

LANGUAGE AND TASTE:

The +/- Social Sanctional Factor in Lexicon ----- Elliott #1642

"It's done" and "It isn't done" are adequate +/- expressions in primitive and tight societies. They and their equivalents serve to "keep in (language) line" the succeeding generations within the culture or subculture, and lexical deviance is punished, usually instantly. In some tight subcultures you'll not get a second invitation--or even a first!--if your diction is not "U"(upper) enough, not "in" enough; nor if it's too "out" of bounds. Tabus in speech operate mindlessly and cruelly, and the philosophers of religion and of language are fascinated by the numinous energy in these sanctions. This thinksheet invites to meditation on (1) the classistic factor (class, race, tribe, nation, sex being residences of prejudice impeding Christian life, thought, influence), (2) the professional factor (e.g., expressions clergy are expected to/not-to use), (3) the communication factor (the ordinary use of language, as of a window, being to look through, not at), (4) the self-separation factor ("I can't play with you anymore because you said ____" or "because you don't talk like us."), and (5) the ostracism factor ("You can't be one of us any longer because ____," or "We can't have you as our ____ because ____."). Two ILLUSTRATIONS provide something to chew on while thinking about these five factors:

JOAN D. OHRN, 10Mar82 C.C.NEWS finds my 24Feb82 letter (also in #1630) "distasteful" but doesn't say why, and I can't find out because of phonebook sexism: I don't know which of the seven Ohrn's is her man, if any. My letter sought a solution to the anguishing problem of death from teen-drunk drivers, and I was shocked that anyone would trivialize so grave a matter be reference to taste. Actually, what she finds distasteful is the paper's publishing my letter: to her, my letter is so far out of bounds that she thinks it unnecessary to allude to its contents! No *De gustibus non disputandum* here, but a sanctional fierceness. Why? Profanity, blasphemy, scatology? None. I do not (Francis Bacon) "handle holy things without feeling," and I have never even thought to blaspheme--to say nothing of taking God's name(s) in vain. I am, as often happens, shocked and offended when I hear clergy use profanity and blasphemy; and I'm angered by their hypocrisy in doing it only among themselves, "not in the presence of the children" (read for "laity"). No cursing, either, in the letter: I never curse my fellows or any other thing that the good God has made. Nor any reference to the nature or function(s) of the human genitals. No urinary-or-anal excretion words. What, then, was wrong? Did I say "leg" instead of "limb"? No. I had to deal with male/female hormones to make my point: I suppose sex--even at the merely hormonal level!--is "distasteful" to her. Saddening. And frightening. She's probably "a good Christian": the closer to the church people are, the more irrational and cruel I've found them to be vis-a-vis language. Jesus died at the hands of the Keepers of the Conventions, ecclesial and political; the Church has not only domesticated him, but also converted him into the Supreme Keeper of the Conventions. The Good Lord deliver me from Ms. Ohrn's "taste"!

ANONYMOUS, 15Mar82, from a Lenten-series student of mine in the Osterville Methodist Church. Anon. is better than nothing, and the letter is a responsible effort to get me to use language "worthy of your calling" (i.e., talk like a preacher), "suitable for church members expecting inspirational Lenten themes," and such as "should be expected from a man of your background." Which of the five factors (above) are in action in this "condemnation"? Our Lord was unemployable, too shocking for the going "expectations." E.g., he used a despised man as "The Good Samaritan," as I used Fritz Perls (whom the letter-writer, intensifying my description, deals with thus: "the sexual antics of a syphilitic bastard") to shock into sophistication about "goodness": morally crippled though he was, Fritz was a profound source of human good; and my accent was on that good, which the letter-writer never mentions. The letter's questions are rhetorical, attacks rather than queries: "Why did you think it necessary or acceptable that some of your language would make a stevedore blush?" Untrue, but oh if it were a real opening to conversation! What does Fritz "have to do with Lent?" So much, if the writer would only listen! "Degenerates" might need "sewer language to get their attention," but not we Methodists! (I've reproduced, now, the entire contents of the letter.) Clergy are paid by uptight language-users, so clergy-talk in public and (generally) in private is uptight rather than free-flowing honest.

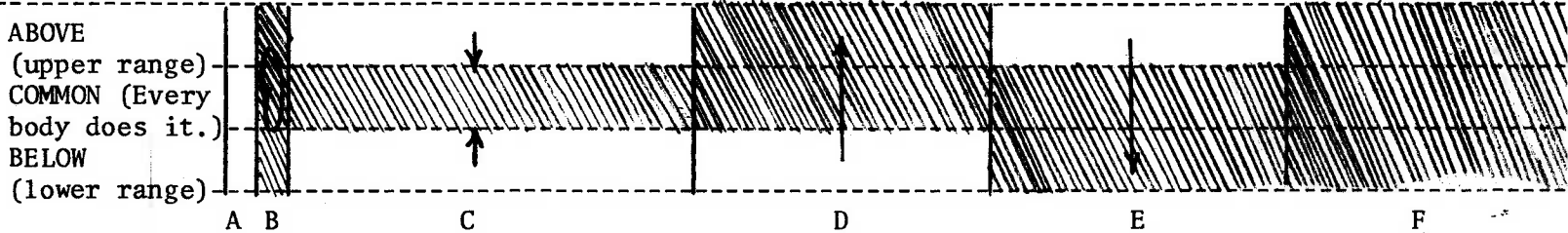
Letter #1

Letter #2

OVER

"Semiology" (=semantics or semasiology or semiotics) means "signing" meanings --pointing to meanings--by language. That's its encoding side: its decoding side is making sense of language-signs. Both active and passive, this is *using language to "make sense."* "Linguistics" is *making sense of language* itself. "Social linguistics" is the study of *how people use language under social pressures (+/- sanctions, motivators, incentives)*. This thinksheet is about social linguistics, especially about "lexicon" (=word-choosing) as an instrument of social control. Your conner (ex-"conman") will move in on a culture or subculture and soon be "talking like a native" in the interest of ripoff: s/he will violate no lexical tabus (e.g., will not say "God" or "shit" where those words are offensive) and will sound forth all the "holy" and "in" words. As I am a language master (if I'm master of anything), I'm extremely aware of the language dance being performed by vicious, ordinary, and saintly individuals. I sense where the incentive focus of an utterance is: on self-promotion (+ or -; 95% of all the talk on earth, Nels Ferré used to say), the glory of God, or any-thing/one between.... Use this diagram for thinking about the two letters [over]. Note that the diagram is about *sanctional (social-pressure) language-range*: two others are (1) breadth (how many subjects can/does one speak of?) and (2) depth (how competent is one's speech about those subjects?).

SANCTIONAL LANGUAGE-RANGE



"A" is autism and "B" is parrhesia, the pathologies of (respectively) overcontrol and under-control (babbling). "C" is ordinary, courageless, conventional speech-behavior, either supine or cunning. It is the speech of all bureaucracies, cannily aware of what's "out of bounds" up and down. In class, a Broadway-actress student of mine reported the fractured-tabu silence when, in a meeting of psychiatrists, after one had said "Nobody believes in God anymore," she said "I do," thus violating the guild's upper limit (viz., OK to speak of God only to bad-mouth). (In a secular society, all Christian verbal witnessing commits this violation of speech-tabu; and since it's so expensive, few except right-wing Christians ever "say a good word for Jesus Christ" in public.) [Media moguls are white-male-liberal-secularist, so implicit/explicit atheism is pushed in their guild and influence. This is one of the current American realities the Moral Majority etc. is challenging. --PUBLIC OPINION magazine, 3/82: Robt. Lichter & Stanley Rothman study.] The bottom arrow is pressure for "correct speech," "acceptable language," "proper English," etc., and against "obscenity," "foul-mouthedness," "gutter/sewer speech," "dirty language." Falling below the line includes you out--e.g., of a literary group insisting on more precise and elegant language than you use, or of a pious group that says "limb" instead of "leg." "D" is your sanctional picture for pious, churchy subgroups (including Khomeini's Iran!). Much talk is in the above-range (though excluding blasphemy, the impious use of divine names); and the arrow represents the fumigation*of any words from the below-range. Body-hating cultures (such as "educated" USA) are chary of referring to certain body parts/functions and to certain words on the low end of the biblical blessing/cursing range (esp. "damn" and "hell"). The upper reaches of the USA "educated," because of stronger Stoic influence, tends to allergy in the present of any expressions of strong emotion: "cool it"'s the word. [This has produced the emotional unfreedom that Dr. Feelgoods are now making their livings curing.] "E" is your linguistic underclass over against "D." The arrow here represents the desecration of above-words: blasphemy, swearing, cursing. "F" is liberated speech, what I called (over) "free-flowing honest." It neither fumigates nor desecrates, but is full-ranged up and down. I model this speech-type, undismayed though dismaying many. As a responsible artist with words, I know what I am doing with them and why: my palette is not the mess the circle in "B" represents. And those have never been turned off-and-away who are more hungry for what I have to give than offended by the words I choose to give it.

*I find especially fraudulent and offensive the "cleaning up" of narratives to be told "in church."