

applied to speech acts ceases to have any significance once it is admitted that there are acts that simply cannot be infelicitous.

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Edmund Leach (1966:403) emphasized almost half a century ago that "speech itself is a form of ritual." This insight still has many stimulating consequences for research on ritual, communication, and ritual communication in anthropology, anthropological linguistics, and linguistic pragmatics—not to mention human ethology. Robbins reminds us of this long and good tradition. However, on the basis of Rappaport's (1999) posthumously published contribution to the study of ritual as communication and from the point of view of the growing literature on "linguistic ideology," he also points out that any theory of ritual communication and of ritual as communication must "situate its claims in relation to broader issues of linguistic ideology and cultural constructions of communication more generally."

This claim not only is very convincing but also strongly supports similar demands of such a theory made by human ethnologists and linguists cooperating with them (see, e.g., Eibl-Eibesfeldt 1989; Heesch 1987; Senft 1987, 1997). I have summarized their concept of "ritual communication" elsewhere (Senft 1991:245–46) as follows:

Speakers of natural languages must learn the rules of nonverbal and verbal communicative behaviour that are valid for their speech community. One of the most important objectives of this learning process is to understand and duplicate the construction of the speech community's common social reality. Verbal and nonverbal patterns and modes of behaviour must also be coordinated and harmonized. The social construction of reality thus duplicated must be safeguarded and secured, especially with respect to possible "sites of fracture" such as cooperation, conflict, and competition within the community. Its protection is warranted by the ritualization of verbal and nonverbal communication, which relieves the tension in critical social situations and regulates social differences and dissensions by increasing the harmonizing functions of speech, by creating and stabilizing social relations, and by distancing emotions, impulses, and intentions. Thus, it increases the predictability of human behaviour and also opens up space in which behaviour can be tried out—playfully—without any fear of possible social sanctions. Therefore "ritual communication" can be defined as a type of strategic action that serves the functions of social bonding and the blocking of aggression and that can neutralize elements of danger which might affect the community's social harmony in the verbal domain simply by verbalizing them and bringing them up for discussion. There are many culture-specific forms of ritual communication and different levels

within them (Senft 1987); however, many of its forms can be understood as distinguishing elemental interaction strategies for, for example, group maintenance and bonding, social learning and teaching, rank striving, and fighting (see Eibl-Eibesfeldt 1989:519 ff.).

This concept of ritual communication not only solves what Rappaport and Robbins call "the problem of alternatives" but also represents a different approach—or ideology—with regard to language (which I as a linguist prefer). The ethological perspective does not discredit language as "untrustworthy" and "not well suited to the communication of the truth." On the contrary, it allows and even asks for deep pragmatic analyses of speech that may reveal that so-called situational intentional varieties (Senft 1991) such as the "veiled speech" of Mount Hagen to which Robbins refers or the Trobriand Islanders' *biga sopa* (joking or lying language) are themselves ritualized speech varieties that use linguistic vagueness and ambiguity as stylistic means to avoid possible distress, confrontation, or too much and too aggressive directness in everyday speech situations (see Senft 1997:389). Such linguistic pragmatic analyses are, in Robbins's reading, prerequisite for any sound account of a given people's ideologies of communication; moreover, they help researchers to distance themselves from their own language ideologies.

Robbins's paper is an excellent contribution to the field (although I find his final notes toward a history of Christian ritual ideology rather ethnocentric and not convincing at all, given Max Weber's [1920] classic analyses of Protestant ethics). I hope that my comment on it will contribute to the combining of interdisciplinary forces and resources that is necessary to come up with a comprehensive theory of ritual and ritual communication.

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Among linguistic anthropologists it is, I believe, a matter of "settled science" that rituals are actional texts-in-context to be read as (conventional) indexical icons. Within a particular cultural universe, rituals "dynamically figure" what they effectuate in the space-time context of their performance. The empirical rituals with which we are concerned are, moreover, simply "full-tilt" versions, dense and meta-semiotically laminated, of a more general event-quality of *ritualization* present in any event. Those brought into a ritual's structuration are summoned to ontic or metaphysical necessities of cognitive, moral or ethical obligation as the cosmic-"literal" order—indexically presupposed by "this" event, "here," "now"—is "made flesh" in tropic figuration.

Rappaport, like many others of his generation and training, came to the topic of ritual with little or no semiotically informed linguistics and philosophy, and therefore he could only dance around the central issues