

SHELLY AND RENATO ROSALDO

June 6

Dear John,

Almost everything but what I plan happens in 436 (your old office) Wm. James. Yesterday or so your special paper arrived. 'Aha,' I thought, 'I once wrote that paper.' But I hadn't. It's really exciting, really neat. Anyway, Vogtie said that there were zillions of copies because you wanted comments so I thought I'd tell you what I thought.

Fine things and surprises:

great footnotes on Harris, treatment of Boas, pp. 36ff. pushing Whorf, stuff on Berlin (also liked your review), points on structural notions of 'significant' language--signifying categories and Malinowski, the two things you get from Malinowski (Do you know Tambiah, '68, on "the magical power of words", in Man), Dixon's ideas, relativity and determinism...

Thoughts:

p.4 you want to consider language as a cultural code without considering it as a kind of sociolinguistic performance, but later say you are concerned with native metalanguage, metaphor...can you have it both ways? can you (p.15) distinguish linguistic context /cultural context from context of performance? My hunch is that this is what people on the old Drinking Project thought they could do, somehow by eliciting 'cultural propositions'; but I don't think Kay's propositions ever materialized; instead they got lots of abysmally specific 'rules' ('the man in front drinks first')--more or less structurally located, more or less salient (and here 'statistical' problems also arise: what if a proposition you find highly salient, illuminating is the kind of thing almost nobody says.....do you know Geohegan's stuff: sometimes I wonder if the 'native language' questions that work best on his decision trees are the one's people are most likely to use).....WHAT am I saying? maybe, that you fudge the problems of context, of describing the realities in which divergent responses make sense (finding examples), which I see as incredibly difficult.

another way to say this, perhaps, is that I'm never sure what you think the semantic information you're out to discover has to do with that-larger-thing-ethnography.

I have mixed feelings about your suggestions (p.36ff.) for applying Whorf. On the one hand, one thinks of devising psychological tests of perception (Lenneberg-steffle), but I gather that's not what you want. Then there's your point, 'what there is to talk about'--which brings you back to categories in the lexicon. Then there's something like what works stylistically, the (p.38) 'ordinary limits' of expression and thought: I like that idea--can we develop a notion of the relative difficulty or plausibility of certain propositions in certain languages (physics comes easy to the hopi...)? Also, thinking (p.37) about roots and grammatical classes--in Phillipine languages roots are not particularly members of any class--then what (perhaps there are more--meaningful--syntactic alternatives in realizing a particular 'X')?

I'm not sure why you went thru' Quine to argue with (hurray, yes, yes) referential theories of meaning; in rejecting S-R don't you throw out 'indeterminacy' of reference as a relevant in the same way...

Eric Wanner who was on my thesis prospectus board said he was excited by some new work on representing sentences to a computer in purely relational terms--I don't really understand, but it sounded like: a word is defined by a set of primitive relations to other items; 'is a...' might be one such relation,

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possibly predicated with a componential description; and there would be other kinds of primitive relations, syntagmatic, oppositional...sounded something like what you say of Dixon's primitives plus; I have the references in my office (today is saturday), will look soon and let you know if they're good.

p.62 footnote on Wittgenstein--excites me; can we go beyond examples, to infinite structural, componential descriptions? (is one thing about Berlin--haven't read it--that he counts on intuition from his perhaps-examples but he takes that as a failure, doesn't address himself to that fact)...

p.69 'all semantic analyses based on relations in small lexical sets'. I'm not sure that this is what you mean, but a friend--Susan Carey--is working on the ways the structure of a domain (judgments of similarity, etc.) changes with addition or subtraction of items from it; so maybe people are (in making metaphors, etc.) always doing 'componential analyses' on ever-changing domains....I'm also struck by the fact that (you sort of say this) eg in Romney on psychol. kinship the dimension that isolates the domain (plus/minus 'kin term') itself is not (by similarity judgments) psychologically salient.

p.14 on metaphor/idiom: are you sure the distinction has to be made if so, a 'literal' application of an idiom should be surprising/impossible (Beckett exploits this); in an extension that is 'idiomatic' perhaps a term ceases to enter permit use of items within its contrast set--we say, 'a thin play', but not 'a thick play'....and maybe a metaphoric use would permit the set...

If any of this makes sense, I'll be glad...if not, it would be good for me if you asked.

And today it is raining, but definitely, it is summer rain. Renato thinks and thinks and writes. I get hysterical over politics, talk to lots of women and promise to start a special paper on magic next week. All to soon it will be August and we'll be going west: Stanford Ho! (which means--if you didn't know that Renato has a job there--that you have another reason for visiting on your way--when?--home). Did you ever hear of the easterner who thought she might melt in California?

We saw Sophie looking splendid on her birthday.

Enjoy summer, the students, etc., etc.

Best, R. sends love

--and love to Costie

Shelly