

This message was communicated through root metaphors in the song lyrics and playful versions of key scenarios in the plot. For instance, the contested meanings of the spill were portrayed as the dancers in a square dance, which falls into confusion as the dancers promote their self-interests and refuse to cooperate. The “Jaws” dilemma that I have identified as a root metaphor of the events was symbolized by Mr. Slick, a suave crooner in shiny black tights who urged the community to stop complaining and enjoy the wonders of oil, even if it is on the river. “Come up to oil country!” he sings.

Thus my pursuit of the interpretive question—what does the spill mean to river residents?—led to my helping the residents to answer it by serving as advisor to the play, which the region adopted as a commemorative ritual, a ritual intended to keep certain memories alive and, in the process, to forge stronger community bonds (Omohundro 1991). Evidence that the play was adopted into the local culture has been the singing of its theme song in grade school commencement ceremonies.

But was I in a position to answer my interpretive question? If I’m not a river resident, and thus a participant myself, can I truly grasp what anything means to the participants? Did my research data provide me with an overview that was somehow superior to that of any one participant—whether a mucker, Coastie, or river rat—so that my interpretation was the right one to teach the librettist, and through his play, the community itself? And how has this project changed me, the anthropologist? What’s become of my views of the river, big oil companies, and river rats as a result of conducting this study? Locating and tracking the researcher’s position in the landscape of human viewpoints is to answer the reflexive question, What is my perspective?, the topic of the next chapter.



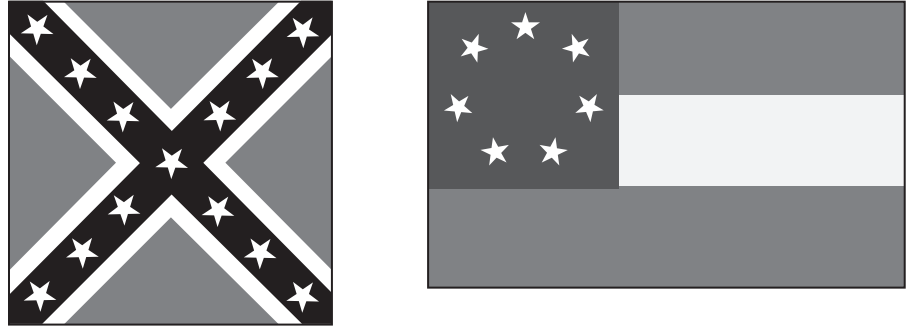
## Chapter 8



### EXERCISES

#### Exercise 1: The Meaning of an Artifact

In the United States, the battle flag of the Confederate States of America, also known as the “Southern Cross” or the “Beauregard flag,” is widely recognized as a symbolic object (Figure 8.10). Flying that flag is a symbolic act that also expresses meaning, because it represents a political entity that no longer exists. The flag has been in the news as I write, because some states are being sued to take it down from their capitols. In this exercise you will translate this symbolic object and assess it as a key symbol.



**Figure 8.10** The battle flag of the Confederacy (left), also known as the “Southern Cross” or the “Beauregard flag.” It was designed by General Beauregard to distinguish his troops from Union troops during battle. The official flag of the Confederate States of America (right) was too difficult to distinguish in the field from the northern Stars and Stripes.

1. “Translate” the battle flag, so to speak. The object’s design and its red, white, and blue colors have meaning. Most of us haven’t learned that meaning, but our society’s historians (or an encyclopedia or a Web site such as <http://americancivilwar.com>) can teach us. From them we learn, for example, that the Confederate battle flag contains symbols from the British flag that were left out of the Stars and Stripes. A historical approach to the battle flag is found in Green (2004).
2. Using yourselves as informants, apply Sherry Ortner’s five clues for deciding whether the Confederate flag is a key symbol for Americans (or some Americans).
  - a. Do the participants claim it is an important symbol?
  - b. Are participants in the culture emotionally aroused by the symbol?
  - c. Is the symbol displayed in a variety of contexts?
  - d. Are there many ideas or practices associated with the symbol?
  - e. Are there restrictions and rules applying to the symbol?
3. Explore the connotations of flying the flag. What do the supporters of the flag say flying it means? What do the critics say flying the flag means? You may be familiar enough with the symbol to imagine this, or you might talk to acquaintances, or you might read the debate in the news archives. The *New York Times* covered this story in South Carolina, Mississippi, and Georgia between May 2000 and April 2001.
4. Do you see the symbol displayed occasionally in your region? In northern New York, I’ve seen it recently as a flag and on T-shirts, mailboxes, and pickup trucks. What is the flag-flyer saying in a northern place like this, or in your state? Ask one or two people who display it.
5. List some meanings that your flag-flying informants don’t mention but that you have a hunch are also being expressed because as a receiver of their message, you’re picking up that meaning. Use Victor Turner’s three sources of information to support your interpretations.

- a. Is anything happening in the society that might provide a clue to this symbol's meaning?
- b. Are there other symbols in that person's or group's life that support this interpretation of the symbol's meaning?
- c. Did the person or group do anything before using the symbol, or are they doing something during or afterwards, that sheds light on what the symbol means to them?

Your report is in five parts, following the steps of this exercise.

## Exercise 2: Magic Rituals

In this exercise you will collect some examples of magic rituals and interpret the symbolic acts, objects, and utterances of which they are composed.

For the purpose of this exercise, I propose working definitions for the terms magic and ritual. As stated earlier, ritual is a formal procedure made up of a symbolic act or set of acts to express important truths to the participants. An act that is merely repeated or routine but does not carry any meaning, such as washing your hands before eating, we sometimes loosely label a ritual, but that act does not meet the definition here.

Magic is the belief that impersonal supernatural forces affect the natural world. A magical ritual is an instrumental ritual, meaning that the symbolic acts themselves are intended to influence those impersonal supernatural forces and thus have a practical effect. This kind of magic has nothing to do with entertainment forms such as card tricks or rabbits in a hat. Most cultures include beliefs in magic and procedures for magic rituals, including our own. You probably call them “superstitions,” but that is a derogatory term meaning “beliefs and practices I consider silly.”

In the United States, the most widely accepted impersonal supernatural power is “luck,” and Americans perform many rituals to draw good luck and repel bad luck. I regularly “knock on wood,” or “touch wood” after making a remark about the future. I propose that this is a magical ritual. Here is how I answer the interpretive questions of this event.

- *What are the symbols in this procedure?* The wood, touching wood, and saying “touch wood” are symbolic, because they are arbitrarily associated in our minds with future events.
- *How does the use of symbols make this a magical ritual?* Touching the wood is thought to undo or reduce the bad luck that might come from speaking about the future. Thus by a symbolic act I attempt to influence real-world events. And that is the very definition of magical ritual.
- *What are the deeper meanings?* As in any ritual, I speak to myself with these symbols. In touching wood, I restate the eternal verity that I am not totally in control. To discuss a future event could “jinx” it, replace it with an event that would be disadvantageous for me, because I might be “overheard” and squashed for my pride in assuming the best outcome. So, to

protect myself after commenting on what the future will bring, I touch wood. I knew that touching wood says “pardon me”—a little humble bow to powers that control luck. Then I looked up the practice in a book on folk beliefs and found that the pre-Christian Druids believed that wood was powerful because spirits lived in trees. That feeling about wood survives even now.

Do I really believe in magic? Do I believe that touching wood works? What’s pertinent for this exercise is that I perform this ritual regularly (I just did it again today). As an anthropologist, I have read and seen for myself that performing a magic ritual makes the practitioner feel a bit more prepared to face the future. Below we will assume that greater confidence is the effect intended in magic rituals. This is Malinowski’s theory of magic, briefly described in Chapter 4. What we want to know is What are the meanings involved? What is the practitioner saying to her/himself to achieve the magic ritual’s effect?

1. Collect at least one ritual performed in everyday life from each of four people, including yourself. Be sure to keep the four people anonymous by giving them pseudonyms. Ideally, you already know people who do something interesting and can just query them about it. I recommend not bringing up the etic concept of “magic” because that can be misunderstood by your informants.
2. Say to your informant, “Tell me about a good luck practice that you do.” You can prime the pump by mentioning “knocking on wood.” Don’t write down the first thing said; it may take the informant a minute to warm to the subject and to remember. Be patient and encouraging.
3. Take notes on what the informants report that they do, say, or use, where and in what situations. Ask them why they do that particular thing. Talk with them about the meaning of the symbolic elements of the ritual.
4. Write a report about the four rituals in the following format:
  - a. Informant’s pseudonym
  - b. Title of the magical ritual (perhaps the informant suggests one, otherwise, your choice)
  - c. Brief description of the informant, such as age, gender, ethnic affiliation, current occupation (about twenty-five words)
  - d. Brief description of the ritual (about fifty words)
  - e. What are the symbols in this ritual? Take it apart and identify the symbolic acts, utterances, and objects. How shall these symbols be translated? The informant may know some of the meaning, but you may need to inquire further among other informants, or in a reference work on folk beliefs (for example, Daniels 1971 or Radford and Radford 1969), or you may speculate. Specify which method you use.
  - f. How does the use of symbols make this a magic ritual? Why does the informant say he or she performs this ritual?
  - g. What are the deeper meanings; that is, what does the ritual “say” to the informant and to any observers? For example, my touching wood

says, “I’m not responsible for my good luck, and I can’t prevent bad luck, so I’m anxious when I speak of it.” You and the informant can develop this answer together.

### Exercise 3: What Terms of Address Say

“In speaking people reveal their social position,” linguists say (Eastman 1997, 167). “In conversation, we negotiate our position relative to one another.” Anthropological linguists have explored how speakers of a language reveal their relationship to each other by (among other ways) the choice of terms of address used to refer to each other in dialogue (Brown and Ford 1961).

In this sociolinguistic exercise you will identify the terms used at your college or university, identify who uses which term when addressing whom, and make more explicit the meaning behind the terms.

In your university community, there are cultural patterns for the use of each of the following terms of address.

First name (FN), such as “John”

Title and last name (TLN), such as “Professor Omohundro”

Last name (LN), such as “Omohundro”

Nickname (NN), such as “Doc”

Title and first name (TFN), such as “Doctor John”

Title only (T), such as “Professor”

Kin terms (K), such as “brother”

Terms of endearment (E), such as “honey”

These are the choices for how custodians, department secretaries, professors, students, deans, coaches, and others may address each other in English in North American campus culture. The choice symbolizes the relationship between the speaker and listener. The campus culture itself sets the general tone. Terms appropriate at a Quaker institution, Native American college, Virginia military academy, or California state university will differ, but all will use the same symbolic code.

The first-time college student has to learn how people address each other on campus. The student wishes to acknowledge the instructor’s relatively higher status, for example, but doesn’t know anything about the instructor or which of the instructor’s characteristics are relevant. Is it the degree, rank, age, marital status, or something else? Mrs. Smith? Ann? Dr. Smith? Professor Smith? Ms. Smith?

What is the cultural rule at your institution for addressing this instructor: is there a “default term” that is appropriate in most situations? Discuss this before continuing.

1. In small groups, treating yourselves as informants, decide what terms you could expect to be spoken (or you’ve heard spoken) between the following pairs in the given campus settings. Write your answer in the form of a

hyphenated pair of terms, the first term being the one spoken by the first person mentioned. For example,

A student and a department secretary, who happens to be her mother, in the classroom building hall: **K-FN**

This means that the first person will address the second as “Mom” (K), and the second person will address the first as “Susan” (FN). In the following pairs, you may add a few details to the scenario if that helps to clarify which term-pair to use. Make note of those additions.

- a. A senior professor and a junior professor in the classroom building hall
  - b. A senior professor and a secretary, in the department office
  - c. A male student and female student romantically linked, in the college union
  - d. A female student and the female custodian, in her residence hall
  - e. The college president and the provost, on the tennis court
  - f. The college president and a female professor, at Faculty Senate
  - g. A professor and one of his students of ten years ago
  - h. A senior professor and a senior professor, in the snack bar
  - i. A student representative and the student presiding, in Student Senate
  - j. A student athlete and a student athlete, during team practice
  - k. An older male student and a young male assistant professor, in the professor’s office
  - l. A nineteen-year-old male student and a fifty-year-old female student, just met, in the classroom
  - m. A student and the instructor, who happens to be his father, in the classroom
2. Discussion groups now report to the class. Enlist your instructor as an informant at this point, also. You may be unsure of the convention in some of these pairs, and the discussion group may not be in agreement about others. This is an indication of how well enculturated you are in the campus standards of address (or how little culture about address there *is* at your campus). More pertinent for this exercise is your reasoning about which terms to use. Review what criteria the group considered important in choosing a term-pair.
  3. Conclude the class discussion by answering these questions:
    - a. What sorts of details did you need to add to some cases to clarify your choice of a term-pair?
    - b. What characteristics of the two persons affect the terms used?
    - c. Can the term-pairs between two people vary with the setting?
    - d. Can the term-pairs vary over time?
    - e. What do nonreciprocal forms such as TLN-FN *mean* about the relationship?
    - f. What is the difference in meaning between reciprocal forms TLN-TLN and NN-NN?

The product of this exercise is a written report on each of the three sections.

## Exercise 4: Translating an Event

Other cultural events besides rituals can have a symbolic dimension. That is, the actions can mean something beyond the apparent activity or purpose. Clifford Geertz has examined the cockfights in Bali, Indonesia, as events that “say something” about Balinese men and culture (Geertz 1973a). I attended a cockfight in the Philippines, so I can imagine the events Geertz is interpreting. From my etic point of view, a cockfight is a gladiatorial contest between two roosters with knives tied to their legs. Spectators bet on the outcome. Geertz, however, saw more in the cockfight: a celebration of Balinese maleness and personal honor, a thrilling reflection on death and fortune, and a veiled competition among kin groups and villages.

I don’t know whether Geertz’s interpretation of the Balinese cockfight is correct or the only one possible, but anthropologists readily accept his claim that events like a cockfight, a rock concert, a demolition derby, a family reunion picnic, or an antiwar demonstration are rich in meaning that we may interpret. Anthropologists have interpreted American football (Arens 1981) and television’s six o’clock news (McKinley 1982) for the cultural themes and values these events display and reinforce. In this exercise you will translate the meaning of a public event, serving as your own informant.

1. Select a structured group event such as a game or ceremony with which you are familiar. (Correct or not, Geertz’s interpretation of the cockfight was at least based on his thorough knowledge of Indonesian culture.) Don’t select a religious ritual for this purpose, but something secular such as a bridal shower, intramural coed broomball game, birthday party, or poker game. Select an event that you have recently experienced or will attend for this exercise. You may be a participant or exclusively an observer, as long as being an observer is an acceptable role.
2. Write a two-part ethnography of the event. Part 1 describes the event so someone not of the culture can visualize the observable features. Part 2 is your analysis of the meaning of the event, as a knowledgeable participant. Below are some lines of inquiry for Part 2.
  - a. What are the cultural values (“what’s important”) expressed in the event? What are the metaphors? The metonyms?
  - b. Beneath its surface purpose, what is the event saying to the participants? In other words, what are its connotations? What evidence is there that it may include a key scenario as defined by Sherry Ortner?
  - c. What actions, utterances, and objects in the event reveal these values and messages? Apply Turner’s three questions to confirm your interpretation.
  - d. Compare your analysis with that of a classmate who analyzed a similar event. Are your interpretations similar? Does that suggest that your interpretations are valid? If the interpretations are different in whole or in part, does some of the other person’s analysis also seem right to you?

The product of this exercise is a descriptive narrative of 300–600 words for Part 1 and an analysis of 300–600 words for Part 2.

### Exercise 5: Root Metaphor in Medicine

In this exercise you will identify the root metaphors in some texts and consider the consequences of their meaning.

The medical profession in our society is a powerful and admired occupational group, not only because it strives to heal but because it uses science (see the discussion of science in Chapter 9). The language its members speak carries high status and authority. The way doctors talk about our bodies often becomes the way we talk about our bodies. Because until recently most medical professionals in the United States have been male scientists, their talk about our bodies has been in the scientific mode and from a male point of view (Martin 1987). Physicians have drawn from American culture certain root metaphors to describe body processes, and these in turn have become the culture's metaphors for those processes. This is noticeable in the following excerpts from medical texts about the process of menstruation.

Menstruation is fraught with meaning in many cultures. It is associated with power, fertility, danger, pollution, or female solidarity, and is often circumscribed by rituals to handle these “forces.” In the United States, menstruation is not handled ritually the way it is in many cultures. In some Native American cultures, menstruating women must not cook or step over men's hunting tools. In some African cultures, the women are secluded in special huts on the edge of the village and fed by other women (Small 1999). Nevertheless, the symbolism in American English reveals Americans' ideas about menstruation. In *The Woman in the Body: A Cultural Analysis of Reproduction* (1987), anthropologist Emily Martin analyzes the way American culture represents the female body. Below are two passages she has excerpted from two medical texts describing the process of menstruation. (All of the passages are from *The Woman in the Body*, by Emily Martin. Copyright ©1987, 1992 by Emily Martin. Reprinted by permission of Beacon Press, Boston.)

#### Excerpt 1

The fall in blood progesterone and estrogen deprives the highly developed endometrial lining of its hormonal support, constriction of blood vessels leads to a diminished supply of oxygen and nutrients, and finally disintegration starts, the entire lining begins to slough, and the menstrual flow begins. Blood vessels in the endometrium hemorrhage and the menstrual flow begins. The menstrual flow consists of this blood mixed with endometrial debris. The loss of hormonal stimulation causes necrosis (death of tissue). (Martin 1987, 45)

#### Excerpt 2

If fertilization and pregnancy do not occur, the corpus luteum degenerates and the levels of estrogens and progesterone decline. As the levels

of these hormones decrease and their stimulatory effects are withdrawn, blood vessels of the endometrium undergo prolonged spasms (contractions) that reduce the blood flow to the area of the endometrium supplied by the vessels. The resulting lack of blood causes the tissue to the affected region to degenerate. After some time, the vessels relax and allow blood to flow through them again. However, capillaries in the area have become so weakened that blood leaks through them. This blood and the deteriorating endometrial tissue are discharged from the uterus as the menstrual flow. As a new ovarian cycle begins and the level of estrogen rises, the functional layer of the endometrium undergoes repair and once again begins to proliferate. (Martin 1987, 48)

1. Mark the individual words in each of the texts that seem to be “loaded” with connotations. Taken together, what messages do these terms convey to the reader? How do the messages in the first excerpt differ from those in the second?
2. Draw brackets around the phrases describing processes, such as “deprives the . . . lining of its hormonal support.” While many of the nouns are technical, many of the verbs are metaphorical, and the phrases in sequence unfold a particular “story” about the process. Attempting to narrate the process to the medical student, the authors have borrowed key metaphors based on other processes that are familiar to Americans. Taken together, with what other (perhaps totally unrelated) processes known to Americans is the female menstrual cycle being equated? If this is the way Americans are enculturated to understand the menstruation process, how will men and women think about menstruation, how will women think about their bodies, and how will physicians and women interact?

Excerpt 3 is a passage drafted by Martin herself that is equally accurate but introduces an alternate metaphor.

### Excerpt 3

A drop in the formerly high levels of progesterone and estrogen creates an appropriate environment for reducing the excess layers of endometrial tissue. Constriction of capillary blood vessels causes a lower production of menstrual fluids. As a part of the renewal of the remaining endometrium, the capillaries begin to reopen, contributing some blood and serous fluid to the volume of endometrial material already beginning to flow. (Martin 1987, 52)

3. What connotations are carried by the process words in Excerpt 3?
4. What is the root metaphor that the narrative is developing?
5. Does Excerpt 3 seem also to be factually accurate (at least in comparison with the previous two, because you may not be particularly knowledgeable about the subject)?

6. How might this root metaphor change the way men and women readers think about menstruation compared to the other passages?
7. Can you compose a narrative without root metaphor? Would that be better, in some way (speaking as a participant in American culture)?

The product of this exercise is your markups of the three narratives and your written answers to the three sections.

## Exercise 6: Ethnolinguistics

The way the culture organizes words into **semantic domains**, or sets of words with related meanings, reveals the patterns in which its speakers think. A large semantic domain suggests a culturally important area, because the speakers want to talk about it in detail. Scientists are sure that there are more than a million species of beetle (the family *Coleoptera*), but except for “ladybug” and perhaps a few more, most Americans couldn’t name many. We lump all beetles together as “bugs” because we have no desire to know much about them. On the other hand, there is only one species of pet dog (*Canis familiaris*), but Americans can name many breeds—collie, shih-tzu, doberman, and so on. Why do we lump beetles yet make many distinctions among dogs? Because we are interested in dogs, not in beetles. We think and talk more about dogs, so we need more words as tools for our talk.

Furthermore, our semantic domains are organized into categories and subcategories. We can sort specific dog breeds into broader categories such as lap dogs, hunting dogs, working dogs, show dogs, and so forth. There is nothing “natural” about these categories, as we learn when we study another culture’s semantic domains. Even basic distinctions such as what’s animate, or female, or green, vary between cultures. Studying semantic domains is called **ethnolinguistics**.

In this exercise you will collect terms in a semantic domain, sort them, and attempt to chart them to reveal how Americans “think about” that domain.

1. Select a fairly narrow area of American experience that interests you and your likely informant. My students have done interesting work with SUVs, rock or rap music (work with just one genre of popular music), prime-time television shows, academic majors, and types of snow. More serious topics include “races” or “social classes” in America.
2. As your instructor directs, you could interview yourself, the person sitting next to you, a friend outside of class, or some combination of these.
3. Ask your informant to list all the members of that set that she/he can think of (for example, DOGS: collie, shih-tzu, doberman . . .).
4. Put each of these words on a separate slip of paper or index card.
5. Tell your informant that you are trying to learn about American culture with her/his help. Give the stack to your informant and ask that the cards be sorted into piles representing meaningful categories. You are striving for a result of more than one pile but not a separate pile for each word.

**Table 8.2** Semantic Domain of Invertebrates for English-Speaking Americans

	<i>Live on Land</i>		<i>Live in Sea</i>	
	Bad	Not Bad	Seafood	Not Seafood
Flying	Wasp	Butterfly	Lobster	Starfish
Crawling	Spider	Worm	Clam	

6. When the sorting is complete, ask the informant to explain the piles. This usually involves labeling and defining the labels for the piles. Your informant will say, “This pile I call the X’s because they all . . .” Take notes. To keep the talk going, ask him/her to explain, “How is *this* pile different from *that* pile?”
7. Draw a semantic domain chart that shows all the terms and how Americans (in this case, your informant) categorize them. Table 8.2, with six kinds of “invertebrate,” is an example. This chart is the way my students usually classify invertebrates when I survey them in class. The headers in the chart are based upon the labels and explanations the students give to the piles, and the words in any one cell are the words they pile together. The interview in step 6 sometimes reveals that two piles are actually subcategories of one category. For example, “flying” and “crawling” in the chart are subcategories of “bad” invertebrates that live on land. If these distinctions cross-cut your other categories, you can make rows, as I have done.
8. On the basis of the chart you have made, what can you say about the way Americans (your informant) think about the topic under study? As for invertebrates, I conclude from my chart that students sort by the invertebrate’s habitat, its value or threat to the speaker, and its form of locomotion, rather than the anatomical criteria used by professional biologists.

The product of this exercise is your chart and answers to step 8.