

RELATIONAL SOCIOLOGY –TRANSATLANTIC IMPULSES  
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**Meaning Emerges in Relation Dynamics**  
Harrison White

I will quote from three recent integrations of *Identity and Control* (2008) around meaning as central construct (in working papers co-authored variously).

with Frederic Godart

Meanings are “sparks” generated by irregular switchings across socio-cultural compounds called “netdoms,” mixtures of networks of relations and domains of topics. Switchings originate from identities mitigating uncertainty, biophysical as well as from control efforts by other identities.

A story concatenates meanings in a relational structure within a horizon of possibilities. Netdoms constitute the fabric of socio-cultural life, wherein domains—through stories—provide the interpretive while networks—through relations—supply the social texture. These are textures both for participants and observers. Socio-cultural formations invoking more complex compounds of stories (story-lines and plots) thereby frame social time, enabling mobilization for social action (narratives).

Identities achieve social footing as both a source and a destination of communications to which identities attribute meaning. Footings are disrupted by *events*, or *switchings* in surroundings. Events thus guide identities seeking control over uncertainty and over fellow identities. In other words, uncertainty and contingency originating from physical and social settings trigger control attempts that lead identities to act across and among mixtures of networks of relations and domains of topics, *netdoms* for short. By doing so, identities generate specific meanings, along with discursive formations. Netdoms, just like identities, vary in scale and scope. They are the locus of interaction of identities which find footings in different contexts by switching across them. It is the process of switching from netdom to netdom that generates meanings, perception, and representations, not the netdom itself.

Meanings coalesce into *stories*. However, stories do not simply aggregate meanings, they combine them in transposable patterns of relations, create networks of meanings that can be invoked in different contexts. Stories—in our sense—can exhibit a beginning, middle, and end. Stories can also be atemporal when they compare and contrast social settings.

Stories in isolation are meant to disappear. In order to thrive and spread, and to become basis for communication, a story need to be transposed across contexts. An atemporal example is rules of thumb (Simon 1945) and a temporal example of story set is strategic analytical frameworks (Porter 1985). The point is that stories are in essence relational, not temporal. For example, an academic switching back and forth between business and academia can tell stories of these switchings in which meanings generated elsewhere—about money and the “ivory tower”—are mobilized.

Once triggered by netdom switchings, meanings need to “travel” in order to thrive. The diffusion of meanings, from context to context, is channeled through socio-cultural formations. They exist across contexts, but are not context-dependent as they are durable social formations. They are configurations of footings among identities that reproduce themselves. Surely, however, expositions through cross-section typologies are not sufficient to explain the social organization of meanings.

Meaning horizons need not be limited within netdoms and we now turn to a larger analogue to switching, to another scope of multiplicity and multiplexity in meaning. Meaning establishes itself in consort with horizon, and these changes of horizon can be as much a matter of rhythm as of interdigitation, in which the changes become intertwined spreads in social time and space. Such *syncopated complexity* occurs only through reproducing itself as an integral *sensibility* in first-order observation. In deference to their distinction as sensibilities, we refer to syncopated complexities as *styles*. Countless styles can be observed in ongoing social systems, in all sorts of scopes and distributions, over time and space and themes. A style is in many ways a precursor of identity, not only a follower.

Style is dual. Call *style  $\alpha$*  a style that expresses itself in spontaneity and novelty. Call *style  $\beta$*  a style that has reached some level of codification and imitability. The first type of style can be found for example in arts, the second in business. Reflexivity is not what distinguishes these two types of styles. While because of its imitability, style  $\beta$  seems more reflexive than style  $\alpha$ , style  $\alpha$  is also reflexive. Think about the artist trying, quite consciously, to “improve” his or her style. In this case, a style  $\alpha$  requires work and reflexivity. Style  $\alpha$  evolves into style  $\beta$  over time for example when art analysts or historians classify schools and define the features of genres. Style  $\beta$  can also evolve into style  $\alpha$  when going a renewal for example—think about neo-retro movements in design.

Both types of styles— $\alpha$  and  $\beta$ —are mechanisms that organize switchings among stories. These switchings are similar to the switchings among netdoms that trigger meanings, but they are deployed at a higher level, the level of stories. So styles introduce regularity as well as change in switchings across stories. However, styles of the first type do not account well for purposive action.

Like identities, socio-cultural formations can be mobilized to achieve some strategic goal (White, Godart and Corona 2007). Action comes from style  $\beta$ . *Narratives* are used in the process of mobilization, as a tool to convince allies and thwart adverse control attempts, following patterns from the codified type of style. Networks of meanings, stories, or rhetorics form narratives when they are mobilized by identities to “get action.”

with John Mohr

It is through institutions that styles come to be enacted. One of the most striking developments in recent research on institutions has been the appearance of a spate of new work by scholars who are using relational modeling techniques originally developed for the study of social networks to disentangle the complex logic of institutional processes. Of course, one can argue that social network analysis has always been about the study of social institutions and in a certain sense that is surely true. But it is also true that there has been a significant shift over the last decade or so by a number of researchers who have moved away from a more traditional focus on interactional (e.g., social) networks

towards a modeling strategy of a broader scope that directly tackles the structural character of institutions by recognizing that what makes an institution work is that it interpenetrates the social with the cultural. Thus an institution links together different orders and realms of social life, notably the agentic with the structural, the symbolic with the material, and the micro with the meso and the macro structures of social organization. Indeed we argue that it is precisely this — the articulation of relational sub-systems into a structured whole —which constitutes the very essence of an institution.

We contend that an effective analysis of institutions needs to take account of three analytic sites in which linkages occur between different orders of social experience, those specifying the linkage of agency to structure, of culture to practice and of linkages across levels of social organization. First, we propose that the stickiness of institutions, those qualities of institutional life that lead them to be particularly enduring, is directly related to their capacity to effectively bridge these types of divides. In what follows we illustrate this contention with an example of one institutional form that derives its resilience from its ability to stretch across levels of social organization and to fruitfully combine the social organizational properties characterizing different levels of social interaction under the same institutional roof. Second, we argue that the undoing of institutional stability, including the possibility for significant institutional change, may be dependent upon the sustained juxtaposition of multiple styles within the same institutional site. In a sense then, institutional stability derives from bridging while instability is the result of over-bridging.

Social institutions are made up of different types of interlocking networks. Once one begins to unpack the social phenomenology of a network it becomes necessary to change the way one thinks about individuals, action, culture, and social process more generally.

The situated meanings, the shared stories, the story plots that give heuristic structure to shared narratives, and the systems of values that provide a core categorical substrate for this process, all of these are cultural (symbolic) phenomena and they too are ordered in relational systems (Saussure, 1959). Thus, in addition to social networks, institutional life is organized around cultural networks, relational structures that link

meanings, values, stories and rhetorics together into various structured configurations. An institutional analysis needs to attend to both of these types of structures, and thus to systems of discourse and systems of social interaction and to the linkages that tie them together.

But social life affords as well chaos among structures:

### and with Jorge Fontdevila

Far-reaching yet fragmented social networks make the ability to uphold pervasive ambiguity in daily interactions crucial to navigate domination orders. strong interactional footings or other competitive edges may emerge through successful albeit temporary juggling of disjointed framings across netdom switchings. Moreover, to manage mounting ambiguity and contradiction across rapidly polymerizing netdoms skillful innuendo and indirect language is used.

Language is unique because of its *reflexive* capacity. It is used to talk about itself and describe its own structure and uses, to report either directly or indirectly earlier utterances of other speakers, to indicate shifting speakers' roles . Language is also used to index: for instance aspects of narrative events by signs that do not represent but point to the world in order to create or reproduce the social contexts in which they are uttered. We argue that some social identities, to enhance their control in the face of shifting netdom demands and rapid decouplings, contextualize and frame growing ambiguity and contradiction through language's reflexive and indexical features.

Meaning, rather than residing in semantics, emerges reflexively between grammars and participants' interactional hard work at indexically framing ongoing speech situations. Meaning in language is thus an interactional accomplishment of identities seeking control and thereby inducing and reproducing patterns of power. . Thus when several coworkers explain to each other a job-related task using slang or informal language and then suddenly revert back to technical language because they realize their boss is within earshot, their switching registers reflects or presupposes institutionalized work-place relationships via the indexing of the appropriate technical register. However, note that if some coworkers were to continue using an informal register before their boss

new creative realignments and authority challenges could arise in need of further negotiation among all hierarchies involved. Silverstein (1976), drawing on Jakobson's insights on the ubiquitous metalingual function of language (i.e., language about language, about the linguistic code), claims that most of the reflexive capacities of language are essentially metapragmatic, that is, most meta-linguistic activities are not about semantic understanding but primarily about the pragmatic use of language in interaction.

A constitutive characteristic of all utterances is that they anticipate the active, rather than passive, understanding of someone else. In other words, utterances have a certain *addressivity* built into them. The addressee can be a concrete participant or any abstract audience, including the un-concretized "self-other" of an internal conversation. According to Bakhtin, "both the composition and, in particular, the style of the utterance depend on those to whom the utterance is addressed, how the speaker senses and imagines his addressees, and the force of their effect on the utterance. Each speech genre in each area of speech communication has its own typical conception of the addressee, and this defines it as a genre" (Bakhtin 1986:95). In other words, it is the speaker's orientation toward different classes of addressees or audiences that shape and define utterances as token expressions of various styles or genres of speech. Thus, both the complete sentence and the lexicon as linguistic units of thought lack real communicative expression per se, since only the utterance form is constituted with the practical understanding of the other(s) in the horizon and hence can elicit an active communicative response.

The legacy of the Bakhtin school, with its emphasis on reflexive and indexical devices such as reported speech, has become evident in a growing body of research known as performance-based studies and ethnopoetics (e.g., Bauman & Briggs 1990). These studies take seriously Jakobson's insights on the poetic function of language as also being pervasive in everyday talk. While the metalingual function (see above) treats the linguistic code as its own referent, the poetic function manipulates the formal features of the code to call attention to its own stylistic organization and aesthetically persuasive possibilities. Through creative poetic play of figurative and metaphorical speech, quotation, proverbs, riddles, jokes, rhymes, insults, greetings, gossip, innuendo, and

various oratorical and rhetorical genres, as well as many other formal features of ordinary conversation, utterances can reframe contexts and signal meta-messages that may be quite tangential to their actual referential contents. the use of reflexive and indexical devices during interaction is seldom an innocent performance to build consensus in the reproduction of social orders. On the contrary, indexical and reflexive phenomena are never universally available to all members of society and are produced, circulated, and accumulated unequally in a “political economy” of linguistic exchanges.

Grammar itself is routinization, but by domination rather than innocent habituation, over choices of switchings among unequal social networks and interpretive domains. In this respect, we call on the insights of the sociolinguistics of pidgins and creoles as models for localized grammaticalization processes intrinsically embedded in relations of domination, and adapt them to any pragmatic situation where actors, fluent in different sublanguages and indexical subsystems, are forced to interact in a common *lingua franca*—thus not only trade posts and plantations, but multi-ethnic job places in any modern organization traversed by global networks of transactions and peoples as well. In other words, it is important to understand how grammaticalization, for example of social deixis in the modern corporation, results from multiple nested levels of registers and linguistic capitals that interact through various domination interfaces and netdom switchings of transposed “lexifier acrolects.”

Return to discourse: the stories and story-lines that circulate across netdoms and that construe identities, ties, and network cliques are seldom symmetrically co-produced by all the speakers of a participation framework. Thus speakers with stronger and durable footings in institutional settings have more metapragmatic influence and heteroglossic control in the Bakhtinian sense to frame the stories that capture their interactions. They are the ones who have a stronger “voice” in the messy co-production of stories. They manage definitions of situations through greater metapragmatic leverage and invoke speech genres and reported voicings, interactional times and ambiguities, which asymmetrically shape their emerging stories. Moreover, speakers with stronger metapragmatic footings have the power to indexically “entextualize” circulating stories and “close” or “open” their meanings to interpretive ambiguity