Keys to Cultural Understanding

Figures of speech are tangible manifestations of fundamental modes of perception and conceptualization.

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The ability to communicate through the use of language is peculiar to mankind (*1*). One of the simplest definitions of any language is that it is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which members of a social group cooperate and interact. Anthropologists view language as the basis for all cultural activities (*2*). Linguistic behavior is of course but one kind of human behavior—a most significant kind for analysis, however, since man in all his social relations depends on the use of language. Though the meanings of the arbitrary symbols that form any language are considered important by linguists, the basic concern of linguistic science in America has been with the structure and relations of linguistic symbols and with historical linguistics. The area not so well investigated is that of the relationship of language to culture (*2*).

The chief architect of this latter variety of linguistic study was Edward Sapir. He viewed language as a guide to social reality and held that human perception is conditioned basically by language. To him, even "simple acts of perception are very much more at the mercy of . . . words than we might suppose" (*3*). The work of Benjamin Lee Whorf on the behavioral effects of modes of perception and conceptualization reflects Sapir's influence. According to Whorf, the systems of grammatical structure in a language determine what the individual perceives, or can perceive; how he thinks, or can think, about his world. Language functions not only as a device for reporting human experience but also as a way of defining, analyzing, and organizing it through prescribed channels into meaningful categories for its speakers (*4*). Linguistics, said Whorf, is essentially the "quest of MEANING . . . a heuristic approach to problems . . . a glass through which . . . will appear the TRUE SHAPES of many of those forces which hitherto have been . . . but the inscrutable blank of invisible and bodiless thought" (*5*).

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Communication and Meaning

In the ever-constant process of communication people call upon the familiar expressions of their language—expressions which they have used in the past—sometimes attaching new meanings either consciously or unconsciously. Comparisons are made and analogies drawn. One thing is likened to another. In our own culture, for example, an intelligent person is said metaphorically to be "brilliant," respectable citizens are referred to as "pillars" of society (these individuals are the so-called "solid" citizens), and cunning behavior becomes "foxy." The names for various flowers provide examples of metaphor in abundance. The term *daisy* is properly *day's eye,* and was applied first to the sun and secondarily to the flower; larkspur, cockscomb, and even tulip and iris may all be traced to something considered similar by some innovator.

Metaphors commonly are based upon relativity of form, function, color, position (elevation, distance, in-ness or out-ness), proportion (size or weight), viability, resilience, validity, and so on. Generally there is a tendency to use "concrete" terms for abstract ideas, such as may be noted in proverbs, parables, and sayings. Similarly, through synecdoche, meanings related to parts expand to relate to wholes. Workmen become *hands,* an intelligent person is called a *brain,* and livestock numbers are designated by so many *head.* In parts of Malaya animals are tallied not by their heads but by their tails—so many tail of cattle. This practice extends even to the seemingly illogical custom of referring to frogs and other tailless creatures in similar fashion.

In metonymy one word is used for another with which its meaning is closely connected. The restaurant (or, ludicrously, the airplane or steamship) has an excellent *cellar.* We read *Whitehead, Virgil,* or *Shakespeare.* Examples from contemporary English usage could be added almost infinitely (*6*). The exercise need not be limited to English, for figures of speech are found in all languages. Philologists and linguists concerned with etymology explore such modes of expression with rich rewards. "If we would discover the little backstairs door that for any age serves as the secret entranceway to knowledge, we will do well to look for certain unobtrusive words . . . which, having from constant repetition lost their metaphorical significance, are unconsciously mistaken for objective realities" (*7*).

It has been pointed out by students of language that most languages actually operate with a rather limited lexicon. Basic vocabularies in common use differ in their extent to be sure, but none fully exhaust the potential of the language. In any language some words have multiple meanings. However, speakers, guided by context, usually are not troubled by semantic variations. Innovations which alter lexical meanings but do not change grammatical function are called *semantic* changes by linguists. Figures of speech, so innovated, are later transmitted to other speakers and achieve currency.

Home-Made Models

An analysis of the use of figures of speech in a given culture (insofar as they pertain to human relations) may provide insights unachievable through other modes of analysis, help to corroborate other findings, or both. Such an approach can serve as a tool for opening "the way to a broader analysis

which considers all the ways of organizing the world around us and the ways this is reflected in our social organization and the other parts of culture" (*8*). Figures of speech act as models which the people of a culture construct, sometimes consciously and sometimes unconsciously, to illustrate and define both social and nonsocial relationships. They may be termed the "home-made" (*9*) models which help people to define their universe and its workings, and which enable them to render the abstract concrete. The study of social organization deals with abstract relationships almost exclusively—relationships between individuals and between local and kin groups. In view of the prevalence of such relationships and the need to express abstract ideas, we should expect a widespread use of figures of speech in reference to societal organization. This situation seems to hold especially true in the Palau Islands of Micronesia (see Fig. 1). It is our purpose in this article to cite some examples of the use of figures of speech in Palau and to illustrate their significance in the general area of social organization (*10*). We occasionally cite comparable data from other cultures.

In Palau, as elsewhere, the fact that an utterance is actually a figure of speech is often overlooked by the speaker. The usage may be so accepted as a matter of fact and convention that even when the figure is pointed out, the speaker may not be convinced easily. A case in point has to do with the Palauan words for "five" and "hand." The terms are often cognate in Malayo-Polynesian dialects, as they are in Palau. There the term for "my hand" is literally "my five," referring, of course, to the five fingers. Other figures are more easily recognized by the person using the expression. For example, the little finger is called "child," obviously because of its diminutive size. In contrast, the middle finger is considered relatively more important and has the same name as that used to designate descent in the female line (*ochel*). Though features of bilateral organization are present in Palau, maternal descent is emphasized over paternal descent.

Another example of a term with accepted meanings being applied in another context is seen in the forming of the superlative in Palau. Maternal descent, as just mentioned, is emphasized in preference to paternal descent, though both are reckoned. Senior females in prestigeful kin groups, considered generally to be of high status, and women of advanced age are universally called "mother," whether or not there is a genealogical connection between them and the speaker. The positive values which accrue to the term for mother are readily seen in superlative expressions. Largest or oldest is *delal a klou* (literally, "mother of large or old"); best is *delal a ungil* (literally, "mother of good"); and highest is *delal a ngarabub* (literally, "mother of up"). This usage reflects an important organizational bias.

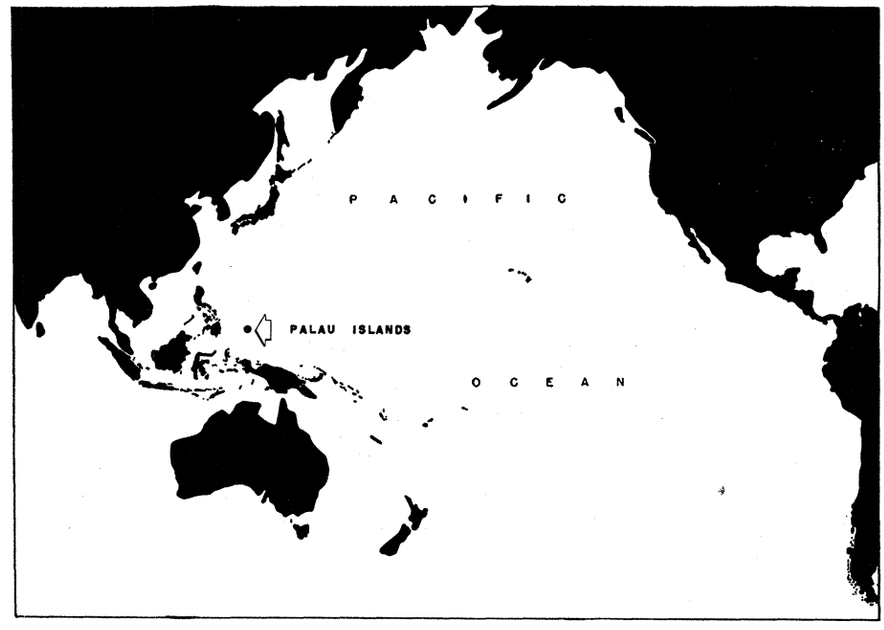

Fig. 1. Map showing the location of the Palau Islands.

Natural Prototypes

To Palauans a beautiful woman is a "comet." An illegitimate child is a "child of the woods or bush." The term for ocean current (*omtelub*) has come to be used to describe repetitive accusations. A Palauan born in a given village is said to be the "meat" of a certain nut (*techel a miich*) of that village. This expression illustrates one's extremely close relationship to his place of birth. The various developmental stages of a coconut also provide material for several figures of speech. One of the most notable of these is an honorific designation for elder females, who are called *mechas* (literally, "mature coconut"). In Hawaii a man without male siblings is called "a single coconut" (*11*). To Palauans, the first child is *ketingek* (literally, "my first child") from the expression *ketingel a du* (literally, "first fruit of the banana tree"). In contrast, the youngest child is called the "tail of the fish."

Figures of speech are used in Palau to refer to concepts of considerable magnitude as well as to those of relatively small proportions. The two territorial and political divisions of the islands in aboriginal times were referred to as *bital eiyanged ma bital eiyanged* ("other heaven or sky and other heaven or sky"). Often remarked upon in discussions of Palauan societal organization is the dual character seen in this last example. The presence of a dual system of organization can be seen throughout the social structure. Whole villages in aboriginal times were visualized as having a "right" and "left" side; *bital belu ma bital belu* (literally, "other village and other village"). This division was called "the split of the village" (*metiud a belu*). Corresponding to the scheme of village division in Palau was an institutionalized division of village age-grade societies. Theoretically, in each half of the village there were three men's clubhouses. Each half had its own water channel (*taoch*), which was used in the launching and landing of watercraft from that moiety. The division of the age-grade societies was conceived analogically; each group of three clubhouses was called a *taoch*. Just as the village was divided into two parts (*bital belu ma bital belu*), age-grade societies were

divided into *bital taoch ma bital taoch* ("other channel and other channel").

Figures of speech are sometimes used in reference to broad segments of a kinship system. Pehrson (*12*) has noted that the Könkämä Lapps use them in this way when they speak of a tree with its ramifying branches and root system to refer to kindred. On the other hand the reference may be relatively limited, as in Palau, where the complete analogy with a tree is not drawn, but where relatives separated by spatial distance (not by genealogical distance) are referred to by the term which denotes the tip of a tree branch. Similarly, the beginning (origin) of a sib is called by the same term as is used to refer to the stump (origin) of a tree. The term is usually applied to the earliest traceable ancestral female within a matrilineage. Such a person is also called "mother of the turmeric plant." This expression may be a combination of the use of the term *mother* in the superlative sense and a reference to the important turmeric plant as a kinship model.

The turmeric plant also serves as a model when a man wishes to designate his sister's children and the children of female nieces (his sister's daughter's children). These he calls by terms which refer to the roots of the turmeric plant (see Fig. 2). Such roots consist of tubers which are progressively farther away from the rhizome. A man calls his sister's children by the same term which is used to designate the proximal

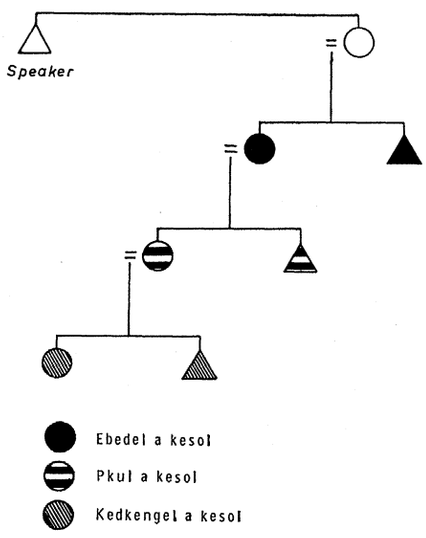

Fig. 2. Diagram showing the use of a natural prototype in a figure of speech. The ways in which a man refers to his sister's children and subsequent generations of offspring in the maternal line all relate to the turmeric plant.

	Nuclear Family	Extended Family	Lineage	Sub-sib	Sib	Super-sib
NATIVE TERM:						
oungalek	x					
talungalek	x	x	x	x	x	
keblil		x	x	x	x	(x)[1]
kleblil					x	x
blai	x	x	x	x	x	x

[1] occasionally

Fig. 3. Kin group terminology overlap in Palau. The terms *keblil* and *kleblil* are derivatives of the generic term for house (*blai*).

tuber, *ebedel a kesol* (literally, "close to the turmeric plant"), whereas a sister's female child's children are called by the name for the next nearest tuber, *pkul a kesol* (literally, "projection of the turmeric plant"). Offspring of the next descending generation in the maternal line are called *kedkengel a kesol*. The term *kedkengel* means "a new shoot" and is customarily used to designate a new shoot of taro.

Among the Kuma of highland New Guinea, references to an edible leaf symbolize kin relationships. Close kinsmen, such as brothers (same mother), are said to eat the same leaf. In recognition of cultural unity the same thing is said of less closely related and larger social aggregates. Alien groups or tribes are considered a different kind of people, since their edible leaf is not the same (*13*).

As noted above, figures of speech which make reference to body parts can provide additional significant cultural insights. In a manner similar to English usage, a village or sib leader in Palau is called the head (*ptelul*) of the village or sib. Moiety arrangements within kin groups are compared with legs because of the analogy with bifurcation. Groups of people within a lineage, sib, or super-sib who are assumed to be related by virtue of the fact that they are descendants of the members of certain ancient migrations are referred to as *bital wa ma bital wa* ("other leg and other leg"). This expression is applied as well to the descendants of two individuals who were closely connected, such as sisters by adoption, and to two kin groups which have been fused into a larger one. Descendants of relatively late migrations are referred to discriminatingly by Palauans as "wet legs." The reference defines those it is directed toward as having arrived so recently (though the migration may have been generations before) that their legs are still wet from having waded ashore.

An extremely close kin relationship such as that between the children of two sisters is referred to as "other stomach and other stomach—just one person." This reference recalls one found on Yap, where the kinship term *ngayil* refers to siblings born of the same mother and "is a contraction of two words meaning 'same belly' " (*14*). Commenting on the Chinese kinship system, Kroeber has remarked upon the presence of metaphorical supplements or qualifiers. An example similar to those noted for Palau and Yap concerns the use of the term *placenta* to denote "own brothers or sisters"—that is, siblings as distinct from cousins (*15*).

Relatively weak consanguineal ties in Palau are called *ngamkehui* ("a hair of the smallest diameter"). Figurative references to lineal descent are equally logical and, in at least one case, euphemistic. When referring to descent in the maternal line, the word for stomach (*delach*) is applied, whereas paternal descent is designated by the word for blood (*rasech*), which is a euphemism for semen (*tiied*). A final example of the use of a figure of speech having to do with body parts and social organization is the use of the word for heel (literally, "your first") to signify one's place of birth. Thus "your heel" and "your place of birth" are one and the same.

Cultural Prototypes

An intriguing aspect of Palauan societal organization is the extension through metonymy of the term for house (the physical structure) to refer to the group of individuals dwelling

therein. This may be either a nuclear family or an extended family. The term *blai* (literally, "house") by similar logic also is used to refer to larger kin groups whose members do not live together under one roof but who are related or are assumed to be related consanguineally. Thus, lineages, sibs, and even the more nebulous super-sibs are called *blai* as well (see Fig. 3).

Firth has noted a similar "predilection for using a word with a wide variation in meaning in different contexts" in Tikopia (*16*). He notes that the Tikopian word for house is *paito*. Through a transfer of meaning, the term not only refers to the family living in a given house but is the "recognized designation for the kinship unit constituted by a number of households living under different roofs" (*16*). *Paito*, then, are not necessarily localized residence units; they may be scattered through several villages. What is demonstrated here, and in Palau where a similar situation prevails, is that the relation between the physical structure and the kin group associated with it has been either consciously or unconsciously recognized and an appropriate term has been employed through the process of metonymy. In Palau the generic term for house (*blai*) is related (as *paito* must be) to the Indonesian root term for house (*balay*) (*17*). Through the addition of a prefix connoting mutuality and through conjugation for tense, the Palauans have developed several related terms for different levels of kin group membership, all of which may be traced back to the generic term for house.

Another usage which has its basis in the analogy between a house and a kin group has to do with incest regulations. When one makes a money payment in native bead currency to rectify incestuous behavior it is called "making the floor clean." Obviously, this is a euphemism referring symbolically to the "floor" of the house (kin group). The meaning is clear to Palauans, since close genealogical relationships are customarily indicated by saying that the individuals involved are all "people of one house" or that they are "people of one floor."

Aboriginally, one of the most distinctive architectural structures in the Palaus was the *abai* (council house or clubhouse) (see Fig. 4). Every village possessed several such structures, each of which was the result of considerable expenditure, physical labor, and artistic endeavor. Consequently these structures were very much valued and were maintained for many years, even after structural timbers had begun to sag with age. When an aged *abai* was in danger of collapse, owing to the weakness of its main support members, the custom was to provide external props of wood all around the structure. These angled from the upper sidewalls near the eaves to the ground. Analogously, a parallel between the *abai* and a kin group (sib or lineage) was drawn. The leader (senior male in the maternal line) of a kin group was compared to these supports. It was he who was viewed as the major support of the kin group and thus was referred to as the *tkakl a keblil* ("support of the kin group"), just as a wooden prop was called *tkakl a bai* ("support of the council house or clubhouse").

Seligman (*18*) calls attention to the practice of associating certain kin groups and title-holders with the posts of the *dubu* platforms and the steeple houses of Papua. He mentions the practice of dividing a structure into "front" and "back" halves and the relation of various clans with the halves and the structural posts they contained. This practice also occurred in aboriginal Palau, where council houses were divided into front (*ngelong*) and back (*rebai*) halves. Seating arrangements in front of the posts reflected the moiety alignment of the village sibs.

Within Palauan villages there exists a system of ranked sibs (unilinear consanguineal kin groups). The leaders and members of the four highest-ranking sibs are the elite. Traditionally, their will was the law of the village and they dominated all activities. These four highest-ranking sibs are called the *kloal saos* ("four posts"). The reference is to the four corner posts of a house or council house, which support the building. In like manner the four

Fig. 4. A contemporary council house in Ibukl village of Ngerechelong municipality in the Palau Islands.

top-most sibs support the village structure. The role of the sibs is aptly described metaphorically. In Samoa there is a comparable relationship between the two highest chiefs present at a meeting and the two main posts at either end of a round house. The posts serve as back rests, and at the same time they signify relative status. Other architecturally less significant posts serve similarly for lesser-ranking chiefs (*19*).

A common practice in Palau is that of utilizing terms usually employed in the designation of kinship (parent-child or sibling-sibling) to refer to villages considered to have especially close ties. Thus, a particular village is a "child" (*ngelegel*) or younger sibling (*chocholel*) of another village. There is a somewhat similar usage among the Mountain Arapesh of New Guinea. Beach villages are referred to as "mother villages," and the mountain villages are called their "daughters" (*20*).

Franz Boas remarked that to him it seemed that the relationship terms by which some of the Indian tribes of eastern North America designate one another were originally "nothing but a metaphorical use of these terms, and that the further elaboration of the social relations of the tribe may have been largely determined by transferring the ideas accompanying these terms into practice" (*21*).

In Palau the word for antagonist (*chesmachel*) is applied to certain male affinals referentially. A man will refer to his son-in-law (his daughter's husband) as *chesmechelek* (literally, "my antagonist"). The close connection between the methods of denoting relationship or kinship and forms of social organization has been noted many times since Rivers first pointed it out (*22*). Such a connection exists in Palau, where consanguineal ties are emphasized over and above affinal ones. It is not surprising, then, to find the term *antagonist* used in reference to certain affinals. What is seen is another case of the drawing of meanings from one context and their application with a common term to another.

Just as one figure of speech may emphasize the absence of close relationship (or even antagonism, latent or overt), another may point to its presence. The term *kaubekl* refers to a married couple and signifies their close conjugal relationship; it also refers to a type of canoe where the oarsmen are seated in pairs.

Summary

Figures of speech are tangible manifestations of deeply rooted modes of perception and conceptualization. They represent categories or models for interpreting the universe—natural and supernatural, and material and nonmaterial phenomena. These categories or models are reflected in all aspects of culture and are fundamentally determined by culture. They should not be considered universal but, rather, extremely relative and highly variable. Some students of language and culture, such as Whorf, would consider figures of speech not to be the most important organizing categories and would give precedence to grammatical constructions—that is, subject-predicate division or verb tenses. The use of figures of speech, however, is in some ways more easily investigated than grammatical categories, and their analysis can provide both unique and corroborative insights into various aspects of a culture, as has been demonstrated here with Palauan social organization.

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