Once More with Feeling: A Forbidden Performance of the ‘Great Speech’ of the Mopan Maya

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Abstract
The Great Speech of the Mopan Maya cannot be simulated, for fear of supernatural consequences. Above all, sexual partners may not engage in it. On one occasion, however, a Mopan husband and wife did agree to demonstrate this genre to me. They were well aware that what they were doing was highly taboo, as their use of containment strategies makes clear. I propose from this example that utterances which are immune to hedging by explicit quotation may nevertheless be mitigable by indexical double-voicing, because indexical double-voicing inverts the process by which taboo is produced. Indexical signs, with their necessary relation of form to content, are mobilized in taboo and ritual speech as semiotic icons of the desired necessary relations between proximate form and primary, authoritative motivation. Such an iconic function is unavailable to arbitrary symbols, whose sign relations are instead icons of contingency. [Keywords: Maya, respect, compadrazgo, taboo, arbitrary, indexical, double-voicing]
Introduction

Scholars of language since the days of Saussure (1983 [1915]) have recognized the arbitrary association of many linguistic signs with their meanings. Language users, too, sometimes incorporate such a belief into their everyday ideologies and practices of language (cf. Schieffelin and Kroskrity 1998). Following the terminology of Peirce (1978 [1934]), and the insights of Keller (1998), let us use the phrase ‘Symbolic’ philosophy of language to identify the belief that signifieds are arbitrarily related to their signifiers. Since they are without necessary relation to sign content, arbitrary linguistic signs normally rely on acquired conventions of association in order to function; a code that employed new arbitrary associations with each utterance could not be satisfactorily shared.1

Despite the large-scale reliance on convention in language, certain utterances do occur which present novel and arbitrary associations of sign form with sign content to interpreters. Such cases, for example, are presented by novel metaphors, in which familiar sign forms are paired with unfamiliar sign content, thus simultaneously showcasing and exploiting the arbitrariness of the sign for figurative effect. Romeo exclaims, for example, “Juliet is the sun!” In order to interpret such an utterance, hearers must turn to clues from motivated realms of sign use, since conventional associations have been tossed aside. Aspects of the utterance context, such as the identity of the speaker, and his or her probable states of mind (Grice 1989a), become paramount in interpretation of such sign uses. So strong in fact is its reliance on immediate pragmatics for the achievement of reference that novel metaphor cannot be transposed directly into reported speech without a quasi-ironic effect that appears to comment upon the original speaker (“It was time for the sun to go inside and wash her hair” [cf. Dobrzyńska 2001]).2 This is so because quotation introduces a second interpretive context, anchored in the here-and-now reporting event, within which the meaning of the quoted utterance must be interpreted (Voloshinov 1973 [1929]). In quotation of novel metaphor, the identity and circumstances of the original speaker, upon which interpretation of the original utterance so heavily relied, is severed by the introduction of this second context. It follows that in such cases, explicit statement of the fact of quotation, with reference to the original speaker, may be effective in rescuing the quoted metaphor (“It was time for the sun—as Romeo called her—to go inside and wash her hair.”). The effect of such explicit statement is to remove responsibility for the contextual associations that are necessary to interpretation of the novel
metaphor from the current, quoting speaker, and to place them back where they belong—with the original, quoted speaker.

It is easily observable, however, that cases exist in various times, places, and contexts, in which such explicit statements are utterly ineffective in insulating the quoter of an utterance from responsibility for its content. Such cases, for which I will use the general expression “taboo,” are amply exemplified in the papers of this volume. Taboo utterances rely upon what I will call a Symptomic set of understandings about language (Keller 1998), sometimes tacit ones, in which sign form is taken to be necessarily related to sign content through indexical relations of cause and effect, part-whole, or other kinds of (meta) physical contiguity. Under such a philosophy, the hearer need seek no assistance for the task of interpretation in the context of any utterance’s production—certainly not in “what is in the mind of the speaker.” Utterance effect is instead believed to be achieved regardless of such circumstances—regardless even of whether or not the hearer (or the speaker) actually understands the utterance. Such utterances therefore remain fully effective regardless of possible secondary contexts of utterance such as those found in explicit quotation. Adherence to a Symptomic philosophy corresponds to a belief that signifiers are related ‘naturally’ and of necessity to their signifiers, in a way that can be ideologically contrasted with the “non-natural” (Grice 1989b) relations of the arbitrary Symbol.

Like novel metaphors then, taboo utterances are resistant to double voicing, but it is for reasons and with effects that are diametrically opposed. Novel metaphor has semantic efficacy (at its best, it evocatively and memorably refers) that is carried largely by pragmatics. Taboo has pragmatic efficacy (at its ‘worst,’ it evocatively and memorably performs) that is carried by semantics (exact wording). Novel metaphor resists a second voice because the identity and circumstances of the original speaker are so necessary to its interpretation. Taboo resists a second voice because the identity of no original speaker is relevant to its interpretation. The identities of Animator and of Principal (Goffman 1979) are by this evidence fully fused in the taboo utterance.

In what follows, I discuss a particular kind of taboo utterance from Mopan Maya, that is—as the definition requires—quite immune to semantic double-voicing, but which turns out to be highly vulnerable to the effects of double-voicing when these are executed in the pragmatic mode. I propose that this is so because, where an overarching sense of necessity
("self-evidence") is what is desired, semiotic Symptoms (Peirce’s indexes) with their necessary relation of sign form to sign content, are able to function as semiotic *icons* of the desired necessary relations between proximate form and primary, authoritative motive. Such an iconic function in the linguistic construction of a sense of necessity is unavailable to semiotic Symbols, whose sign relations are instead icons of contingency.

**Compadrazgo and Respect (*tzik*) in Mopan Maya**

Among the Mopan Maya of Southeastern Central America (Danziger 2001), as in Latin America in general (Mintz and Wolf 1950), one category of recognized ‘kin’ clearly has no basis in genealogy, ‘blood,’ or genetic linkage. These are the highly respected relationships of *compadrazgo*, created and honored between two adults when one of them has sponsored the other’s child in a Catholic ceremony such as a confirmation or a marriage. I will argue that a sense of the natural (necessary, non-contingent) nature of these relationships, and of the cosmic order which sustains and requires them, is produced by Mopan actors largely through a particular type of speech behavior in which the strongest semiotic mechanisms are those which themselves rely on necessity for their signaling function. We will see from examination of a particular case of taboo breach in Mopan that, while sign relations in this type of speech are elaborately constructed as natural and necessary, and while they therefore resist double-voicing through explicit quotation—double-voicing in the pragmatic mode is successful in separating Animator from Principal.

Compadrazgo is an institution already well known from this region for the ritualized speech which it commands (cf. Haviland 2009) and for its quintessential nature as socially created. In Mopan, at marriage and other rite-of-passage ceremonies, the sponsors and the parents of the young protagonists establish their new relationship as compadres by means of a solemn ‘baptismal’ greeting (Kripke 1972). They address one another for the first time with the compadre terms in this greeting, and as they do so, they are believed actually to become relatives in the new status (Danziger 1996, 2001). Individuals who perform the greeting are understood to be legitimate cases of the right kind of relation, even if they were dubious candidates to begin with. And even sponsors who have performed all Church obligations but who do not perform the greeting will not be taken to be compadres afterwards.
A named genre of recognizably non-everyday speech called *Kichpan T’an* (Beautiful Speech) or *Nukuch T’an* (Great Speech) is used between individuals who are in compadrazgo relationship to one another. At the baptismal moment during the original sponsoring event and whenever they meet each other thereafter, individuals in these relationships use this Great Speech to address one another vocatively with the kinship-like forms *kompaade* [male Alter] and *komaade* [female Alter]. Ideally, everyone who occupies this particular kinship relation will always greet his or her Alter in this way. Since failure to do so would be construed as evidence that incest or other abominations have taken place between the two delinquents, the virtuous are motivated to produce such speech whenever it is required, even if only to display that no delinquency has in fact occurred (Danziger 2001).

Compadrazgo relationships are taken by Mopan to be at the apogee of relationships requiring ‘respect’ (*tzik*) behavior. In general, *tzik* precludes murder, dishonesty, rudeness, waste, sexual license, and laziness. In compadrazgo relationships in particular, *tzik* forbids the occurrence of any sexual encounter (the thought of such encounters provokes more horror than the thought of brother-sister incest) and it also proscribes most forms of levity, including laughter and even smiling. Tzik is explained or expounded upon as a matter of “not just doing whatever one wants.”

1) Those without *tzik*:  

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Le’ek} & \quad \text{a} \quad k’u \quad u-k’ati \quad b’et-e, \\
\text{The_one} & \quad \text{RELATIVIZER} \quad \text{what} \quad 3a-\text{want} \quad \text{do-TRANSITIVE_IRREALIS} \\
\end{align*}
\]

‘Whatever it is that they want to do,

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{tan} & \quad u-b’et-ik. \\
\text{DURATIVE} & \quad 3a-\text{do-TRANSITIVE_INCOMPLETEIVE} \\
\text{they} & \quad \text{do it.’}
\end{align*}
\]

This kind of respect, then, is constituted by the willing and obedient assimilation of personal practice to the dictates of a supra-personal imperative. The use of the Great Speech itself constitutes an instantiation of such respect.

Elsewhere (Danziger 2001) I have described how *tzik* (respect) is understood as being crucial to keeping the Mopan universe in good order. Mopan
people say that if tzik behaviors were to be abandoned, men would begin to marry their mothers and grandmothers, and also that articles of household furniture would turn into wild beasts and wander away. When tzik proscriptions are violated—or when such violation is contemplated—Mopan consultants express a feeling that ranges from principled disapproval to horrified outrage (depending on the particular violation and the identity of its perpetrators). Such reactions do not appear to derive from a sense that violators would have offended in any interpersonal manner either some reigning divine power, or social others in the secular community. Instead, they derive from an almost naturalistic understanding that if relationships among humans (and also between humans and nature) are not in good order, then disaster will necessarily follow. The offense would bring its punishment as a quasi-natural—not a social—consequence (cf. Frazer 1922). This understanding typifies the sense of necessary connection between action and effect that is the hallmark of what I am calling a Symptomic philosophy of language and behavior.

Using the Great Speech

When established Mopan compadres and comadres meet, each uses the Great Speech genre to ask elaborately after the other's health. They alternate over several speech turns to give thanks for any current good health, pointing out that we live in a world where sickness is omnipresent, devastating, and ultimately probably inevitable. Such exchanges can last 20 minutes or more. During their course, use of the address term (komaaade, kompaade) is recurrent. The speech displays many characteristics understood to identify “ritual speech” worldwide (DuBois 1986): Several of those features (semantic parallelism, honorifics/humiliatives, formulaic repetition) can be observed even in English translation:

2) Speaker Manuel Coy with compadre Jose Coy. Translation by Eve Danziger and Mark Wills. (A 25A 7:58):

Pes b’aalo kompaade,
Ma yan b’iki,
walak a b’etiki.

Well so it is compadre.
There’s no choice,
you just get on with it.
Here we are alive,
No-one is going to trouble to tell us
how much we have been granted.
One by one we are just here
to receive whatever (time) is given us
to briefly come onto the earth.

There’s no choice,
we have to accept,
we have to meet, apparently,
what we would little like to:
finishing
going home
as we humbly say.

But however little you humbly wish it,
It’s humbly only with breath/wind
that we live,
Only with breath/wind
that we humbly move ourselves about.

Even the holy trees,
the holy stones
they crumble,
they tremble.

But as for us,
only with wind/breath,
only with...with...our humble food
we humbly live.

We stay alive like this,
we humbly say compadre.

In the audio original, a distinctive “carrier intonation” is also readily discernible. This intonation, a low-voiced and rhythmic singsong, does not allow for the peaks and valleys of prosodic production that in everyday speech would identify moments of special emotional involve-
ment in the talk. Facial expressions are also carefully kept neutral during these exchanges, and speakers generally do not face one another or meet one another’s eyes. This is so despite the fact that the speakers clearly address one another throughout the exchange, using second person (singular) address at the appropriate moments, with at least an ostensible interest in specific particulars of this very addressee’s physical well-being. At no point does the speech become prayer in the sense of being addressed to a deity.

Let us use the term Animator for the producer of speech form and Principal for the persona who takes responsibility for speech content (Goffman 1979). DuBois (1986) points out that the effect of ritual speech features such as those that are readily observable in Mopan Great Speech is to depersonalize the moment of speaking so that the voice of any particular Animator merges with the impersonal or institutional voice of non-Animators (perhaps a god or group of ancestors), to produce authoritative, sacred, or “self-evident” (DuBois 1986) effect. This feeling of necessity—of imperviousness to individual will—is (perhaps ironically) quite diligently created by practitioners through behaviors of ostentatious self-restraint, in which any inclination to exercise individual control is displayed as having been virtuously erased. Through the creation of uni-vocality in this way (Bakhtin 1981), the occurrence of speech on this particular occasion is made to appear the necessary result of ancient or omnipresent forces, rather than the result of willful choices by individual mortals.

Ritual speech is to this extent, in fact, strictly parallel to what I have already described as ideal tzik behavior—and, perhaps, much of what is described as “ritual behavior” around the world: the actor is expected to visibly constrain his or her individual preferences in display of a willingness to abide by whatever cosmic precepts are in play. Individual behaviors are proscribed just because they are individual. The effect is to close the gap between Animator and Principal and, by eliminating the element of contingency that would be introduced by the appearance of any individual choice in the matter of production, to create that sense of a necessary rather than a contingent relationship between production of speech form and responsibility for speech effect which we started out to examine.

In the Mopan Great Speech, another recurrent feature (cf. lines 6, 13, and 16 in the excerpt above) bears striking testimony to the appropriateness of such an analysis:
We always (humbly) say

Repetedly, formulaically, this explicit quotative is part of all Great Speech texts. It acknowledges the non-spontaneous nature of what is said (it has been said before—in fact it is said habitually), while at the same time it does not abandon the first person (cf. Urban 1989). But the first person here is a first person plural, so that this particular Animator is presented as one of a multitude of those who also say, have said, and will say what he is saying. In using this formulation, the Animator over and over again commits himself to and enacts a voluntary unity with the plurality, in a move which recapitulates both the essence of Mopan tzik (willing subordination to the supra-personal) and that of ritual speech in general.12

A Forbidden Performance
To the extent that ritual speech features succeed in merging their Animator with supra-personal Principals, such speech should, by definition, be impervious to mitigation through explicit attempts to separate the Animator from other speech participant roles. Conversely, if speakers wish to separate their individual personae from those of the ritual Principals (for example, in order to discuss practical arrangements for the conduct of a ritual in progress), some or all of the ritual speech features will have to be abandoned. Any fully realized performance of this type of speech, in short, should count as effective, however explicitly hedged, and whether or not it is executed in good faith and under appropriate circumstances (cf. Silverstein 1996). In Mopan this is certainly the case. Participants are clear that no amount of explicit hedging can be effective in conferring immunity from responsibility for the consequences of any Great Speech performance. It is not possible to demonstrate or simulate such speech without being guilty of a violation of the cosmological order.

I discovered this when I attempted to get Mopan speakers to perform the Great Speech for me on tape, partnering with non-compadres for the sake of convenience. Such suggestions were rejected as impossible and wrong on several different occasions and by more than one person on
each occasion. Particularly horrifying to Mopan was my suggestion that, perhaps, a male speaker could demonstrate this type of speech in partnership with his wife—who would be the most accessible, knowledgeable adult in the vicinity. Recall that compadrazgo relationship and tzik behavior in general are disallowed with sexual partners.

While violation of respect proscriptions does meet with social disapproval, the outrage that greeted my suggestion did not appear to derive solely from the fear that participants in such a demonstration would have committed a merely conventional offense. Rather, a sense that disaster would automatically attend such simulation was paramount—even if the simulation was conducted with the benign motive of educating a foreign visitor about the glories of the Great Speech.

The example in (2) then comes from a Great Speech performance that was produced on a staged occasion for my benefit, but the occasion was not a simulated one. Jose Coy and I had made an arrangement a week ahead of time that Manuel, his brother and compadre, would visit his house for the purpose of performing this speech for me. Perhaps significant for what follows is the fact that, among the arrangements made ahead of time was an understanding that I would be willing to pay both participants for the time that they would spend making the tape for me.

Despite the staged, and arguably even slightly commercial, nature of the interaction, the Great Speech on the recording from which example (2) is taken was never understood by its speakers as anything other than a genuine occasion of greeting between the two compadres. Several frame-breaks appear in the recording, when the Great Speech register is momentarily dropped for the purposes of consultation and meta-arrangements. These are fully recognizable in their abandonment of all ritual speech features (According to my analysis, this is the same as saying that such frame breaks correspond to the linguistic re-possession by the Animators of individual responsibility for their words). During one such frame-break, I made the mistake of referring to what the speakers were doing as “demonstrating” the speech for me. I was emphatically corrected:

4) Jose Coy (large caps indicate emphasis):

Ma’ tan ti yee’-ik teche.
NEG DURATIVE 1A_PLURAL show-TRANSITIVE_INCOMPLETIVE 2_INDEPENDENT
‘We’re not demonstrating this for you.’
The prohibition on demonstrations of the Mopan Great Speech is one way of displaying that this is not speech one can choose to perform; that Animator is not just contingently but of necessity aligned with Principal. As with religiously oriented ritual speech, the entire force of the Mopan Great Speech genre is aimed toward keeping individual speaker and supra-personal authority together in this rhetorically self-evident and ostensibly ‘necessary’ way.

Nevertheless, I do have in my possession one recording of a very credible demonstration under inappropriate circumstances of this type of speech. A few weeks before Jose and Manuel Coy made the tape for me, I had made a similar arrangement with another family. But when I arrived at the house, the expected compadre had not turned up. The man of the house himself then offered to take me up on the suggestion that had been refused with outrage a week or so before—he suggested that he could provide the speech I wanted to tape by partnering with his wife. The recording which I then made constitutes an excellent forgery. My transcription consultant, a young educated villager, who later went through the tape with me, did not identify it as anything other than a genuine occurrence of a Great Speech exchange. The characteristic features of appropriate topic, carrier intonation, archaism, and honorifics are all present, in virtuosic performance.

5) A24A: 5.30

Leek ab’ee laji nooch winik. That’s what it is my good sir.
Nooch. It’s powerful [i.e., sickness]

Tz’i chelaanech ta kuuch. You are just humbly lying in your place.
Tan wuyik b’oon ora, You find out what hour
b’oon k’in what day
b’el u kaa u b’ete tech. it will work on you.
There are, however, some containment strategies associated with the forged text. Before undertaking the recording, for example, the speakers stipulated that they should remain completely anonymous in any re-presentation of the text that I might make. This strategy seems clearly aimed at containing possible social damage from their violation of respect prescriptions. But the existence of additional containment strategies testifies to the fact that social damage was not the only kind that was anticipated. In particular, as can be seen in (5), the speaker avoids use of the term “compadre” in direct address to her husband. Instead she uses a term of polite address that is not part of the respect lexicon (Danziger 2001), and that is normally appropriate for use from wife to husband. In his turn, her husband used the corresponding female Alter term when addressing her.\(^{14}\) Evidently the cosmically transgressive potential of violating such moments of direct address was even greater than that of the rest of the speech.

However, this particular containment strategy breaks down in the course of the tape. It transpired that in making their demonstration, my speakers had embarked upon a facsimile of the kind of speech that would be made on the first occasion of a compadrazgo encounter. After the initial greeting exchange, exemplified above, they entered into an exchange in which one of them was required to simulate asking the other to sponsor a child for Catholic confirmation.\(^{15}\) This led them inevitably to the baptismal moment, the pinnacle of respect observance, when two adults, formerly unrelated, first address one another as compadres, and by doing so create this enormously charged respect relationship with one another.

In genuine moments of direct compadrazgo address, such as those captured on the tape made for my benefit by compadres Jose and Manuel Coy, the tone is solemn and measured. Since Jose and Manual were already compadres at the time my tape was made, the moments of direct address between them are not baptismal moments. Even so, the seriousness of their enactment of this simple moment is apparent:

Ma’ a weel
waj ti b’eb’eeel
Ma a weel
waj ti jomolil,
ka jok’ok yok’ol a luumal
Walak ti wadiki.

You don’t know
whether it is forever
You don’t know
whether it is for a short time
that it comes out in your body
We humbly say

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6) Direct address (Jose and Manuel Coy, brothers and compadres)

Jose Coy:    Dios       Kompaade.
            GREETING    compadre

Manuel Coy:  Dios       Kompaade.
            GREETING    compadre

The moment of baptismal address in the forged text is rightly introduced with several turns of Great Speech which my speakers performed with complete fluency in appropriate register. But after this had been done, the speakers indulged in a frame break in which they briefly consulted and encouraged one another to go forward. The break is characterized by metapragmatic description of the target event, and by light laughter. The two then speak the solemn greeting in turn, with actual address in the forbidden manner. But, shockingly, their laughter carries over into the respect register, and into this apical moment of respect behavior.

6) Direct address (anonymous speakers)

M: (laughs) In tzik-ik-ech xan?

1A respect-INTRANSITIVE_INCOMPLETE-2B DISCOURSE PARTICLE

‘Should I respect (tzik) you then?’

W: (laughs) mmhmm

Eve: mm

M: (still laughing lightly) Dios Kompaade
    GREETING comadre

W: (still laughing lightly) Dios Kompaade
    GREETING comadre

My transcription assistant was openly shocked by this passage: “They shouldn’t laugh!” he exclaimed. But, let me be clear, he was shocked not because he detected the forgery at this moment, but because he did not.
His reaction in fact constitutes clear evidence that this intrusion of laughter into the respect greeting moment mitigated the speakers’ full participation in the Great Speech frame. Their laughter constitutes an indexical demonstration that their attitude toward their speech at that moment is not one of pure commitment. It proposes, rather, that they remain partially in the meta-frame.¹⁶

The laughter, then succeeded in doing what explicit hedging could not—it allowed the performers to speak their volatile lines while simultaneously declaring (in indexical mode) that their identities as Animators remained somewhat separate from those of the Principals whose voices they were allowing to be heard. This laughter, in fact, is a form of double-voicing, an indexical proposal that the speech that is performed is presented ‘in quotation marks’ (Voloshinov 1973 [1929]). As such, the laughter was indeed effective in breaking the sense of a necessary (indexical) link between Animator and Principal which underlies the non-hedgeability of taboo utterances in general. Perhaps most shockingly of all, by doing so, it demonstrated that such linkage was not in fact a ‘natural’ necessity. That is, arguably, the deepest level of the cultural understanding which, to my assistant’s trustful ear, was violated by the forgers’ laughter.¹⁷

**Conclusion**

For the speakers of this forbidden performance, their laughter is clearly a containment strategy. Momentarily, it mitigates the enormity of their transgression by rendering it less complete; it separates their individual, tittering Animators from the awe-some collective Principal of the speech they are producing. But, more importantly for our purposes, from the perspective of the transcription assistant, this laughter is not a containment strategy. Instead, since the assistant believes that the two speakers are truly compadres, it is for him the first instance of a breach of taboo. Outrage and shock are the natural reactions, since the entire force of the Great Speech genre is aimed toward keeping Animator and Principal together in a rhetorically self-evident and ostensibly ‘necessary’ way. This occasion of laughter undermines by demonstration the necessity of single-voicing which the entire speech genre in general aims to create. In turn, this example provides a way of understanding the phenomenon of taboo more generally.
When a sense of authoritative social or cosmological necessity is to be behaviorally produced, it will be important to occlude any whiff of individual will or other contingency in the production of the relevant behavior. In semiotic terms, this entails an ideological treatment of linguistic signifiers as if they were necessary ("natural") Symptoms and not arbitrary ("non-natural") Symbols of their signifieds. An observable outcome of this is the phenomenon of taboo, in which signifier and signified are seen as inherently, necessarily linked, and in which no distinction is made between the Animator and the Principal of an utterance, or between production of a semiotic form and production of its social-cosmological consequences.

Most importantly produced in the observance of verbal taboo under this analysis then is not so much a sense that speakers choose to comply, as a sense that they have no choice but to do so. Taboos exist in order to make this apparent. Virtuous speakers must not only take on the forms that signal identity of Animator with Principal, they must appear to do so of necessity, and not by the contingency of choice. The social undesirability of breach must be presented as physical impossibility—i.e., not a matter of deliberate and willed personal restraint, but one of relatively effortless submission to the proper laws of nature. In short, a Symptomic rather than a Symbolic philosophy of language must be mobilized.

Once this has been achieved (and to some extent in order to achieve it), explicit semantic hedging of quoted utterances cannot be permitted to be effective, because such hedging functions by creating a second context of utterance within which the utterance is to be interpreted—but context of utterance is irrelevant to utterance effect under the Symptomic philosophy. This is why taboo utterances have the peculiar characteristics that they do—namely, performative effect regardless of context of utterance or state of mind of the utterer. But, while thus immune to double-voicing in the semantic mode, we have now seen that ritual speech utterances like those of the Mopan Great Speech appear in fact to be somewhat vulnerable to double-voicing when it is made in the pragmatic mode, using indexical features such as an Animator’s laughter. This is, perhaps, partly so because pragmatic speech mechanisms are less available to ideological manipulation (Silverstein 1981). I contend that it is also so because double-voicing in the pragmatic mode has at its disposal the particular strength of “self-evident” iconic display which was the very modality in which—through speech features such as impersonal prosody which iconi-
cize necessity through their identity as indexes—the necessity of single-voicing was itself most powerfully produced in the first place.

I conclude by proposing briefly that this superiority of pragmatic over semantic speech features in the production (and consequently also in the subversion) of authority (cf. Bakhtin 1981) owes its existence partly to the fact that indexical speech features, unlike semantic ones, are able to iconically display, as well as to contextually indicate relations of necessity between Animator and Principal (between sign form and sign consequences)—and concomitantly therefore may also be mobilized to display their non-necessity). It is the double semiotic power of the index, which when deployed to signify necessity functions as both indicator and icon, that underlies the primacy of the indexical sign in taboo and other kinds of ‘replicatory’ ritual speech.

To conclude, the taboo word, in short, is definable as one that has been socially constructed as a semiotic index (its form relates directly and ‘necessarily’ to its performative effect). It is constructed as such largely to fulfill the additional semiotic function of iconizing its own indexicality. It exists and is observed to some important extent merely mainly in order to display its own necessity, and that of the social/cosmic order which it presupposes. When ruptured, its most corrosive effect is, in turn, also one of semiotic iconicity. There is no better demonstration than a successfully double-voiced taboo that the ritually proposed necessity of the authoritative merger of Animator with Principal has been defeated.

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ENDOTES

1Non-arbitrary sign modes can, of course, also make use of conventional associations, but the arbitrary is the sign mode that most requires them.

2This is one of the stronger linguistic arguments that I know of in favor of the (neo-)Gricean interactionist account of metaphor and against the organismic Lakoffian one (Lakoff and Johnson 1999).

3I use this word in its Pacific sense, which includes positive as well as negative dimensions of sacred performativity.

4Taboo utterances such as prayers can be fully effective in foreign languages—in fact they may lose their effect if they are translated, even if referential content and pragmatic context are kept identical. On the other hand, it is often possible to unhang the taboo by changing the form of words just slightly, as with euphemisms like “Jeepers!” etc.

5The analyst may, perhaps, be aware that such indexical contiguity—the fact that this form of words and not another is held to make the direct link to performance—is at some level other than that of speaker-interpreter philosophy a matter of arbitrariness and convention.

6The dichotomy natural/ non-natural as articulated by philosophers such as Grice is a startlingly clear example of the ideology that contingency (as opposed to necessity) in human affairs can only be the result of deliberate and conscious choice-making. Contingency resulting from emergent, non-conscious or ‘invisible-hand’ processes (cf. Keller 1994) are not recognized in this ideology.

7This dichotomy between novel metaphor and taboo aligns with one which has been noted in studies of ritual and religious speech between, on the one hand, speech anchored in the utterance context which is expected to express the immediate feelings and aspirations of the animator/author, and on the other, speech reiterated formulaically from revered existing models (Urban 1996, Shoaps 2002, see also Keane 1997, DuBois 2009). The peculiar forms of the latter kind of speech have been closely examined (DuBois 1986), and have been persuasively linked to the creation of social “self-evidence,” in a process by which one set of relatively creative “first-order” linguistic usages (Silverstein 1976, 2003) is related to a “second-order” set of socially created assumptions in such a way that the former can be taken for granted—‘naturalized’—, as if they were not socially created at all. In ritual speech this is often done by deploying speech features which propose that Animator and Principal are one; speech features such as impersonal prosody, which index (rather than stating) the identity of Animator with Principal are observed to be especially characteristic of this type of speech.

8I have known people decide not to become compadres with one another, despite the prestige involved, because they did not choose to undertake the level of interactional constraint that would be required in the new relationship.

9Mopan words in the text are underlined. Fuller Mopan locutions are set out as numbered examples with interlinear glossing and free translation. Orthographic conventions for Mopan follow those established by the Academia de las Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala (England and Elliott 1990). In this orthography, the apostrophe represents glottalization of the preceding consonant, or a glottal stop if it follows a vowel. Most of the character symbols otherwise hold values that will be familiar to readers of English, with the following exceptions: [x] represents the voiceless palatal fricative, [j] represents the voiceless glottal fricative, [a] represents the mid-central vowel, [tz] represents the voiceless alveodental affricate.

10I do not know what happens when an addressee is actually physically ill. At all occasions I have witnessed, the addressee responds that s/he is in good health, and to the best of my observation, this is apparently so.
Once More with Feeling: A Forbidden Performance of the ‘Great Speech’ of the Mopan Maya

17This does not of course exhaust Goffman’s distinctions, and later scholars (cf. Irvine 1996) have pointed out that the total possible number of distinguishable participants in any utterance is to be determined in cultural and situational context.

12While clearly a case of multivocality, this is not the diverse polyphony which Bakhtin (1981) describes—but neither does it have the monologic character of his epic. I am experimenting with the term “symphony” to characterize what is going on here.

13My best guess as to why this transgressive possibility was now offered is that perhaps there was a sense of contractual responsibility to me, combined with a desire to not to lose out on the promised fee for recording time which would otherwise have been forfeit.

14According to my notes, use of these terms was at my suggestion after the speakers showed hesitation, before beginning the recording, to use compadrazgo terms to one another.

15I had asked for a demonstration of Great Speech, without much understanding what would or would not be included.

16To my ear the laughter here does not sound mocking or amused. Rather, it is nervous laughter, bespeaking embarrassment or light fear. As the recording proceeds, the speakers are able to continue once again with straight faces, now actually addressing one another with compadrazgo terms.

17The value of the example is then, not so much in its documentation of the fact that some Mopan were willing to attempt a breach of the Great Speech taboo, nor even that they proved unable to carry off their taboo simulation without some apparently involuntary separation of their Animator from their Principal selves. It is in the opportunity that this example provides to verify from the reaction of a local who was not privy to the forged nature of the text, that the identity between Animator and Principal which the ritual speech effects is in fact vulnerable to their laughter.

REFERENCES


