

# The Contempt of Ritual. II

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by Mary Douglas

Ritual is pre-eminently a form of communication. Let us turn therefore to a modern sociologist who conducts research among ourselves into different patterns of communication. Professor Basil Bernstein says that

different speech systems or codes create for their speakers different orders of relevance and relation. The experience of the speakers may then be transformed by what is made significant or relevant by different speech systems. As the child learns his speech, or, in the terms I shall use here, learns specific codes which regulate his verbal acts, he learns the requirements of his social structure. The experience of the child is transformed by the learning generated by his own, apparently voluntary acts of speech. The social structure becomes in this way the sub-stratum of the child's experience essentially through the manifold consequence of the linguistic process. From this point of view, every time the child speaks or listens, the social structure is reinforced in him and his social identity shaped.<sup>1</sup>

He distinguishes two different types of linguistic codes. One, he calls the elaborated code, in which, as he says, the speaker selects from a wide range of syntactic alternatives, and these are flexibly organized; this speech requires complex planning. In the other, which he calls the restricted code, the speaker draws a much narrower range of syntactic alternatives, and these alternatives are more rigidly organized. The elaborated code is adapted to enable a speaker to make his own intentions explicit. It is adapted to the elucidation of general principles. It is the kind of speech I am using now. Each type of speech code is generated in its own type of social matrix. As I understand it, the differences between the two coding systems depends entirely on the relation of each to the social context. The restricted code is deeply enmeshed in the immediate social structure, utterances have a double purpose; they convey information, yes, but they also express the social structure, embellish and reinforce it. The second function is the dominant one, whereas the

<sup>1</sup>From a forthcoming paper entitled 'A Sociolinguistic Approach to Socialization', *Research in Socio-Linguistics*, edit. J. Gumperz and D. Heims; cf. 'Some Sociological Determinants of Perception', *Brit. J. Sociol.* 9, 159; "'A Public Language": Some Sociological Implications of a Linguistic Form', *Brit. J. Sociol.* 10, 311; 'Linguistic Codes, Hesitation Phenomena and Intelligence', *Language and Speech*, Vol. 1, January-March, pp. 31-46; 'Social Class, Linguistic Codes and Grammatical Elements', *Language and Speech*, Vol. 4, October-December, pp. 221-240.

elaborated code emerges as a form of speech which is progressively more and more free of the second function. Its primary function is to organize thought processes, distinguish and combine ideas. In its most extreme elaborate form it is so much disengaged from the normal social structure that it may even come to dominate the latter and require the social group to be structured around the speech, as in the case of a University lecture.

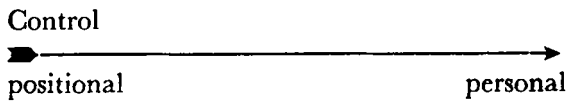
The elaborated code is a product of the division of labour. The more highly differentiated the social system, the more specialized the decision-making roles—then the more the pressure for explicit channels of communication concerning a wide range of policies and their consequences. The demands of the industrial system are pressing hard now upon education to produce more and more verbally articulate people who will be promoted to entrepreneurial roles. By inference, the restricted code will be found where these pressures are weakest. Professor Bernstein's research in London schools and families finds that the codes are instilled into children from their earliest infancy by their mothers. Each speech system is developed in its corresponding system of family control. He asks mothers of working class and middle class families how they control their children under five; what happens if the child won't go to bed? Won't eat? Breaks the crockery? From their detailed responses he constructs a distinctive pattern of values, a distinctive concept of the person and of morality.

Let me describe the two kinds of family role system. Restricted codes are generated in what he calls the positional family. The child in this family is controlled by the continual building up of a sense of social pattern, of ascribed role categories. If he asks 'why must I do this?' the answer is in terms of relative position: Because I said so (hierarchy); Because you're a boy (sex role). Because children always do (age status). Because you're the eldest (seniority). As he grows his experience flows into a grid of role categories: right and wrong are learnt in terms of the given structure; he himself is seen only in relation to that structure. The curiosity of the child in a working class family or in the aristocracy is harnessed to the task of sustaining his social environment. By contrast, in the family system which Professor Bernstein calls personal a fixed pattern of roles is not celebrated, but rather the autonomy and unique value of the individual. When the child asks a question the mother feels bound to answer it by as full an explanation as she knows. The curiosity of the child is used to increase his verbal control, to elucidate causal relations, to teach him to assess the consequences of his acts. Above all his behaviour is controlled by being made sensitive to the personal feelings of others, by inspecting his own feelings. Why can't I do it? Because your father's feeling worried, because I've got a headache. How would you like it if you were a fly? Or a dog? He is freed from

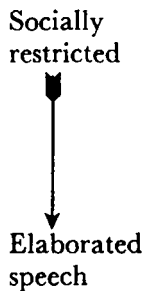
a structured system of roles, but made a prisoner of a system of feelings and abstract principles.

The personal system of family control is well adapted to develop verbal skills: the child will do better in school examinations as a result of his control of the elaborated code. He may shoot forward to the top of the wider society, become Prime Minister, Head of UNO, the sky's the limit. Underlying this family system is anxiety about the child's development and educational success. It is probably not inspired by ambition. More likely it is inspired by the knowledge that in a changing world the only ticket anyone can hold for staying in a privileged niche is education. The child is being educated for a changing social environment. As his parents move from one town or country to another in response to the need for professional mobility, the child grows in a family system which is unstructured, a collection of unique feelings and needs. Right and wrong are learnt in terms of his response to those individuals; he himself is seen in detachment from any particular structure. There is no need to indicate the clichés from the literary and philosophical output of the last 100 years which validate the system.

To sum up Basil Bernstein's work in a diagram: one line expresses the way that patterns of family control are progressively detached from the immediate social structure of the family and local community and progressively co-ordinated with the demands of the wider industrial social structure:



The other line studies the effect of the same industrial pressures upon speech and shows how it is progressively detached from its service to the immediate social context and elaborated for its use in the widest social structure of all:



In the process, note that as speech sheds its social harness, it becomes a very specialized, independent tool of thought. Basil Bernstein has plausibly suggested that the emancipation of speech

from social control underlies some variations in religious worship. The following table is the result of our discussions together. It is very impressionistic and designed more than anything to help you to follow in imagination the kind of transitions that we want to study.

TABLE I  
Speech  
socially restricted

A	C
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(i) Piety, Honour (respect for roles)</li> <li>(ii) formal transgressions against social structure</li> <li>(iii) self, passive, undifferentiated element in a structured environment</li> <li>(iv) Primitive: structural elaborations upon social categories, humans as cardboard allegorical figures</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(i) Sincerity, authenticity</li> <li>(ii) sins against the self, hypocrisy, cruelty, acceptance of frustration</li> <li>(iii) internally differentiated agent, attempting to control unstructured environment</li> <li>(iv) Romantic: triumph of individual over structure (escape, brief happiness, etc.)</li> </ul>
Family Control System	
Positional	Personal
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(i) Truth, duty</li> <li>(ii) Cardinal sin is failure to respond to demands of social structure</li> <li>(iii) active agent, internally differentiated, responding to roles</li> <li>(iv) Classical: triumph of structure over individual</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(i) Success</li> <li>(ii) generalized guilt, individual and collective</li> <li>(iii) subject alone</li> <li>(iv) Professionalism: concern with techniques of creative process</li> </ul>
Speech elaborated	
B	D
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(i) cardinal virtues</li> <li>(ii) cardinal sins</li> <li>(iii) the idea of the self</li> <li>(iv) art form</li> </ul>	

Admittedly, there are several difficulties about this table. To understand it we should look first at A and B. A represents most primitive cultures in which speech forms are firmly embedded in a stable social structure. The use of language is to affirm and embellish the social structure which rests upon unchallengeable meta-physical assumptions. In such a system we would expect to find that the admired virtues are those which unquestioningly uphold the social structure, and the hated sins are transgressions against it. Since individual motivation is irrelevant to the demand for performance, we would expect to find little reflection on the notion of the self; the individual is hardly concerned as a complex agent. On the contrary, the self is seen as a passive arena in which external forces play out

their conflicts. I found this idea in Godfrey Lienhardt's analysis of the Dinka concept of the self.<sup>1</sup> This would be the social structure to give rise to totemic thought systems and to art forms which celebrate social dichotomies and confrontations. In these the relation of the individual to society is hardly considered. This class emerges as appropriate to English working class and folk culture.

In square B, speech and thought have been elaborated as specialized tools for decision-making, but the social structure still retains a strong grip on its members, even to the extent that its underlying assumptions are not challenged. Elaborated speech in this case is still in the service of the social structure, but uses the philosophical reflections at which it has become adept for examining and justifying those assumptions. This would be the square for Aristotle. The result of this reflection of speech and thought on the social structure would be an awareness of the demands of the latter upon the individual and of the possibility of the individual not responding adequately. Truth and duty, I suggest, are the primary virtues. They express the confidence that the social structure rests upon a rational foundation which justifies its claim to allegiance. As a result of the capacity for reflection and as an expression of the new independence of thought, we would expect the self to be accorded a much more active role. The danger of the individual rejecting the claims of society would here be recognized, though condemned. Does it help to suggest that classical drama, *Oedipus* and *Le Cid*, depicts these attitudes?

In squares C and D the social structure has lost its grip. Square C, according to Bernstein, is unstable, a transitional phase. For example, a mother of middle class education and aspirations, married into a working class environment, might bring up her children by the techniques of personal control, but through the rest of their social relations they would be obliged to use speech of the restricted code. Here the individual is valued above the social structure; hence the literature of revolt, Rimbaud, D. H. Lawrence and Ibsen.

In so far as there is a literature for this square, we have to assume that individuals reared in it have made in their life-time the move from C to D, have become verbally articulate in elaborated codes.

We can understand square D most easily for it includes ourselves. I cannot go further without trying to be more specific about who, in our contemporary society, fits into squares B and D. What is the distribution of people using elaborated speech codes between positional and personal family control systems? Start with square B. The positional family develops on the assumption that roles should be defined clearly and the elaboration of speech, in so far as it is used to sustain role patterns, reduces ambiguity. Here we would expect to find upper classes whose aspirations are relatively fixed and whose role structure is clearly ascribed. Also certain sections of the middle class will be here. The military profession, for example, demands

<sup>1</sup> *Divinity and Experience*, 1961, pp. 49-50.

unambiguous allocation of roles; the legal profession lives by reducing role ambiguity. There are other educated sectors of modern society whose profession encourage them to favour positional control systems. The work of engineers, concerned primarily with relations between material things, does not lead them to use the elaborated code to reflect critically on the nature of social relations. That they should tend towards positional family systems becomes clearer when we see how square D is filled. Here are the people who live by using elaborated speech to review and revise existing categories of thought. To challenge the received ideas is their very bread and butter. They (or should I say we?) practise a professional detachment towards any given pattern of experience. The more boldly and comprehensively they apply their minds to rethinking, the better their chance of professional success. Thus the value of their habit of thought is socially confirmed, and reinforced. For with the rise to professional eminence comes the geographical and social mobility that detaches them from their original community. With such validation, they are likely to raise their children in the habit of intellectual challenge and not to impose a positional control pattern. How much more likely are they to prefer personal forms of control if the area of their professional thinking deals with human relations: psychologists, anthropologists, novelists, philosophers, political scientists. The professions which deal with the expression of personal feelings rather than with abstract principles are also found here. This is the square in which ideas about morality and the self get detached from the social structure. This would be the niche in which to consider Existentialism and the deep preoccupation of our day with the technical process of artistic creation.

From this scheme Bernstein has suggested (personal communication) three types of religious behaviour.

## TABLE II

- A God—attributive  
Theology—implicit  
Cult—ritual
  
- B God—attributive  
Theology—explicit categories  
and logical discriminations  
Cult—ritual
  
- CD God—personal relation  
Theology—blurred distinctions  
Cult—un-ritual

As with the idea of the self, so with the idea of God. It is progressively disengaged from the social structure in which, in square A, it was firmly embedded. A movement from ritualism to anti-ritual is predicted, since (as I argue) ritual only flourishes where the social structure validates symbolic categories. Square A would include

Judaism, Square B, the Catholicism of Aquinas and of the now despised 'Penny Catechism'. The last place would be filled by various forms of Protestantism, in which the main content of religion is the personal, affective relation of God and self.

These tables are merely suggestions of how the idea of God, of the self and of ritual may be related to the social structure. Their object is to show what kind of hypotheses an empirical religious sociology might profitably entertain. They are to help us to understand the kind of pressures which lie upon ourselves and which form our views of what is the right and proper way to approach God.

Let me pause to consider which is the best kind of home for a child to be brought up in. Surely the judgment is impossible? Myself, I favour the picture Bernstein draws of the working class or of the aristocratic home in which the structure of roles draws everything else in to the task of expressing and maintaining itself. The child is learning an external social structure; everything is fixed by rules; he carries little load of responsibility for deciding between right and wrong. He does not have to imagine the sufferings of the toad under the harrow. The home is more full of wit and laughter, for a strict set of role categories is the basis for endless banter about attempts to evade or usurp obligation. This positional child who knows the patterns in which he belongs cannot understand the anguish which Sartre has described so poignantly in the biography of his first ten years of life (*Les Mots*, 1964). The young Sartre was tormented by the consciousness that his existence had no necessity. How to justify his existence in a patternless adult world which made unconvincing pretence of needing him for his uniquely lovable personality? This dominant anxiety of childhood is clearly related to his later philosophical position. Bernstein suggests that problems of self-justification arise in the personal family—and was not the Reformation about the problem of Justification?

As a final defence of Bog Irishism, let me refute the idea that the child reared in the personal family has more capacity for affection and deep personal commitment. On the contrary, it must be more difficult for him, for whose unique feelings everyone has always expressed concern, to value others more than himself; more difficult for him to be bound by promises, more difficult to draw moral lines. Unquestioned boundaries have not been part of his upbringing. Of the two kinds of commitment, the personal, affective one is probably less firm than the positional, ritualist one. Ionesco has given a moving description of his wife in extracts of his journal (1966) which I take as a model for Bernstein's ideas of a positional woman. He himself, highly articulate, mocker of established categories, clearly belongs in class D. She is not very verbal, she mostly says 'I told you so' or 'Why did you ask them to dinner without warning me?' She appears in most of his dreams,

the perfect partner is dialogue, above myself and another facet

of myself, sometimes like a shadowy figure, sometimes scolding and critical, sometimes the voice of conscience, sometimes a formidable adversary. But she is there. Obviously, she shares my fate, whether I want her to or not or whatever the degree of my wanting or not wanting. Were she no longer with me she would feel hopelessly distraught and anguished, lost in a chaotic world, a world deprived of its foundations . . . poor dear little wisp of a thing, little wisp of being weighed down with anxiety, suffering and love. I see her tiny figure darting like a squirrel from one room to another, from one section of my book case to another, tidying things up, sorting them out or looking for some object, a pencil or glasses, that I just mislaid for the hundredth time in the past half hour. Our home seems like a vast domain to her and like a meticulous ant, she is always busy putting things in order. She feels most at home in my study, sorting out my manuscripts. Here she feels happy, she is much more at home here than in the rest of the flat. Her world, or rather the centre of her world, lies here; here she finds the kind of air she can breathe. I myself am her domain, as if I were a house of which she were the tenant. . . . I am her abode. Where else would she live? (*Encounter*, XXVI, 2nd February, pp. 3-20; XXVI, 5th May, pp. 29 seq.).

In the way this woman relates to her husband we have a strong echo of some primitive religions. Not verbally or intellectually, but in tidying and ordering, her mute service recalls primitive rules of purity which enact the categories of God's creation. Here is the basis of ritualism, as a way of living and a form of worship. I cannot see why our pastors should value it so little.