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ABSTRACT

The distinction between the value system and the unconsciously held assumptions of a culture is clarified in this paper. The underlying structure of the sociocultural whole of a particular society leads the author to explore culture's "ground of meaning" in terms of main themes. A tentative summary of the value system of French culture is proposed under 12 of these main themes which include: (1) individualism, (2) intellectualism, (3) art of living, (4) realism, (5) "le bon sens", (6) friendship, (7) love, (8) family, (9) religion, (10) justice, (11) liberty, and (12) country. A brief classification of the assumptions most characteristic of French culture is included. [Not available in hard copy due to marginal legibility of original document.] (RL)

Culture-Wide Values and Assumptions as Essential Pedagogical Content

Howard Lee Nostrand, University of Washington, Modern Language Association Conference 21 (How To Teach the Culture in a Language Program), 27 December 1967.

Once the teacher has decided that he wants to impart an understanding of a foreign way of life, the next question is what to select from the immense socio-cultural whole, as the points he considers essential to teach. This question must be answered, in the interest of a necessary economy of effort, before one goes on to inquire how each essential should be defined, what structure makes the essentials understandable, and lastly, how the materials and structure can be unfolded within the growing comprehension of the young learner.

The essentials, I propose, must by nature be generalizations which confer significance upon concrete "facts." The so-called facts do not spontaneously produce an enlightened conceptualization. There was once a German archeologist who deeply impressed the caretaker at Machu-Picchu. "Ah," said the caretaker afterward, "he was the one who really understood what I showed him. He paused before each ruin, nodded his head slowly, and said: "Hmm." The caretaker might be right; but his archeologist imparted no understanding. By letting the stones speak for themselves, without hazarding a generalization himself, he achieved only to look profound and objective. If his hearers happened to be interpreting the concrete data wrongly, against irrelevant and misleading assumptions drawn from their own culture, they continued to do so.

In the quest for enlightening concepts we must sharply distinguish between descriptive generalizations, which can be empirically verified (assuming that their underlying assumptions are accepted), and explanatory or interpretive generalizations both of which are much more tentative.

Explanatory generalizations are tentative for the reason that they allege causes, and we always run the risk of overlooking some factors in the total causative situation. Interpretive generalizations are tentative because they venture to place a situation-specific description within a larger construct: that is, to subsume the descriptive generalization under a larger generalization at a higher level of abstraction; and these larger constructs are in a continual state of building and rebuilding as we revise one or another of their constituent parts. We must continue to live with the tentativeness of explanations and interpretations, as in fact open-minded people have always done. For the little generalizations we can establish scientifically are too numerous to juggle, and at the same time they are too few and far between to be usable as the basis for judgment and action. They have no explanatory power, and their predictive power is limited to the specific type of situation they describe.

Two areas in a sociocultural fabric prove especially rich in the sort of generalization that helps one to explain, interpret, and predict, within a wide range of behavior. These two areas are the value system of the culture, and its assumptions (many of them held unconsciously most of the time) concerning the nature of man, society, and the human situation.

Values differ from assumptions of fact in that they center around an aspiration or a choice or judgment: in a word, a value centers around a directive toward some desideratum which lies outside the existing situation. Yet the line between the two categories marks only a difference in emphasis. Every value can be expressed as an assumption of what ought to be; and every assumption contains an implicit directive to choose the view it embodies. Furthermore, items shift from one category to the other. Our own life and health, for example, are tacitly or unconsciously assumed as facts until there is a question as to whether they can be counted on to continue. Then they become values until they are assured and assumed again.

Together, the two categories of values and assumptions make up the culture's "ground of meaning: the habitual behavior patterns which very nearly determine what

the bearer of the culture will perceive, how he will classify and structure his perceptions, and to a lesser but still significant extent, his thought processes and emotional reactions.

Let me be careful not to seem to say that the ground of meaning is all one needs to know of a people's life, or that it is a self-dependent part of the whole. On the contrary, it is interdependent with other very important features of the sociocultural system. It evolves with the empirical knowledge of the population, its language, art forms and other systems of symbols. The values and assumptions are given particularized forms, moreover, in the norms that define the social roles whose interaction constitutes the social institutions. The same values and assumptions are again particularized in the ecology of the people: its interaction with the physical and subhuman environment. And lastly, the shared ground of meaning enters into the unique personality of each individual as he reacts in his own way to each pattern of the surrounding society -- conforming, or rebelling, or exploiting. But precisely because of all this interaction on several fronts, the generalized, culture-wide values and assumptions occupy a central place in the sociocultural system. If they are grasped and applied with the prudence that makes generalizations serviceable for the educated mind, these partial truths can decidedly help a teacher to impart something of his lifelong experience to the student who cannot afford a lifetime of contact with the one foreign people in question.

The last of the contentions I shall present here, still in the spirit of inviting discussion, is that a culture's ground of meaning can be organized the most compactly under "main themes" of the culture at a given moment. I mean by "theme" a value, accompanied by the relevant assumptions and by the particularized forms of the value that are applied in practice. The number of main themes in a culture, as Morris Opler has observed, tends not to exceed a dozen or so, perhaps because proliferation may be inhibited by the painfulness of value conflicts.

The following list of purported culture-wide French values and assumptions may not be too sketchy to suggest the sort of generalization that I propose should be refined, nuanced (for regions, social classes and age groups), and utilized in imparting the cultural context of a foreign language and literature. These summaries have been translated and abridged, with a few additions, by Tora T. Ladu, North Carolina State Supervisor of Modern Foreign Languages, from "A la recherche des thèmes majeurs de la civilisation française contemporaine" and from "Le Substrat des croyances inhérentes à la conscience collective française" (Sections I.A and I.C respectively of my Background Data for the Teaching of French, 1967, Part A, La Culture et la civilisation françaises au XXe siècle, pages 77-103 and 123-147). I am grateful to Mrs. Ladu for the permission to quote the summary of the values, and the recapitulation of the section in which she summarizes the assumptions of French culture, from the current draft revision of the North Carolina State guidelines for foreign-language teachers. The assumptions are here listed separately from the cores of the main themes, since this presentation is intended to facilitate the designing of instructional units, and we believe it best to utilize each illustrative moment in the language or literature course as the occasion for introducing just the element of the ground-of-meaning that we can defensibly claim is illustrated at that point.

The Value System of French Culture: Tentative Summary

It is necessary in studying a culture to make some generalizations but one should also distrust them. Values, assumptions, social patterns and institutions all interact, and they change with the rapid evolution of modern society.

1. L'individualisme

The French understand by individualism a high degree of personal independence, which gives rise to several principles for living: to keep always intact and authentic one's own personality, to cultivate a critical mind, and to protect one's independence against importunate demands and against authority.

The Frenchman seeks to develop and progress as an independent entity rather than as a part of a team or a community. He tends to regard the world around him somewhat as a detached observer; therefore he tends to put a relatively low value on civic responsibility and civic discipline. He wishes to have the least possible contact with authority, either political or religious. In a word, the Frenchman resists everything that tends to destroy his independence.

2. L'intellectualité

This theme has sometimes been called "method" or "reason." The French mentality is distinguished by its conscious preoccupation with intellectual methods: methods for observing closely, reasoning logically, and expressing exactly one's thoughts and ideas. The French have developed to a high degree the art of observing human nature and of examining it methodically, on an intellectual level. The Frenchman savours the paradox, the witticism, the "jeu d'idées." He has a high regard for the intellectual and for the education that shapes him. Despite the greater preoccupation today with the practical and the material life, intellectuality persists in the French mentality as a national quality justly admired by the foreign observer.

3. L'art de vivre

This art means, first of all, for all classes of French society, a love for all the little pleasures of daily living, such as the delight of savoring a well-seasoned dish or tasting a good wine, the enjoyment of good conversation at a meal, the attempt to express one's own personality through the decoration of the home. The appreciation of the little pleasures imparts to French life a certain esthetic orientation, manifest, for example, in the idea that there must be certain norms, such as standards of good taste, and moderation in all things. (The acceptance of the "Académie Française" as an institution reflects the willingness to accept norms of good usage in language.)

The French who continue the aristocratic tradition of classicism and of the ancien régime consider all life as a work of art. This is expressed in the concept of elegance, whether in the turn of a phrase in conversation, in the "composition" of a meal, or in the perfect finish of a woman's costume. Elegance requires politeness, as a rule of the game and not necessarily as an expression of sentiment. It requires a gracious reserve that the cultivated Frenchman calls "la tenue." This tradition of refinement remains for the foreign visitor something characteristic of France even though the new generation is rather rapidly altering it.

4. Le réalisme

French realism, joined to intellectuality, is characterized by a methodical effort to see everything clearly, devoid of any prejudice. For the Frenchman, to face realistically the things that cannot be controlled requires the resolution to accept the disagreeable and the painful without sentimental whim. A typically French method is that of holding a problem at arm's length, so to speak, in order to examine it objectively and put it in its place.

French realism is also manifest in the manner of regarding time and space. The French look far into the past and take an equally long look into the future, and yet they are oriented to the present. The periods of grandeur are so numerous and so diverse in the history of France that the mentality of contemporary Frenchmen

varies according to the tradition with which each individual chooses to identify himself.

The geographical horizon is today broadening. The French in general realize that their country is too small to remain independent, that it is necessary to co-operate with their neighbors and to be interested in the affairs of the entire world. The prosperity of recent years and the change in attitude toward money (they spend more and buy on credit) has caused a greater preoccupation with the material benefits of modern life. Therefore one finds today a conflict between the traditional values and the demands of modern society. There exists in France an increasing consciousness of this change.

5. Le bon sens

This universal value is shared by all cultures but "le bon sens" of the French is distinctive nevertheless, partly because it is influenced by other themes in the French system of values.

The French "bon sens" is made up, in part, of particular ideas of moderation and happiness. Prudence, as everywhere, forms the basis of this theme of practical wisdom.

Prudence, as expressed in the ideas of foresight and economy, is disappearing in this era of prosperity, as we have seen elsewhere. But prudence means also a distrust of chance, and of anything new and unaccustomed, including "les étrangers." From this comes an attitude of seeking only a "modus vivendi" with foreign nations.

Moderation in French culture has a broader sense than the prudent distrust of extremes. The French apply it to all leading ideas of their life. For example, happiness is for them an ideal chastened by experience; it does not mean a constant state of enjoyment nor a continuous production of brilliant works. The ideal of "la juste mesure" guides their effort to make of life a pleasing work of art.

6. L'amitié

The French, in general, have a small circle of intimate friends. It is often

the parents and the circle of their friends which furnish the possibilities for friendships among children and young people. Today, more and more, young people choose their friends outside the family circle without consulting their parents. Friendship is probably, among the major themes that have remained since ancient times, the one whose ideal and practice have varied the least in the course of twenty centuries.

7. L'amour

Since the Middle Ages, variations on the theme of love have held an important place in French literature. It was a part of the art of living and a technique to cultivate according to the literary styles in vogue, but the second world war brought an end to this "mystique" maintained through the centuries. The new generation is much more realistic, and love with its many facets,- sentimental, physical, literary, and intellectual - is tending to be considered less important. The French woman no longer seeks idyllic love but has a more sensible outlook. "Le grand amour" outside of marriage is rarely found. People no longer have the time and no longer believe in it. Man and wife tend to become partners whose common interest is the intelligent management of the household and the family property.

8. La famille

The French family is both a social institution and a cultural theme. On the cultural level this concept enters into the interaction of the system of values, and on the social level, into the interaction of persons and groups. Today the institution and the theme (value) are both undergoing a rapid evolution.

The character of the family varies according to the social class and according to whether it is rural or urban. The old provincial traditions are found today chiefly among the peasants. The former autocratic character of the father is gradually giving way to a kind of equality among all members of the family, especially in the urban working classes. Women are becoming more and more independent. One of every two works. The noonday meal, a rite that through the

centuries united members of the family, is becoming less common in the large cities because of the difficulties of crowded transportation. On the other hand the prevalence of the automobile, camping, and television brings about a comradeship among parents and children which satisfies the emotional need for security and affords a refuge in the midst of a vast industrial society.

As a cultural value, the family is the object of a loyalty above all other social loyalties of community or nation. For people who mistrust outsiders, the intimacy of the home must be inviolable and can be shared only with trusted friends. Although less strict than formerly with their children, the French still seem to think it belongs to adults to mould the character of the children, acting on the assumption that human qualities are not innate. From childhood on, the family symbolizes the restraining and stabilizing forces of society.

9. La Religion

Like the family, religion is both a cultural theme and a social institution. Religion signifies personal convictions, an historic dogma, rite and its system of symbols, the social communion of a congregation of believers, and finally, the church as an institution.

In France, personal convictions vary greatly. Religion as a cultural theme dominates the life of a minority of true believers; it exerts a more or less strong influence on a middle group, while at the other extreme are the anti-clericals who think that all organized religion is noxious. The greatest proportion of anti-clerical opinions is found in the urban working class. In spite of the variation of religious attitudes, most Frenchmen believe that the Church should no longer have any secular authority, especially in the matter of education.

10. La justice

The Frenchman does not expect to be treated with indulgence nor even with kindness, but he does claim the right to justice. "C'est injuste" is one of the most serious reproaches that can be made to anyone in authority.

Equality is a part of the same theme. There is no conflict between justice

and equality because the latter means "distributive justice" which has been one of the constants, since the eighteenth century, of the French concept of justice. To the humanitarian spirit has been added a new moral obligation of the privileged, goaded on by the increasing demands of the less fortunate, so that justice today requires the availability to everyone of a rising minimum of material comfort and of education.

11. La liberté

The French conception of "liberté" requires above all the political and social conditions demanded by individualism. The French resist, sometimes to the point of lacking civic discipline, all authority that tends to restrain their freedom of action and of thought. The restraints imposed by the state or by "le patron," however, are considered exterior forces, whereas social or religious obligations are identified rather with the choice of the individual conscience. One finds in France a great variation in the conception of freedom, from the conformism of the most conservative small community to the broad view of the cosmopolitan milieu. The jealous defense of individual independence permits one, without the risk of criticism, not to belong to a group and not to participate in a collective effort. The French regard society as a mutual arrangement among autonomous individuals, who may sometimes yield to common standards and again may change these standards to suit their own particular interest.

12. La Patrie

French nationalism is personified in "Marianne," a concept of a cultural, non-political entity. France has survived a long succession of monarchies and republics. The French consider their nation a kind of scale-model of human civilization and their style of national life as a universal ideal. The French tend to consider themselves not as one society among others but as an aggregate of individuals, with independent opinions and differing tastes. At the cultural level, a Frenchman feels his identification with the many manifestations of French civilization.

Traditionally, regional differences in France could be easily seen by the foreigner and considered evidence of a lack of unity and social integration in the nation. Years ago one could tell the regional origin of a French person by his accent, his dress, and even by his way of thinking and feeling. "In the last fifteen years, however," says Laurence Wylie, "a new sense of solidarity and cooperation has developed among the French. With lessening of a number of barriers which have traditionally separated the French from one another - regional differences, class distinction, the conflict between rural and urban points of view, and religious divisions - France has become socially much more tightly integrated."*

13. Underlying Assumptions of Fact

The underlying assumptions of a culture are difficult to describe since they are more unconscious than conscious and therefore have not been made the object of an abundant documentation. In this they differ from the values, or "themes," which are subjected to constant discussion.

Five universal problems of cultural orientation have been selected as crucial and common to all human groups. These are Human Nature, Social Relations, Man and Nature, Time, and Space. The assumptions which appear most characteristic of French culture are indicated below**.

1. Human Nature: a. The ego as a discrete entity, b. Humanity as an acquired characteristic. c. Reality versus appearance.

2. Social Relations: a. Primacy of the individual over the group. b. A vertically structured society. c. Cautious attitude toward the outsider.

3. Man & Nature: Adaptation of man to nature in order to utilize it.

4. Conception of Time: a. The present viewed in a long perspective. b. History as a storehouse of models.

5. Conceptual Organization of Space: a. France as a focal point. b. Radial organization of space. c. Current enlargement of the international context.

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*Wylie, Laurence. "Social Change at the Grass Roots," in In Search of France, Harvard University Press, 1963, p. 197

**See Nostrand, op. cit. pp. 123-147