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ABSTRACT

A model for interpreting the role of clothing in society and culture is presented. From the point of view of the wearer in any culture, the decision as to what to wear is based on two kinds of information: the nature of the occasion and the wearer's image of his social identity. People, therefore, use clothing to project information about themselves. An analysis of the clothing behavior of Tzeltal speaking Tenejapa Indians of Chiapas, Mexico, initially shows clothing as a symbol of ethnic differentiation from Spanish-speaking Ladino families. Within the Tenejapa society, there are accepted combinations and types of clothes for specific occasions which express the wearers' social identity and his degree of self-esteem. Any other form of clothing is marked by the addition of descriptive features termed "cues." Consequently, special outfits are worn by such little seen figures as civil-religious officials to identify them to the community. Variations from the accepted form of attire by the elements of the general population indicate the amount of freedom within the society. (Author/DE)

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"I See by your Outfit that you Are a Cowboy":
ATTIRE AS A MARKER OF ETHNIC, SOCIAL, AND PERSONAL IDENTITY

by

Katherine B. Branstetter

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"I SEE BY YOUR OUTFIT THAT YOU ARE A COWBOY":

Attire as a Marker of Ethnic, Social, and Personal Identity

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Without going into a lengthy discussion of this statement, I think most anthropologists will agree that cultural anthropology has taken on the task of describing and studying human behavior. This study is approached on any number of levels, among them: the study of individual behavior, the study of social behavior, and the study of cultural behavior. A fourth level of study, universal behavior, has a special place in the study of human behavior. By universal behavior I do not mean simply the universal needs of biological man, such as food, protection, security to breed and raise young, and so forth. The most interesting universals are the universals of social man--language, social structure, and economic system, some kind of religious activity, etc. These universals are the features separating man from other creatures and linking the members of mankind to one another.

The use of clothing for ethnic, social and personal identification is one of those universals of culture. We have known that it is an universal for some time. Even some textbooks comment on clothing: most of those even state that it is a universal feature of human behavior, and some even go on to describe its attributes--or functions: warmth, protection, modesty, status, etc.--the characteristics vary from book to book. So it should not be a shock to anthropologists that clothing is a subject worthy of study.

The interesting question to ask is: Why has clothing been so widely ignored by anthropologists? Some cultural universals have attracted considerable attention: linguistic universals, the incest taboo, as well as other features of kinship systems, color categories, and other semantic universals, for example. What ever happened to clothing?

In the early part of the century anthropologists paid more attention to clothing; it was usually given a section in a chapter on material culture. In 1931 Ruth Benedict wrote an article on "Dress" for the Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, and in 1933 Ruth Bunzel contributed one on "Ornament", though, as Karl Heider points out, the 1960's International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences does not even include those subjects in its index (Heider 1969:379).

In the 1930's and 1940's some use was made of clothing to reinforce studies of peasant cultures and illustrate examples of culture change. Robert Redfield included a nice sketch of clothing as evidence for the folk-urban continuum in Yucatan (1941). Ruth Bunzel (1967) and Melvin Tumin (1952) discussed clothing as evidence of acculturation in the villages they studied. But something happened to clothing studies in the late 1940's or so. Most people who have investigated the area notice that clothing study went out along with studies of material culture. Peter Ucko feels that the first step in the decline of material culture studies was the preoccupation of social anthropologists with their relationship to sociology. They neglected the study of material culture, and it fell to archaeologists who, because of the limitations on their data, are forced to neglect most of the most useful cultural aspects of material culture in their analyses. (1969:27). No wonder material culture studies were heading into the "descriptive jungle" described by Karl Heider with "diligent cataloging of material objects.... giving rise to larger and more comprehensive catalogues... adding little of general interest to anthropological thinking" (1969:379). Clothing studies in particular were hurt by this change in direction in anthropology. Prehistorical clothing is seldom collected in the kind of quality or quantity necessary to even necessitate a catalogue. Clothing slipped into the chasm developing as social anthropologists and archaeologists came to think of themselves as belonging in separate fields.

This is not to say that we have no body of literature on clothing. The problem is that much of the literature is virtually useless as data in a systematic study of clothing-behavior. On the other hand, I do not think that we can simply ignore previous work, so I would like to mention some of the places to look for studies of clothing and clothing behavior. This is not intended to be anywhere near a complete listing, but rather an example of some of the places the student of clothing can go for information:

Historians are interested in the direction of the spread of clothing styles in the periods they study. The role of clothing and raw materials of clothing as items of trade is often investigated.

Folklorists have often collected data on folk costume-- especially in peasant Europe.

Students of Drama are interested in authentic costumes and sometimes research them carefully. Their work sometimes includes plans for the production of authentic-appearing clothing from a particular period and place.

Economists occasionally study the dynamics of fashion marketing.

Home Economists or Domestic Scientists have done some very useful bibliographic work on clothing. Roach and Eicher (1965) Dress, Adornment, and the Social Order includes an

annotated bibliography which is an excellent introduction to the field.

Sociologists have done quite a bit of work with clothing as a social marker in our culture. Veblen's work on social classes cited clothing as a prime example of conspicuous consumption (1899). Much of our current interest is based on the work of the interactionist sociologists such as Goffman (1961, 1963):

Psychologists have given us much valuable material on clothing and its relationship to self-image.

Even Political Scientists have entered the field with studies of sumptuary legislation.

Anthropologists have not been completely dormant. There have been some valuable studies¹-some of which I mentioned before.

With that lack of common background there has been an understandable lack of communication among those with an interest in clothing-behavior. One of the results of the lack of communication has been a lack of uniformity of terminology used to speak of the subject. Researchers have to get used to looking in bibliographies and indexes under: 'dress', 'attire', 'costume', 'clothing', 'fashion', 'style', even 'appearance'. Sometimes useful material can be found under 'textiles', 'weaving', or whatever else the technology is which results in attire, such as 'bark-cloth', 'knitting', 'netting', 'tattooing', 'scarification', or 'cicatrization', 'body-painting', or 'cosmetics', etc.

This brings me to the question of a definition for this field of inquiry. Karl Heider suggests 'attire' as a category name and suggests as its subject: "cultural objects relating specifically to the person, which are worn, carried, smeared, or hung on the body" (1969:380).

1 An article by Hilda Kuper (1973) which was brought to my attention after the presentation of this paper most certainly belongs in this category.

His is a functional definition and objects which have the functional qualities of his categories 'tool', 'weapon', or 'utensil' are excluded from attire. This definition does away with the problem of including belts and wondering about watches or hand-bags. It includes cosmetics and body paint and all forms of ornament. The only possible objection to this definition that I have is that it does not include tattooing and scarification and the like. But they are included by the functional criteria.

What the study of clothing or attire needs now is a body of data upon which we can test new approaches to the study of clothing-behavior. It is not enough that each of us goes out to a society, tests a particular approach and by that study shows that more attention should be paid to clothing. We must also feel responsible for collecting a body of data from that society so that others may use it in retesting the hypotheses which have been tested in their own field work.

I would like to present the model I used to analyze the clothing-behavior of the Tzeltal-speaking Indian population of Tenejapa, in Chiapas, Mexico.⁽¹⁷⁾ I offer it as an approach to the description of behavior relating to the use of attire which I believe could be applied in any culture; expanding it where necessary and resulting in the more or less complete collection of data on the description of and use of attire in that culture.

Looking from the point of view of the wearer in any culture, it appears that the decision as to what to wear is based on two kinds of information. First, the nature of the occasion, and second, the wearer's image of his social identity. From the point of view of the person evaluating a particular instance of dress-behavior, his interpretation is based on: first, again the occasion, and second, his interpretation of the wearer's image of his social identity, based on his dress-behavior. If this hypothesis is valid, then it would seem that an analysis of dress-behavior which would produce a set of rules which might be used to both predict and define dress-behavior in a culture would also bring out information about social identities and occasions which he must possess in order to determine what attire to wear and the meanings of the costumes he sees.

I chose a linguistic model for this study for two reasons. First, material assemblages are complex cultural codes, made up of numerous features some of which are discrete, some related--similar to language. These features can be bundled to show individual items, or an individual feature can be traced to show its distribution with lines functioning like isoglosses marking the boundaries of individual features. Styles or assemblages can be identified for living as well as extinct cultures. Thus, the linguistic model is useful simply because it has been developed to handle the same kind of complex system.

There is another aspect of clothing which makes a linguistic model so appropriate. Clothing is used as a code of communication. People use clothing to project information about themselves as will be seen from my example.

Unique attire is one of the most striking features of the cultures of the highlands of Chiapas--the state of Mexico located just north of Guatemala--as each speech community exhibits its own particular costume. The use of costume for ethnic identification is so fundamental in Chiapas that an Indian's first overt step toward becoming a Ladino--that is, toward disaffiliating himself from Indian society and joining Spanish-speaking Mexican society--is to adopt Ladino clothing. In an area of ethnic rather than racial prejudice, this makes him blend in with lower class Ladinos, who then may refer to him as an indio revestido--literally a 'reclóthed Indian'--in an attempt to maintain the class distinction. Furthermore, a wealthy Indian might speak Spanish and live in a town center next door to Ladino families, but as long as he dresses in a traditional Indian costume, he will be accepted as an Indian by Indians and considered to be an Indian by Ladinos. The importance of clothing as a symbol of ethnic affiliation is explained in a tale which I collected in Tenejapa. The tale describes the presentation of unique costumes and languages and the teaching of the tasks of the civil-religious officials to the people of the communities of Highland Chiapas by their patron saints on orders from God. Whether or not this story is related to the Christian Tower of Babel story, the addition of costume and civil-religious tasks to the gifts and the patron saints as the bearers of the gifts is a particularly Highland Maya twist.

One of the speech communities of Highland Chiapas, Tenejapa is a township of about one hundred square miles located about thirty miles northeast of the city of San Cristobal de Las Casas. Most of the about twelve thousand Tzeltal-speaking Tenejapan Indians live scattered throughout the township. A few Indians live in the town center, which is also called Tenejapa, but usually only for the duration of their terms as civil or religious officials. Almost the entire Ladino population of Tenejapa, numbering about one thousand, lives in Tenejapa Center. Tenejapans gather at weekly markets and at about twelve religious festivals in Tenejapa Center throughout the year.

The Tenejapan's wardrobe is not large: the largest wardrobe owned by a man in my sample included twenty-two items, the smallest, nine; the largest wardrobe owned by a woman included sixty-three items* and the smallest, nine. Tenejapans have no desire to

*That woman was extremely wealthy. The next largest wardrobe for a woman consisted of forty-two items.

change clothing often. Rather, changes in outfit tend to be attributable to changes in the occasion upon which it is worn, or changes in the wearer's social identity.

The outsider's first impression of a group of Tenejapans is that everyone of the same sex is dressed alike. The man's costume always consists of a black wool poncho belted at the waist with a cloth belt and a pair of loose, knee-length pants often decorated with predominately red designs around the bottom edge. The woman is dressed in an indigo-blue skirt which reaches to mid-calf. The skirt is gathered at the waist and belted with a stiff, wide, red belt. Tucked into the belt and skirt she wears a white blouse, usually with some, again, predominantly red designs. This is the basic outfit for the adult Tenejapan.

With experience and exposure to different occasions in Tenejapan life, one finds that the Tenejapan conveys a considerable amount of information regarding his or her social identity and self-esteem by adding to and varying this basic attire.

To facilitate the analysis of Tenejapan clothing I set up a statement of the rules for dress-behavior in Tenejapa which would constitute a grammar of the communication code of Tenejapan clothing. As a grammar, I felt the rules could be shown by using a method somewhat analogous to that used to describe a linguistic code. Once a workable set of rules for defining normal dress-behavior--dress behavior which conforms to the norm--was produced, the meanings of variations from normal dress-behavior could be investigated to determine their place in the set of rules.

As the first step of my clothing study I did an analysis of the most basic elements of the knowledge of clothing--the knowledge of weaving techniques, the aesthetics of design and the evaluation of the purchased items of Tenejapan clothing. This information was collected in the Tzeltal language while I was in the process of learning to weave, in order that the material could be described according to the categories of weaving description set up by Western experts in non-Western weaving.*

*Though one might be tempted to exclude this information as tangential to the communicational value of clothing, I need only mention that clothing quality is one of the most important cues in the judgement of personal self-esteem.

Second, I developed a list of items of Tenejapan costume. This list included all articles which might be worn at any time. With the help of informants the lists were sorted into sets of mutually substitutable items of clothing which I call substitution classes as they are analogous to substitution classes in linguistic analysis. For example, two kinds of women's shawl which would be found in the same clothing "slot"--in the case of a shawl, over her shoulders or head--but which not be worn at the same time would be in the same substitution class.

Next, the co-occurrence of articles from different substitution classes was discussed with informants. Just as it would be odd to wear a dinner jacket with dungarees in our clothing system, a Tenejapan would not, for example wear a ceremonial shirt with a breechclout. The resulting acceptable combinations which I call outfits are somewhat analogous to well-formed sentences in language. They are full of meaning, relying on context to make that meaning clearer. These outfits were then matched with informants' impressions of typical contexts or occasions where the particular combination of items might appropriately be worn. The formal rules which describe this set of outfits are statements of how the average Tenejapan "should" dress in Tenejapa.

The rules for dress-behavior are part of a highly productive communication code, which, given the culturally shared context, a Tenejapan can use to interpret his fellow's specific social identity and his degree of self-esteem. This part of the communication code can best be expressed in terms of its use of marking rules.

Marking is a feature of linguistic analysis which can be used to indicate categories in which information is given through a lack of information. To use a linguistic example, in its unmarked state the term nurse refers to a 'female doctor's assistant'. In order to specify a nurse who is not female we must add the feature male. Male nurse is, then, a marked category. On the other hand, doctor in its unmarked state refers to a male. A lady doctor, or its variations, is the marked category in this contrast set.

Sex is not the only feature which can be marked. In most places a martini must be marked to indicate the desire for a twist of lemon peel. In its unmarked form it will appear with an olive. Generally, then, the unmarked category refers to the common or expected in a contrast set. Any form other than the most common one is marked by the addition of descriptive features--cues. The use of marking rules is especially useful in clothing study because while showing differences, it also gives priorities and simulates the feed-back aspect of clothing communication.

There are three elements which make up marking rules.* The first are the outputs--which in this case are the outfits which are the possible results of applying the marking rule. Second are the marking operators which perform the actual encoding of information, but which can be left out of this discussion. The third element which makes up the marking rules is a set of cues. In this case the cues are the items of clothing or the manners of wearing clothing which can be encoded by the rule.

*My use of marking rules is adapted from Geoghegan (1969).

I found it to be very useful to distinguish between context and content information in the study of clothing in Tenejapa. Con-

text information is the information which a Tenejapan must have in order to determine which output of a marking rule is unmarked. In this case it includes the identification of the basic social identity of the wearer--that is to what age and sex category he belongs: infant, boy, girl, adolescent boy or girl; man or woman--and the occasion upon which the outfit is being worn. The output of these assessments is the interpreter's best guess as to the unmarked outfit which could be worn. At the same time the interpreter is comparing the content information--the actual make-up of the wearer's outfit--with the unmarked outfit. In order to identify the social identity and his personal identity the interpreter must analyze the marked items--the cues--in the wearer's outfit. Some of the cues are found only in certain contexts. Those are the cues which mark the specific social identity of an individual.

A Tenejapan can easily judge the basic social identity of a fellow Tenejapan. He has, in his lifetime, come to know the cues he needs to tell him what outfit to expect of people according to their social identity. The Tenejapan has seen considerably fewer civil-religious officials. In addition, except for certain tasks he performs at festivals, the official is not particularly recognizable by his actions. Consequently special outfits are worn by civil-religious officials which serve to identify them to the community. And special, rather conspicuous cues such as staves of office, brightly colored rosary beads, red and blue scarves, red suits of clothes, and long, heavily brocaded dresses are part of the outfits of these important men and women. A special outfit which is bound to catch anyone's eye is the 'woman's' outfit worn by male religious officials at the Deceiving Festival.

The rules which can be written to describe special Tenejapan outfits still represent appropriate behavior--prescribed behavior. They are the kind of information which would be included in a Tenejapan etiquette book in the chapter on dress. The next step is to determine the meanings of variations from this ideal set of rules; this would indicate the amount of freedom the Tenejapan has to use his clothing to express his personality. For Tenejapa the information is conveyed at two levels: the appearance of each article of clothing, its quality and newness; and the appearance of the whole costume, that is, the presence of optional items and how the items are arranged. I do not want to take the time to go into this aspect of the clothing code here, but the material can be handled in much the same way as has been described--by using marking cues as signs that an outfit must be re-evaluated by the viewer.

This model for the analysis of the communication code of clothing served me well in Tenejapa and I believe it is one which can be adapted for use in any society. It requires, basically, an analysis of first, the ethnic role of clothing--clothing as an indicator of ethnic identification, second, a study of the social role of clothing--the use of clothing to identify certain social categories which, for some reason need instant identification,

and third, the role of clothing as an indicator of self-identity. Once the basic data is complete, the ways in which clothing-behavior reaches into other parts of the culture can be traced. And, hopefully, if a number of studies based on models of this type could be completed we would have a body of data upon which we could base some substantial conclusions about the nature of clothing as a universal feature of human culture.

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