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CULTURE IS COMMUNICATION

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It has been an ever-growing conviction of the writer that the basic culture of a community or nation or people is to be found in the customs and attitudes at the grassroots level. Culture is not just art, music and literature, and although these form a part of it, they very often misrepresent it. Basic culture is the mode of inter-action of those of mutual intelligibility. The test for intelligibility is adherence to code, and the science which assesses and describes this communicative behavior is linguistics.

Language is the most obvious of the structured systems that make up any given culture, but there are many more: association, subsistence, temporality, territoriality, play, bi-sexuality, exploitation, politics, defense, etc. Too often we tend to judge peoples by institutions rather than by these systems of their culture pattern, while actually the institutions are shaped by the behavior of the people and may very well have been imported from elsewhere in the first place!

The type of communicative behavior which concerns the linguist most is the "informal", most of which is acquired in childhood and in a atmosphere of unaware-ness. Like the features of one's own speech, this culture is not easily changed after one is grown, and like language, it can be molded during childhood.

Since informal culture is fundamental, our judgements of others — and indeed of ourselves — should be based on behavior traits rather than on institutions. To the linguist, institutions are to society what written grammar is to language: a post-facto evaluation. The real grammar is in the people!

Therefore, the structured systems of "informal" culture have extreme tenacity and continuity, and the General American English which so many of us speak, as well as many of our attitudes and customs, go back to the 17th century. The best key to this situation is the living structure of this very English, as well as the comparisons that can be drawn between General American, for instance, and the English of Boston, Massachusetts, which due to the accessibility of the region, has been subject to the influence of England and its 18th century speech. The less accessible regions of North America do not drop the "r" at the end of a syllable (an 18th century British development) as is the case in Eastern New England, New York City and the Southeast.

In like manner, the Spanish of Latin America shows clear traits of the 16th century in the less accessible areas, while that of the trade routes (Cuba, Puerto Rico, Venezuela, Panama, Argentina, Chile) is Spanish of the 17th and 18th centuries. In both cases it is Andalusian Castilian, but the time factor, combined with the factor of accessibility explain much.

By the same token, one can illustrate the cultural importance of many other systems of communication besides language: temporality, territoriality, bi-sexuality, politics, play, paralinguistic activities, and other forms of inter-action that are shaped by the community and that are perpetuated in a climate of unawareness.