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Source: *The Sociological Quarterly*, Vol. 28, No. 3, Conceptions of Temporality in Sociological Theory (Autumn, 1987), pp. 343-356

Published by: Taylor & Francis, Ltd.

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4120647>

Accessed: 23-02-2018 20:31 UTC

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THE LANGUAGE OF TIME: TOWARD A SEMIOTICS OF TEMPORALITY

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This article examines temporality from a semiotic perspective, as a quasi-linguistic system of signification, shedding light on the rudimentary elements of the “language” of time and the way both individuals and societies use them in their “speech.” It first explores how people manipulate various dimensions of temporality (e.g., duration, speed, frequency, timing) as virtual semiotic codes through which they manage to convey various social messages (e.g., about priority, importance, commitment, respect, intimacy, informality) without having to articulate them verbally. It then proceeds to show that this schema of symbolic relations between the temporal and the social seems to operate not only at the microsocal level of interpersonal relations but also at the macrosocial level of societal politics. Using the Jewish Sabbath, the Christian Lord’s Day, and the French Republican calendar as case studies, it examines the way “temporal contrasts” are used to substantiate and accentuate social (conceptual, cultural, and political) contrasts. The article introduces the “semiotic quadrangle,” the use of which enables the student of symbolic communication to view meaning as a function of an entire system of symbolic associations at both semantic and syntactic levels.

INTRODUCTION

Culture, according to semiotics, is a communicational system consisting of various messages conveyed by and to members through the use of certain codes (Leach 1976; Lévi-Strauss 1966). Language is clearly the prototypical semiotic code, yet, ever since Saussure (1959, p. 16; Barthes 1968, pp. 9–11), it has been regarded by semiotics as only one of many such codes, and linguistics as merely one branch of the science of “semi-ology” that ought to encompass all of them. Indeed, for the past several decades, semiotically oriented sociologists and anthropologists have continually explored the way various nonlinguistic systems of signification—gestures (Birdwhistell 1970), clothing (Barthes 1983; Sahlin 1976, pp. 179–204), food (Lévi-Strauss 1978, pp. 471–495), and space (Bourdieu 1973; Hertz 1978; Schwartz 1981), to name a few—actually function as such semiotic codes.

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The Sociological Quarterly, Volume 28, No. 3, pages 343-356.

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ISSN: 0038-0253

Extending such endeavors to the domain of temporality, the present article attempts to develop a distinctively semiotic perspective on time. Aiming at laying out the rudimentary foundations of a semiotics of temporality, I shall examine the way people practically manipulate time as a virtual code through which they manage to convey many important social messages without having to articulate them verbally. Examining the symbolic relations between the temporal and the social within the contexts of both interpersonal relations and societal politics will reveal an intricate semiotic system that seems to operate at both the microsocal and macrosocial levels.

TEMPORAL SYMBOLISM IN INTERPERSONAL RELATIONS

Duration as a Code

While only few of us may have been formally sensitized to it, we all seem to be tacitly aware of the way in which the amount of time we allow an event or activity to last is symbolically associated with the degree of significance we attach to it. That we are willing to spend a lot of time on a given activity is usually indicative of its great importance to us, particularly relative to comparable activities. The respective numbers of hours per week schoolchildren spend on mathematics and art, for example, clearly reflect the considerably greater priority we assign to the former over the latter. Similarly, the length of television news stories usually indicates their relative importance vis-à-vis other stories in the same magazine.

It also indicates, however, the relative prestige of the correspondents who report them vis-à-vis other correspondents (Schlesinger 1977, p. 342), which seems to suggest that long durations are symbolically associated with important activities as well as people. Thus, for example, the amount of time we are allowed to claim the "floor" in a conversation usually corresponds to our social status vis-à-vis others participating in it (which is why people often defer to their superiors by allowing them a greater amount of speaking time [Lauer 1981, pp. 95-96]). Similarly, the length of the official leaves we are granted for mourning dead relatives usually corresponds to our socially defined "distance" from them (Pratt 1981, pp. 327, 329). Consider also our pride over having spent an unusually long time with particularly eminent (or at least busy) others.

The amount of time we are willing to devote to the various relations in which we are involved and organizations to which we belong clearly reflects the level of our commitment to each of them. That is why "greedy" organizations such as religious sects and underground movements usually try to restrict the amount of time their members spend outside them (Coser 1974). That is also quite characteristic of "possessive" parents, spouses, lovers, children, and friends, which seems to suggest that we clearly perceive the amount of time we are willing to spend on others as symbolically indicative of the degree of their significance to us. (The use of the word *spend* in this context is quite critical, given that the amount of money we are willing to spend on others is usually also regarded as a symbolic display of the degree of their importance to us.) Consider, in this regard, the deep hurt we usually feel when our guests leave "too early" or when sexual encounters we look forward to end up as "quickies."

Just as we associate long "positive" stretches of time (such as interacting with desirable others) with high priority and importance, we tend to associate long "negative" stretches

of time with insignificance. *Waiting*, for example (which, given the modern utilitarian approach to time [Zerubavel 1981, pp. 54–59], is generally regarded as an ordeal), is normally associated with worthlessness, and making others wait is often regarded as a symbolic display of degradation. The longer we make them wait, the greater the degradation, since, by implying that their time is quite worthless, we seem to convey a lesser degree of respect toward them. Being on time, on the other hand, is symbolically indicative of the respect we feel toward others, the extreme form of “ritual waiting” being an explicit symbolic display of deference (Hall 1959, p. 18; Schwartz 1975, pp. 39–43).

Consider also the symbolic dimension of *lead time* (Hall 1959, p. 17). Essentially defining themselves as less accessible, the powerful and eminent usually also demand longer advance notice when being approached, occasionally making others wait longer before they can reach them for the mere sake of displaying the respect they expect. Celebrities thus feel insulted when they are invited to attend events on an unwarranted short notice, and prominent speakers might refuse an invitation to give a guest lecture “only” six weeks ahead of time (even if they are not otherwise engaged and their lecture is already prepared) merely in order to preserve that respect. (This seems to be true of social status as well as of social distance. In a strikingly similar manner, women who wish to avoid the risk of being taken for granted might refuse an invitation for a first date, even if they happen to be free on that particular evening, when it is made only one day in advance.)

Shorter waiting time entails greater *speed*, the symbolic implications of which become quite apparent when one considers urgency and immediacy. The rapidity with which doctors and nurses attend some patients, for example, is usually indicative of their relatively high priority to them as emergencies, just as the speed at which journalists report events (that is, the degree to which they approximate “live” coverage) is symbolically indicative of their newsworthiness (Popkin 1986; Schlesinger 1977, pp. 339–340). Similarly, in academia, writing a letter of recommendation right away or finding the time to read a student’s dissertation proposal or a colleague’s manuscript draft as soon as possible are unmistakable tokens of commitment. For the very same reason, we usually feel deeply hurt when it takes friends three weeks to do us a relatively minor favor or when they call us to announce the birth of their child only two months after the event.

The negative connotations of long stretches of waiting time also become apparent once we examine the symbolic implications of the *frequency* at which social contacts occur. As the somewhat sarcastic undertones of the term “Sunday father” might suggest, we usually regard the frequency of contact between people as symbolically indicative of the degree of their commitment to one another, with low frequency (i.e., long waiting periods between contacts) being generally associated with low priority and relative insignificance. Moreover, the “moral density” of our relationships (Durkheim 1966, pp. 198–202, 1984, pp. 201–205)—measured by the frequency at which we actually meet one another, talk over the telephone, or exchange letters—is also commonly regarded as indicative of the degree of social distance or intimacy that characterizes them. Thus, by merely dating one man on a regular weekly basis and another on a monthly basis, a woman would actually convey to both of them a rather unequivocal message regarding their relative significance in her life and the relative degree of her commitment to each of them vis-à-vis the other.

Timing as a Code

The same message might also be conveyed by dating one of these men only during the day and on weekdays and the other on evenings and weekends. Given our association of exclusivity with intimacy (Simmel 1950, pp. 126–132; Zerubavel 1982b, pp. 100–102), we usually attach particular significance to contacts that take place at times that are socially defined as more private. Since people are generally expected to be less accessible during such time periods, contacts that do occur within them tend to acquire a special meaning (Zerubavel 1981, p. 145). Thus, for example, given the relatively exclusive circle of intimates with whom we normally spend our vacations, contacts that do occur during vacations are generally regarded as particularly significant. This also seems to be true of business breakfasts, “because to start working at 7:30 or 8 A.M. shows you’re really interested” (Taylor 1982, p. 94). For quite similar reasons, meeting with professors outside their more public office hours usually means much more to students than meeting them during those hours. That an aura of exclusivity seems to surround contacts that occur during the more private parts of our time also accounts for the differential meanings of dinner and lunch dates.

Weekends, too, are commonly regarded as relatively exclusive, private time periods that we usually spend only with our intimate others (even the prostitute in *Never on Sunday* would restrict her Sunday sexual encounters to “nonprofessional” ones), which is why weekend contacts tend to mean much more than ordinary weekday ones. Weekend nights are generally regarded as the main temporal loci of contacts among datable individuals (which makes adolescents as well as single adults feel particularly embarrassed to be seen in public by themselves [Goffman 1963, p. 104]—or, still worse for the former, with their parents—on those nights). Hence the markedly different symbolic meanings of Monday and Saturday night dates, for example.

Given the association of access to private time with intimacy, consider also the symbolic implications of *ever-availability* (Zerubavel 1981, p. 146). Admittedly becoming increasingly anachronistic with bureaucratization (Zerubavel 1981, pp. 153–166), the quality of being always accessible nevertheless remains a powerful symbol of a rapidly dying traditional social order and is still strongly cherished and admired within traditional domains of social life such as family and friendship. The extent to which one approximates an ideal-typical state of ever-availability remains a most common criterion for evaluating how committed a parent, child, spouse, sibling, or friend one is. Dedicated parents are still defined largely by their willingness to fulfill their parental responsibilities at *any* hour of the night or on any day of the week, and a loyal friend is still commonly defined as someone who is *always* there when you need him.

The degree of *firmness* and finality with which we schedule events is usually also indicative of their relative importance to us. Contrast, for example, the firm “Could you come over on the sixteenth?” with the tentative “Let’s get together sometime” in terms of the degree of commitment to establish further contact they seem to convey. We clearly convey more commitment to the events we treat as the unalterable constituents of our schedules than to those we assign a more residual status there.¹ That is why we often feel hurt when others move—not to mention cancel—appointments or dates they had originally scheduled with us.

The degree of *rigidity* with which we schedule events is also indicative of their relative importance to us. Tasks with deadlines, for example, are usually perceived as carrying

much more weight than those that are left open ended. It is also indicative, however, of their relative degree of formality. An event scheduled to begin precisely at “7:14” clearly sounds much more formal than one scheduled to begin around “sevenish” (see also Parkinson 1962, pp. 78–80). Similarly, an event that is scheduled to begin at 5:00 sounds far less formal than one that is prescheduled to last “from 5:00 until 6:30.” That dinners have generally acquired in our culture a somewhat more open-ended character than lunches (whereas lunch is usually not expected to last more than an hour, ending a dinner date after only one hour would normally be considered rather rude) may thus add another critical dimension to the symbolic difference between meeting for lunch and for dinner.

THE POLITICS OF TEMPORAL CONTRASTS

Meaning and Structure

Given our tendency to reify social reality (Berger and Luckmann 1967, pp. 89–92, 134–136), we often regard the association of particular “signifiers” with particular “signifieds” (Saussure 1959, p. 67) as inevitable. Such symbolic relations, however, are essentially conventional and, quite often, arbitrary (Durkheim 1965, pp. 261–265; Mead 1934, pp. 117–125; Peirce 1932, Vol. 2, pp. 165–169; Saussure 1959, pp. 67–69). The association of deadlines with importance, for example, is by no means less arbitrary than the association of the word *water* with water, and it should come as no surprise that, at least in the Middle East, they are actually associated with rudeness and pushiness (Iutovich, et al. 1979, p. 72). Similarly, while we normally associate long waiting periods with low priority, it is not uncommon for bureaucrats in Ethiopia, for example, to try to “elevate the prestige of their work by taking a long time to make up their minds” (Iutovich, et al. 1979, p. 72). Even within our own culture, speed may normally be associated with commitment yet at the same time also indicate lack of respect, as the case of overly “fast” courting might suggest (Birdwhistell 1970, p. 159).

Along similar lines, while the sequential order in which we arrange items is usually indicative of their relative priority to us, the essence of such a symbolic relationship is by no means unproblematic. While we normally regard temporal precedence as virtually synonymous with priority (and would indeed be quite correct in assuming that the leading stories in radio and television news magazines are also the most important ones), the order in which speakers are usually introduced at formal ceremonies seems to suggest that last is not always least. (Similarly, lest we forget, it is actually its temporal location *after* the appetizer that signifies the greater importance of the entrée.) The fact that whether the most senior authors of multiple-authored publications are listed first or last often remains ambiguous (Zuckerman 1968) also serves to remind us that, within the essentially artificial realm of the symbolic, one should not expect the relations between most signifiers and signifieds to be anything other than arbitrary.

One of the foremost contributions of Saussure to semiology was his claim that individual signs are always part of larger systemic wholes and that the meaning of any particular sign is essentially a function of the way in which it is related to other signs within the same *system* of signification. Finding out the meaning of any particular sign thus is possible only within the context of the entire symbolic system within which it is anchored, since it is necessary to first examine its relations to other signs within it. This

implies the virtual inseparability of semantics from syntactics, and, indeed, Saussure's followers are often quite appropriately called *structuralists*, as they view signs not so much in terms of their substantive "content" as in terms of the ways in which they are formally related to other signs (i.e., in terms of the *structure* of the symbolic system to which they belong). More specifically, they tend to focus particularly on the formal relation of opposition or *contrast*, because, "in any semiological system, whatever distinguishes one sign from the other constitutes it. Difference makes character" (Saussure 1959, p. 121; see also pp. 115-122). Stressing the "negative" quality of signs, they thus view their meaning essentially as a function of their "*distinctive* features" that serve to differentiate them from other signs (Jakobson 1978, pp. 81, 96, 109; see also pp. 27-43, 61-67, 72-87).

Consider, for instance, Leach's (1976, pp. 58-59) analysis of the meaning of widows' black dress. Rather than focusing exclusively (as a Freudian, for example, would) on the semantic relation between blackness and widowhood, he examines the entire system of both semantic and syntactic relations among blackness, whiteness, widowhood, and bridehood. Using the structuralist argument that "the substance of contradictions is much less important than the fact that they exist" (Lévi-Strauss 1966, p. 95), he claims that the substantive fact that widows wear black is far less significant than the structural fact that there is a fundamental formal contrast between the colors of the dresses widows and brides wear. Viewing the contrast between white and black as essentially homologous to the one between brides and widows, he then claims that the basic meaning of the colors of the dresses both brides and widows wear is the message they convey regarding the fundamental cultural contrast between the social states of entering and exiting marriage.

Along similar lines, whether cultures forbid their members to eat pork or candies is far less significant than the structural fact that they try to establish a fundamental conceptual contrast between "edible" and "taboo" food. Likewise, they can symbolically associate the sacred with either silence or noise as long as they associate the profane with the other, thus maintaining a formal moral opposition between these two categories. To quote the most prominent exponent of structuralism today, "the existence of differentiating features is of much greater importance than their content" (Lévi-Strauss 1966, p. 75).

Ordinary and Extraordinary Time

It was Bergson (1960, pp. 98-128, 226-240) who first sensitized us to the qualitative dimension of time by noting how we often experience mathematically identical durations as having quite different feeling tones. However, it was Hubert's (1909, pp. 197, 207-210, 226-229) portrayal of the sanctification of "holy days" as a classic manifestation of the way we introduce heterogeneity among mathematically identical durations that first made us aware of the critical role played by society in assigning time differential qualities. Hubert's analysis also inspired Durkheim's (1965, pp. 345-347) portrayal of the institutionalization of holidays as society's way of physically segregating the sacred from the profane so as to avoid any cognitive confusion between them. (According to Durkheim, this social need to preserve the mutual exclusivity of those two existential domains actually underlies all calendrical interruptions of the continuous flow of time. Were it not for society's wish to distinguish the sacred from the profane by

periodic alternation between them, time would have remained a continuous, homogeneous entity instead of the discontinuous series of qualitatively heterogeneous segments that it has become.)

That temporal contrasts can indeed be used to substantiate elusive conceptual contrasts and thus facilitate the cognitive differentiation among abstract categories such as the sacred and the profane is best exemplified by the institution of the “pulsating” week, which is a cycle of periodic alternation between a set of ordinary days and an extraordinary “peak day” (Zerubavel 1985, pp. 113–120).² The latter, a “marked” day explicitly set apart from the other “unmarked” days of the cycle and providing the pulsating week with its distinctive rhythmic beat, is a symbolic representation of the extraordinary. As such, it is used to convey the critical cultural message regarding the fundamental conceptual contrast between the extraordinary and the ordinary.

The classic manifestation of such a pulsating cycle is our seven-day week. Its origins lie in the Jewish institutionalization of the Sabbath, the essence of which has always been the setting of one extraordinary day apart from six others so as to substantiate the conceptual contrast between the sacred and the profane (Zerubavel 1981, pp. 105–137, 1985, pp. 6–11, 113–120).³ From a purely structuralist standpoint, the very existence of a fundamental contrast between one extraordinary, “marked” day and six ordinary, “unmarked” ones is far more significant than the actual choice of Saturday as the peak day of the Jewish week. An ancient Talmudic ruling that travelers who lose count of the day of the week should stick to the practice of observing the Sabbath every seventh day despite the likelihood of its being the “wrong” day (*Shabbath* 69b) clearly shows that the structural pattern of periodic alternation between the sacred and the profane along a 6–1 rhythm is far more central to Judaism than the actual temporal location of either within historical time.

The Lord’s Day Versus the Sabbath

From its very early days, the Church has observed a seven-day weekly cycle peaking on Sunday, also known as “the Lord’s Day.”⁴ Stressing the symbolic association of that day with the Resurrection, early church fathers such as Barnabas (*The Epistle of Barnabas* 13.10) and Justin Martyr (1861, Ch. 67, 1956, Ch. 41) claimed that Christians ought to observe Sunday because, on that day, Christ manifested his presence to his followers through rising from the dead and ascending to heaven. This essentially theological explanation of the Sunday observance is a classic example of an incomplete account that is confined to the semantic dimension of symbols. As I shall demonstrate, examining the syntactic relations between Sunday and other symbols within the same calendrical system of signification allows us to unveil the more subtle political undertones of this practice.

The observance of the Lord’s Day originated as an addition to—rather than as a substitute for—the Sabbath observance. Being also Jewish, the early Christians used to observe both Sunday (as Christians) and Saturday (as Jews), and their adherence to a Christian week peaking on the former did not conflict with their adherence to its Jewish counterpart, which revolves around the observance of the latter. There came a point, however, when the increasing social and cultural distance between Judaism and Christianity made the identity of being both a Christian and a Jew increasingly difficult to

maintain, and Christians began to feel the need to establish their own exclusive identity as Christians, which inevitably entailed stressing their own distinctiveness vis-à-vis the group out of which they had originally sprung. It was at that point that their Sunday observance no longer seemed to suffice by itself, and abandoning the Sabbath observance as a condemnable “Judaizing” practice (*Collosians* 2.16; Cotton 1933, pp. 41–45; Hefele 1896, Vol. 2, p. 316; Ignatius 1956, Ch. 9) became a political necessity.

Temporal contrasts can be used not only to substantiate abstract conceptual contrasts but also to help accentuate actual social and political ones (Zerubavel 1985, pp. 47, 71–72). The early Christians’ redefinition of the observance of the Lord’s Day as a substitute for—rather than as a mere addition to—the Sabbath observance was essentially an attempt to establish a weekly cycle that would be recognizably different from its Jewish precursor and was clearly motivated by their wish to accentuate their distinctiveness vis-à-vis Jews. Abandoning the Sabbath observance was thus one of the most significant political moves they made as a self-conscious group. (Incidentally, as part of the very same political agenda, the Church also introduced the current method of fixing the date of Easter that guarantees that this pivotal festival, around which the entire ecclesiastical calendar revolves, would never coincide with its Jewish precursor, Passover [Zerubavel 1982a, pp. 286–288]. Dissociating Easter from Passover was part of the same political attempt to create a total calendrical as well as social break between Christianity and Judaism.)

The Christian reform of the Jewish week (preserving its original rhythmic form yet altering its “peak”) was a symbolic act essentially designed to convey a message about the social and cultural split between the Church and the Synagogue. From a purely structuralist standpoint, the Church’s theological association of Sunday with the Resurrection was far less significant than the fact that, in choosing a day *other than Saturday* as the Lord’s Day, it managed to establish the first seven-day pulsating week that does not peak on the Jewish Sabbath. Sunday and Saturday are functionally equivalent as candidates for constituting the “peak” of a seven-day pulsating weekly cycle. But because Saturday had already been symbolically associated with Judaism, the Church found it necessary to establish a similar symbolic connection between Sunday and Christianity.

The previous discussion underscores the inherent limitations of any semiotic inquiry that is restricted to the semantic dimension of symbols, since it shows how the association of Sunday with Christianity is actually a function of the essentially systemic symbolic relations—at both the semantic and syntactic levels—between (a) Sunday and Saturday, (b) Saturday and Judaism, and (c) Christianity and Judaism. Using the *semiotic quadrangle* (see Figure 1), devised to systematize such relations, the first step in accounting for the positive semantic relation between Sunday and Christianity is highlighting the negative syntactic relation between Sunday and Saturday as two alternative “peaks” of the seven-day week. We should then introduce into the equation both the positive semantic relation between Saturday and Judaism (Zerubavel 1981, pp. 70–72, 105–107) and the negative syntactic relation between Judaism and Christianity as two alternative religious systems. Since the negative syntactic relations between the two signifiers and between the two signifieds appear to be homologous, we may then conclude that the positive semantic relations between Judaism and Saturday and between Christianity and Sunday must also be homologous.

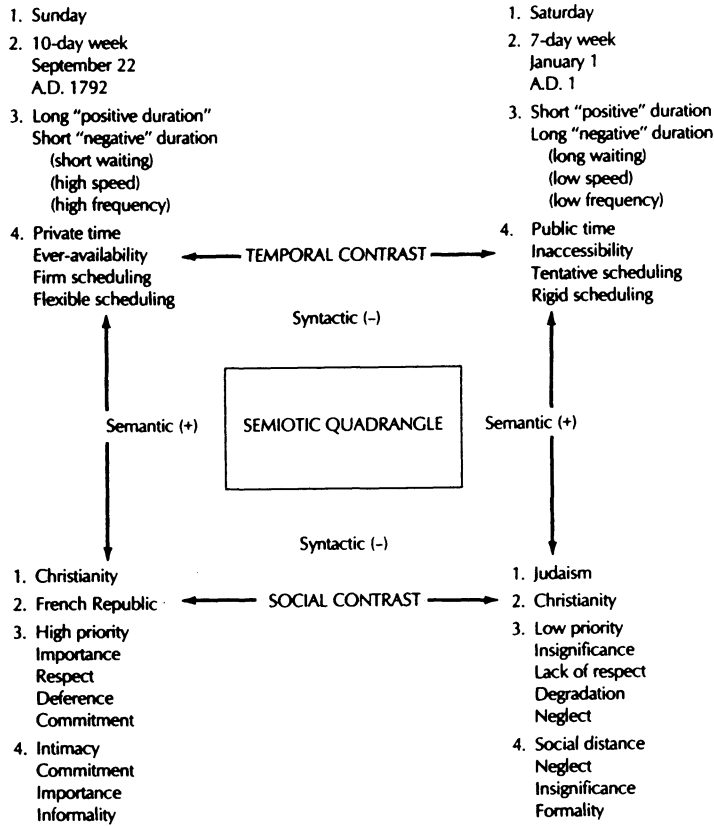


Figure 1. The Semiotic Quadrangle.

From such a structuralist perspective, the choice of Friday as the principal weekly day of public worship in Islam (Zerubavel 1985, p. 26) bears a striking formal resemblance to the choice of Sunday as the Lord's Day in Christianity. Regarding itself as a member of the same set of religions as Judaism and Christianity yet competing with both for pagan proselytes, it was critical for Islam from the outset to convey the message that it was an entirely new monotheistic faith, quite distinct from the other two. In order to distinguish Moslems from both Christians and Jews, Mohammed chose to associate Islam with a distinctive weekly "peak day," thus establishing a distinctively Moslem week that was different from both its Jewish and Christian counterparts. The specific choice of Friday as the "peak" of that cycle was, again, far less significant than the decision to choose a day *other than Saturday or Sunday*, those two other members of the same set of days that had already been symbolically "contaminated" through their respective symbolic associations with Judaism and Christianity.

In their search for the days that would constitute the peaks of their respective weekly cycles, both Christianity and Islam chose to ignore the four midweek days and settle on the only two days that literally touch Saturday, the original peak day of the seven-day

week. As a result, all three great monotheistic religions are to this day symbolically associated with seven-day weekly cycles that revolve around peak days that, while admittedly different from, nevertheless touch, one another. That in both instances Saturday was replaced as the weekly peak day by a neighboring day—by no means a mere coincidence—seems to underscore the political logic of establishing even the most minimal temporal contrast for the sake of accentuating social contrasts.

The French Republican Calendrical Reform

While altering its internal structure through shifting its “peak,” both Christianity and Islam have nevertheless preserved the original seven-day rhythmic form of the Jewish week to this day. Two centuries ago, however, a serious attempt was made to totally obliterate the seven-day week by introducing an alternative cycle of an altogether different length. Such a radical idea was put into effect in 1793, when France began experimenting with a ten-day week (Zerubavel 1985, pp. 27–34). The experiment was part of a larger calendrical reform explicitly designed to convey some poignant cultural and political messages (Zerubavel 1981, pp. 82–95). Decoding one of those messages will further highlight the possible contribution of semiotics to the sociological study of time.

Again, if we confine ourselves to the semantic dimension of symbols, the French ten-day week—along with the ten-hour day, the hundred-minute hour, and the hundred-second minute—can only be seen as part of a decimal system of units of time symbolically associated with the rationalist spirit of the French Revolution (Guillaume 1894, Vol. 2, pp. 44, 443–444, 701, 881–882). A semiotic analysis that is also sensitive to the syntactic relations among symbols reveals, however, that establishing a weekly rhythm that contrasted with the seven-day rhythm traditionally associated with the Church was far more significant to the reformers than the actual choice of the number “10” as the basis for the new week. Our semiotic quadrangle helps us realize once again that the association of the ten-day week with the French Republic was actually a function of, and, therefore, inseparable from, an entire system of symbolic associations including (1) the negative syntactic relation between ten-day and seven-day weeks, (2) the positive semantic relation between the seven-day week and the Church, and (3) the negative syntactic relation between the French Republic and Christianity. (Such an analysis would also reveal that the remarkably similar Soviet experimentation with five-day and six-day weeks between 1929 and 1940 [Zerubavel 1985, pp. 35–43] was essentially part of a general attempt to destroy all three major monotheistic religions symbolically associated with a seven-day “beat” of collective life.)

Consider also, in this regard, the somewhat similar introduction of a new calendar year by the French reformers that began on September 22 and a new chronological era that began with the year A.D. 1792 (Zerubavel 1981, pp. 85–87). A semiotic inquiry that is restricted to the semantic dimension of symbols does reveal the symbolic association of the new calendar year and chronological era with the First French Republic, which was actually founded on September 22, 1792.⁵ The full symbolic significance of both calendrical innovations, however, unfolds only within the context of the cultural and political contrast the reformers tried to establish between the French Republic and the Church. From a purely structuralist standpoint, the negative association of the year A.D. 1792 and the date September 22 with the year A.D. 1 (on which Christ was traditionally

believed to have been born) and the date January 1 (on which he was believed to have been circumcised), those virtual cornerstones of the Church's Christian Era and Gregorian Calendar, was far more significant than their positive association with the foundation of the French Republic. Our semiotic quadrangle helps to demonstrate once again that the symbolic association of A.D. 1792 and September 22 with the First French Republic was essentially a function of, and, thus, inseparable from, (1) their negative syntactic associations with A.D. 1 and January 1, (2) the positive semantic association of the latter with Christianity, and (3) the negative syntactic relation between the French Republic and the Church.

LANGUAGE AND "SPEECH"

As we examine actual statements made by Emperor Constantine upon introducing the current method of fixing the date of Easter (Eusebius 1952, Book III, Ch. 18) or by the Committee of Public Instruction upon introducing the French Republican calendar (Gaxotte 1932, p. 329; Guillaume 1894, Vol. 2, pp. 44, 441–445, 448, 696, 698, 701, 703, 875–882), it becomes quite evident that they were both extremely self-conscious about the symbolic undertones of the calendrical reforms they helped engineer.⁶ Like the commissars who later introduced the five-day and six-day weeks to the Soviet Union, they were most probably quite aware of the political concerns that led them to launch those reforms in the first place. Similarly, while Christian theology has traditionally presented believers only with the semantic aspect of the Sunday observance, the early church fathers must have also been aware of the more subtle, implicit syntactic relations between Christianity and Judaism that our semiotic quadrangle seems to highlight.

In short, the "language of time" identified here is by no means a merely intellectual phenomenon invented by sociology. Not only are we all aware of its existence, we also use it quite actively in our own "speech."⁷ The manipulative use of temporality is quite evident not only at the macrosocial level of societal politics, but also at the microsocial level of interpersonal relations. We employ the language of time quite strategically in our everyday "speech" and, quite often, what appears on the surface as entirely spontaneous behavior may actually involve a deliberate manipulation of temporal circumstances.

Consider, for example, the manipulative use of the symbolic association of "private time" with intimacy. While we normally avoid calling nonintimates late at night, on weekends, or during vacations so as to protect their privacy, we may nonetheless opt to call them precisely at such times in order to convey to them our wish to make our relationship a more intimate one. (Given the symbolic dimension of lead time, we may also convey the same message by inviting them to drop by "in a couple of hours.") Similarly, when Sally Field tells Paul Newman in *Absence of Malice* that she is free on any other evening but Friday, his blunt "Then how about Friday night?" can only be interpreted as an aggressive display of his desire to decrease the social distance between them and penetrate her exclusive circle of intimates.

Consider next the manipulative use of the symbolic association of the frequency of social contacts with both intimacy and commitment. Just as we might mention the fact that we meet certain others every day as a tacit way of announcing our closeness to them, we might also refuse to have a second date with someone only a couple of days after the first one in order to avoid appearing overly eager to develop an intimate

relationship (which we would by establishing a pattern of meeting so often) so soon. Most of us are also quite sensitive to the symbolic undertones of frequency alterations—such as switching from biweekly to weekly letters or telephone calls or, conversely, gradually regressing from regular weekly to biweekly dating—that people often use to signal the warming up or the cooling down of relationships.

Note also the manipulative use of the symbolic relation between waiting and power, a classic manifestation of which is the practice of making others wait just in order to punish or humiliate them (Lauer 1981, p. 96; Schwartz 1975, pp. 37–39). Since “the worth of a person is not independent of the amount of time others must wait for him, that person can maintain and dramatize his worth by purposely causing another to wait” (Schwartz 1975, p. 34, see also pp. 39–40). Because it is usually the powerful who have the license to make others wait, some people are deliberately late to meetings, essentially making others “cool their heels,” for the sole purpose of displaying their power. Our awareness of the symbolic dimension of waiting may also lead us to refuse to wait for those whose authority we wish to defy yet to pointedly ask our secretary not to transfer any telephone calls while we meet with those to whom we wish to display our commitment and respect.

For quite similar reasons, being mindful of the symbolic association of temporal flexibility with informality (an association well recognized by the inventors of the jazz “jam session” and by those who organized the relatively open-ended rock concerts of the late sixties), we may deliberately refrain from glancing at our watch when interacting with intimate others. In a similar fashion, being aware of the symbolic association of duration with importance, we may pointedly reserve particularly long appointment slots for those to whom we wish to display our commitment and respect. By the same token, however, it is their awareness of the symbolic association of lead time with respect that also leads people to create last-minute “emergency” crises around them—essentially forcing their subordinates to act on a very short notice—for the mere sake of displaying their power or testing the limits of their authority over them.

This is the “language” of time, and that is the way we “speak” it. As I have shown throughout this article, time clearly constitutes a quasi-linguistic nonverbal system of signification that deserves the full attention of students of symbolic communication. As we have seen, both individuals and societies use this “language” in their “speech,” essentially manipulating various dimensions of temporality as virtual semiotic codes through which they manage to convey critical social messages without having to articulate them verbally. Few of us have ever learned this language in any explicit manner, yet we all seem quite familiar with both its grammar and vocabulary. Moreover, we seem to be able to speak it quite fluently.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to express my deep gratitude to Laurie Beck, Karen Cerulo, Rose Coser, Liora Gvion-Rosenberg, and Noga Zerubavel for their many valuable comments on an earlier draft of this article.

NOTES

1. On this aspect of the dynamics of scheduling, see Zerubavel 1976, p. 91.

2. The market days and religious festivals held regularly by the ancient Romans (every 8 days) and Aztecs (every 20 days) as well as by contemporary West Africans (every 4 days) and Baha'is (every 19 days) are some notable examples of such weekly "peak" days (Zerubavel 1985, pp. 45-51).

3. Hence the fundamental difference between the Jewish week and the seven-day astrological week (Zerubavel 1985, pp. 12-19, 113), which, despite their surface resemblance, have no single peak day that is set apart from the other six and is thus essentially a nonpulsating, "beatless" cycle.

4. Sunday's names in French, Italian, Spanish, Catalan, Portuguese, Rumanian, and Gaelic (Zerubavel 1985, p. 20) all derive from the Latin *dies Dominica*, a direct translation of the original Greek *kryiaké*, which literally means "the Lord's Day."

5. On employing the past for meaningfully structuring the present, see, for example, Maines et al. 1983.

6. It is mostly symbolic concerns that have also characterized the opposition to the introduction of our current standard international time-reckoning system that is based on Greenwich Mean Time (Zerubavel 1982c, pp. 13-14, 18-19).

7. On the distinction between the "language" and "speech" aspects of systems of signification, see Saussure 1959, pp. 7-15.

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