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Reply to Jan Pouwers The hidden flow

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JAMES WEINER

REPLY TO JAN POWWER'S 'THE HIDDEN FLOW'

I am very grateful to Professor Pouwer for taking the time to comment extensively on the semiological grounding of my analysis of Föi myth. I appreciate his appeal to the contrast between Continental semiology and American symbolic anthropology, and similarly to that between structuralism and hermeneutics. These contrasts are analytic summaries of important trends in the history of Western approaches to languages and meaning, and an understanding of these trends is of course critical for situating one's analysis of any natural language.

I take it as axiomatic that meanings are an effect of such a prior situating of one's frame of analysis. Professor Pouwer identifies this as a post-modernist trend in my writing, but I prefer to call it an appeal to Wittgenstein's later views on language. To put it more simply, where and how we identify meanings is an effect of the way we use language. But this is not to imply that the way we use language is in some sense divorced from all else we do, including that which conventional anthropology labels as social life. Language after all 'reaches out to the world', as Wittgenstein once put it. Meaning is inscribed in our social institutions in the same way it is inscribed in our speech, and what Professor Pouwer appeals to by way of 'history' and 'data' emerge just as much as a by-product of a particular 'form of life' as 'myth' and 'ritual' do.

What Professor Pouwer thinks is missing from my discussion of Föi symbolism is the rational calculus of factual, objective social relations that 'really explains' them. In this view, it is admissible to derive a symbolic system from a set of 'concrete' historical relations, and not admissible to do the opposite. But a real objectivism would have to admit that there are no meanings in the world, and no facts in the world, no structure, independent of the sentences we use to describe it.

Thus, it is misleading to appeal, as does Professor Pouwer in his concluding technical note, to the self-evidence of the distinction between denotation and connotation. It is tempting to define conventional significances as some self-evident domain of events and relations, something more apparent, and prior to, the domain of trope. But it is precisely metaphor which makes us notice the significant and defining relationships between ways of labelling or referring to these events and relations. Metaphor or structure – or history or social life for that matter – is a

shorthand for a kind of effect certain language usages have on a community of speakers, an effect that I described by way of Ricoeur's phrasing: a 'turning' or 'deviation' from conventional significances. Language use, which includes trope-ic or metaphoric constructions, reveals an objective world through these same constructions, as part and parcel of its apperceptive mechanism.

To suggest that there are two distinct and separate processes going on in language, however, is to commit oneself to a dualism of world and conceptual scheme. Professor Pouwer reinforces this dualism in his antinomy between Enlightenment appeals to rationality and Romantic appeals to meaning, and thus suggests that my analysis of Foi myth 'interprets, [but] does not attempt to explain'. In Richard Rorty's words, Professor Pouwer wants to distinguish claims about what language is about from claims about what the world is about. But this claim is unhelpful if it involves suggesting that there is a neutral viewpoint from which one can perceive the world independently of the symbolic vehicles we use to represent it, or that the kinds of forces that constitute social formations are of a different ('more objective') sort than those that affect our linguistic usages.

I am not, however, subscribing to a version of Whorfian literalism which suggests that reality is entirely a function of the language we speak, and that therefore different language speakers inhabit different realities. Like Lévi-Strauss, Whorf sought the ultimate test of the real world in the *ideas* we have of it. I am rather by-passing the entire question of the verifiability of our representations and instead focusing on the kinds of work that language does in fashioning an intersubjectivity.

Professor Pouwer does not seem to have any disagreement with the *content* of my analysis of Foi myths and social formations. The centrality of certain images in Foi myth and elsewhere in their discursive world leaps out to us, it grasps us, as Wagner observed. Perhaps we can both agree with Roland Barthes, who commented to the effect that myth hides nothing. Only if we weren't reasonably sure that the world also reaches out to us, grasps us through our language, would the difference between Lévi-Strauss' and my *procedure* be something other than trivial. That both structural and tropic analysis eventually wind up in the same place is evidence that meaning depends on a mastery of both semantic and metaphoric relationships, and that the functions of language are not problematic even if the forms may be.