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**TRIBAL SIGNIFIERS AND INTERSUBJECTIVITY
IN A GENERAL THEORY OF GROUP IDENTITY**

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Abstract

Group identities, whether related to ethnicity, gender, religious belief, class, or other social and cultural categories, appear to be vexingly contradictory. These identities can clearly be deeply meaningful to people who hold them and have powerful effects in practice. Yet at the same time, they can be shown to be highly circumstantial, situational, and historically contingent. This paper proposes a theory of group identity that explains why and how group identities are at once fundamental to senses of self and at the same time essentially ambiguous and shifting. Building on the work of Emile Benveniste and others, it argues that senses of individual and group selves are implicit in and engendered through intersubjective discursive interaction. Furthermore, it explains how tribal signifiers, which bring to mind groups of people, stand in anaphoric relationship to the senses of selves engendered through discourse. In the process of producing and interpreting these tribal signifiers, subjects and persons create senses of belonging to each other.

Introduction

“Unless we who speak about groups, tribes, people, and cultures know how we and our informants go about labeling ethnic entities, we literally do not know what we are talking about.” (Moerman, “Who Are the Lue?” 1965:1223)

“To the Lue of today, the Lue are the Lue. But to us, for global comparative purposes, perhaps they are not the real Lue. Perhaps they are something else. Let me explain.” (Naroll, “Who the Lue Are,” 1968:78)

Over thirty years ago, anthropologists Michael Moerman and Raoul Naroll grappled with the elusive identity of “Lue” on the borders of Thailand, in the pages of the *American Anthropologist*, and at the meetings of the American Ethnological Society (Moerman 1965, 1968; Naroll 1968; see also Keyes 1992). This exchange between Moerman and Naroll highlights a still unresolved debate between positivist and interpretivist approaches to analyzing groups and group

identity (cf. Rew and Campbell 1999:9). Moerman's interpretivist inclination was to examine the symbolic establishment and maintenance of boundaries between groups (cf. Barth 1969; Cohen 1985). Naroll by contrast, sought to identify a number of criteria or markers by which Lue could be positively identified apart from the vagaries of terms and labels that might be open to interpretation (cf. Cohen 1981; Keyes 1976). Despite several decades of work addressing various aspects of primordial attachments (e.g. Geertz 1973:259-269; Gil-White 1999, 2001; Keyes 1981, 2002) as well as circumstantial and historically shifting uses of ethnic and other identity markers (e.g. Butler 1990; Hirschman 1986, 1987; Nagata 1981; Riley 1988), I wonder if we are any closer to understanding "how we and our informants go about labeling ethnic entities" or more generally, "groups, tribes, people, and cultures"?

My interest in this subject springs mainly from conducting research over the past decade in Malaysia, where notions of ethnicity or race (as it is more commonly called in Malaysia) and particularly the concept of "Malay" display all the qualities of shifting historical, circumstantial, and politicized nationalism, yet at the same time are the basis for deep and meaningful attachments (see for example Milner 1995; Nagata 1981; Reid 2001; Shamsul 2001; Thompson 2003). My question is, how can group identities be simultaneously ambiguous and open to interpretation while at the same time deeply embedded in people's sense of self and who they are? In this paper, I propose an approach to thinking about group identity as built upon elementary characteristics of intersubjective semiotic systems – such as language. This approach sees group identity as shifting and ambiguous because it relies on open-ended discursive interaction. But at the same time, these discursive interactions provide the basis for senses of self and, I argue here, for group identity (cf. Cohen 1977; Mühlhäusler and Harré 1990; Singer 1989, 1991).

At least as far back as Durkheim's work on *The Division of Labor in Society* (1893) and *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912), anthropologists and other social theorists have sought to explain the relationship between individual identity and group identity (cf. Rew and Campbell 1999:4). In work of the past century we can find innumerable formulations of this self-culture or self-other relationship.¹ All of these formulations seem to have in common the relationship of a singular self to a pluralized group, a culture, or a generalized other. A problem with these formulations, as I see it, is that they presuppose the existence of groups in an attempt to explain group identity – i.e. group identity exists because people identify with groups; an apparently tautological argument.

I argue in the following pages that group identities can be understood, at least in part, as built upon qualities inherent to elementary parts of language and discourse. By extending the

logic of Emile Benveniste's work within a Saussurean theory of linguistics, we can postulate that qualities of subjectivity and personality, which define the relationship between singular positions within discourse, confer particular qualities onto discursive pluralities as well. Or, to put it another way, the logic of discourse and communication is such that the relationship between I, the writer or speaker, you, the reader or interpreter, and he/she, about whom I and you may converse, confers certain qualities onto groups of we and they. I refer to this pluralizing effect of intersubjective semiotic systems as "tribalism" – the mechanisms of group identity generated through discourse.² I am using the term "tribalism" in a very particular way, to refer to a *general* process through which groups of people are discursively conceptualized. Furthermore, I provide an argument for the relationship between these basic principles of group identity in discourse and in the operation of what I term "tribal signifiers," which operate in language as signifiers of discursive group identity. In arguing that this is a general process, I am not claiming (nor do I believe) that the mechanisms I am describing are the only or even for some analyses the most important things going on with regard to group identity. However, I am claiming that the processes described in this paper provide a useful account of the discursive basis of group identity.

I will briefly discuss why tribes and tribalism are especially discursive phenomena and outline the Saussurean semiotic theory around which I will be making my argument. I provide a number of examples of what I mean by tribal signifiers, which is an intentionally broad term meant to indicate any word, set of words, icon, symbol, or other sign that brings to mind or is interpreted as referring to a group of people. I then turn to Benveniste's arguments about the qualities of subjectivity and personality within discourse. These qualities, which relate to issues of agency and non-agency, being and non-being (*vis-à-vis* discourse), are produced in both singular and plural forms through discursive interaction or intersubjectivity. Tribal signifiers stand in anaphoric relationship to plural subjects and persons (as well as non-subjects and non-persons). In other words, a tribal signifier (e.g. Lue, anthropologist, etc.) is displaced by a plurality (e.g. we, they, you-all) with specific qualities of subjectivity and personality in the process of interpreting speech or a text. Finally, I argue that to understand the fundamental ambiguity and fluidity of tribal signifiers and group identity, the positions of I as speaker or writer and you as interpreter or reader, must be kept analytically distinct at the same time that they are understood to be practically inseparable and co-indexical (cf. Mühlhäusler and Harré 1990:35).

Tribalism as a Discursive Phenomenon

I do not intend to argue here that “tribes” – broadly defined as any sort of group of persons – are *purely* discursive phenomena. I believe the body of social science literature shows us that there are important things going on outside of what we call “discourse.” *Contra* Derrida (or at least certain readings of Derrida), everything is not discourse (cf. Derrida 1978:354). It would be unproductive to suggest that there are not a wide variety of non-discursive or pre-discursive mechanisms at play in the processes through which groups of persons come into being. For example, mechanisms which go under names such as socioeconomic, political, biological, etc. and are studied within such paradigms.

The discursive dimension of tribes, however, is especially important for a number of reasons. First, while it is a simple sort of exteriorized solipsism to argue that there is nothing outside of discourse, in a banal sense Derrida is correct in that it is impossible to conceive of tribes (or anything for that matter) in any *meaningful* way outside of discourse.³ We must take discursive effects into account in our analysis to one degree or another. However, it is not only that tribes – like everything else – must enter into discourse before we can conceive of them in a meaningful way. Tribes, for reasons I outline in this paper, are *especially* discursive phenomena. In other words, while understanding the discursive aspects of some phenomena (e.g. gravity, biological evolution) may be more or less important to our understanding of those phenomena, discursive mechanisms are extremely important to our understanding of tribes.

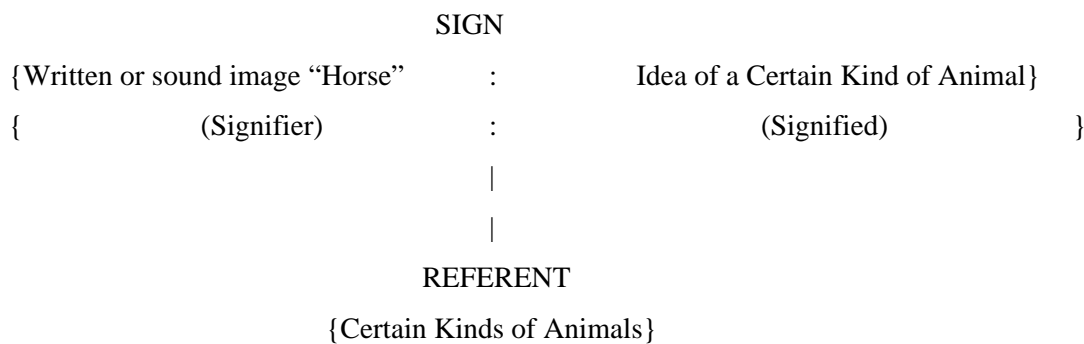
Tribes are ontologically discursive because the use and interpretation of tribal signifiers draw on qualities inherent to intersubjective semiotic systems to produce powerful effects of group identity. Following Benveniste, I am calling these qualities subjectivity and personality. The paradigm proposed in this paper can go some way toward addressing certain problems that have vexed other attempts to understand the dynamics of groups of persons. How my approach might suggest solutions or at least an approach to certain questions will be addressed in greater detail once the general argument has been laid out. Therefore, while not taking tribes to be *purely* discursive, my interest here is to explicate a theory of an underlying mechanism of *tribalism* – the production of tribes in and through discourse.

A Theory of Discourse and Signs

If in significant ways tribes are ontologically discursive then we must appeal to a theory of discourse in order to understand them. I am using a Saussurean semiotic theory to work through this idea of tribalism, though one greatly modified through a century of theoretical writings (see

especially Benveniste 1971; Derrida 1976, 1978; Saussure 1983; Silverman 1983). For purposes of this paper, I will very briefly sketch out my understanding of the theory of the signs derived from Saussurean linguistics and semiotics.⁴

Signs, according to Saussure, have a dual nature. A sign consists of a signifier and signified. The signifier is the material aspect of the sign, for example ink organized in a specific way on a piece of paper or the wave displacement of air when we speak. The signified is the mental image evoked by these signifiers. A third term, the referent, is that to which the sign refers.⁵ For example, the sign {signifier : signified} and referent of “horse” can be diagrammed as follows:



Significantly, these relationships of signifier to signified and of sign to referent are both arbitrary. There is no inherent reason why the signifier “horse” brings to mind the image/idea of a certain kind of four-legged animal or that the sign “horse” refers to a certain kind of material, biological creature. The signifier and the sign could just as well be “*kuda*,” “*Pferd*,” “*cheval*,” or anything else.

Understanding or meaning derives not from our association of signifier to signified nor sign to referent *per se*, but rather from the relationship of one signifier to other signifiers and of one sign to other signs, within a particular signifying (or semiotic) system (such as a language), especially in relationships of difference. In other words, we do not understand the meaning of “horse” because of its *signification of or reference to* certain large four-footed animals, but rather because of its relationship to other signs – i.e. a horse is “not-cow,” “not-goat,” “not-tree,” etc. This does not mean that signifiers do not have signifieds or that signs do not have referents; rather that there is nothing inherent in those relationships and that those relationships are established through differentiation in signification and discourse.

The consequences of this are important to our case in several ways, one of which is that this fact about signifying systems allows us to imagine and talk about things that have no physical

referent (or at least, no obvious physical referent) – e.g. unicorns, kinship systems, nations, etc. I will not dwell on this point, except to note that tribes are generally such kinds of referents. They are, in Anderson’s evocative phrase, “imagined communities” (Anderson 1991). The referent of tribal signifiers is rarely if ever physically present. In other words, we can rarely point to an entire group all at once and say “those are ‘the Lue,’ ‘the anthropologists,’ ‘the students,’ etc.” Moreover, in cases where we point to a *representative* of a group (a Lue, an anthropologists, a student), we are merely transforming that body into a sign (or perhaps more precisely an icon or symbol), not pointing to the referent. And finally, even if in some rare instance the referent – all the individuals imputed to make up a particular tribe – were immediately available to our senses, this would in no way extract them (or us) from the operations of tribal signifiers to be outlined below.

Tribal Signifiers: Examples from Four Sources

In order to understand how we and our informants go about labeling groups, tribes, peoples and cultures, I propose as an analytical category a particular kind of signifier that I call a “tribal signifier,” which describes a particularly broad semantic domain. A tribal signifier is any signifier that signifies a group of people (i.e. in Saussure’s terms, its “signified” is a group of people). In other words, it operates within a system of signs in such a way as to “bring to mind” a group of people. The functioning of such signifiers is what I wish to explore under the rubric of “tribalism.” Whether or not there is any such group of embodied persons that one can point to in any given instance (i.e. an external referent) is irrelevant to the mechanism of tribalism (though, perhaps not irrelevant to the consequence of particular instances of tribalism).

Tribal signifiers are all those signifiers which in discourse are or can potentially be displaced by plural persons (we/they – of which much more will be discussed below), and which therefore signify the plural person. One implication of this proposition is that the number of “tribal signifiers” in given discursive instances may be quite vast – far beyond the mere handful (e.g. ethnic groups, nations, religions, classes, genders, etc.) which have captured a great deal of analytical attention. For purposes of discussion, I will briefly describe a number of tribal signifiers from four disparate sources (or discourses). These are: (1) political systems of Highland Burma as described by Edmund Leach (1964), (2) the “imagined communities” of undocumented workers in California and Texas as described by Leo Chavez (1994), (3) gender and sexual identities in Indonesia as described by Dede Otomo (1996), and (4) the exit of the Singapore

Lions football (soccer) team from the Malaysian Premier League in 1995 as described in the pages of the Straits Times, Singapore's leading English-language newspaper.

Tribal signifiers are ubiquitous in intersubjective discourse. My choice of these particular examples is guided by the desire to illustrate certain points. First, I have chosen these examples precisely because of their diversity. Tribal signifiers, as I am formulating them, are not particular to any specific languages, signifying systems, or instances of discourse (or at least, they are not meant to be). Tribal signifiers and their operations are a general discursive mechanism for group formation and identity. Second, tribal signifiers operate across fields often analyzed distinctly – e.g. ethnicity, nationalism, gender, sexual identity, class, sports, institutional structure, and so on. Third, tribal signifiers are not mere epiphenomena – labels of convenience used to describe some underlying process or processes. They are efficacious in and of themselves. Fourth, tribal signifiers are inherently ambiguous and shifting. Their ambiguity is part of their nature within discourse. And as such, my aim here is not to “pin them down” but rather to provide an account of that ambiguity and how it operates. The following examples are meant to illustrate these various characteristics.

Political Tribes of Highland Burma

Edmund Leach's *Political Systems of Highland Burma*, while providing us with examples of classical anthropological "tribes" was also important in opening up some of the questions of how (to paraphrase Moerman) anthropologists and our informants go about labeling ethnic entities, groups, tribes, people, and cultures. Leach explicitly addresses the flexibility and ambiguity of certain “tribal signifiers” (or as Leach put it, “verbal categories” 1964:xii). The full text describes in great detail a vast array of tribal signifiers – not only for ethnicity but also for residence, kinship, rank, class, and religious hierarchy, among others (esp. pp. 101-195). At the heart of Leach's analysis are the “verbal categories” of *gumsa* and *gumlao*. They describe political systems – with “*gumsa*” being broadly hierarchical and aristocratic and “*gumlao*” being broadly egalitarian and democratic. At the same time, they are explicitly “tribal signifiers” in that they refer to groups of people. In relating a condensed account of a “*gumlao* origin story,” Leach reports that: “*gumlao* were people who maintained all men were of equal rank ... the *gumsa* were people who had chiefs” (ibid.:198-200).

Leach describes *gumsa* and *gumlao* as two polar types of Kachin political organization. The importance of Leach's work (in the history of anthropology at least) was his description of the vacillation of particular groups of Kachin between “*gumsa*” and “*gumlao*” organization and

identity. Among other things, Leach makes it clear that the two – social organization and discursive identification – did not always go hand-in-hand; self-identified “*gumlao*” villages could be hierarchically “*gumsa*” in practice (e.g. pp.96-97). Yet it is also the case that *gumlao* and *gumsa* appear effective and meaningful in several interrelated respects. First, subjects’ accounts of society vary systematically according to the sign with which they identify, i.e. if they consider themselves *gumsa* or *gumlao*. Second, while there are *gumlao* and *gumsa* villages which do not conform to what the signifier supposedly denotes, most villages conform more-or-less to one or the other category, and operate under that sign. And finally, the discourse of *gumlao* and *gumsa* appear to have regulated important aspects of political and social change in mid-19th century highland Burma.

Illegal, Undocumented Tribes of North America

More than half a century after Leach's fieldwork in Burma, Leo Chavez's work on undocumented immigrants in San Diego and Dallas provides us with another set of socially and politically important tribal signifiers. Chavez's text provides us with three domains of tribal signifiers. One domain describes the status of subjects vis-à-vis the legal system of rights in the United States, with the signifiers "immigrants," "aliens," and "citizens." A second domain, proposed by sociologists, describes the attitude of immigrants and aliens toward their community of origin and community into which they have moved: "sojourners" who maintain an orientation toward their community of origin and "settlers" who are oriented toward the community into which they have moved. Third, Chavez discusses a domain of geographic-cum-national signifiers: "North Americans," "Mexicans," "Salvadorans" and "Central Americans" (which for purposes of Chavez's analysis are treated as more or less co-equal, i.e. at the same level of contrast).

As with Leach, Chavez demonstrates that tribal signifiers operate on a shifting discursive terrain and that they have an efficacy of their own. Legal criteria may be appealed to both in the case of “immigrants,” “aliens,” and “citizens” and with regard to geographic-cum-national signifiers to objectively determine who does and does not belong to the North American community. But Chavez’s survey data indicate that his respondents’ subjective self-definition, as belonging to the North American community (*la comunidad norteamericana*), which Chavez describes as a “sense of belonging,” can be shown to have an effect on their intentions to stay or leave the United States, apart from their legal status and other significant factors. Chavez demonstrates this effect through factor and regression analysis of his data, which allows him to parse out various sorts of effects (e.g. kinship networks, family salary, education, years in the

United States, etc.). His analysis powerfully demonstrates the significance of subjective identification with an “imagined community,” and more specifically, with particular tribal signifiers (in this case, *norteamericana*).

Gendered Tribes of Java

Imagined communities do not have to be ethnic, national, or explicitly political in nature. Likewise, tribal signifiers operate on a much wider terrain. Our third example draws on Dede Oetomo’s description of gender and sexual orientation in Indonesia and specifically Java (1996). Oetomo analyzes the differences between “*banci*” (the best English language translation of which might be “transvestites”) and “gays” in Indonesia. In this brief chapter to an edited volume on “the feminine” in Indonesia, Oetomo provides – at least in passing – a rich vocabulary of tribal signifiers current in various Indonesian dialects, all related to sexual or gender identities: e.g. *banci*, *gay*, *laki*, *laki-laki*, *perempuan*, *wadam*, *waria*, *bencong*, *bences*, *binan*, *wandu*, *siban*, *bandhu*, lesbian, homosexual, *hemong*, *hombreng*, *sihom*, *lesbong*, *lines*, *sentul*, *pria*, *wanita* (ibid.:259-260). As with Leach’s Kachin, Shan, gumsa, gumlao, etc. and Chavez’s illegals, undocumented workers, *Norteamericanos*, etc. these signifiers identified by Oetomo operate as “tribal signifiers” insofar as they bring to mind groups of people.

Banci and *gay*, as the most prominent among the signifiers that Oetomo mentions, operate within a field of Indonesian discourse on gender and sexuality. This is not a discursive field of which all Indonesian speakers are equally aware. But among Indonesians familiar with these terms, they delineate two very different “tribal” categories. *Banci* and *gay* suggest very different attitudes toward sexual interaction, toward gender, toward dress and self-presentation, as well as implying socioeconomic class differences. But what Oetomo demonstrates convincingly is that neither *banci* nor *gay* in Indonesia can be reduced to any of these differences – of sexuality, gender, dress, economics, etc. In Indonesian discourse, they provide categories of persons with which individual subjects may or may not identify. Moreover, identification with the signifier – *banci* or *gay* – affects an individual’s activities; most notably in the fact that *banci* and *gay* as groups do not generally mix and have their own social spaces and networks.

Sporting Tribes of Malaysia and Singapore

A final example of tribal signifiers operating a particular discursive field is drawn from a short article from the Straits Times calling for the development of the Singaporean football league in the wake of the Lions’ exit from the Malaysia Cup (Straits Times, 23 February 1995); the Lions

being the nickname for Singapore's national team. In this article, all the following appear as tribal signifiers, or at the very least as candidates for such categorization:

. . . league, fans, officials, Singapore, Malaysia's Cup, the Republic, Football Association of Singapore (FAS), players, clubs, Lions, Malaysian League, producers, Football Association of Malaysia (FAM), sovereign country, Malaysia, neighbors, sponsors, youngsters, footballers, Singaporeans (and others as well).

In some ways this explodes our understanding of the concept of "tribe," as it is conceived in the sense particularly of ethnic groups or nations – or even if we expand this to include religions, classes, genders, etc. Arguing that ethnic groups or nations operate in important ways as religious groups do, or socioeconomic classes, or genders, may or may not be accepted, but perhaps would not be completely preposterous. But, to say that ethnicities or nations (as our sort of prototypical concept of a tribe) operate in significantly similar ways to "Football Associations," or "players," or "fans," or "youngsters"? Does this not seem rather far-fetched? I am arguing that it is not, and that understanding why it is not (and the mechanisms of signifying systems that allow them to operate in similar – if not identical ways) is important to understanding the *phenomena* of human groups or "tribes" (e.g. ethnicities, nations, etc.; and the reasons why *that* is important are obvious, I think, and not necessary to digress into here; cf. Rew and Campbell 1999:8).

Singularities, Personality, and Subjectivity in Discourse

If tribal signifiers are signifiers that are or may be displaced in discourse with the "plural persons" of "we" or "they," then it is necessary to ask what is the quality of these plural persons? What are the implications of "pluralizing" persons? What qualities does this engender in the system of signification? And why are tribal signifiers qualitatively different from other signifiers (such as cows, trees, or horses)? Here, I draw heavily on Benveniste's classic essay "Relationships of Person in the Verb" (and related essays; Benveniste 1971) while also extending some of the implications of his argument. To understand plurals we must first look at singularities (commonly called "first, second and third person" in English grammar) on which I am going to argue that pluralities are built.

Understanding Benveniste's use of {I}, {you}, {he/she} as *discursive positions* rather than signifiers of pronouns here is crucial.⁶ Work on pronouns across various linguistic systems,

including some which take into account certain readings of Benveniste, has shown that the operations of pronouns themselves and the type of pronouns available in different contexts have important effects on senses of self and social relationships (e.g. Mühlhäusler and Harré 1990; Singer 1989, 1991; Urban 1989). However, particularly in his essay “Relationships of Person in the Verb,” Benveniste indicates that this is *not* what he means or at least, not *only* what he means (Benveniste 1971:195-196).⁷ Benveniste uses {I}, {you}, {he/she} and others signs to signify *relational categories implicit in semiotic systems*, particularly language, and even more precisely, in the discursive instances in which those semiotic systems are “put into action.”

Beneveniste’s argument, which I am not able to fully explore here, is that all languages with verb forms imply these three categories of one who speaks {I}, one who is addressed {you} and one who is absent {he/she}. Without belaboring the point here, or addressing the fine points of how and why it is the case, following Benveniste and many others, one assumption of my argument is that any intersubjective semiotic system (i.e. one used to communicate between and about individual subjects), implies these three categories of sender, addressee, and absentee (cf. Fabian 1983:83-87; Lyotard 1984:15; Mühlhäusler and Harré 1990:62; Silverman 1983:198-199; Singer 1989:236-239). Some semiotic systems, for example mathematics, *may* not imply these categories (and this is a very qualified *may*). But I believe we will be hard pressed to find a language or similar semiotic system which does not.

It is crucial, however, to keep in mind that I am using these bracketed categories of {I}, {you}, {he/she} and others discussed below to signify these *implied categories* and *not* specific pronominal forms which make them explicit in language and discourse.⁸ There are linguistic systems, including English, where some (or theoretically, even all) of these forms may be absent. For example, as will be discussed below, English ambiguously uses one “we” to signify several potential pluralities. And as my own tortured use of “he/she” indicates, pronouns can do all sorts of other things, such as impute gender, age, kinship relations, and so on (Mühlhäusler and Harré 1990:60-86), apart from signifying these singularities of the one who speaks, the one addressed, and the one absent in discourse.

So what is it that {I}, {you}, and {he/she} – which I am calling “singularities” – do in language and discourse? Benveniste argues that {I} and {you} in language signify “persons” and have a unique and special status in discourse. Note that language indicates a particular system of signs, while discourse is that system “in action,” as it were (Saussure’s distinction between *langue* and *parole*). In language, {I} is self-referential, making it a very strange and special kind of linguistic entity, according to Benveniste.⁹ {I} cannot exist outside of discourse, as {I} is the speaking subject of the discourse. Moreover, {I} is predicated on a {you} and visa-versa.¹⁰ {I}

and {you} require each other within language or more precisely, within discourse. They therefore have a privileged place in signifying systems as “persons” (we might think here of persons as meaning “beings engaged in discourse”). This quality of “personality” is inherent in (and only in) the “I-you relationship.”

By contrast, so-called “third persons” {he/she} (and we could properly add {it}) are not “persons” in the sense of not having this quality of being engaged in discourse. {He/she} is a “thing” (as opposed to a person) – no more engaged in the discourse than horses, cows, or trees. Benveniste draws on Arab linguists who describe {he/she} as the “one who is absent.”¹¹ Rather than being marked as a presence within *discourse* {he/she} is explicitly *not* present within discourse. {He/She} must be spoken of or for because {he/she} is not present to speak for her or himself or to be addressed. If {he/she} was present in the discourse, {he/she} would become an {I} or a {you}.¹² When semiotic systems are put into action – in discourse – the positionality of subjectivity and personality are continually shifting between embodied beings, except perhaps in the hypothetical case of pure monologue.

Benveniste calls difference between {I-you} and {he/she} the “correlation of personality” (or we could say the contrast of personality). {I} and {you} are persons, {he/she} is not. {I-you} are related to and differentiated from each other in discourse through what Benveniste calls the “correlation of subjectivity.” {I} is a speaking subject addressing a {you}. {I} is the sign of the “subject person” and {you} the sign of the “non-subject person.” So-called “third persons” {he/she} are non-subjects and non-persons. Person, as mentioned above, has the quality of “being” in the sense of being *present in the discourse* – a particular ontological status with regard to discourse. All other things are *absences* – they do not talk or listen, they are only talked *about*. Subjectivity implies a quality of agency and of self – the one who speaks, but also the one who acts or is imputed to act within discourse. Non-subjects lack agency, they are in a very simple sense objects to be acted upon (e.g. subject-verb-object; subject does verb to object; cf. Benveniste 1971; Mühlhäusler and Harré 1990:97).

Singularities	Qualities
{I}	Subject, Person
{you}	Non-Subject, Person
{he/she}	Non-Subject, Non-Person
Correlation of Personality	Person {I-you} : Non-person {he/she}
Correlation of Subjectivity	Subject {I} : Non-subject {you, he/she}

Pluralization and Tribal Signifiers

Given these correlations of personality and subjectivity, Benveniste goes on to argue that some very strange things happen in the processes of pluralization – things that are of special importance to an investigation of tribalism. Most significantly, he argues “that ‘we’ is not a quantified or multiplied ‘I’; it is an ‘I’ expanded beyond the strict limits of the person, enlarged and at the same time amorphous” (p. 203). In other words (some of which are Benveniste’s as well), {we} is not simply a lot of individuated {I}’s. Rather, {we} *expands the person and enlarges the subject*. I take this to be an important key to the power of tribalism. It is not a new or earth-shaking idea – not surprising to say that there is something powerful about being “part of a group”; having a “sense of belonging.” But, what this argues in discourse is that this power is not simply (or perhaps not at all) “strength in numbers” or being “part of a group.” Rather, tribal signifiers – these signifiers of plural persons – contain the potential to *expand and enlarge the subject/self*, imparting certain qualities of discursive “singularities” onto the group.

What sort of pluralities are there in discourse? Once again, I do not mean explicit pronominal forms such as we, they in English, *kami, kita, mereka* in Malay, *nous, ils, elles* and perhaps *on* in French (see Mühlhäusler and Harré 1990:178-191). Rather, I will be using a series of bracketed signs {we1}, {we2}, etc. to discuss the pluralities implied by intersubjective semiotic systems and discourses. As with the singularities, these pluralities may or may not be explicitly present as pronouns in any particular semiotic system or language and they may not be explicitly differentiated.¹³ The pluralities I discuss here are an implicit and, I believe, inherent function of any intersubjective semiotic system and discursive interaction. And tribal signifiers are at least one of their manifestations.

We have seen that there are three singularities: {I}, {you}, {he/she}. Pluralities are discursively derived from these singularities. Putting intersubjective semiotic systems into action activates the {I}, its corollary {you}, and their corollary {he/she}. Once this triad is active, their interaction and combination becomes possible, if not inevitable. The three singularities produce seven minimal combinations, which can be classified as Hybrid Plurals and Additive Plurals:

4 Hybrids	{we1} (I+you)	{we2} (I+he/she)	{we3} (I+you+he/she)	{you-all} (you+he/she)
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3 Additives	{I-I} (I+I)	{you-you} (you+you)	{they} (he/she+he/she)
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These various plurals have qualities which are of particular importance to our understanding of tribal signifiers and tribalism. If, as I am arguing here, tribal signifiers are displaced in discourse and interpretation (of which, more below) by plural persons then it is the qualities of these Hybrid and Additive Pluralities which are imputed onto or within the tribal signifier. Of particular interest are the Hybrids, which join the singularities across the very qualitative differences which establish their meaning within an intersubjective semiotic system.

The Additive Plurals do not impart any qualitative difference in the movement from singularity to plurality. It seems highly suspect that what I indicate here with the signifiers {I-I} and {you-you} are in any way legitimate plurals. We might in some fanciful way speculate on the {I-I} as a split or schizophrenic subject; likewise {you-you} as some sort of schizophrenic projection. However, the split or schizophrenic subject (as when “I talk to myself”) seems much more productively thought of as an internalization of the {I-you} relationship (cf. Mead 1934, whose social-psychological theory rests on an “I-me” relationship internal to a social self). Likewise, with regard to the logic of intersubjective semiotic systems that we are concerned with here, the difference between {he/she} and {they} is only significant insofar as it registers an enumeration of the non-person, non-subject of discourse. Such enumeration may, in Benveniste’s term “amplify” these qualities (or more precisely, amplify their absence), but it does not impart anything especially new to discourse.

The Hybrid Pluralities, on the other hand, produce something new within discourse and are the basis of a system’s intersubjectivity. {We1}, {we2}, {we3} and {you-all} do not merely add {I} to {you}, or {I} to {he/she}, or {you} to {he/she} – they join these signs across the very qualitative differences (or in Benveniste’s term “correlations”) which establishes their meaning in the first place. Secondly, they also amplify the presence or absence of certain qualities. {We1}, often called the “inclusive we,” collapses the correlation of subjectivity and amplifies personality. {You-all} collapses the correlation of personality and amplifies the absence of subjectivity. {We2}, often called the “exclusive we,” collapses both correlations between the {I} subject-person and {he/she} non-subject-non-person. {We3} collapses and amplifies both qualities of subjectivity and personality.

{We3} is a particularly interesting “universal we.” On the one hand, it is “all- inclusive.” But, I have some question as to its legitimate status or at least meaningfulness within discourse, for any supposed totality must admit to a supplement – some “other” or difference to make it meaningful (see Derrida 1976). For the time being at least, I would consider any claim to such universal inclusiveness in fact a case of {we1}, with a necessary if suppressed supplement. For

example, in the English version of the now famous Le Monde headline following September 11, 2001, "Today, we are all Americans," "we" and the use of "Americans" might be read as all-inclusive, signifying all of humanity. But, are the perpetrators of the attacks on the World Trade Center or their supporters part of this "we"? I suspect that in this or any case, there are in fact exclusions. At least provisionally, therefore, {we3} will not be included as a legitimate plurality.

Based on the above discussion, I propose that there are four legitimate discursive pluralities with the following qualities:

Plurality	Qualities
We1 (I+you)	subject/non-subject, person*person (potential subject, amplified person)
We2 (I+he/she)	subject/non-subject, person/non-person (potential subject, potential person)
You-all (you+he/she)	non-subject*non-subject, person/non-person (amplified non-subject, potential person)
They (he/she + he/she)	non-subject*non-subject, non-person*non-person (amplified non-subject, amplified non-person)

(*) denotes amplification of a quality

(/) denotes the possibility of displacement of a quality

For the three hybrid plurals among these four, the essential ambiguity of their qualities highlights the intersubjectivity (and perhaps, interpersonality) of semiotic systems. {We1} in particular marks the intersubjectivity of the speaking or writing {I} and {you} the addressee. In the case of {we2} there is an ambiguity of both subjectivity and personality. Both qualities become *potentialities*. In general, this {we2} provides a gain of subjectivity and personality to the non-subject, non-person {he/she}. Evoking {we2}, the {I} expands its agency beyond the singular to the group vis-à-vis the passive {you}. Yet, given the essential ambiguity of the subject/non-subject quality of {we2}, it at the same time masks the agency of {I}. The responsibility of {I} is, at least potentially and provisionally, shifted onto the group (cf. Mühlhäuser and Harré 1990:87-130). Similarly, evoking {you-all} may be thought of perhaps as creating a greater distance between the subject, person {I} and the addressee {you}, casting doubt on the ontological status of {you} as a person within discourse by associating {you} with the absent non-persons of {he/she} or {they}.

How then are these pluralities evoked within discourse (in any way other than explicit use of pronouns) and how are tribal signifiers manifestations of these pluralities? Linguistic studies of plurals and anaphora are a useful starting point here. In general, linguistic approaches to the semantics of plurals and mass terms focus on issues of the relationship of parts to wholes, such as members to a committee and how these are to be formally interpreted (see for example Fox 2000:37-106). A related body of literature examines the operations of anaphors (singular and plural), which are those parts of language that substitute for, take the place of, and/or refer to other linguistic terms (Bosch 1983). Pronouns are a classic example of anaphors, though there are other forms, including such things as elliptic absences (Fiengo and May 1994:129-189; Huang 2000). As in the case of plurals and mass terms, linguists have developed a variety of arguments for the semantics and pragmatics of anaphoric interpretation (e.g. Dekker 2001; Garnham 2001; Koh and Clifton 2002).

Tribal signifiers share important characteristics of plurals and anaphors. They are a particular kind of plural anaphor. However, their point of reference and signification lies in the discourse of intersubjective semiotic systems themselves. Because tribal signifiers bring to mind people, and because qualities of personality and subjectivity – associated with people – can be derived from intersubjective semiotic systems, tribal signifiers can be (and I would argue, in many if not all cases are) interpreted as referring back to those positions within the system itself. Tribal signifiers (such as *gumsa*, *gumlao*, *norteamericano*, citizen, alien, gay, *banci*, fan, player), while containing other information, are interpreted as referring to {we1}, {we2}, {we3}, {you-all}, or {they} within discourse.¹⁴ Depending on their interpretation, therefore, tribal signifiers assume the qualities of personality and subjectivity (or lack thereof) in particular discursive instances. How this happens and where the locus of interpretation lies then becomes a significant question.

{You}, the Interpreter

As Benveniste observes, the {I} and {you} of a signifying system are transposable; that is, the {I} who speaks can become the {you} who listens and vice-versa. However, for an understanding of the *intersubjectivity* of tribal signifiers, it is important to note that while {I} and {you} are transposable in discourse (i.e. it is possible and perhaps necessary for the back-and-forth of dialog to take place in a signifying system; cf. Benveniste 1971; Mühlhäusler and Harré 1990:35, 93), the two are distinct discursive positions. Work on identity and subjectivity has tended to focus on the {I} within semiotic systems or to collapse {I} and {you} by discussing how individual

subjects give voice to their interpretations of signifiers within a particular system of signs (e.g. the various essays in Spickard and Burroughs 2000). However, while it is the {I} of discourse which is endowed with the agency to produce signs or more broadly texts, as the addressee, {you} takes control of the signs in the process of reading and interpreting them.

The evocation of discursive pluralities, to which I have alluded already, is not in the hands of {I} or {you} alone, but in the interaction between them. While ways in which the {I}, as speaker or author, structures a text (broadly defined) may tend to produce certain readings rather than others, all texts are ultimately open to multiple interpretations (cf. Foucault 1977; Eco 1979). It is the interpreter or reader, not the speaker or writer, who determines the status of tribal signifiers.¹⁵ The {you} of discourse determines if the appropriate displacement of a particular tribal signifier is {we1}, {we2}, {you-all} or {they}. All tribal signifiers must be displaced by one of these combinations by the {you} the interpreter (if they are not then they are not tribal signifiers).¹⁶ And *all tribal signifiers are open to all possible displacements*.

From the case of the sporting tribes of Malaysia and Singapore, mentioned earlier, consider the following sentence:

“Fans and club officials interviewed by Timesport yesterday said the Republic had made the right decision.”¹⁷

If {fans}, {officials}, {Timesport}, and {Republic} are interpreted as signifying (at least among other things) groups of people, then in all, this sentence (with respect to tribal signifiers) has 264 (4⁴) possible interpretations, all of which at a purely semiotic level are equally valid. The writer, in this case a newspaper writer, cannot determine how these signs are ultimately interpreted, that power lies with the reader.¹⁸

The way in which the tribal signifiers of this, or any other text, are interpreted affects the sense of discursive group identity attached to the signifier. Moreover, how {you} interprets the text’s tribal signifiers has implications for the relationship between different groups, the relationship of {I} the writer to {you} the reader and the qualities of subjectivity and personality associated with particular groups in particular discursive instances. Consider just the two following possibilities (among 264) for this sentence, and the tribal implications:

(a) Fans {we1} and club officials {they} interviewed by Timesport {we2} yesterday said the Republic {we1} had made the right decision.

Implications: Writer and reader are the members of the same tribes signified by “Fans” and “the Republic.” Club officials are an objectified (non-person, non-subject) tribe of “others.” The tribe signified by “Timesport” is a “subject person,” from which {you} the reader is excluded. A relationship of similarity is established between Fans and the Republic. Relationships of difference are established between Fans/the Republic vs. club officials vs. Timesport. Note that this is a relationship of *difference* not of *exclusivity*; and that distinction is important. The latter terms (Timesport, club officials), for example, are not *excluded* from the domain of fans and the Republic, rather, a difference is established between them (perhaps this could be thought of as a cognitive “distance” – that through this particular interpretation, fans and the Republic are made closer while Timesport and club officials are made more distant).

b. Fans {you-all} and club officials {they} interviewed by Timesport {we2} yesterday said the Republic {we1} had made the right decision.

Implications: Fans, including the reader, are non-subject persons, whom the writer is addressing but excluding from the domain of subjectivity (note the importance this has with regard to *agency*); while all other terms remain the same as in example (a). But, changing the interpretation of this term changes the structure of the relationships between terms. Fans and the Republic share personality but not subjectivity. Timesport and the Republic share subjectivity and personality (though the personality of the Republic is “amplified”). {You} the reader *as fan* gains subjectivity only through association with {you} the reader as the Republic.

At least one implication of this theory of group identity is that understanding the interpretation of tribal signifiers in terms of their displacements and relationship to discursive, intersubjective pluralities will be important to understanding how and why particular identities are meaningful to subjects in particular instances. While this is perhaps a generally interpretivist, as opposed to a positivist approach to group identity, it is not entirely about the negative establishment of boundaries and difference, derived in various ways from {we2}, {you-all}, {they} (cf. Barth 1969; Moerman 1965:1216). It also gives us grounds for understanding the basis of affective senses of belonging to {we1} engendered through discursive interaction.¹⁹

Returning briefly to Leo Chavez’s research illustrates the importance of the interpreting {you} in this sense of belonging. Chavez and his research assistants, as a part of a broader survey, asked their respondents “Do you now feel like you are part of the American (*Norteamericano*) community?” (Chavez 1994:61).²⁰ Following the argument I have laid out here, with regard to tribal signifiers, Chavez was asking his respondents to engage in an interpretative task – to

interpret the signifier “North American” or more precisely “*Norteamericano*” (as the interviews were conducted in Spanish). The question cast the respondent into the role of {you} the interpreter. To answer Chavez’s question in the affirmative, the respondent must displace the tribal signifier “*Norteamericano*” with a plural person which includes {you}. In other words, to answer yes (as 60.3% of Mexicans and 47.9% of Central Americans did), requires that the respondent displaces “*Norteamericano*” with or takes “*Norteamericano*” to mean {we1} or {we2}. Alternatively, to respond in the negative implies interpreting “*Norteamericano*” to mean {you-all} or {them}.²¹

The value of Chavez’s strategy (by no means unique, but still a fine example) is to cast his informants in the role of interpreters, in this case by giving them an explicitly interpretive task. Giving voice to interpretation by breaking the silence in which interpretation takes place, so to speak, casts {you}, the interpreter in to the role of {I}, the subject person. It opens up a space, however circumscribed within a wider discourse, for Chavez’s interlocutors – the {I}’s that constitute his {you} and {you}’s that constitute his {I}’s in the discursive moments of his research – to speak. Of course, in the discursive moments of Chavez’s article, these “Central American, Mexican, *Norteamericano*, undocumented immigrant, Americans” become once again interpretable tribal signifiers to {you} the reader, and laid open to further interpretations with regard to tribal signifiers.²²

Conclusions and Implications

Anthropological research, with a focus on emic, insider worldviews has sought to understand how people interpret their world at least since the Boasian rejection of the 19th century evolutionary paradigm. Over the past century, anthropologists and those with similar projects have sought to understand the form and structure of what Geertz, following Weber, has famously called the webs of meaning people spin (1973:5). My intention has been to provide a theory for one aspect of the discursive process through which those webs get spun.

In the introduction, I evoked the 1960s exchange between Micheal Moerman and Raoul Naroll to ask if any headway had been made in this debate over how to conceptualize and label groups of people, or what I have called tribes. Moerman’s inclination toward a form of interpretivism, or something of the sort under various names, has generally been in ascendancy in social and cultural anthropology since the 1970s (cf. Rew and Campbell 1999:9-13; Romney 1999:113). While positivism and objectivism in anthropology of the sort championed by Naroll may be “dead” (Aunger 1995:114), a “failed” project (O’Meara 1997:399), or “moribund”

(Romney 1999:113), it continues to prove itself to be a powerful tool or perspective both inside and outside of academic discourse. Recently for example, application of cluster and consensus analysis to particular sorts of survey and interview data has generated groups or “cultures” operationalized through mathematical and statistical functions with some rather interesting results, which may explain such things as conflict between parents and teachers over the education of children (Handwerker 2002) or why union organizing is a low priority for shop stewards (Durrenberger 2002; see also Brumann 1999). In such analyses, “cultures” are cognitive models which appear (lit. become visible) through the operations of the anthropologist. The subjects in whose minds they theoretically reside may be only vaguely or not at all aware of them (for a critique of this theory see: Aunger 1999). The researcher then defines members of a particular group as those holding similar views.

In my opinion, such positivists approaches, of which there are many beyond those mentioned in the paragraph above, are useful for explaining a great number of things. Yet as powerful and perhaps indispensable as positivist and objectivist delineations of groups and group identity may be, they cannot explain the discursive process through which group identity is generated and the affective results of that process. Moreover, such positivism produces some rather strange effects. Identifying with a particular group has no standing. For Narrol, the “Lue” are not the “Lue.” Similarly, as in the case of cluster and consensus analysis, subjects may be members of “cultures” of which they have no conscious awareness (Aunger 1999). Positivist, objectivist approaches (at least of the sort I have discussed here), in which groups are “operationally defined” and named by the anthropologist or some other authority elide rather than answer the question of how group identity comes into being.

The problem with group identity and tribal signifiers, from a positivist point of view, is that they are inherently ambiguous, flexible, and open to interpretation. They share qualities of indexical pronouns such as I and you, in that their referent resides in particular discursive moments, rather than pointing to something outside of discourse. Tribal signifiers can be associated with certain characteristics, such as those proposed in ethnicity theories of primordial sentiments, like blood, land, kinship lineage, belief systems, and so on (see Geertz 1973:259; Gil-White 1999, 2001; Keyes 1976, 1981). But reducing tribal signifiers and group identity to such associations raises the same problems as arguing that {I} is merely a substitute for proper names (Mühlhäusler and Harré 1990:93-96) and elides the important discursive effects of tribal signifiers, in other words, the ways in which, like {I} and {you}, they produce senses of subjectivity and personality (or their absence) within discourse.

At the same time, various interpretivist approaches fall short in explaining group identity because they take it for granted. Societies, cultures, generalized others, and so on are taken as groups or symbolic systems to which individuated selves or subjects relate (e.g. Geertz 1973; Giddens 1991; Habermas 1981; Mead 1934). Or in some analyses, individuated selves disappear altogether, and in their place, everything becomes discourse seemingly produced out of nowhere (e.g. Derrida 1976, 1978; Foucault 1970, 1977). The problem, especially in the latter case, is that it is difficult to see why or how any identity is meaningful to anyone, if everything is just a play of signifiers (cf. Derrida 1978:354)? The account of intersubjectivity and tribal signifiers I have outlined here attempts to answer that question. In particular, it is not just the subjectivity of {I} within discourse that produces a sense of self, it is also the interpretive {you} and the interplay between them (as well as their relationship to non-person, non-subjects of their discourse). Tribal signifiers are of special significance in this regard, because of their anaphoric relationship to pluralities, the interpretation of which from instance to instance may associate or dissociate the three singular positions of {I}, {you} and {he/she} along with their characteristics of subjectivity and personality.

I have asserted that the outline presented here is a general theory. I believe that it is, though it may well be that the characteristics I have presented here are not characteristic of all intersubjective semiotic systems. Or perhaps, there are semiotic systems that do not have the characteristics I have described and therefore we would not want to call them intersubjective. If so, some revision would need to be made to the generality of this argument. However, two final points need to be emphasized. First, many cogent arguments have been made regarding the ways in which particular linguistic or semiotic systems produce different senses of selves (e.g. Cohen 1977; Daniel 1984; Mühlhäusler and Harré 1990; Urban 1989). This is closely related to, but not at odds with, the argument I have presented here. The three positions within discourse which I have outlined are not themselves “senses of self” (or of others). They are elementary discursive positions through which senses of self, and of group identity, are produced. The second related point is that I have not outlined a general theory of tribal essences, rather this is a general theory of tribal *ambiguity*. Neither {I} nor {you} can control tribal signifiers. {I} produces them. {You} interprets them. They are in a very fundamental way – not a fanciful one – open to interpretation.

Notes

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of my ideas in this paper were presented at the 9th Malaysia-Singapore Forum, 28-30 October 2002 at the National University of Singapore. Of course, the responsibility for shortcomings in this analysis resides with {I}, the author.

¹ Examples of this relationship of self, individual, subject, etc. to society, culture, discourse, generalized other, etc. are innumerable. For over a century, this relationship has been a central but vexing and unresolved area of social and cultural research (cf. Rew and Campbell 1999:13). Much of what I am arguing builds on significant contributions to understanding this relationship. For example, Habermas and others have developed ideas of intersubjectivity, which are crucial to the analysis I present here. Generally, however, intersubjectivity has been theorized as a relationship between individual subjects mediated by a general cultural milieu, such as Habermas's "lifeworld" (1984, 1987) or in relationship to a generalized other, as in the influential social psychology of George Herbert Mead (1934). Beneveniste and a number of other writers, notably Milton Singer (1989, 1991), have pointed the way toward understanding senses of self through discursive relationships of the sort I outline here, though the implications for group identity have, from what I have read, not been fully realized. In this respect, Barbara Fultner (2002) highlights some interesting work by Robert Brandom in *Making It Explicit* (1994), which may closely parallel the argument I outline in this paper. Unfortunately, I do not have access to Brandom's text at the time of this writing.

² I have chosen to use the terms tribe and tribalism to name what I am describing for several reasons. The terms are both out-of-date in anthropology (replaced by culture, ethnic group, and other terms) but also recently in vogue in some scholarly and popular discourse (Rew and Campbell, for example, refer to the popularity of "neo-tribes," 1999:1). I must admit to a certain appreciation for the sense in which tribal and tribalism are at once retrograde and progressive, contemporary terms. Aside from that I cannot find a better term for what I am describing and am adverse to making up some neologism, which while filling a linguistic void would more likely simply be interpreted to imply all sorts of characteristics of preexisting concepts (in the way that race became ethnicity which more recently has become ethnic, but with questionable results as to how effective adoption of a new term has been in erasing the problems of the prior term).

³ At the very least, in a minimal sense, the concepts that individual sentient subjects might have are not "meaningful" until they are shared (cf. Geertz 1973) – which "enters" them, so to speak in discourse. It is probably the case as well that a more accurate portrayal of what is going on in "conceptualization" is that individual subjects are processing available discursive, cultural "stuff" (symbols, signs) to forge their concepts and the concepts of individuals are therefore structured in important ways by antecedent discourse.

⁴ Somewhat parallel to Saussure is the contribution of Charles Sanders Peirce to theories of semiotics and signs (see Daniel 1984; Hoopes 1991; Silverman 1983; Singer 1989). Peirce has been highly influential in the development of many ideas on which this paper is based, but a comparison and contrast of Peirce's ideas to Saussure's in relationship to my argument would take us far afield.

⁵ Saussure did not have much if anything to say about the relationship of sign to referent; especially in comparison to Peirce and later writers (Silverman 1983).

⁶ From this point onward I will use bracketed signs - {I}, {you}, etc. rather than quotation marks. In part, this is because I find this simply easier to read but also in order to highlight that I do not mean particular signifiers (“I”, “you”, etc.) but rather discursive positions.

⁷ Greg Urban (1989), for example, explicitly cites two other important essays in Benveniste’s *Problem in General Linguistics*, but not “Relationships of Person in the Verb.” The fact that my own attention was drawn to the latter essay owes its genealogy to a seminar on “Anthropology and the ‘Subject’” taught by Marilyn Ivy at the University of Washington, Winter 1993.

⁸ Critiques of the universality of this discursive triad of sender-addressee-absentee appear to rest mainly on arguments as to whether their explicit pronominal forms are universal, which is clearly not the case (see Mühlhäusler and Harré 1990:62-65). But such an argument does not overturn either the general logic of the discursive triad nor the argument that these positions are universally implied, if not always explicit, in intersubjective semiotic systems like languages.

⁹ This “self-referentiality” of {I} relates to the concept of indexicality. Mühlhäusler and Harré (1990:13) note that indexicality has been somewhat neglected in linguistics. At the same time, they argue, following Wittgenstein, that indexicals are not denoting or referential. In other words, {I} does not refer to anything outside of discourse. Instead, they write that “the transcendental ego is a shadow cast on the world by grammar” (1990:18). I believe that what I am arguing corresponds to their formulation, though my way of presenting the argument – that what pronouns for {I} refer to is a position in discourse itself - is rather more mundane (cf. Silverman 1983). As Greg Urban (1989) also points out, there are a number of other, non-self-referential uses of the signifier {I} in English and of parallel signifiers in other languages; again, it is this self-referential *position* in discourse that I am writing about, not manipulations of various signifiers used to signify it – such as the English “I”, the Malay “Saya” and “aku”, the Fench “je”, etc.

¹⁰ Mühlhäusler and Harré use the term “co-indexicality” to discuss this relationship of {I} and {you} (1990:35, 90).

¹¹ Benveniste does not cite precisely which Arab linguists he is getting this idea from, but at least acknowledges the general source of this idea.

¹² Importantly, {I}, {you}, and {he/she} are not describing “self-same” individuals outside of discourse but the positionality of subjects (and persons and things) within discourse.

¹³ For example, English – or at least Standard American English – does not have an explicitly plural “you,” though I will be using the common colloquialism you-all. Likewise, there is not an explicit differentiation between the forms of “we” I will be

discussing in English; though such a differentiation, at least between two, does exist in Malay and a number of other languages (cf. Benveniste 1971:202; Mühlhäuser and Harré 1990:60-86).

¹⁴ This of course reverses most traditional accounts of anaphora, especially pronouns, in which the pronoun is portrayed as referring – usually “back” – to and substituting for an antecedent signifier. For example, in the phrase, “As citizens, we must do our duty,” {we} would be said to refer back to {citizens}. There is nothing wrong with such an account for some kinds of analyses. However, what I am proposing is that the singularities and pluralities of discourse in intersubjective semiotic systems have a rather special ontological place within discourse and the fact that tribal signifiers can and are made to signify and refer to them is important to the affective nature of these particular kinds of signifiers.

¹⁵ The role of {you} as interpreter raises an important complication to the idea of {you} the addressee as a passive participant in discourse, vis-à-vis {I}. The distinction to be made is that while {you} is an active participant with regard to interpreting signifiers in discourse, the ability or agency to produce signifiers is reserved for {I} in discourse.

¹⁶ Displacement of tribal signifiers with discursive pluralities may be relatively conscious or unconscious in different instances. The extent to which it is conscious or unconscious, and under what circumstances, might be a useful area of empirical research (cf. Singer 1989).

¹⁷ This sentence is quoted from the Straits Times, 23 February 1995. This and other articles related to the exit of Singapore’s team from the Malaysia Premier League can be found in the National University of Singapore’s Singapore Malaysia Collection newspaper clippings under Social Life and Customs (Singapore) (1994) vol. 28 no. 4-6.

¹⁸ The discourse of newspapers (and of writing in general) produces a distance between the {I} and {you} – extending the gap and extenuating the relationship between the two (cf. Derrida 1976). However, as with specific pronominal forms, the difference between writing and speaking is important to the operations of tribal signifiers in specific instances, but does not imply a fundamental difference in the discursive operations I am describing in this paper.

¹⁹ Of course, in a more complex way, just as the discursive triad of singularities of {I}, {you}, and {he/she} all necessarily imply each other, the discursive pluralities of {we1}, {we2}, {you-all}, and {they} imply each other as well and each implies a specific set of discursive inclusions and exclusions.

²⁰ The exact question asked, in Spanish, was “Se siente ya parte de la comunidad norteamericana, o todavia no?” (Leo Chavez, personal communication). This is in fact a good example of Benveniste’s argument about the “Relation of Persons in the Verb.” While the English translation of the question uses the pronoun “you” twice, the Spanish form of the question does not have an explicit pronoun, but {you} as a discursive position is implied in the conjugation of “Se siente.”

²¹ In both affirmative and negative cases, to determine precisely which displacement the respondents were making would require knowledge of how they interpreted their interlocutor's position (i.e. that of Chavez or his assistants) vis-à-vis "*Norteamericano*."

²² Understanding the operations of tribal signifiers has important implications for issues of representation such as those raised by Fabian (1983), Said (1979), and in very interesting ways in Singer's (1989) discussion of Levi-Strauss, though it is not possible to fully explore these implications in the present article.

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