

The Roots of Semasiology

As the architect of a theory of human action called 'semasiology', I recently found myself answering questions about the approach put by Jenna Cameron, a graduate student in the Anthropology Department at the University of Illinois (Urbana-Champaign). She had to write a paper for a seminar on the history of ideas in our discipline. As a dancer attracted to human movement studies, she wanted to write about semasiology. One of Jenna's questions was: "Is there an already existing body of theory [in anthropology] that accurately describes your work?" And, she wanted to know how semasiological theory "got started."

The answer to Jenna's question about already existing theory is answerable by a single word: "no." Semasiology grew out of several ideas that existed in social anthropology, but it didn't (and still doesn't) depend upon extant theories of human movement research on either side of the Atlantic. There was no comparable approach to human movement studies in late 1972 when I finished the B. Litt. thesis, nor as far as I am aware, is there now.

Since 1991 students have had an overview of available modern theories of human movement in *Ten Lectures on Theories of the Dance* (1991: 208-243), and I believe these theories¹ are still in use, especially those compatible with "The Old Paradigm" in scientific investigation (see Harré, p. 125 this volume).

In this issue of *JASHM*, I propose to address Jenna's second question. I will explain how and in what ways semasiology "got started" by reproducing four items containing some of the "already existing ideas" in British social anthropology that eventually led to semasiology. These are found in (1) an early essay by E.E. Evans-Pritchard on Azande dancing; (2) an early paper by Rom Harré explaining to social anthropologists the then recent paradigm change in the natural sciences and (3), excerpts from two of Edwin Ardener's papers: his excellent introduction to *Social Anthropology and Language* (1971) and a short essay of his entitled, 'Behaviour: A Social Anthropological Criticism' (1973). Comments on each item will appear as 'reviews'.

• • •

I first read E.P.'s 'Azande essay' along with a few other anthropological works in 1968-69 before coming to Oxford. Convinced by then that social anthropology was something I wanted to do, I was enrolled as a Diploma student at the Institute of Social Anthropology in Michaelmas Term, 1970 (see Williams 1999: 160, 169-178 for the whole story). The Diploma year was crucial to my scholarly development in many ways, but one of the memorable events was a meeting of the Anthropological Society of Oxford, where an invited speaker - Prof. Rom Harré, a philosopher of science - gave a talk entitled 'The Shift to an Anthropomorphic Model of Man'. I was so encouraged by what he said that I emerged from the session in a state of mild euphoria.²

¹ Including Kaeppeler's 'Emic/Etic' approach (Williams 1991: 227-29), Proxemics (1991: 229-231), Kendon's "Gestural approach" (1991: 231-32), Birdwhistell's Kinesics (1991: 223-26), and one style of East-European Motif-Morphology (1991: 218-20).

² Although I came to Oxford without a B.A. degree, I had completed several courses in philosophy during the three years I was an undergraduate student at the University of Wisconsin (Madison). I was acquainted with philosophical literature -- meaning that I knew who David Hume, John Locke, George Berkeley and other well-known philosophers were and had some idea, at least, of the universe of discourse.

Keep in mind that for years, my thinking was dominated by a desire to find some way of talking and writing about dancing that was different from various approaches with which I was already familiar. The undergraduate student experience at Wisconsin (1963-66) in this regard was disappointing. I found that if I wanted to do serious study at a graduate level there, I had three basic choices: 1. I could combine the study of dancing with studies of primates; 2. I might work at attempts to use movement to contribute to studies of robotics, or 3. I might analyze a dance or some stretch of danced movements using a 'scientific' methodology which was from the 'Old Paradigm' (described in Harré's paper in terms of "dependent and independent variables" and a kind of "experimentalism"). This was what the Dance Department³ offered at a graduate level in those days -- all of which I rejected. My attitude could be best summed up by an assertion I made in the simple terms I spoke of such things back then, i.e. "If these are the only ways to talk about and explain dancing, then I will never write about it."

It wasn't only the alleged 'scientific writing' about the dance with which I was unfavorably impressed. I didn't much care for other types of literature about dances and dancing either. For example, in philosophy during the early 'sixties, phenomenology was in "full flower," so to speak. A colleague, Maxine Sheets, was in the process of finishing her book, *The Phenomenology of Dance* finally published in 1966. I wasn't enthusiastic about the phenomenological approach, even though it appeared to offer much more to my subject than did philosophies which preceded it. My main objection was that phenomenology denied dances any continuity through time (see Williams 1991: 79 and 251). It seemed only to be the other side of logical positivism's coin.

Although interesting and informative at one level, histories and biographies of dancers and dance companies never really hit the mark for me about dances and dancing *per se*. Fascinating though dance artists were (and are), I wanted to learn about *the dance forms themselves*. Trying to discover these, I waded through one or two "how to" books, but stopped fairly soon because these books never said anything about what dances *meant*.

To me, a lot of the available descriptive writing about dancing seemed to consist of little more than extended program notes; for example, the many well-written, informative works of Cyril Beaumont on individual ballets (e.g. Beaumont 1941 and 1955). I liked Jean George Noverre's *Letters* (1930[1760]) but that was more about teaching -- in which I was interested, to be sure -- but the *Letters*, like Arbeau's *Orchesographie* (1926[1588]) and, say, the *Code of Terpsichore* (Blasis 1830) revealed a great deal about dances *then*, but they didn't disclose anything I wanted to know about dances *now*. Books about dances more often talked extensively about music or rhythm, about 'steps' or how to perform certain moves (e.g. the Cecchetti manuals: Beaumont 1940),

³ The Department was the oldest in the U.S. (started by Margaret H'Doubler in 1918), it was a subdivision of the Physical Education Department, whose research and graduate studies were largely dominated by kinesiology -- thus by scientific method -- in its manifestations as 'The Old Paradigm'.

but they didn't say *what the dances were about*. They always talked *about* the dances. And, think about it: there is a big difference between, say, talking *about* the Sokodae dance and discussing what Sokodae is *about* (see Williams 1993: 68).

Books like Sachs's *The World History of the Dance* (1937), DeMille's *The Book of the Dance* (1963)⁴, Martin's *Introduction to the Dance* (1939) or *The Dance* (1963[1947]), and Sorell's *Dance Throughout the Ages* (1960) were completely unsatisfying.⁵ There always were (and sad to say, still are) two major problems with this *genre* of book: 1. they are heavily biased because of a standard format they all seemed to follow, which I've talked about elsewhere (1991: 88-91), and 2. the dance forms they discuss didn't receive equal treatment, and they were often handled with unequal respect.

For many years, I thought my problem consisted simply of not knowing enough: perhaps I hadn't found the really *good* books on dances I naïvely imagined were out there somewhere. So -- I kept searching. The process I went through is best described by saying that I constantly found myself striking books and writers off my mental list: "Not this," "No. Not this, or this," and so on -- until I encountered 'The Dance' by E.E. Evans-Pritchard in 1968 at the Royal Anthropological Institute Library in London. After reading E.P.'s essay, I thought, "Yes, this could be it. Maybe social anthropologists know something about how to talk about dances." Thus it was that the first powerful, positive impression of anthropological writing about the dance was made before I entered Oxford.

Keep in mind that Evans-Pritchard wrote on Azande dances before 1928. When I first read his essay at the R.A.I. Library in 1968, I had no idea whether he was still alive or not. Finding out that he was, I wrote a long letter telling him what I thought about his essay. I enclosed three articles I had written on the dance. These eventually got me to Oxford -- or so Evans-Pritchard said after I got to know him. He told me he saw a "potential anthropologist" in my writing. Starting in the spring of 1971, we discussed my untutored efforts (see Williams 1991: 287-321 for an overview of these articles) and we also discussed his Azande dance essay.

I intend to share with present-day students some of the insights I gained twenty-eight years ago through talking to Evans-Pritchard, but we will start with some short biographical notes regarding his lengthy career for those who may not know who he was.

⁴ Not all of DeMille's books were unsatisfying. When she writes of her own experience as a choreographer/teacher/dancer in *Dance to the Piper* (1952) for example, her writing is intelligent, informative and penetrating.

⁵ I had experienced so-called "primitive" dancing when I studied several years with Pearl Primus and Percival Borde in New York, and I had studied North Indian Kathak dancing with Gina Lalli, (also in New York). I had been an exhibition ballroom dancer, and, although my basic groundwork in dancing was in ballet, I had been a professional modern concert dancer for several years. Apart from this, I studied several dances in Ghana and Ivory Coast for three and a half years.