

supposed to characterize artefacts and machines (Baudrillard 1968: 12–13), led nowhere. A technical action (*chaîne opératoire*) is not a ‘sentence’ in which a combination of operations, matter, and actors following some kind of ‘grammar’ would result in a modification in the material world that, in turn, could be glossed as the ‘meaning’ of that technical action. More efficiently, most studies have concentrated on the information that techniques and artefacts contain and convey. This information—or ‘meaning’—has to be understood both from a wide etic point of view (what do techniques, in their most physical form do in social relationships?) and from an emic point of view (for the people who make and use them, artefacts are markers of some identity; artefacts are inscribed with some information; etc.).

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A good reason for this failure to apply some kind of semiotic theory to technical processes derives from the complex aspects of that information and processing that constitute what anthropologists call ‘tacit (or implicit) knowledge’. As Bloch (1998: 11) stated, after showing that the operations needed to drive a car ‘not only *are* not linguistic but also *must* be non-linguistic if they are to be efficient’. The automation of gestures and mental operations (e.g. what you do in order to overtake another car) that result from a long process of apprenticeship implies that the actors are not ↴ (or no longer) conscious of them, and this indirectly makes it hard for the anthropologist trying to grasp them (Mahias 2002: 97–108). Any comment by the actor is welcome, for it may help understand what kind of phenomena are involved, together with the words used to describe the elements put together in a technical process. A good example is Delaporte's (2002) work on the ‘herder's eye’ in which he explains how Sami herders are able to grasp, in one glance, a set of information which allows them to recognize one particular animal in a herd of several hundred.

From the point of view of the social scientist, by distinguishing one artefact from another by its form, decoration, or characteristics of fabrication, i.e. by studying its ‘style’, one is able to make hypotheses on the homogeneity, particularities, and inscription in a historical or regional setting of the group of people who produced or used them. As mentioned earlier, this approach is the first step of most archeological research. In anthropology, the deciphering of style has been mostly limited to the marking of identity, following two researchers whose work was influenced by linguistic theory: Bogatyrev (1971[1937]), for whom the folk costume of Moravian Slovakia was a ‘sign’, and Wobst, who studied the components of the Yugoslav costume as pieces in a process of information exchange (Wobst 1977: 321). Delaporte's work (1988), which is also on costume (that of the Sami), is among the very few studies that envisage the functioning of such a system of signs to identify which are the units used to produce meaning, or what is the nature of the ‘meaning’ thus produced.

The recent and promising trend in research on technology explores the multiple and diverse manners in which the very materiality of objects and technical actions are part of a system of thought, social relations, and actions. However, a linguistic approach to artefacts *in the making* is extremely rare. Not surprisingly, it was developed by French scholars who were more or less influenced by Haudricourt (1988), who was both a linguist and ‘technologue’, and by Leroi-Gourhan and his students. In case studies on weaving (Lefébure 1978; Drettas 1980) or the domestic kneading of dough (Virolle-Souibès 1989), a painstaking recording and description of the vocabulary associated with a given technique, as well as a study of the connotations of the terms (their semantic field), allows us to grasp some links between technical acts, what people say about them, and the various activities, symbolic or not, relating to the activity as a whole and to its components.

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As we have seen in the Anga cases studies above, some techniques, such as the making of a Baruya garden fence, may be a way to repeat and make tangible some essential aspects of a social system, institutions, shared representations, etc. Others, such as the Ankave mortuary drum and ceremony, evoke and gather aspects of a culture, social organization, and system of thought that may not be verbalized. But these non-verbal ways to evoke key sets of relations (or values) of a given human group cannot be discovered without careful attention to whatever words are uttered about these relations as well as technical actions. If one does not listen to ↴ Baruya men boasting about male cooperation, or to Baruya brothers-in-law having a row because they did not do some work that they should have, there is no way to realize that making a fence is