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# ***“SHE JUST CALLED YOU HONEY”: MY QUANDARY AT WAFFLE HOUSE***

BRETT LUNCEFORD

My wife and I arrived in Mobile four years ago. As we drove from Pennsylvania into the deep South, I began to notice the subtle changes that became increasingly less subtle, not least of which was the stifling humidity. It was bad in Pennsylvania, but I am from California where we generally don't have humidity that you can see. But another change that we began to notice in our eventful four day excursion to the other side of the Mason–Dixon Line was the food. I have an affinity for truck stops because, when it comes to food, I like quantity almost as much as I like quality. We began seeing things that were foreign to us like grits, collard greens, and field peas.

People also started to sound different the further south we went. We stopped at a truck stop Wendy's in Georgia and participated in the following exchange:

Young Man at Register: What can I get y'all?

Me: I'll have the bacon cheeseburger and a chicken sandwich.

Rebecca: I'll have the salad.

Young Man at Register: What kind of dressing?

We'll stop here to note that the young man was mumbling because he was scared as hell, this being his first day on the job with a line a mile long at a busy travel plaza. But he had other things to be scared of as well. We had

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watched his supervisor, a rather loud African-American woman telling him how to do things. Just then, she exclaimed,

Supervisor: You say sir and ma'am or I'll smack you!

Rebecca and I mentally thought, "Holy crap!" We believed that it was going to happen right there in front of us. But the problem was that neither Rebecca nor I could understand what the person behind the register was asking because of his thick accent. Thus, the exchange continued:

Rebecca: What?

Young Man at Register: What kind of dressing do you want? (still unintelligible)

Rebecca: I can't understand what you're asking.

Finally, much to the relief of both the young man at the register and the people behind us, we realized that he was asking about the salad dressing. We resolved that whatever ended up in the bag was what we would get because we really didn't want to try to decipher the language and we definitely didn't want the poor guy to get smacked by the supervisor.

We arrived in Mobile with an over-heated car and a heavily loaded moving truck, barely making it to the apartment complex where we would be living before the rental office closed. By the time we had taken care of the lease agreement, retrieved our over-heated car from the parking lot where we had ditched it, and unloaded some of the essentials, we realized that we were hungry and that it was well past when respectable establishments would be open. Thus, our first meal in our new home was had at Waffle House. I had only heard of Waffle House but had never been to one. The first time we had seen them was on the way down south. I believe that it is important to explain the worldview in which I operate. I am beginning to say things like "y'all" and am developing a taste for collard greens and grits, but I am still a Westerner at heart. Thus, I am completely unfamiliar with many of the unspoken linguistic rules that Southerners seem to take for granted. In the dialogues between the waitresses and the patrons, relationships are being established, defined, and negotiated—relationships that are, in many ways, new to me.

In this essay, I will examine a particular linguistic strategy that I have observed in waitresses at Waffle House: the use of the epithet "honey." Discourses rarely have single interpretations, but by carefully examining a particular discourse, one can distill possible interpretations of how it functions rhetorically. I suggest that the waitresses at Waffle House engage in rhetorical

strategies that help (re)define the relationship between the customers and themselves. To support this claim, I will consider how the architecture of Waffle House provides a space where an intimate relationship can be proposed, the way the use of the term honey proposes a particular, if ambiguous, relationship between the waitress and customer, how this relationship may be interpreted, especially from the standpoint of a cultural outsider such as myself, and the consequences of such a relationship.

### **Establishing a Relationship**

It should come as little surprise that we eat not only because we need the calories for energy but also because of the pleasure that it provides. Research by Lisa Hoffman and John Polich<sup>1</sup> suggest that “food consumption contributes to the subject’s general arousal state,” arousal in this case being physiological, rather than sexual. Scholars have also noted that food stimulates pleasure centers in the brain.<sup>2</sup> As such, it seems reasonable to speculate that when we eat at a restaurant, we are engaging in what is essentially a hedonic practice, attending not only to physiological needs but also to psychological needs. In a restaurant, one pays for the privilege of being waited on and served. Thus, there is a sense of importance that is granted to the diner. One enters a space where you can “have it your way” and the customer is always right. One places an “order,” rather than a “request” or a “plea.”

My experience on the West Coast, as well as much of Pennsylvania has been, with a few notable exceptions, that of dining out as an isolated experience. The waiter or waitress is there simply as a liaison between the party at your table and the kitchen. He or she is there to take your order, retrieve your order, and replenish anything that should be refilled. The relationship is sterile but comfortable. Each knows his or her place in the relationship, which is simply transactional. Most importantly, there is an understanding of the hierarchy in the relationship. From our first experience at Waffle House, we recognized that such rules were open to question in this space. The waitress immediately asked where we were from, probably because of our accents. We told her that we had just moved from Pennsylvania and that we had never eaten at a Waffle House. At that point, it was not just a conversation between ourselves and the waitress, but also the other waitress and the cook that the waitress called over to tell them about our inexperience. I asked about the triple hash browns done “all the way,” and she just told me that I had to get them. She reminded the cook that this was our first time and to make them good.

Here we see a subtle shift in the balance of power in the situation. The waitress subtly reminds us that the kitchen staff has power over our dining experience. One is always reminded of this at Waffle House because the kitchen is completely open. In other restaurants, the kitchen is secluded in the back, allowing the diner to maintain the illusion that the food is being magically created, rather than being fried on a blackened metal grill. The cook is always in clear view like a low-rent Mongolian grill. In Goffman's<sup>3</sup> terms, the front stage and the back stage are one in the same, which brings the humanity of the situation to the forefront. One cannot help but watch the tattooed cook carelessly scatter the onions on the grill or the waitress mangle the waffle as it comes out of the waffle iron. Everything is right there; one sees every mistake as the cooks and waitresses perform in the panopticon. Yet there is still the creeping suspicion that the performance is just that—an illusion. Thus, the kitchen functions as simulacrum, appearing to be real but serving only to maintain the illusion of reality.<sup>4</sup>

Architecture plays a role in the interactions between the patrons as well. One cannot escape scrutiny or avoid over-hearing the conversations of the other customers; there are no private spaces in Waffle House. It is easy to become drawn into other people's conversations simply because the architecture of the space invites this kind of interaction. Tables are in fairly close quarters, making it difficult to have a private conversation. Because of the close proximity of the kitchen, especially at the counter, the two spheres often intersect. For example, when sitting at the counter, I have felt the spray as the waitress rinsed out a coffeepot in front of me. To dine at Waffle House is to experience a degree of exposure that can be greater than even fast food restaurants, simply because most Waffle House restaurants are smaller than the average fast food restaurant. The architecture and the interactions of the staff each invite a significant degree of intimacy that is generally lacking in other restaurants. This constructed intimacy sets the stage for the relationship that is about to be formed once the waitress speaks.

### **Defining The Relationship**

My wife still finds it amusing every time a waitress calls me "honey." Rebecca smiles, nudges me, and says, "she just called you honey." This, more than anything, let us know that we had definitely crossed the Mason-Dixon Line and that the experience of the Southern diner would be considerably different than what we had experienced on the West Coast where we are both from. There are enough Waffle Houses around Mobile that I am not really a regular at any of them, so I am not on friendly terms with any

of the waitresses. But I am being invited into a different kind of relationship with the waitress with one simple word—honey. Very few people call me honey, so in some ways, this act creates an artificial sense of intimacy. But is it really artificial? S. I. Hayakawa<sup>5</sup> notes that terms such as honey “make use to some extent of the affective connotations of words,” and I feel good when the waitress calls me honey. But I still have yet to know how I should respond in turn. For the waitress, calling an unknown customer honey appears natural, but let us consider how this act functions rhetorically because this simple act seems to be a key component of how she constructs the relationship between herself and the customer.

Maurice Charland, drawing heavily from Louis Althusser, describes how rhetorical discourses can act as interpellation, or hailing. Charland<sup>6</sup> writes, “Interpellation occurs at the very moment one enters into a rhetorical situation, that is, as soon as an individual recognizes and acknowledges being addressed.” When the waitress refers to me as “honey,” I recognize myself as “honey” and this recognition invites me to feel and behave as such. Edwin Black<sup>7</sup> states that “the critic can see in the auditor implied by a discourse a model of what the rhetor would have his real auditor become.” As the waitress defines me, I am offered not only the relationship but an identity to fulfill. I know what it means to be someone’s honey, but I am not quite sure how to be the *waitress’s* honey.

When the waitress refers to me as honey, she engages in altercasting, or defining a role for the other in the interaction.<sup>8</sup> What remains unclear are the parameters of that role. How is she defining me? What is my identity at that moment in her eyes? Eli Zaretsky<sup>9</sup> states that “the notion of identity involves negation or difference—something *is* something, *not* something else.” What, then, is negated in my identity that she offers me? There is a kind of possession implied in the term of endearment used. When someone calls another honey, they generally have some kind of claim upon them—one is *someone else’s* honey. In other words, I am now *her* customer; she is not *my* waitress. I recognize a kind of relationship being signified by her choice of terms that I had no part in constructing other than by my presence and choice of dining establishments. My own identity contradicts my role; when the waitress calls me honey, I become simultaneously he who is served and he who is possessed by the server. Perhaps part of my unease in this construction of the relationship is the reluctance to let the waitress formulate the bounds of our relationship unilaterally, but I am left speechless as she does so. She performs an illocutionary act, where “a speaker’s utterance is simply recognized by the listener as an action that,

when successful, transforms a situation of subjectivity (there is no relationship between the speaker and listener) into one of intersubjectivity (there is the relationship of 'having communicated,' i.e., recognition of the force of the utterance),"<sup>10</sup> but she also performs a perlocutionary act in that it does something to me as listener.

I am left with the recognition that I now have a relationship with the waitress, but without an understanding of what this relationship entails. To more fully understand how to fulfill this role, I must know more about the waitress. In the rhetorical transaction, she has constructed her own persona in addition to the one that she invites me to adopt. But there is more taking place here; the rhetorical transaction takes place synchronically rather than in isolation. Thomas Benson describes the transactional quality of defining oneself; when presented with a possible way of defining one's self, the person who would be defined is free to choose whether to accept or reject the offered identity. A major determinant in this process is whether the person is willing to accept the proffered identity from the person who defines it.<sup>11</sup> In other words, *ethos* is an important factor in defining a relationship. Aristotle<sup>12</sup> argues that *ethos* is more than just one's reputation; rather, it is created during the speech act. I must consider whether or not I trust the waitress to define our relationship and how she invites me to trust her.

In the process of constructing her *ethos*, the waitress attempts to build a sense of identification.<sup>13</sup> As customer and waitress, there is an implied balance of power already existing that must be bridged if we are to have a relationship such that I am her honey. After all, honey is a term that suggests a mutual relationship, if not an equal one. Kenneth Burke<sup>14</sup> writes, "To the extent that a social structure becomes differentiated, with privileges to some that are denied to others, there are the conditions for a kind of 'built in' pride. King and peasant are 'mysteries' to each other." It seems, then, that the waitress attempts to bridge this gap between customer and staff, re-defining herself as at least an equal partner in the dining experience. By establishing a relationship, she removes this sense of mystery between the customer and herself and injects a sense of familiarity.

There are few situations in which people are called honey: there are maternal impulses and romantic impulses. My wife is an elementary school teacher. She states that she calls her students honey, but observes that she had not previously done so until we moved to the South. Such actions seem appropriate when dealing with second graders, but despite my sometimes paternal impulses toward some of my students, it would seem quite out of place for me to call my college-aged students honey. One reason for this is

the chance of misinterpretation; it is easy to see such behavior as a romantic overture. In the case of the waitress, this ambiguity can be strategic. Gregory Sawin<sup>15</sup> notes that men in particular can sometimes mistake a woman's friendliness for seduction, describing it as "a man creating a mental map that did not match the territory of the man–woman interaction." The use of the term honey by the waitresses at Waffle House seems to blur the line between maternal and romantic impulses.

This brings us back to the persona that the waitress has constructed for herself. As one who feeds me, she fulfills a maternal role, yet because she is at least close to my age, there is always the potential for sexual undertones in the relationship. D. Keith Mano<sup>16</sup> writes, "You are fed by the most important, most sensual women in life: mother, spouse, mistress." Mike Rose<sup>17</sup> expands this point: "The roles afforded to the waitress in the encounter with the customer play out within stereotypic gendered scripts: The waitress becomes servant, mother, daughter, friend, or sexual object." The waitress, then, skillfully uses her femininity to negotiate the liminal space between object of nurture and object of desire, between madonna and whore. The waitress is able to exploit this ambiguity; for example, Julian Roebuck and Mark Hickson<sup>18</sup> provide the following example of a waitress negotiating sexuality in her work:

Waitress: Hi, honey, what can I get you this morning?

Truck Driver: Hi baby, what will you give me?

Waitress: Well, the special is two eggs, sausage, hash browns, muffins, and coffee.

Truck Driver: Is that *all* I can have?

Waitress: No, but that's all *you* can *get*.

In my own experience, I never quite know what to make of the waitress when she calls me honey and I remain at a loss concerning how to respond to the waitress's terms of endearment. Do I respond with my own term of endearment, such as "darlin'," which I have heard used on occasion? Do I also call her honey? And what should I mean when I do so? In some ways, her calling me honey implies that I already have a pre-existing relationship with her or that I somehow invited this response. This leads to the kind of situation proposed by Watzlawick, Bavelas, and Jackson<sup>19</sup> where I find myself thinking, "This is how I see you seeing me seeing you."

Perhaps this strategy is simply a way to resist the power dynamic between waitress and customer. Mike Rose writes, "Conventions and the intensity of symbolism change over time, and vary by the type of restaurant, but



waitressing continues to involve the acquisition of customs of service—and one's accommodation to them. The residue of the servant's role rankles, and recent studies of waitressing reveal the number of ways waitresses resist it: from covert criticism and ridicule of haughty behavior ... to direct rebuke and declaration of status."<sup>20</sup> The idea of waitress as servant is embedded in the terms used to beckon them to pay attention to our needs and desires. Maryam Moody,<sup>21</sup> a waitress at a diner, states, "To ensure tips, I have to play along with their divine right to patronize. As a woman and a waitress, my participation in the little dance comes with the meal. 'Hi hot stuff! Hey smiley. I'll have coffee, darling. How are you, gorgeous? Thank you, dear. How's it going, beautiful? Hey, lady. Bye, babe.' You get used to it." Elaine Hall<sup>22</sup> echoes these observations: "Although male servers are called 'waiters,' female servers are called 'girls' or 'broad' by male co-workers (LaPointe 1987) and 'honey,' 'cutie,' or 'sweetie' (Howe 1977, 114) or the 'immature adult' term of 'miss' by customers (Elder and Rolens 1985, 32; Howe 1977, 114)." Terms such as "honey" and "sweetie" can be seen as offensive by some, a throwback to a time where the "girls" in the office and the waitresses knew their place. Kira Cochrane,<sup>23</sup> for example, reports that some people took offense to Barack Obama referring to a clothing manufacturing worker at a campaign stop as "sweetie." By pre-emptively using such epithets to describe the customer, the waitress and the customer are both symbolically brought to the same level and the waitress is able to take control and define the relationship by using these terms first.

Diner waitresses, in general, recognize that they will be diminutized by the customer. Yet, when the customer is subjected to the same treatment, it is viewed with admiration. Mark Bazer<sup>24</sup> describes the "What'll It Be, Honey" waitress as "America's favorite waitress, she warms up our nation's diners, calling everybody honey—you, your father, your clergyman, your mother, Jeff Goldblum, everybody. She makes you feel at home." In calling customers honey, the waitress performs the role that has already been prescribed for her. Perhaps one reason the waitress's use of the term honey is not internalized as a slight or a sexualization of the relationship is because the customer is already in a position of power. The customer is the one who gazes, rather than the object of the gaze, thus the use of honey does not have the same undertones when coming from one who is performing a role that can be seen as maternal and/or sexual and is therefore more vulnerable.

Bazer's description of the "What'll It Be, Honey" waitress underscores the importance of emotional labor in the waitress's role.<sup>25</sup> Carol, a waitress, reports, "Managers want you to give 100 percent to the customer. In other

words, they want you to be as sweet as possible, no matter if the customer is grouchy or if you've had a bad day."<sup>26</sup> In his celebration of diners, Gregg Cebzynski<sup>27</sup> writes, "What I like best is that the waitresses, underpaid and harried as they might be, still find a way to turn every meal into a 'dining occasion,' which is no easy thing to do when I'm just having two eggs over easy with a side of bacon." Such expectations are likely to take a toll on the waitress. She is expected to be at the customer's beck and call, all while performing service with a smile. The use of the term "honey" in an attempt to equalize the power dynamic between herself and the customer seems consistent with Diane Seymour's<sup>28</sup> assertion that "if restaurant workers are treated with a lack of respect or with over-familiarity, then they must find ways to protect their sense of self so that they can accept the demeaning treatment without thinking of themselves as demeaned."

Of course, there is another possible reason for the use of the term "honey." Waffle House is not an upscale dining establishment—it's diner food, cheap eats, and, most importantly, down home cooking. Waffle House is a Southern establishment, but more than that it is a blue collar, working class Southern establishment. Thus, the adoption of the epithet honey may simply be a way of performing the role that has already been defined for the waitress. Carrie Yodanis<sup>29</sup> writes, "During interactions, to be associated with a particular class, we present symbols of the class in which we will be categorized." The waitress, then, performs a particular class as well as a role. Just as the use of the term honey would seem out of place at an upscale restaurant, so too the use of "gentleman," would seem out of place at Waffle House.

Perhaps this is one reason for my continued confusion as to how to respond to the waitress's use of honey. Despite my job as a professor of communication, I grew up in a poor working class family. We didn't have much money, but I never went hungry. However, this took place on the West Coast, where the interaction rituals followed different patterns. Thus, when I go to a truck stop in California or Oregon, I understand how to deal with the waitress and can engage in banter with her. Thus, it is not enough to simply identify the use of honey as a class issue, but also an issue of cultural geography.

The use of honey may be a performance not only of the diner waitress but also of the *Southern* diner waitress. Sharon McKern<sup>30</sup> notes that "the code" of Southern femininity "prohibits deliberate efforts to diminish the masculine ego; bawdy backroads humor, hidden in gleeful kitchen whispers, make it possible (in private, at least) to take a sardonic swipe at the men

who have power over them." This seems consistent with the use of honey as a way to make me feel good about our relationship and myself. It also suggests that women may use linguistic strategies as a way to perform an inauthentic role of subservience and feigned intimacy. McKern<sup>31</sup> suggests that the Southern woman "knows the code, and it demands that she greet the world daily with good manners, a modicum of form, and a sunny smile." I will never know what takes place in the break room, where I am unlikely to retain my status as honey. Her cheerfulness is just another part of the role in which she is cast, her script that she must follow.

The use of honey as a part of the role of the Waffle House waitress may simply be a means by which the waitress uses displays of emotional affect to more effectively do her job. After all, the waitress has several goals in the transaction, not least among them is receiving a good tip. Anat Rafaeli and Robert Sutton<sup>32</sup> suggest, "The link between emotion work and financial well-being is explicit when employees depend on tips from customers. We have all noticed how friendly even the most incompetent food server can become as 'tip time' approaches. And empirical research suggests that such friendliness is rewarded." Thus, the use of honey as a way to bring the customer closer to her has practical applications as well as emotional ones. Such language also serves to reinforce the waitress's performance of gender. Elaine Hall<sup>33</sup> writes, "Appearance norms and interactional styles differentiate between male and female workers doing the same job in the same work setting, creating *gender meanings* of the work." The use of honey is specifically coded as feminine and would seem out of place coming from a waiter.

Andrew Hurley<sup>34</sup> explains that the diner has transformed "from a male, working-class eatery to a middle-income family restaurant." Yet it seems that Waffle House still holds on to these masculine norms and working class roots. For example, a male waiter seems rare at Waffle House. But Hurley<sup>35</sup> also observes that "in transforming the diner, builders and proprietors created a borderland, a place where cultures intersected, clashed, and sometimes fused." Waffle House is where the blue collar and the white collar intersect, at least spatially, but the rules are still based on blue-collar Southern norms of speech and gender. Elaine Hall<sup>36</sup> states, "Some aspects of the way gender meanings are loaded onto work behaviors are captured in the term *women's work*. Occupations such as cocktail waitresses (Spradley and Mann 1975), flight attendants (Hochschild 1983; Nielsen 1982), and secretaries (Pringle 1988) are considered typical women's work, partially because they involve activities that are culturally understood as extensions of femininity-serving, supporting, and deferring to men."

The waitress's use of honey can be viewed as an extension of her performance of gender, culture, class, and employment. In so doing, she fulfills sometimes contradictory roles of nurturer and object of sexual desire while emphasizing her Southern blue-collar status. Yet, there is a measure of resistance in this strategy, in that she is able to pre-emptively define the relationship by using against the customer the same terms that have been used against her. As a cultural outsider, I am aware that there is always the possibility that others may simply say, "That's just the way we talk down here." But the language that we use has significant power to define people and relationships. Haig Bosmajian<sup>37</sup> points out that "one of the first important acts of an oppressor is to re-define the oppressed victims he intends to jail or eradicate so that they will be looked upon as creatures warranting suppression and annihilation. I say 'creatures' because the redefinition usually implies a de-humanization of the individual." To put it another way, consider the difference between calling an adult female a woman or a girl. The two are simply terms of femininity, yet they each imply a kind of status and class. To call an adult woman a girl is to deny her maturity and imply that she is childlike. This invites those who would call women girls to adopt a kind of paternalistic view toward women. However, women too may also adopt such a viewpoint. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann<sup>38</sup> write, "In the dialectic between nature and the socially constructed world the human organism itself is transformed. In this same dialectic man [and woman] produces reality and thereby produces himself [and herself]."

## Conclusion

I have argued that the use of the term honey by waitresses at Waffle House functions to rhetorically construct relationships between the waitress and the customers. Despite the myriad possible interpretations of this strategy, it is clear that the Waffle House waitress enacts this strategy as part of a role that she is expected to perform. This role is defined as subservient, partly because it is coded as feminine. Hall<sup>39</sup> states, "Waiting on tables is defined as typical 'women's work' because women perform it and because the work activities are considered 'feminine.'"

Parke Burgess<sup>40</sup> explains that "the strategies and motives of any rhetoric ... represent an invitation to a life style, an invitation to adopt a pattern of strategies and motives, verbal and non-verbal, that determine how men and women will function together in culture." Even something as seemingly mundane as gendered pronouns and signifiers place us in a particular mindset concerning others.<sup>41</sup> The term honey is an invitation to adopt a particular relationship

with the waitress. Its power lies in its polysemy; the one addressed is invited to make his or her own assumptions concerning the use of the word. As Michael McGee<sup>42</sup> suggests, "The only way to 'say it all' in our fractured culture is to provide readers/audiences with dense, truncated fragments which cue *them* to produce a finished discourse in their minds." Thus, to me as a cultural outsider, it is a strategy that challenges my notions of how waitresses should behave; to another it may be an invitation to flirtatious banter; to yet another it may just be what waitresses call you and that this whole exercise is to over-think the obvious.

The truth of the matter is that all of these interpretations are correct to some extent. The waitress at Waffle House provides me with no other context from which to make sense of her use of the term honey. I am left with only my own thoughts concerning how to interpret her definition of me as honey. Despite my angst concerning how I should interpret her words, in the end, so long as I leave a good tip and don't wreck anything, she will likely fulfill her role—complete with scripted terms of endearment—oblivious to the possibility that there is any other way to interpret her words other than the way she meant them. Despite the reasons for her use of honey—as a strategy of resistance, as a performance of Southern femininity, or simply to get a better tip—she likely does so without much thought other than getting the order correct and thinking about what she will be doing after her shift. After all, I am simply a bit player in the drama of Waffle House.

## Notes

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3. See Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959).

4. For more on the intersection of the real and simulation, see Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, Trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1994).
5. S. I. Hayakawa, *Language in Thought and Action*, Revised Edition (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1949), 84.
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7. Edwin Black, "The Second Persona," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* Vol. 56 Number 2 (1970): 113.
8. See Eugene A. Weinstein and Paul Deutschberger, "Some Dimensions of Altercasting," *Sociometry* Vol. 26 Number 4 (1963): 454–466; Eugene A. Weinstein and Paul Deutschberger, "Tasks, Bargains, and Identities in Social Interaction," *Social Forces* Vol. 42 Number 4 (1964): 451–456.
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