



On the Nutritional Value of Cannibalism

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verbally communicate the norms where the child cannot observe sufficient demonstrations of behavior to reliably distinguish the range of acceptability from the deviant.

Following out Burling's comparison between linguistic and ethnographic descriptions, one must conclude that the ethnographer, like the child, needs verbal articulation of rules (or cases) for nonlinguistic behavior because he cannot personally observe a statistically reliable number of actions. The linguist, like the child, can rejoice in receiving within a comparatively short time period a statistically adequate sample of the behavior he wishes to analyze.

BURLING'S REPLY TO KEHOE

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I agree with Kehoe that children (and ethnographers) learn language in a somewhat different way than they learn the other aspects of their culture, and it may well be that one of the differences is in the size of the sample available for observation. We might be careful not to exaggerate the difference, however. Garo children visit many villages besides their own, and can easily observe two or three hundred households. Conversely, some less common types of linguistic construction may not occur so very often in the experience of a child. Moreover, children are given verbal corrections when they make verbal mistakes just as they are when they make mistakes of other sorts. Nevertheless, I do think it is true that most other learning does characteristically require more verbal explanation than is generally needed when learning a language.

The point I would emphasize, however, is that *how* we learn something is quite irrelevant to the kind of description we give unless, of course, we are describing the learning process itself. The practical procedures used by a linguist when investigating a language, and by an ethnographer when investigating a culture, surely do characteristically differ. Ethnographers do rely more heavily (though not exclusively, of course) on verbal explanations. Linguists do rely more heavily (though not exclusively) on observation of examples. But rules that account for some sort of human activity (whether language, or residence, or anything else) are not justified by the way we

get them, but by whether they work. To this extent I feel that linguistic and ethnographic descriptions have the same logical status. The number of examples observed while working up the rules is entirely irrelevant either to a child or to an ethnographer, as long as the rules work once he gets them.

ON THE NUTRITIONAL VALUE OF CANNIBALISM

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While duly appreciative of Garn and Block's attempt (*AA* 72:106) to calculate the amount of protein available from the flesh of a 50 kg man, I regard as extremely misleading their suggestion that a group has to "consume its own number in a year" for cannibalism to be of nutritional value. Although it may be, as Garn and Block argue, that "regular" people-eating is without much nutritional significance, "irregular" people-eating, which may well be the more common mode of cannibalism, still needs to be considered in terms of its satisfaction of nutritional requirements. In this connection, I suggested some years ago (Vayda 1960a:70-72 and 1960b) that human flesh, while not a regular item of the diet of the Maoris of New Zealand, was nutritionally important to Maori warriors on distant expeditions against other tribes, for it was precisely on these expeditions that food supplies were likely to be short. More recently, Rappaport (1967:84-87) has indicated that pork, while not a regular item of the diet of the Maring people of New Guinea, may nevertheless be of critical nutritional importance when consumed in irregularly occurring ritual contexts that correspond to stress situations. Specifically, Rappaport has noted that the consumption of the flesh of sacrificial animals by individuals suffering from illness or injury or otherwise undergoing stress is probably important for counteracting the stress-induced increase in these individuals' catabolization of protein, for the negative nitrogen balance resulting from this increase, if not offset by the ingestion of high-quality proteins, may impair the healing of wounds and the production of antibodies and have other physically harmful consequences for people, like the Marings, whose protein intake has been marginal, even

if adequate for everyday activities in the absence of illness or injury or other appreciable stress. The question of whether the consumption of human flesh might function in the same or a similar way—perhaps especially among people who are on low-protein diets and without ready access to such animals as cattle or pigs as sacrificial items and sources of high-quality proteins—has hardly been asked. Yet just such questions about irregularly occurring anthropophagy must be answered—with whatever appropriate quantifications are feasible—before firm conclusions about the role of nutrition in the practice of cannibalism can be made.

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