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IN PRAISE OF TITLES: A SOCIOLOGICAL EXPLANATION OF THEIR IMPORTANCE IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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RESUMEN

La proliferación de aparatos electrónicos equipados con herramientas para enviar mensajes de texto ha aumentado el ritmo de degradación en términos de etiqueta social en los Estados Unidos de América. La popularidad del envío de textos ha sobrepasado la de los correos electrónicos y de esta manera ha establecido un nuevo estándar en términos de etiqueta escrita. Se lidia con el anonimato de la esfera pública con el uso de la falsa intimidad en el sector de servicio. Aunque los Estados Unidos son conocidos por su baja distancia de poder y por el comportamiento relajado de sus ciudadanos, cambios recientes en la omisión completa de títulos dificulta la interacción social y tiende a aumentar el número de conflictos y por lo tanto crea inestabilidad social.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Social Status, interaction, social markers, contemporary American Society, communication, Conflict, social identity

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ABSTRACT

The proliferation of devices enabled with texting and messaging capabilities has exponentially increased the rate of decay in terms of social etiquette in the United States. Texting has overtaken e-mails in terms of popularity and thus set a new standard in terms of written etiquette. Anonymity in the public sphere is increasingly dealt with through the use of fake intimacy in the service sector. While the United States is known for its low power distance as well as by the easy going nature of its citizens, recent developments in the complete omission of titles makes social interaction difficult and at times may actually increase conflict and thus social instability.

KEY WORDS: Social Status, interaction, social markers, contemporary American Society, communication, Conflict, social identity

1. INTRODUCCIÓN

It is no secret that the United States has one of the most informal cultures in the world in terms of social etiquette. Neighbors are used to greeting each other by their first names and co-workers do that same with most of their colleagues. Nevertheless this omission of titles and formal salutations applied only to acquaintances of a relatively similar social status. It was a way to reinforce intimacy between friends and close acquaintances. Titles were still used for people of a different social status as well as for people who were not members of the in-group of acquaintances and friends.

Increased urbanization and mobility resulted in the virtual anonymity of millions of people who moved away from their original communities. Mobility further exacerbated the decay in social intimacy and resulted in a widespread transformation of *gemeinschaft* into *gesellschaft*. This transformation is certainly not unique to the United States but rather one of the many negative externalities of late modernity and of global capitalism. Nevertheless, there are many possible reactions to this challenge presented by an increase in mechanistic relationships the subsequent decay in social intimacy. While most other societies have opted for the reinforcement of social markers as useful cues to guide behavior, Americans have opted for the opposite. A ritualistic emulation of yearned for social intimacy devoid of meaningful social cues has proliferated rather than a concrete and meaningful set of social marker that could be used in order to adjust or at least calibrate social behavior.

The present essay explores the challenges presented by this phenomenon in both written and face to face interaction. Another challenge is also discussed, the one presented by the inaccurate use of traditional titles with the result of sending ambiguous social signals.

Human culture is a response to the chaos encountered in the world. Culture is a shared mental model, as any introductory sociology or anthropology course teaches first year undergraduate students. Culture is humanity's answer to the myriad challenges involved in attempting to understand and most importantly to operate in a complex world. Survival even in primitive societies requires cooperation and competition. Communication is at the core of both processes; however there is a pivotal phenomenon that needs to take place before cooperation or communication can take place. This process is the experiencing of the world. The world is not experienced directly by humans; we make sense of it through our imperfect senses. Language introduces conventionality and thus provides a useful shortcut to communicate shared experiences. Think of a "chair". No two people experience a "chair" in exactly the same way, nevertheless the word expresses the minimum characteristics of an object categorized as a chair. This simple linguistic convention allows meaningful cooperation and competition based on the idea of a chair. While the example of the "chair" or any other inanimate object is easy to understand due to the direct experience that we have of it through our senses, other equally "real" phenomena in our world tend to be more abstract and thus conventionality is of even greater importance in order to deal with them. Examples of this include roles and statuses in society. Society is a structure as real as the parts of the body or the parts of a chair, yet our senses cannot perceive it directly. That our senses cannot experience it directly does not make it any less real in the same way that not being able to see an atom does not invalidate its existence.

A simple way to understand statuses and roles is through the most basic social organization in society, the family unit. The family has a structure composed of statuses and roles. A status position is that of the father which also has a matching role which is to take care of the wife and the children. Thus statuses are positions in the social structure while roles are the expected behaviors connected to those positions in the social structure. Every society has an array of clearly defined statuses and roles and following those gives structure to the world and makes interaction more stable and more efficient.

Historically humanity has created a vast array of social markers to denote status and to help reduce uncertainty in the social world. Examples include heraldic clothing during the early middle ages, uniforms for many professions, business cards, jewelry, and even hair styles. Nevertheless one of the most useful and specific of social makers is titles. Social titles include salutations such as "mister" as well as more specific ones such as police officer, professor, doctor, and public attorney. Some languages complement formal titles with formal and informal pronouns and verbs to emphasize the relationship between two or more people.

While many countries still cherish the use of titles, America is suffering from the obfuscation of traditional titles and the disuse of others. This is leading to an increased in social anonymity and a breakdown of social norms. It should be noted that the previous conclusion does not mean that American society is coming to an end but rather that social controls are breaking down and that it has not reached another point of stability but is rather in a constant state of flux causing challenges in daily interaction.

2. FACE TO FACE INTERACTION: A RISKY ENDEAVOR MARKED BY UNCERTAINTY

Face to face interaction has considerable advantages over other forms of interaction due to the many cues involved in a single interchange. Facial expression, body language, clothing, and even the tone of voice, inter alia, all aid in the process of communication. As basic communication theory poses, any interchange involves two levels of communication, the content and the relationship. For the purposes of this essay we are mostly interested in the relationship message but it should be noted that failures in the conveyance of the relationship message may intrude in the content message. Therefore, every interaction conveys a message attempting to define the relationship between the people interacting. For example, is the interaction between members of the in-group? Is the relationship defined by *gesellschaft* or *gemeinschaft*? Who has more authority? There are many of the questions that need to be answered in order for the content information to make sense. Once the relationship message has been properly conveyed, it is much easier to convey the content message. Moreover, the relationship message allows both parties to adjust their behavior to fit the situation.

With the increasing anonymity of city life and the resulting standardization in dress, other cues becoming increasingly important in order to convey the relationship message. Diversity in dressing styles has increased but not only between groups but most importantly within groups. This means that it is becoming more difficult to ascertain the social level of a person solely based on dress or their profession for that matter. On the other hand facial cues, body language, and tone of voice are still very good indicators. This is one of the most important advantages of face to face interaction. As intimated in the introduction to this essay, the current trend in America in particular, and to a certain extent in certain parts of Latin America, is to mask social class behind a veneer of fake intimacy. Educated people imitate the way uneducated people speak. This attempt to blur the lines of class and education makes interaction more difficult by eliminating important social information from the exchange.

Historically, titles provided the surest and most direct way to convey this type of social information. For example, the pre-nominal "Lic." in the Spanish speaking world

indicates the holder of a bachelor's degree. The title "Don" implies respect and the completion of at least a high school diploma. Spanish even has different pronouns for different levels of respect and verbs are conjugated appropriately. In English there are useful titles to convey similar relationship messages such as "Doctor", "Sir", "Mister", "Master", etc. The previous examples are all pre-nominal styles, in that they come before the given name of the person. There are also a vast array of post-nominal styles such as when someone is introduced as Thomas Johnson, Chief Executive Office of Company X. The post-nominal title, a corporate one in this case, provides the listener important information regarding the occupation of the person in question. Other examples would include occupational titles such as Police Officer, Clerk, etc.

Public opinion now a day in America tends to perceive the inclusion of this type of title in all but the most formal of occasions as archaic and pretentious but this is far from the truth. The information that John Smith is a Master Carpenter is as important as that someone else is the Bishop of Paris. Knowing that John Smith is a Master Carpenter provides useful information about John Smith as well as about his skills and life experiences. It can even provide us a few clues about his lifestyle. A good example of the problem of not providing full information when introducing yourself or an acquaintance is when introducing a doctor. There are many kinds of people who use the title of "doctor" in the United States but only a few who actually hold the title in the strict sense of the word. A "doctor" is the holder of a doctorate which is a third level degree granted by a university that includes original research. Doctorates can be granted in many disciplines ranging from Literature to Biomedicine. Nevertheless, the American education system is unique in that first degrees in certain vocational fields require the completion of a first degree in another field.

Examples of this include Law and Medicine. Thus, in order to study law one first needs to complete a bachelor's in another field and then attend law school for three years. For medicine, the picture is similar, with three years of medical school and then one or more years of residency (basically an internship). Graduates of those professional degrees are granted something called a first-professional degree which is equivalent to a master's degree in terms of rigor but with a longer practicum. The confusion comes in the way the wording of their degrees, due to political reasons and a conscious and concerted struggle for prestige by members of the professions they have included the term "doctor" in their degrees while recognizing that their degrees are not doctorates in the traditional sense, as accepted and clearly stated by the American Department of Education (Aud et al., 2011; USNEI, 2008). Therefore it is important to specify the type of doctorate to avoid confusion and to make sure that that the person receives the respect that is due. For example if someone introduces himself as Dr. John Smith, he could be a dentist, a professor, a physician, or even a physical therapist. The years of training are very different for the different professions, for example a physician can claim at least eight years of formal training, three in his profession and four in another field, while the professor can claim in excess of eleven years in a single field. One way to avoid this is to introduce yourself in the traditional way of prenominal, name, and then occupation. For example "Dr. John Smith,

Optometrist, pleased to meet you". Another possible way to do this is "Dr. John Smith, I hold a degree in Optometry". The emphasis on credential versus occupation will depend on the importance of one social marker over another. A CEO with a bachelor's degree will most likely emphasize his occupation rather than his or her credentials while an independent researcher will probably emphasize his or her credentials. The important thing is to provide useful information to the receiver of the information in order to guide subsequent interaction.

There is considerable resistance in America to such a traditional introduction out of a professional context. Some arguments made by the average American include the opium dream of a classless and apparently "statusless" society. Whether this is desirable or not is debatable, however the suppression of titles is not going to abolish classes and statuses any time soon. Another argument that is equally weak is that the information is not useful in a social context. This implies that occupations and credentials do not provide any useful information about what kind of a person he or she is out of the working place. This is equally false since there is a vast literature on the relationship between occupation and identity (McCargo, 2009; Roux, 1998). Moreover, attaining most credentials tends to take years of training which has an effect in the development of a person in and outside of work. Therefore it is important to know that a person attended West Point and that a person has a degree in fine arts. It is equally important to know that a person did not attend college since this allows other people to adjust their language and to adjust the topics that will be introduced for conversation.

Even though the arguments for avoiding titles in social interaction outside of work are weak, they are even weaker at work. It is increasingly prevalent to see people omit titles in the American workplace. This leads to false intimacy and to a possible breakdown of the line of command. More problematic is that it blurs the line between friendship and professional duty. This is a trap for subordinates since they initially feel that by breaking down the barriers set by professional protocol and reinforced by the use of titles their work satisfaction will increase (Silverman, 1970). This is a fallacy since the most common result is that the superior will take advantage of the pseudo-friendship to require even more work from the subordinate than that required by the original contract. Thus a secretary would end up having to walk her supervisor's dog while this is not in the contract. It is easy to jump to the assumption that in most cases the subordinate is the one who attempts to level the playing field by omitting titles however this is far from the truth. In many cases it is the supervisor who encourages the subordinate to omit titles and to treat him or her as a friend even when in a professional environment.

Reasons for this are many, but some may include lack of leadership experience in a traditional setting, young supervisors who may find the age gap with their employees intimidating, or in the case of older supervisors, remnants of the extreme egalitarianism of the 60s. While the reasons for this type of behavior are many, the consequences tend to be negative in most cases. The employee may lose respect for

the supervisor, lines of authority can become blurred, and it becomes increasingly difficult to separate work from leisure.

In today's increasingly lateral administrative organizational structures there is one further challenge in terms of titles and social interaction. While the number of intermediate level managers is decreasing, the number of knowledge workers is increasing. Thus an organization may include fewer direct line supervisors but a larger number of consultants, and other skilled workers who do not fit in the direct line of command. This situation is not entirely new to many organizations such as Think Tanks, Government Agencies, and Universities but it is revolutionary for other sectors such as manufacturing and services. It is clear that a visiting professor at the local University ranks higher than the janitor and that the janitor is supposed to address the professor as Dr. ___ or Professor ____ . The same is true of administrative assistants in Universities and Think Tanks. Nevertheless the issue is less clear in corporate structures.

One very good example of this is the liminal status of interns in the service sector. The intern is momentarily a part of an organization yet does not fit the traditional organizational structure. Most interns tend to be about to finish their degrees and thus are more skilled than most employees in car dealerships, retail stores, and sometimes even more educated than administrative assistants. Since most are young and their liminality is recognized by most member of the organization they are treated with familiarity with the expectation that they will leave at the end of the internship. For those who join the organization the formal familiarity during their internship may become a liability since it is very difficult to re-establish a professional relationship once it has degenerated in a pseudo-friendship. Difficult economic times such as the present recession increasingly brings into contact highly skilled professionals with blue-collar and pink-collar workers increasing the chances of this kind of problem. For instance, positions such as store managers, traditionally reserved as the highest unskilled job attainable in the service sector are currently being filled by college trained professionals. Managers tend to be younger than before putting them in charge of older workers who may attempt to establish a pseudo-friendship with the younger manager out of hurt pride or simply in order to level the playing field.

The aforementioned omissions and misuses of titles lead to interaction problems in face to face conversation and may lead to conflict. Therefore it is recommended to encourage the use of titles in an appropriate and judicious matter. This does not mean that old English should be revived and that we should attempt to emulate medieval society, but that we should use the titles that are pertinent in our modern and increasingly impersonal society.

3. WRITTEN COMMUNICATION

Face to face interaction tends to be less formal than written interaction since there is less time to make corrections and think about the content as well as the format of the message. Nevertheless recent advances in technology have resulted in a marked retrogression in terms of written communication. The first culprit was instant messaging and chat rooms, then they were followed on texting on the cell phone, and now by Twitter and Facebook. Due to the reduced size of keyboards in cell phones, people have slowly started to rely on contractions, omission of articles and conjunctions, and to the complete omission of salutations. While it is understandable and practical to simplify a message as much as possible during an emergency or when the message is simple and clearly on the fly, the problem is that this practice has slowly spread to more deliberate forms of communication such as traditional letters and e-mails. Computer keyboards are equipped with comfortable keys to enter punctuation marks. Writing a letter, printing it, and mailing it implies that the sender had enough time to do so and that it is an important matter. Thus, the recent omission of titles, salutations, and even the date on print letters cannot be explained by a change in technology nor on a lack of time. When e-mails were first introduced they followed the format of traditional letters but recently they are starting to resemble text messages. It is not uncommon to receive e-mails with no subject line, no salutation, and no punctuation marks.

The problem with this retrogression in the writing of letters and e-mails is that it reifies the content over the form and it should be noted that the form conveys the relationship part of the message. Without the benefits of face to face interaction to ameliorate the dearth of information regarding status, role, mood, etc, the receiver is left with only a fragment of the message leading to possible misunderstandings and reducing social interactions to mere functional transactions. Taking ten more minutes per letter to make sure that the proper salutation is used, that the date is included, and that the tone, syntax, and even the font is appropriate is a sign of respect for the receiver and conveys the message that both the information encompassed in the letter is important as well as the receiver himself or herself.

It is sad to see that young people find themselves at a loss the very few times they try to write a formal letter or even a standard business e-mail. This is not solely their fault but rather the fault of their elders and educators who think that by focusing on the supposedly "practical" issues they are helping young people succeed. It is ironic that this is happening at the highest levels of society rather than in the lower classes. It is not uncommon to hear a professor tell his or her undergraduate students "call me Bob" or a trendy upper middle class mother asking her daughter to call her "Barb". This sends the wrong message to young people and leads to an uncomfortable feeling of role inconsistency and ambiguity. For instance, when "Barb" decides to tell her daughter that she cannot go to the party the daughter will understandably feel confused that her friend "Barb" is now giving her orders. It is confusing to call

someone with authority and in the role of the mother the same way she would call one of her high school classmates. The same happens with students, when they receive a failing grade they feel like "Bob" betrayed their friendship.

In summary, it takes a few minutes to write a proper letter or a proper e-mail and especially in professional relationships but also in any relationship in which there may be differences in terms of authority and power. Omitting titles in an effort to blur statuses and roles is detrimental to relationships both at work and in social interaction. Important social facts are omitted and important parts of a person's identity are hidden or worst, intentionally suppressed.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

While reversing the decline in the use of titles in America is a daunting challenge, there are practical and simple ways to contribute to slow the tide. For those in positions of authority either as educators, supervisors, or civic society leaders, it is even easier to influence a large number of people simply by setting an example and serving as role models of good manners and proper etiquette. Everyone belongs to at least one organization, the family. Therefore, we can all start by using proper titles at this most basic of social levels. Instead of telling your son that Tommy is visiting, tell him that uncle Tomas will be here shortly. The simple addition of the title "uncle" provides an important clue to the listener that in a family context an "uncle" has a particular status and a role to play.

Another good way to improve social interaction in our society marked by ubiquitous anonymity and relationships based on *gesellschaft* is by providing as much information as possible when interacting with a stranger. Most interactions in our modern world involve strangers further increasing the importance of the use of titles. This does not mean that you should open your heart out to every stranger that you meet but that you provide at least a few important social markers to guide your interaction with someone that you are meeting for the first time.

Finally, awareness raising and education are the best antidotes to a society inhabited by anonymous consumers. Teach your children, students, friends, and others about both pre-nominal and post-nominal titles. This simple step will not only provide them with the tools to understand an important dimension of the social world but also provide them with the skills to participate and to shape it.

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