

## SEXUAL SYMBOLISM IN FLATWARE\*

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The methods and theses presented by Professor Lévi-Strauss have opened new vistas in the understanding (indeed, in the Verstehen) of cultural phenomena. Professor Lévi-Strauss's analyses have usually been based on exotic data, but one recent article, "The Culinary Triangle," pushes the new attitudes and methods squarely into the breach left by the paucity of consideration of more common materials.<sup>1</sup> If, indeed, these new theories have relevance for our understanding of symbolism in its myriad forms, why should we not apply them to data close at hand? Such applications would have two advantages: the familiarity of the data would facilitate verification of the hypotheses, and the hypotheses, thus confirmed, would provide greater scientific and humanistic understanding of the world and culture in which we ourselves live. It is the intention of this paper, both in method and in empirical subject, to deepen Lévi-Strauss's stimulating penetration into the obscurity of the culinary triangle.

One of the commonest lexical domains in the area of material culture in Western civilization is that of "flatware," that is, the metal instruments employed in eating. True, these materials sometimes are of wood or plastic, and there is some overlap with the domain of "cutlery," so that some particular items fall into both domains (steak knives, for instance). Nevertheless, the limits of the domain are sufficiently distinct to allow analysis of its contents.<sup>2</sup> I do not intend here to perpetuate the naturalistic bias evidenced in so many "componential" analyses, by restricting myself only to the elaboration of some

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code for the designation of immediately observable characteristics of the objects themselves, or of complex manipulation of such codes; rather, I will be concerned with the discussion of the structural relationships between the objects, except for a few comments on their particular nature. We are thus concerned not only (or not even principally) with the structure of some referential set of observable characteristics (as in componential analyses), or with the manipulation of these notations of reference for the reduction of redundancy (as in transformational analyses), but rather with componential and transformational theorizing about the direct relationships between the objects of our concern. In this, we hope to stress again the general principles of such relationship so often found in all varieties of symbolism, including behavior ordinarily considered to be purely instrumental.

It is first of all noteworthy that the general set "flatware" consists of three and only three immediately constituent subsets. In asking informants the control question (vide Metzger, Williams, Berlin and others), "How many kinds of flatware are there?", we usually received the answer, "Three." In reply to another question, "What kinds of flatware are there?", we learned, "Knives, forks, and spoons" (in that order). It is only with difficulty that one can persuade informants to expand the number of immediately constituent sets, and informants are often confused about the precise nature and structural position of items so elicited (e.g., the infant's "pusher" in Britain). There is really no difficulty, however, in their identification of the three sets named or in their assignment of individual items of flatware to one or another of the subsets; they almost always show high agreement (cf. Frake 1961). We know, of course, that it is no accident that there are three subsets (Dundes Ms.).

The three subsets, however, contrast with one another on a series of binary rather than of trinary, quaternary, or any other kind of dimensions. The structure of three subsets is in fact an epiphenomenon of the multiplicity of binary distinctions (vide Lévi-Strauss

1966); these distinctions extend beyond the material to the behavioral sphere and indeed to the structure of opposition and mediation in symbolism.

We should first consider the structure of the oppositions themselves, then pass to examination of mediating principles. I should like to offer one of the principal hypotheses immediately, namely that these utensils are basically sexual symbols. Their differentiation on these principles is thus basically one of male versus female, but the distinctions are not absolute.<sup>3</sup> Rather, they are relative distinctions, and it is most important to stress this, not only from a methodological but also from a theoretical point of view. We can best carry out this portion of the analysis if we distinguish "more male" from "less male," understanding that in any particular opposition, the first of these is "male" and the second "female" in the relative sense noted.

We may first note that knives and forks are sharp, while spoons are rounded, the first displaying male and the second female characteristics. However, forks are possessed of multiple sharp members and knives only of one, so that we may initially judge forks in this instance to be more male than knives. Thus, with respect to knives and spoons, forks are male; with respect to forks, in this illustration, knives are female, but they are male with respect to spoons, and spoons are female with respect to forks and knives. The maleness of forks is also demonstrated by the phonetic similarity between their lexeme and one of the (in several senses) vulgar expressions for sexual intercourse (John Thompson, personal communication, 1964). This interesting homonymy does not occur in other languages with which I am familiar, but statistical proof is not required for essentially mechanical structural models. To go on with these physical characteristics, we observe that knives and forks are elongate while spoons are curved; I do not refer here only to the length of the utensils but to their form. In length, it is also true that knives and forks are longer than spoons in most instances; that is, if the utensils are

matched for their rank in length, it will generally be found that, in any set of flatware, the longest knife is longer than the longest spoon, as is the longest fork longer than the longest spoon, etc. The fact that one can find some spoon that is longer than some knife is irrelevant, for the essential initial pairing has not been accomplished. Now, again with respect to length, it is true that knives are longer than forks of equivalent rank in their own subset. It would thus be apparent that knives were more male than forks, and this might refute the evidence of greater (multiple) maleness of forks noted above. However, it seems to me that mere length is only the crudest measure of maleness, and in this instance, I would not accept the detail as refutation. It does, however, raise the issue, and we must reserve for later consideration this problem of ambiguity concerning the degree of maleness of knife and fork. The ambiguity is intensified by the fact that the three-tined fork is a symbol for the sea, which is in many cases itself a female symbol, but also associated with a male deity. Further, we may note that both knives and forks are relatively flat in their form, compared to spoons, but that forks are slightly cupped, with respect to knives. Again, knives and forks appear more male than spoons, but forks are in an intermediate position, as with length.

We may turn now to the nature of culinary action rather than just of form. How do these utensils function in opposition? First, we are obliged to distinguish European (particularly British) custom from American; I would like to draw particular attention to the theoretical significance of this necessity. We will see here that apparently disparate cultural forms, spatially separated, are in fact only allomorphs of the same structural entity. Both in America and in Europe (including Britain), the fork is used to pierce and in conjunction with the knife to pierce while the knife cuts. Maleness is demonstrated for the fork by its piercing action and for the knife by its penetration; however, the cutting action of the knife suggests some anti-male aggression as well, directed against the fork, a point on which we will

comment later. The carnal focus of this opposition should not go unnoticed.

The problem of the ambiguous position of the fork can also be illustrated in consideration of its use with foods other than meat. In America, the fork is used in the same fashion as the spoon for certain kinds of foods which are of a consistency that does not admit of piercing. The knife is not an adjunct to or a substitute in this operation, at least not in sectors of the society in which all utensils are available. In Britain, the fork is also used as a receptacle, but in conjunction with the knife, receiving that which is placed on it by the (male) knife. Even in the joint use of knife and fork with meat, we must note that although the action of the fork with respect to the meat is to pierce, its function with respect to the knife is to hold or grip. Thus the fork grips while the knife penetrates, even if only edgewise. The ambiguity of the situation is precisely what one should expect, and it is the advantage of this nominological method not only to expose but also to explain such ambiguities. We may note further, before proceeding, that at the end of the actions described above, the operation of the knife and fork is to disengage or withdraw, while that of the spoon is to release or pour out. The function of the fork, in its ambiguous role with certain foods not amenable to penetration, is also to release or pour out.

Before proceeding to a discussion of principles of mediation and analysis of these relationships, we should note a few more types of opposition. In any initial use of these utensils, the fork is usually seized with the left hand, and the knife with the right, when the two are used jointly. (This is reversed, of course, by persons who are left-handed). In Europe, the fork is seized with the left hand even when used alone, while in America it is seized with the right in a more female kind of usage, since the spoon is normally used with the right hand alone in all instances. It is also true that the fork in America is transferred to the right hand after the cutting operation in

conjunction with the knife has been completed. Thus, at the conclusion of an ambiguous operation in which the fork pierces yet grips, while the knife penetrates and cuts against it, the American fork is shifted to the female side, that is, to the hand which is otherwise occupied only by an exclusively female utensil, the spoon, or by a utensil functioning as a spoon.

We come now to the problem of mediation. By mediation I do not mean only the intervention of objects or persons but also the intervention of explanatory principles, as in the concept of "intervening variables."

In laying the service, which is itself of some significance, we find that in America the fork is always placed to the left of the plate and the spoon to the right. The knife mediates between these two symbols of maleness and femaleness in its intermediate position. Clearly the fork has the more male position, in extreme opposition to the spoon, while the knife falls between the two. In Britain, the fork is opposed to the knife, with the latter at the right side of the plate, while the female symbol, the spoon, mediates between them in horizontal position across the top of the plate. It should be very clear that the symbolic structure involved here, including its "ambiguities," is not only sexual but rather Oedipal. The intermediate, vacillating, ambiguous position of the fork is thus clarified. We see the reasons why the British spoon mediates between the knife and fork, and why the American knife comes between the fork and spoon. The aggressive symbolism of the knife, cutting against the fork, is elucidated, and the significance of the ancient folk verse "...and the fork ran away with the spoon" is made apparent.

We cannot ignore the fact that, historically, the fork is an outgrowth of the knife, of a knife with a bifurcate point which developed into two tines. These two tines then developed into three, and later into four. The multiplicity of the male symbolism in the fork can be seen as an overcompensation for subordinate status, as a kind of

wish-fulfillment through the mechanism known to folklorists as "kenning" (Rowe 1962), or as a recognition of the immanency of lineage fission. We must also observe the early determined opposition to the fork offered by the celibate males of the Church, who occupied the same position in that structure as the fork in flatware.

Thus we see that by this method of successive consideration of types of form and of action, on a series of binary discriminations, we can solve the problems of ambiguity which pervade cultural symbolism. In fact, we should go further and point out that such ambiguity is the very essence of cultural symbolism and is basic to its flexibility, its power, and its capability of subsuming enormous specific domains (Hammel 1964b).<sup>4</sup>

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Lévi-Strauss 1966 for analysis of "everyday" materials, and 1963 for examples based on exotic data, particularly the "Structural Study of Myth," which was in many ways the stimulus for the present paper.

<sup>2</sup> On some of these issues, see Burling, 1964a, 1964b; Hymes 1964; Frake 1964; Hammel 1964a, 1964b, 1965; Chafe 1965; Bright and Bright 1965.

<sup>3</sup> Neither are they in biology, of course.

<sup>4</sup> Additional confirmation of some of these interpretations comes from a field observation by Marida Hollos in Norway (in a letter to Donald Cole), as follows: "If you drop a spoon here, a female visitor is coming, if you drop a fork a male."

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