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Proxemic notation is one of the basic features of the study of how humans relate to each other in the spatial mode as a function of culture. What is not widely known is that this notation system summarizes an amazing amount of essential information concerning the nature of proxemics. Such notation systems—unlike alphabets—can be used to do the basic foundation work of interfacing between cultures. [The *SSCI®* indicates that this paper has been cited in over 130 publications.]

Proxemics—A Complex Cultural Language

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All my life's research has been with (and about) people at the "tacit" level. Conducting this kind of research required not only concentration but attention to the "transactional" aspects of human relationships,[1] and it also taught me to act as a control but in nonjudgmental ways.

Apart from contributing to psychic well-being at the individual level, one must ask, Why would such work be important? Granted that political, economic, and historical factors must always be taken into account when examining international relationships. However, there is also an oft-ignored communication aspect to such relationships. As matters stand, world leaders continue to read each other's behavior as though they were dealing with close neighbors. Whenever this occurs, projective identification immeasurably complicates the entire communication process.

So how could an article on such an apparently narrow subject as proxemic notation be linked to intercultural relations at such lofty levels, and why has it been frequently cited? My explanation is lengthy and relates to the importance of occasionally violating the tacit but sacred axioms of academe by investigating covert culture, or what Plato (and Socrates before him) called "doxa," "beliefs without substance, pale shadows of reality, not to be taken seriously."[2] (p. 68)

In the 1950s I was fortunate enough to work with some of the leading descriptive linguists of the times: men and women like George Trager, H.L. Smith, Eleanor Jorden, and others. Some of this work centered on exotic languages that had no writing system (technically, no orthography). Creating a suitable writing system for a language is a lengthy and arduous task, requiring special training and skills. The lessons learned in the process, however (while not widely recognized), will, I predict, ultimately prove to be as important as those of physics.

One might ask, Why couldn't the people create their own writing systems? Why did they need linguists? Answer: They only *speak* the language. It takes linguists to analyze it—to break it down into its component parts, some of which make up the foundation of orthographies.

Paralleling this, my own work in intercultural relations revealed that overseas Americans were reading the behavior of the local populations symbolically and failing to realize that each culture has its own language of behavior. They were responding as though they were at home, in their own cultural backyard. Not only were they unaware of the unstated rules of the country of assignment but of much of their own behavior as well. The study of the cultural boundaries of *time* and *space* demonstrated that differences in the structuring and use of both were fertile domains for miscuing of a deeply personal and at times acrimonious sort.

All of this came together in my work with Trager during the period when we were developing a model for the analysis of culture. Of all cultural systems, language was the one we knew the most about. We also knew that in order to describe behavior across cultural boundaries the first step was to develop a notation system (much like phonetic notation) that could later be used as the basis for creating an alphabet or its equivalent. Phonetic notation systems are one of the basic tools used by linguists.

This may explain the interest and recognition accorded this paper, for it certainly is one of the keystones in the basic plan of *The Hidden Dimension*[3] (translated into 17 foreign languages, and even in Iron Curtain countries).

Another possible explanation may be in the material itself; proxemics is one of those archetypically rooted fields that draws people in, as it were. In effect they are introduced to a part of themselves that can now be consciously brought into play.

Properly constructed notation systems are difficult to design since their structure points are of the tacit variety. Yet one of the greatest needs that all of us have to contend with is to be able to read each other's behavior in a reliable manner. This points to the necessity for more notation systems of a new type with which to accurately describe and record most of what takes place when people interact.

As should be apparent, serendipity was not a factor in my work in proxemic notation. This work, part of a larger theoretical scheme relating to information systems as they were evolved by humans in the cultural mode, began with the publication of *The Silent Language*.[4]

1. Kilpatrick F P, ed. *Explorations in transactional psychology*. New York: New York University Press, 1961. 405 p.
2. Stone I F. *The trial of Socrates*. New York: Doubleday, 1988. 282 p.
3. Hall E T. *The hidden dimension*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966. 217 p. (Cited 885 times.)
4. ————. *The silent language*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, (1959) 1980. 217 p. (Cited 620 times since 1966.)

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