FROM WORDS TO OBJECTS TO MAGIC: HARD WORDS AND THE BOUNDARIES OF SOCIAL INTERACTION

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This essay deals with the relation between magic and the nature of words and things. On the one hand, it considers the ways that words confine and direct thought and desire; on the other hand it deals with how the undeniable essence of things provides both limits and reasons for the ways we think. Drawing on these properties of words and objects, magic can be appreciated as a creative and innovative feature of thinking more complex than earlier writers have claimed.

In the third voyage of Gulliver’s travels a brief episode occurs in which Gulliver observes the results of a project where professors at the Academy of Lagado are attempting to abolish the use of words. Things are to be substituted for words in social interaction: ‘since Words are only Names for Things, it would be more convenient for all Men to carry about them, such Things as were necessary to express the particular Business they are to discourse on’. Thus Gulliver describes the following scene:

I have often beheld two of those Sages almost sinking under the Weight of their Packs, like Pedlars among us, who when they met in the Streets, would lay down their loads, open their Sacks, and hold Conversation for an Hour together; then put up their Implements, help each other to resume their Burthens, and take their Leave (Swift 1970: 158).

In abolishing words and creating a language of things, Gulliver’s professors had decided that objects have certain unique qualities that give them priority over words. Yet, as Gulliver observed, objects have their own innate limitations, the physical burden of their weight making them cumbersome to talk with. This heaviness, however, is precisely the quality that gives objects their formidable power. Objects that are weighty have properties of durability. Before objects decay, they may circulate for a period of time. As they move between individuals, objects take on value, representing the histories of their movements and of the individuals who fashioned, owned and exchanged them. In this way, objects become rare things which increase their weightiness.

Were the professors from Lagado correct? Are these attributes of objects unique in relation to words? Or was Gulliver more observant? Are there limitations in the use of objects as language? This article explores the relation between weightiness and rarity as associated with objects and with words as both or either are exchanged in the processes of social interaction. How do...
words take on heaviness and how do they become valued as rare utterances? What are the limitations in the use of words or objects for accumulating these qualities and bringing them to bear on situations that have social and political consequences? How does the circulation of objects or words between individuals define and limit access to the control that one person hopes to gain over another’s thoughts and feelings.

Although my analysis focuses on one specific society, the island of Kiriwina in the Trobriand group, Papua New Guinea, the ethnographic examples I discuss point to more general theoretical issues concerned with the constitution of particular forms of social interaction. Within the general context of language and experience arise specific processes that give to objects and words the abilities to penetrate or maintain a boundary between an individual and others. From a societal perspective, these processes show the limitations that circumscribe the relationship between the autonomous demands of individual will and the ability of anyone to gain domination over others. The semantic lexicon encoding the acts of linguistic or material exchange not only circumscribes meaning as the result of the exchange event, but documents limitations and possibilities in the processes through which a person’s desires become a social fact.

Trobriand reordering of reality is achieved through objects or through verbal responses in everyday interactions, political discourse and in the use of magic spells. The reordering is grounded in the culturally constituted perception of each individual towards others as an individual’s will and intent are brought to bear on the actions of others. Nowhere are the processes of the interpenetration of individual will onto the thoughts and feelings of others more vulnerable and exposed than at the times when ‘truth’ is publicly expressed. By ‘truth’ (mokita) I mean the accepted knowledge of events as they were in the past, as they exist in the present, and as they are expected to obtain in the future. ‘Truth’ is about history, decisions by people that mark past and present events and circumstances. In the public circulation of objects, ‘truth’ is expressed in values such as durability and rarity. These properties define both the nature of the present relationship and past situations in which the object, in its circulation through time, has been involved. Words perceived to be the ‘truth’ about past events and historical or mythical circumstances are similarly thought to have values of weightiness. In certain cases, these words are considered rare in that they are secret, guarded knowledge. When such words are spoken in a public setting, they reveal the nature of a present relationship by exposing the ‘truth’ about past events. The disguise of ‘truth’ also must be accounted for in these situations. The ‘truth’ is being created anew in the telling or the giving, as an individual elects to hide or expose her or his private thoughts or feelings as well as the circumstances of past events. Through time, each telling gives these words more or less value.

At special times, the force of magic is perceived necessary to affect one’s will over others. Under these circumstances, words and objects are thought to take on extraordinary qualities of weightiness and rarity. These qualities differ in degree rather than in kind from the use of words and objects in everyday interactions. Traditional analytical distinctions between everyday discourse as profane and political oratory and magic spells as belonging to a sacred, ritual domain must be discarded (Bloch 1975)—how Trobriand magic is thought to
work can be understood only from a theory of Trobriand language in use, not from a theory of magic as such.

**Personal space**

My concern is to express through the ethnographic experience itself the attributes and values that words and objects are perceived to have and the way these attributes and values give meaning to and act on the encounters that individuals have with each other. What qualities must be attached to objects or words that will enable either to break through the boundaries between individuals? These boundaries are clearly marked. My informants call them ‘one’s mind’; based on observations of the way ‘one’s mind’ is protected and bounded from the intentions of others. I call these boundaries ‘personal space’—the locus of an individual’s thoughts, desires and intentions. For Trobriand individuals are faced with the task of protecting their personal space from the influence of others, while simultaneously they may be attempting to impose their influence on others. Out of the possibilities of wanting and needing, in a never-ending scheme of demands, an individual must act as if she or he wants nothing, needs nothing and will demand nothing. How one person negotiates his or her own desires in respect of those of another is an extremely delicate undertaking.

The penetration of personal space by the use of words or objects constitutes for Trobrianders the basic work of interaction. The ability to influence, control and gain from another person in situations as diverse as politics or love demands subtle awareness of psychological processes. The protection of ‘one’s mind’ is a constant concern, for personal space is always in danger of being threatened; one’s mind is always in danger of being seduced. Physical space and material possessions can be taken by others, but personal space—one’s mind—is bounded by the idea of privacy. Breaking through this boundary ‘to gain control of someone’s mind’ is an extremely difficult achievement. Only an approximation of what a person imaginatively desires may be obtained. Indeed, the possibility of rejection produces fear associated not only with one’s potential rejection by another, but with one’s own potential failure to reject someone else’s advances. Like weighted arrows, words, objects and magic spells are projected towards another person’s personal space. At the same time, words, objects and magic spells are the very projectiles that others are using to penetrate one’s own personal space. Success or defence must be seen in relation to the hardness of the words spoken, the heaviness of the objects that are given, or the rarified circumstances under which magic spells are performed.

The circumstances under which words and objects are exchanged in interaction go beyond defining heaviness or preciousness. For the ability to say, ‘No’ is as significant as saying ‘Yes’. Burke (1966: 420) argued that ‘The essential distinction between the verbal and the nonverbal is in the fact that language adds the peculiar possibility of the Negative’—the ability to say No. In the Trobriand case, we find that the complexity inherent in the possibility of actually saying ‘No’ leads to ways in which a ‘No’ is verbally disguised. Linguistically, one may tell an alternative story, or say that knowledge of an event is forgotten or
unknown, or disguise the truth by using figurative speech. Burke, however, was not considering objects as part of nonverbal communication, for in exchange, objects say ‘No’ clearly and dramatically. A person either has the object or does not. Although in some cases, a linguistic explanation is given to note an absence or shortage, the explanation never removes the negative fact expressed in the visual representation. Both words and objects carry the possibility of the Negative, but the latter carries the possibility without the potential for ambiguity. That the Negative can be disguised gives its use a special power.

Gulliver’s sage with the heavy sack could not disguise the quantity or quality of his things in his discourse with another. In our own society, disguise of objects is often achieved through such substitutions as forgery, fakes and counterfeits. But all these are meant to be taken as authentic objects. In traditional small-scale societies, authenticity can be well-identified. Knowledge of the history of a kula shell is intimately associated with recognition of the shell itself. Yet the ability to create disguise, to devise ambiguity, has enormous potential for attempting to rearrange social situations to a person’s own advantage while protecting her or his own thoughts and feelings. Such advantage, however, has limitations, in that disguise of the truth may never generate the power of truth itself. The degree of autonomy and domination that an individual may gain over someone else depends upon the weightiness of words, objects, magic spells, but the fact of weightiness is difficult to disguise. Disguise is protection for one’s own thoughts. When disguise is thrown off, a person’s personal space is exposed. Herein lies the inherent dilemma. Exposure, although powerful, is deeply dangerous.

In Kiriwina, formalised speech codes allow for the ritualisation of verbal interaction so that one’s thoughts remain disguised and cannot be controlled by someone else. Ritualisation of verbal interaction is by no means unusual, as studies in other societies on the use of lying, gossip, rumour and innuendo demonstrate (for example, Blom & Gumperz 1972; Dundes et al. 1972; Gilsenan 1976; Gluckman 1962; Irvine 1974; Keenan 1974; Mitchell-Kernan 1972; Szwed 1966; Wilson 1974). In the Trobriand case, special attention is placed on the circumscription of the ‘mind’ (nanola) as the area to which no-one has access. Speaking what one truly thinks about something is called ‘hard words’ (biga peula). Even though the truth about something may be known to everyone, speaking the truth publicly exposes all the compromises and negotiations under which individuals operate in their daily lives. For this reason, saying ‘hard words’ is perceived to be extremely dangerous and produces immediate and often violent repercussions. ‘Hard words’ once spoken cannot be recalled; apologies do not carry any power to mute their effects. From this perspective, ‘hard words’ are weighty, with the ability to penetrate the personal space of others.

Consider the examples Evans-Pritchard (1962) presented in the Zande uses of sanza. When an Azande employs sanza the intent is to release one’s own ‘nasty’ thoughts about someone, without that person understanding the meaning of what is being said. The danger in their use occurs if the person to whom the comments are directed understands what is being said—the reaction is extreme.
In Kiriwina, ‘hard words’ are never ambiguous. Their effect is as extreme as when the literal meaning of a sanza is exposed.

Trobrianders are especially cautious about saying ‘hard words’. My awareness of this situation came about through my own difficulty in using disguise. Although I was taught the importance of disguising my feelings about particular individuals, I could not interact with ease and generosity towards people I thought were taking advantage of me. My assessments of individuals I disliked usually matched what my close friends thought. They warned me, however, that I must never show my anger nor openly discuss incidents I found provoking. I had to hide my ‘true’ feelings and be generous to the very people I disliked. Naively, I wanted to speak about things that bothered me in order to find a way to change them; I wanted them to know that I knew what they were doing to me. The warnings were always the same: ‘Do not say the words in your mind’. I was told to remember that ‘the words you say to someone are not the words you think’.

One day I got very angry and accused X of breaking my bicycle. As I told him what I thought in a mild tone, I watched as my words changed the reality in front of me. X’s face took on hard lines, his eyes flashed with anger, and he bitterly said, ‘I leave you now, because if I stay I will be forced to say what is in my mind and when I say those words we will never speak to each other again.’ In the face of what every friend had previously advised me, I was still unprepared for X’s reaction. He did not apologise nor make any attempt to arrive at an understanding. By leaving my presence immediately, X gave both of us the option to continue our relationship, but we never discussed the incident again. Later, my informants told me that if I had not been ‘new’, X would have answered me by accusing me of things I had done to him, and the interaction would have escalated into fighting.

The shock of these disjunctures in my interaction with others forced me to realise the complexity of verbal interaction. I began to observe more carefully the face-to-face interaction of villagers with each other, and found increasing evidence that individuals whom I knew hated and distrusted each other interacted as if nothing were amiss. Very often one person suspects another of having ‘poisoned’ a close friend or relative, yet displays no sign of suspicion. Recognition of what one is, or might be, or was, pervades villagers’ thoughts. In their interaction with one another such thoughts should be concealed, but at the same time one never disregards them. Once an act of aggression, such as adultery, theft, poisoning or killing has been committed, even though the act has been compensated for publicly, the affair is not forgotten. Acts once committed survive though generations so that new acts may be in retaliation for something that occurred several generations before (see Weiner 1976: 66–8). The reality of social interaction proceeds through the constant disguising of many events, but these events are remembered.

‘Hard words’ and speaking the ‘truth’

People repeatedly said, ‘We say words, but our minds do not believe those words’. The only answer one receives when questioning why W. did something
is ‘We do not know what is in her mind’. When individuals speak with each other—in all interactional domains except the most private recesses of one’s house, the bush or the beach, the areas of confiding and secrecy—an awareness exists that behind each face and verbal interchange lie the hidden, dangerous, autonomous dimensions of what a person really thinks.

Personal space is thus surrounded by formal controls connected to contexts in which one’s private thoughts either do or do not become publicly expressed. Implicit in the decision is the knowledge that verbal expression subverts and redirects the social realities of the moment. Saying what one thinks, what everyone may already believe to be the truth of a situation, can be a politically powerful means of establishing one’s hegemony over others. As John Gumperz pointed out to me, in the Kiriwina case when one speaks the truth, ‘one goes on record’. Such a verbal act means taking a decisive step, a step that many individuals are unwilling and afraid to take.

The disguise of situations extends into many commonplace areas of verbal interaction. For example, although precise levels of semantic contrast operate between terms such as clansperson (veyola), blood kin (veyola tatola) and non-kin (kakaveyola), and even though these contrasts were recognised by all villagers, the most disaffiliative term, ‘non-kin’ (kakaveyola), and the most affiliative term, ‘blood kin’ (veyola tatola), are seldom used. The ambiguous term veyola is used for people who are kin and non-kin (Weiner 1976: fig. xx). One uses veyola (kin) out of ‘respect’ and ‘friendship’. If, however, a person announces that someone whom he calls ‘kin’ is not truly related to him and calls him kakaveyola (non-kin), he is using ‘hard words’. By calling into public notice the lack of kinship ties, this truth produces enormous shame for the person who has been called ‘non-kin’. Thus Trobrianders in close relationship may call each other ‘sister’ or ‘brother’ when in fact they are not blood siblings. To call someone ‘sister’ and to announce the lack of a ‘true’ genealogical link by saying, ‘But your mother and my mother are not the same’ is an extremely shameful statement. The use of ‘hard words’ traditionally would have led the recipient of this statement to attempt suicide. The truth of such statements is not a surprise to anyone because villagers are aware of the genealogical connexions. The ability of ‘hard words’ to change an agreed-upon situation, one in which everyone is knowledgeable about the circumstances, into a situation that produces fighting, suicide or sorcery demonstrates the power of the weightiness of words.

Using ‘hard words’, however, may put the aggressor in as much jeopardy as the opponent. In an intervillage court case over land tenure, Z was asked to testify concerning the information he had about his father’s land. But Z continually denied knowing anything. He said his father had never told him the story of the land and, if he spoke now, the things he would say would be a ‘lie’ (sasopa). Most of the men present knew the ‘truth’. Z was afraid that he and his kin would be killed through sorcery if he told the ‘truth’, because the actual story involved a blood feud, several generations ago, in which control of the land in dispute had been given to a man from another lineage as payment for the murder of his relative. To tell the true story now would still shame the man who was trying to reclaim the land. During the court case, some men shouted at Z:
Why don’t you tell the truth? Are you afraid that they will kill you? We are here and no one will kill you. Just speak. Don’t be afraid. Don’t hide. We are not going to die and that man will not die. If we hide, the people just feel pain.

But Z had few living kin and was much more frightened of sorcery than of fighting. He never spoke the ‘truth’, preferring to ‘lie’ and to ‘take care’ of his kin.

The actual truth of the situation is not at issue. What is imperative is the public declaration, the act of going on record, to say the way things are or were. To lie gives an individual the option to stay away from confrontation and to maintain the safety of an autonomous personal space. In 1976, a high ranked chief, A, was confronted with a situation of ‘hard words’ by his potential successor, B, who also had the rank of chief. One of A’s sister’s sons was told by B that he had planted his taro on B’s land and he would have to dig it up. A, however, declared the land under his control and sent a message for B to come to his village. The tension in this situation was enormous, as everyone said that if B appeared either A or B would be killed by the other. B never arrived. He sent a message saying that he was going to sleep and the tension was defused. B was testing to see what kind of support he would have, and then backed off by telling a lie.

Vagueness and ambiguity are what verbal disguise in the form of lies is about. Lying enables one to deny what most individuals know. ‘Hard words’ strip away the ambiguity, pushing the heavy dimensions of truth into the public arena. To take a stand on ‘hard words’ has such danger associated with it that even powerful men are cautious in their moments of going on record. In this way, the weightiness of ‘hard words’ generates the power to penetrate deeply into someone’s personal space, but ‘hard words’ reveal one’s own mind at the same time. To use ‘hard words’ precludes any attempt to disguise what one is thinking. ‘Hard words’ demand action that for either party is dangerous and fatal. The displacement of ‘hard words’ through disguise such as lies means that other kinds of actions must be available so that intention and desire can be expressed without ‘hard words’ and without ambiguity.

**Objects as the displacement of ‘hard words’**

Situations occur when an individual wants to make his or her desires public. Objects convey unambiguous kinds of information, revealing intention. As in Gulliver’s description, objects in their manner of presentation ‘speak’ a language of negotiation and appraisal. A range of tactics concerned with what Goffman (1969) has called ‘strategic interaction’ are accomplished through the presentation of objects in specific kinds of exchange situations.

In contrast to my informants’ warnings concerning the expression of anger in verbal discourse, I was told that ‘anger may always be expressed in yams’. To anyone familiar with Trobriand ethnography, this statement has vast implications, for yams are the objects that act on the stability and regeneration of all important kin and affinal relations (see esp. Weiner 1978). How then can yams express anger, when angry words shatter relationships? Yams express the Negative, and this expression is made at harvest when the most public display of
the annual yam production takes place for several months. The harvest period demonstrates the labour that men have committed to other men. Yam houses are filled not by an owner’s gardening efforts, but by the efforts of men connected to the owner through a range of kin and affinal links. Each owner himself will be working for other men. Not to work too hard in the garden for someone, thereby producing only a meagre crop, or not to work any garden at all for a person become statements expressing anger. People gave similar reasons for not working hard: ‘He did not take good care of me’. ‘He did not kill a pig for me when I filled his yam house last year’; ‘He tried to poison me’. Unlike ‘hard words’, the use of the Negative through objects is desirable. Thoughts are stated without the dangers of exposure.

Given the intensity of these situations, the contrast with ‘hard words’ seems incongruous. In all kinds of exchange situations, from the small things exchanged between lovers to kula transactions, each individual in the exchange maintains a high degree of autonomy. Even in situations where the producer of yams (or the kula partner) is of lower rank, age or status than the receiver, the person of lower status may publicly show satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the particular relationship. Objects, as they move between individuals, express a range of emotions from fear, to anger, to love, while the partners to the exchange are not exposed to the kind of aggressive behaviour resulting from ‘hard words’.

The power of objects is generated out of the Maussian notion that things are a part of oneself (cf. Weiner 1982a). The display of yams, for example, addresses the ability of the gardener, his present and future political intentions and status. To go on record with objects is intimately tied to the presentation of the self. These actions resemble the values expressed in the decoration of the self as described for other Papua New Guinea societies (e.g. Gell 1975; Strathern & Strathern 1971). Among the Melpa, secrecy of intent, desire and strategy is a primary component of social and political interaction. M. Strathern (1979; also Gewertz 1980 on the Chambri) notes that when large exchanges take place, public statements are being made through objects about secret matters such as wealth, the well-being of the clan and the presence of ancestral ghosts. ‘In daily life what is hidden is the inner self, within the skin, a person’s basic capacities. In the process of decorating . . . it is his inside which is brought outside . . . Disguise is here the mechanism of revelation. The inner self is visible only to the extent that it makes invisible the outer body’ (1979: 249). In the Trobriands, physical beauty, health, shining skin and decorations are statements of one’s potential and desires. Beauty and the decoration of young people are attended to by their elders from just this perspective (Weiner 1976: 121–36). After marriage, however, one enters the major activities of adult life, which are grounded in exchange. Now the locus of power shifts from the body to objects which contain the same statements of inner ability, desire and love. Physical strength and beauty diminish with age, but the objects one produces and acquires disguise the outer body and make the ‘inner self visible’. Possession of a large kula shell must be seen from this perspective. One says nothing when the shell is given, for the shell itself speaks to the fame and renown of its new owner. One’s name becomes synonymous with the ability to obtain the shell (Weiner 1983a).
Objects say things in situations which allow an individual's personal space to remain unviolated when the truth is stated publicly. If two villagers who are not related to each other confront each other and 'hard words' are spoken and fighting is about to occur, the situation may be resolved through the measurement of yams (buritilaulo). Quickly, the relatives of both individuals bring their yams and confront one another with the largest yams they own. Once the confrontation with yams has begun, immediate fighting is averted. Yams have displaced the power of 'hard words'.

Exchange relationships are about production, labour, ritual, even travel, and also the histories of relationships, making the object involved weighty with meanings. These meanings give autonomy to both partners because they address the implications of future loss and past histories. Objects extend the boundaries of personal space, exposing one's thoughts about someone else. Negotiation with objects may, in time, precipitate covert retaliation such as sorcery, but stating the Negative with objects will not elicit the immediacy of aggressive behaviour. With objects, unlike 'hard words', the danger in exposure for both parties is displaced. Objects represent societal constraints in the regeneration of social relations and in the tension between autonomy and domination. It is this tension that gives objects the power of displacement.

The seductive power of tropes

For a range of circumstances, material transactions alone cannot accomplish the strategies one desires. Trobrianders consider tropes (biga viseki), which include metaphor, metonymy, analogy, simile and riddles, to be appropriate for another significant mode of disguise. Everyone understands the meaning in the figure of speech, but the words that explicitly state what is meant are not used. Empson (1964: 341) discussed an aspect of metaphor that is important to consider.

It seems to me that what we start from, in a metaphor . . . is a recognition that 'false identity' is being used, a feeling of 'resistance' to it, rather like going into higher gear, because the machinery of interpretation must be brought into play, and then a feeling of richness about the possible interpretations of the word, which has now become a source of advice on how to think about the matter (emphasis mine).

Following Empson, we can understand the way feeling is generated through the use of metaphor and the way thinking about the matter will entice the listener. Metaphor is not merely a substitution of one word for a similar word. Rather the use of metaphor widens the range of possible associations which, when experienced as Empson's 'source of advice on how to think about the matter', become the production of meaning in a more persuasive way than the original word itself. By demanding attention, thought and evaluation, tropes, if interesting and effective, become weighty and may seductively enter the listener's mind. The ability to invent powerful tropes not only shows cleverness but indicates one's expertise at penetrating personal space.

In the 'Trobriand case, unlike the Zande sanza or Melpa 'veiled' speech (A.
Strathern 1975b), the disguised truth in the trope is known by everyone, but the sense of the trope becomes important by the implication that disguise is necessary. The two most frequent situations where tropes are employed involve sex and politics. Tropes are central in these encounters because influence over a potential lover or ally is tenuous at best. It is no accident that verbal encounters during kula negotiations are talked about in the same way as seducing a lover.

A lover's relationship must begin with words and these words are disguised in tropes. Tropes allow for the desires of one's mind to become public, without becoming 'hard words'. These desires, however, remain dangerous because they occur in situations where kinship ties are not fundamental. Therefore the possibilities of rejection are more likely. Figures of speech are used in soliciting the agreement of a potential lover. Questions such as 'May I borrow your pillow?' 'May I drink some water?' or 'May I ride your bicycle?' will be answered with laughter and with a half-joking negative reply. But the message is explicitly acknowledged and must be reinforced with giving things such as betel nut or tobacco. Finally, however, success may be obtained only by the use of magic.

In much the same circumstances, political encounters precipitate such fears. In large intervillage meetings, for example, men face other men with whom they have no direct kin or affinal relationship. Yet a man may need to influence and persuade these men to join his side. In a public meeting, one has only verbal dexterity to use as persuasion, and success is directly related to the weightiness of one's tropes.

For example, a large public meeting, attended by over 200 men, was held at the site of a cooperative store, which had been closed down. During the meeting, M was asked to speak. M was a chief and his kinsman had been accused of taking funds from the store. M was sitting on a chair and when he started to speak, he remained seated. 'I do not like to stand up to talk to you people. Something is stuck on my leg. I have a sore on my leg and I do not like to stand up.' Everyone assembled knew that the sore referred to M's shame about his kin. When M started to speak, many men were frightened that he would use 'hard words' because of his shame. In having the courage to take up the incident publicly, M promoted his own power and ability. He used a strong trope about a difficult matter, avoiding the confrontation that 'hard words' would have produced.

In 1972, a tense meeting was held with kula men from northern Kiriwina and kula men from the neighbouring island of Kitava. When Kiriwina men had gone to Kitava several months before, the Kitava men told them that they had no kula shells. The Kitava men lied because they already gave the shells to men from Vakuta Island. At this meeting, X spoke for Kiriwina and said, 'I have the lock and you have the key, but you must find the right key to open the lock'. This speech meant that now Kiriwina men would not give Kitava men any kula shells, until they received the shells they were owed. By using this trope, X made explicit demands using 'good words'.

At a meeting concerned with the Local Government Council, W as Council President was in jeopardy because he was losing his position to an opposition movement (Weiner 1982b). In a dramatic speech he said:
I know two kinds of fibres for binding canoes. One is called *momulukwausi* and one is *monuyobikwa*. You people are going to vote for which one you like. *Momulukwausi* is my fibre. If it goes bad, I can change it and put on a new one and then retie it. Other people who live near the lagoon have *monuyobikwa*. They tie it for a long time on the canoe and only then can they change it. But for me, I tie my fibre maybe for two weeks and then I change it. Come on, vote, and then we will find out which fibre is stronger.

References to the fibre concern knowledge of magic for the control of weather. The lagoon people knew magic for the wind, but W knew the most powerful sun and rain magic. He was challenging anyone to surpass his ability to reverse the weather at will. He stated his power to use his magic in the most destructive way, to destroy garden crops. W was issuing a threat made more intense because of his charge to vote. Voting, a Western introduction, establishes winning and losing sides, and like 'hard words' voting turns into fighting. In this speech, W combined the two most dangerous elements in verbal interaction: his knowledge of magic, and in calling for a vote, a demand that 'hard words' be spoken. Speaking with tropes made almost as heavy as 'hard words', W touched the edge of conflict. In political contexts, the use of figurative speech makes others think about the words spoken and decide, 'Is that man talking about true things?' 'Should I believe his words?' 'Do his words sound sweet?' The condensation of desire into the disguise offered by tropes is itself an act of acumen because a person must be strong to be able to use words in this way and to convince others to believe and follow. Not everyone has such ability and, in political situations, many men are afraid to speak.

Tropes operate at a public level in addressing influence and desire like objects of exchange. The use of tropes exhibits an extension of one’s personal space into the public domain, providing the disguise that allows for the emergence of desire and intent. Like the display of important objects, dexterity in the use of tropes is available only for the very strong. Tropes refer to past or present events and demand that attention be given to 'how to think about the matter'. One person directs others to think about experience from his or her own viewpoint and to assess past experience for future decisions. In this way, tropes are inherently idiosyncratic, even when everyone understands their meaning. The tension created through the use of tropes is situated in the very individuality of the operation, because basically one is saying 'My way is the only way'.

Objects are associated with other characteristics in relation to persuasion. Objects are not idiosyncratic. They necessitate labour tied to the priorities and needs of others. The difficulty in the creation and attainment of objects is in the attention and care that underlie reciprocity. The achievement of a return is not automatic. Economic exchanges say 'No' as well as 'Yes'. The presentation of objects, either in acts of exchange or in display, states visually all the Negatives and Positives that went into the attainment of the object. Objects are heavily weighted with the social implications of past relationships and obligations, prior to the statements they make concerning individual desire in the present.

In the final analysis, objects outweigh the use of tropes and 'hard words' in social interaction. Their weightiness includes more than physical qualities. Objects are produced by the singularity of individual creation, but their value is created and sustained through the societal implications of history and the
contexts in which social relations are regenerated (Weiner 1982a; 1982c discusses objects and their relation to history). The limitation inherent in the use of objects as the mode of social interaction is not their heaviness, from Gulliver’s perspective, but rather their scarcity, their state of being rare things that represent the history of ownership and control. In a society where ‘hard words’ lead to disaster, where objects are about obligations that stretch through generations, and where the use of tropes gives no absolute certainty of success, social interactions at best are fraught with tensions and unrequitable desires. Only the use of magic is believed to have the power to enable a person to extend her or his will over others and to be protected from the desires of others. An understanding of the force of magic demonstrates that the kinds of power found in the use of ‘hard words’, tropes and objects are similar to those that give force and credence to the practice of magic.

The force of magic

Magic is thought to have the power to interfere with the will of others at the most direct level possible. Villagers’ perceptions of one another are guided by the fears triggered through their beliefs in the constant suspicions and practices of magic. The potential consequences of magic rooted in the framework of social encounters not only accentuates the danger in social interaction but, simultaneously, strengthens the need to protect one’s personal space from the wilfulness of others. Although the constant concern with magic produces wariness and fear of what others may do, it also produces a strength in one’s own mind that one can defy the intentions of others. Thus the perceived autonomy of personal space is heightened.

The privacy of one’s thoughts and the power attributed to the exposure of one’s thoughts, as in the use of ‘hard words’, contributes to the perceived efficacy of magic. If words of ‘truth’ disrupt and destroy, then the words of magic based on the ‘truth’ of ancestors also have the ability to disrupt and destroy. If thoughts must be guarded carefully, lest they emerge and destroy, then thought is always potentially powerful and can be used in contexts that no one can control. The processes through which magic action is thought to occur are the heightened, focused counterpart to the processes involved in the most important situations of social interaction. Success in magic provides each person with an autonomous connexion to sources of potential help located in a dimension of time and space free from the dangers that exist in the domain of social interaction. However I am by no means imposing the traditional analytical distinction between magic as private and religion as public (see also Beidelman 1974; Douglas 1966; Evans-Pritchard 1956; Goody 1977). One’s own thoughts and words are powerful resources that enable one to displace all forms of social interaction while using the techniques of such interaction.

Trobriand magic has been the subject of extensive debate since Malinowski’s original work. Malinowski (see especially 1935) emphasised that the words of spells are the most significant part of Trobriand magic (cf. Evans-Pritchard 1967 on verbal differences between Trobriand magic and Zande magic; Tambiah
Malinowski also noted that in the full performance of magic, the words are usually impregnated into an object which itself operates as a 'medium' by transferring the words to the final object. As Nadel pointed out 'Yet whence this power ascribed to gestures and “media” or, for that matter, to the words themselves?' (1957: 197). Tambiah (1968) reanalysed the magic spells originally published by Malinowski. He noted the importance of metaphor and especially the significance of metonymy in the spells (also demonstrated by Munn n. d.) as the means by which 'objects and substances are used as agents and vehicles of transfer through contagious action'. Further, Tambiah argued that the use of metonymy 'has several implications for lending realism to the rite, for transmitting a message through redundancy, for storing vital technological knowledge in an oral culture, and for the construction of the spell itself as a lengthy verbal form' (1968: 190). From the totality of Trobriand language, however, the power of spells is grounded in more than realism, redundancy and the storage of knowledge.

In the chanting of spells, words and the objects which absorb them must become powerful enough to activate a range of agents (Malinowski's medium) in the physical environment, such as birds, animals, plants, insects and even the deceased former owners of the spells (ancestors), all of whom exist outside the daily life of social interaction. For example, the whiteness of the cockatoo must be transmitted to a person's skin, or the guinea hen's knowledge of moulding dirt underground must be transferred to a yam. The transmission in the former case enables a person to become beautiful. In the latter case, a yam gains knowledge of how to continue to grow underground when a stone blocks its path by moving dirt aside as a guinea hen does when it builds its nest. In spells, it is the stoniness of a stone, the whiteness of birds' feathers, the crunching sound of dry leaves that must be transferred from wild life or ancestral referents through an agent to a patient, such as a person, a yam, a canoe or the sun. Then the patient, now having gained the desired attributes such as beauty, size, speed or dryness, may accomplish the goals of the individual who solicited or performed the persuasive actions of magic.

The transference of attributes, selected for their precise physical characteristics, is believed to be accomplished through the recitation of the spell and the impregnation of the words into objects, such as leaves, coral, stones, betel and even tobacco. These objects are as important as the spell, because without the appropriate object, the action of the spell would be ineffective. Words must be spoken into a material form that will transfer knowledge from one domain to another. Appropriate objects and words are perceived to be necessary to mobilise the specificity of thoughts into actual events. Desires and intentions are enacted through a route that draws on the powers of tropes and 'hard words' and applies these powers to objects that become agents. In this production of magic the use of figurative speech found in tropes is intensified and exaggerated. Just as tropes in everyday discourse gain power through the disguise of direct desire for 'advice on how to think about the matter', in the use of metaphor and metonymy in spells the listener is seduced with interesting thoughts. In magic a person must persuade agents outside the social domain to transmit these interesting ideas to a patient. The intensification of form and the special-
The verbal action of magic is so demanding that greater force is required than in the use of public tropes. Repetition, shifts in rhythm, specialised vocabulary and changes in pronunciation (the very things Malinowski identified as the irrational aspects of magical language) are believed to be necessary to achieve successful results. Changes in pronunciation are employed to make the words 'sound good', so that they will be attractive to think about for patients and agents. Specialised vocabulary contains archaic words believed to have been used by ancestors. These words give historical validation to the spell. Genealogies of those ancestors who formerly owned the spell are recited at the beginnings of the spell. Not only does the genealogy call on the assistance of the former owners, but it gives weight to the spell by demonstrating the successful history that the spell has had in effecting persuasion.

Repetition of the spell, accompanied by changes in rhythm, is believed to be the effective force in causing the words to enter the appropriate object. Through the object the agents addressed in the spell are activated into conveying the necessary information to the patient of the spell—the lover, the canoe, the rain. This technique is especially important in assuring success for the most difficult and most valued magical action, such as sorcery, love, changes in weather, success in kula or yam growing. In order for Z to control the rain, he must stay awake all night, chanting the spell over and over into a piece of black coral. The repetition acts as verbal persuasion. Such skill and stamina become the measure of one's strength and power to control. Within this physical and verbal tour de force, the power generated by the spell increases until finally the desired information has been absorbed by the agent and the patient. While these physical actions and mental abilities are effecting persuasion, one's personal space takes on unprecedented energy and autonomy. Everything is possible in the moment of recitation, where such power generates the strongest sense that one's desires can be secured. The production of magic begins within the domain of a person's mind, but one's thoughts must be exposed in words and transferred to objects. With magic, the fear of exposure is inconsequential.

The language of magic is elevated to a poetic form (Friedrich 1979). In the chanting of the spells, the autonomy of personal space is one's imagination. Through verbal intensification, one's relationship to the domain of the social becomes totally ego-centred. Unlike the imaginative construction of tropes in social and political discourse, however, the words of spells are historical records of past successes and achievements, through past owners. The use of tropes in magical language is formalised into a poetics that cannot be altered. The imaginative power of the spells occurs during recitation in a process similar to Shklovsky's definition of art as 'defamiliarisation': 'a making strange (osstragenie) of objects, a renewal of perception' (Jameson 1972: 51). The recitation of spells cannot be thought of as mere rote, for the words and the actions of saying the words elicit 'a sudden awareness of the very textures and surfaces of the world and of language' (1972: 50). Such poetic language in magic attracts attention to itself and to the physical and mental powers of the owner of the spell, thereby
resulting in a renewed perception of a world that momentarily one may create and control.

Even within this moment of perceived autonomy verbal abilities, thoughts and knowledge still cannot totally affect desires. The mediation of the agent, the object that carries the verbal messages to the patient, is necessary. Given semantic complexity in both the composition of the spells and their recitation, it is the object, rather than the spell, that is the active carrier of intention and desire. Even with magic, the object is weightier than words.

The most telling example which sets into sharp relief the relation between object and word and the conflict between domination and autonomy is found in magic spells where the ‘poetics’ of figurative speech include ‘hard words’. In situations where the desire to destroy the autonomy of someone else is paramount, such as the most powerful kinds of love magic, ‘hard words’ directly call upon the body and the mind of the other person to move and think in totally controlled ways. For example, in the most powerful spell for love magic, the ‘hard words’ explicitly describe all the detailed physical actions of sexual intercourse. In another spell, ‘hard words’ define the person’s state of mind in that she or he will not listen to the advice of others, will refuse to eat any food, will long only to see and sleep with her or his lover. These spells are said to ‘spoil one’s mind’ causing the person to come under someone else’s control. The ‘hard words’ must be spoken into a betel nut or tobacco to be chewed or smoked by the patient in order for the spell to work. Similarly, spells for sorcery, spoken into betel or tobacco, contain ‘hard words’ that explicitly describe the destruction of the body. Thus, through magic a person is thought to be able to destroy another’s autonomy and anatomy, without the risk of exposure. In order to achieve this ultimate domination, one must, quite literally, enter the body and violate the space of the victim. Entrance is achieved through the object which is the container and carrier of the message—without the object, words alone have no effect.

Conversely, in everyday interaction, ‘hard words’ alone are perceived to have the power to destroy the realities under which individuals tend to go about their lives, by exposing another reality—the ‘truth’. Similarly, ‘hard words’ in magic spells expose the reality in the perceived ‘truth’ of one person’s desire for complete domination over another person. In both cases, one dramatically makes effective one’s will over others. In the former circumstances, the danger in the exposure of ‘truth’ is that the speech act is executed directly, leading to rejection, fighting and even death, with the initiator as vulnerable to the same results as the subject. In the latter case, the person’s desires are not executed in face-to-face interaction. Everyone may know what has happened when suddenly two individuals are in love, and many villagers assume they know the identity of the person who caused the love (or a death) to occur. In usual circumstances, no one makes these claims public.11

As ‘hard words’ in magic spells demand control over others, ‘hard words’ also contain limitations in terms of their actual accomplishments. To be effective, ‘hard words’ must be embedded in an object which enters the body of the victim. Only this object has the power to produce the desired state. Yet this critical stage in the production of magic allows for the reversal of all that went
before as the object may be rejected by the very person for whom it is intended. Therein lies the dilemma of maintaining autonomy while achieving domination. The object must transfer the word, and in that capacity, the object exposes one’s thoughts. The process of exposure protects one’s personal space, but only at the cost of giving protection to the very person one wants to control.

The force of magic stretches the boundaries of one’s own mind as it penetrates and may diminish or destroy the boundaries of someone else’s mind. Potential control and danger manifested in the use of ‘hard words’ in everyday discourse is displaced onto the action of magic, where success is demonstrated publicly in the visibility of successful action, rather than in statements of demands. Belief in the force and the perceived efficacy of magic is rooted in the perception that speech acts have power to disrupt and destroy, or to persuade, influence and convince others. To play out even the seemingly mundane, everyday situations of social interaction necessitates constant awareness and protection of one’s own thoughts and desires. To take these thoughts and desires and give them a spatial field in which they can be transformed into actions describes the basic processes that occur in the use of magic. Personal intention is turned away from the confines of social morality and at the same time, intention is allowed to escape from the confines of one’s own mind.

Words, both tropes and ‘hard words’, are the formal elements that create the potential power to enable speech to shift or recreate perceived realities. In magical action, the words must enter a physical property in order to generate the necessary chain of events between agent and patient. As agent, the object absorbs the words and becomes the material extension of all the power brought to bear in the supreme ego-centred moments of the repetitious chanting of the spell. However, once thoughts held within one’s personal space are given expression in a material form, intention is given its own disguise. It is a disguise more powerful than tropes and far safer than ‘hard words’, but this creation of individual safety and power is weakened by the very fact that it must be transferred into a material object. At this most autonomous moment, a person becomes dependent on an object to provide the result. To accept and not repay is the underlying dilemma in all exchange events. To accept a betel nut impregnated with a magic spell and not chew it underscores the same limitation in persuasiveness and domination.

Because objects, in magic or exchange, express ranges of emotions such as anger, fear, love and distrust, they are given and returned with the same intent: to influence, seduce, convince or destroy. Therefore, whether they are necessary for the production of magic or for cycles of exchange, objects must be understood within the contexts of their own visual discourse. Objects become more than their physical weight either through the tropes and ‘hard words’ they absorb in the performance of magic, or through the histories of social relations as they move through time and space in exchange. This culturally imposed weightiness makes objects rare things that have the ability to displace tensions between autonomy and domination.

The processes of Trobriand social interaction involve an awareness of the boundaries between a person’s own space and the personal space of all others. How permeable these boundaries may be depends upon the ability to express
desire and intention without dangerous exposure. Danger occurs in the moment when domination, expressed by saying ‘hard words’, destroys the boundaries and exposes the truth of intention. In the Trobriands, domination in some degree exists as part of all relationships, but the extent of domination remains muted through the mediation of exchange which allows intention and desire on both sides to be expressed without violation of personal space. A person’s labour needs to be attended to carefully by those who are or hope to be the recipients of the productive results. Strategies in exchange relations apply not only to one time or one year, but stretch out through decades and connect generations to each other. In this way, the future and its possibilities, which must be negotiated constantly, serve as template for the presence of some degree of autonomy in all social relations. Objects, the result of labour and production, have the power to displace the dangers in exposure not only because they are made weighty by history but because they represent the weight of the future.

Moving from thoughts to words, or to objects or to magic demands an extension of personal space that takes on an external form. Each transition is an attempt to rearrange or recreate one’s own lived experiences. Equally, each transition necessitates a disguise that will allow the expression of thought while at the same time providing a measure of safety. Only ‘hard words’, spoken directly to another person as ‘truth’, confront and confound experience. The tension between autonomy and domination and desire and demand can never be resolved without entering into a dangerous confrontation where disguise has been thrown off and security and retreat are no longer possible.

There are certain circumstances, however, when these situations still remain hierarchical. The aggressor is not in jeopardy and has added only the danger of the moment to his own powerful position of autonomy. A high ranked chief may use ‘hard words’ and announce without using tropes that he performed the actions necessary to cause someone’s death. These acts are not employed indiscriminately; the tension and danger are formidable. Truth is exposed, but the truth is about more than the individual. The drama unambiguously testifies to the societal nature of all relationships. There are those who do dominate. Their domination does not release them from the fear of others, and it is this fear that makes these moments rare. The fear of exposure is surmounted, however, by the stronger need to claim full transcendence. In these moments the true dilemma between domination and autonomy is exposed and resolved.

NOTES

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1 The main thrust of interest in the relationship between words and things has been with the use of language to make reference to things. See for example, the work of Brown 1958; Quine 1960.

2 Compare the Melpa concern with the privacy of the ‘mind’ (nonan): ‘do a person’s words come from his nonan . . . or are they simply “in the mouth?”’ (M. Strathern 1979: 250). Also see A. Strathern 1975a.

3 All Trobriand deaths are believed to be caused by traditional magic or chemical poisons, except for individuals who live to be very old—‘their time was up’.

4 Malinowski (1935: 181–7) gave an account which differs from my information in the following ways: the opposing sides are members of dala (lineage), not ‘communities’; the yams are not ‘gifts’; Warfare does not follow (Malinowski 1935: 473 himself was uncertain about this). See Young 1971 on the use of yams as the expression of hostile relations on Goodenough Island.


6 See Ricoeur (1978) on the psychological dimension of metaphor in relation to semantics.

7 In Trobriand cricket (Leach & Kildea 1975) each team taunts the other side in chants asserting in tropes the players’ abilities to win in a game where the host team must always win.

8 There are specialists for certain spells, but Malinowski’s idea of the ‘magician’ (see esp. 1925) ignored the circulation and purchase of spells. All individuals have some access to some sorts of spells and can pay for the practices of others.

9 See similar notions from Tahiti: ‘Magical thinking “blurs fantasy and reality”, ‘makes thought and wish omnipotent’, is “ego-centric”. A basic precept of magic is that “words affect social processes and are therefore assumed to affect natural processes’ (Levy 1973: 256–7).

10 Weiner 1976: 70–72 describes the transmission of magic spells following a death.

11 Powerful individuals such as chiefs may let others know they are responsible for a death by, for example, dressing in fine clothes when everyone else is in mourning.

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