

How to Ask for a Drink in Subanun

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WARD GOODENOUGH (1957) has proposed that a description of a culture—an ethnography—should properly specify what it is that a stranger to a society would have to know in order appropriately to perform any role in any scene staged by the society. If an ethnographer of Subanun culture were to take this notion seriously, one of the most crucial sets of instructions to provide would be that specifying how to ask for a drink. Anyone who cannot perform this operation successfully will be automatically excluded from the stage upon which some of the most dramatic scenes of Subanun life are performed.

To ask appropriately for a drink among the Subanun it is not enough to know how to construct a grammatical utterance in Subanun translatable in English as a request for a drink. Rendering such an utterance might elicit praise for one's fluency in Subanun, but it probably would not get one a drink. To speak appropriately it is not enough to speak grammatically or even sensibly (in fact some speech settings may require the uttering of nonsense as is the case with the semantic-reversal type of speech play common in the Philippines. See Conklin 1959). Our stranger requires more than a grammar and a lexicon; he needs what Hymes (1962) has called an ethnography of speaking: a specification of what kinds of things to say in what message forms to what kinds of people in what kinds of situations. Of course an ethnography of speaking cannot provide rules specifying exactly what message to select in a given situation. If messages were perfectly predictable from a knowledge of the culture, there would be little point in saying anything. But when a person selects a message, he does so from a set of appropriate alternatives. The task of an ethnographer of speaking is to specify what the appropriate alternatives are in a given situation and what the consequences are of selecting one alternative over another.

Drinking defined. Of the various substances which the Subanun consider 'drinkable,' we are here concerned only with a subset called *gasi*, a rice-yeast fermented beverage made of a rice, manioc, maize, and/or Job's tears mash. *Gasi*, glossed in this paper as 'beer,' contrasts in linguistic labelling, drinking technique, and social context with all other Subanun beverages (*tebaq* 'toddy,' *sebug* 'wine,' *binu*, 'liquor,' *sabaw* 'juice-broth,' *tubig* 'water').

The context of drinking. Focused social gatherings (Goffman 1961) among the Subanun fall into two sharply contrasted sets: festive gatherings or 'festivities' and nonfestive or informal gatherings (Frake 1964b). The diagnostic feature of a festivity is the consumption of a festive meal as a necessary incident in the encounter. A 'meal' among the Subanun necessarily comprises a serving of a cooked starchy-staple food, the 'main dish,' and ordinarily also includes a 'side dish' of vegetables, fish, or meat. A festive meal, or 'feast,' is a meal with a meat side dish. A 'festivity' comprises all socially relevant events occurring

between the arrival and dispersal of participants in a feast. Apart from a feast, the necessary features of a festivity are 1) an occasioning event, 2) multi-family participation, and 3) beer. The drinking of beer, unlike the consumption of any other beverage, occurs only during a festivity and must occur as part of any festivity. It occupies a crucial position as a focus of formal social gatherings.

Drinking technique. 'Beer,' uniquely among Subanun drinks, is drunk with bamboo straws inserted to the bottom of a Chinese jar containing the fermented mash. Just prior to drinking, the jar is filled to the rim with water. Except in certain types of game drinking, one person drinks at a time, after which another person replenishes the water from an agreed-upon 'measure.' As one sucks on the straw, the water disappears down through the mash where it picks up a surprising amount of alcohol and an indescribable taste. After initial rounds of tasting, drinking etiquette requires one to gauge his consumption so that when a full measure of water is added, the water level rises exactly even with the jar rim.

The drinking encounter. Each beer jar provided for a festivity becomes the focus of a gathering of persons who take turns drinking. A *turn* is a single period of continuous drinking by one person. Each change of drinkers marks a new turn. A circuit of turns through the gathering is a *round*. As drinking progresses, rounds change in character with regard to the number and length of constituent turns and to variations in drinking techniques. Differences in these features among successive sets of rounds mark three distinct stages of the drinking encounter: tasting, competitive drinking, and game drinking (Table I).

The first round is devoted to *tasting*, each person taking a brief turn with little regard to formal measurement of consumption. Successive turns become longer and the number of turns per round fewer, thus cutting out some of the participants in the encounter. These individuals go to other jars if available or withdraw from drinking during this stage of *competitive drinking*. Measurement is an important aspect of competitive rounds, participants keeping a mental record of each other's consumption. Within a round, successive drinkers must equal the consumption of the drinker who initiated the round. In later rounds, as the brew becomes weaker, the measure tends to be raised. Continued competitive drinking may assume an altered character signaled by accompanying music, dancing, and singing. The scope of the gathering may enlarge and turns become shorter. Special types of drinking games occur: 'chugalug' (*sanḡayuyq*) and dual-drinking by opposite-sexed partners under the cover of a blanket. These rounds form a stage of *game drinking*.

Drinking talk. The Subanun expression for drinking talk, *talug bwat dig beksuk* 'talk from the straw,' suggests an image of the drinking straw as a channel not only of the drink but also of drinking talk. The two activities, drinking and talking, are closely interrelated in that how one talks bears on how much one drinks and the converse is, quite obviously, also true. Except for 'religious offerings,' which must precede drinking, whatever business is to be transacted during a festivity occurs during drinking encounters. Consequently drinking talk is a major medium of interfamily communication. Especially for an adult male, one's role in the society at large, insofar as it is subject to manipulation, de-

TABLE I. SUBANUN DRINKING TALK

Encounter Stages	Discourse Stages	Focus of Speech Acts	Function
1. Tasting	1. Invitation— permission	Role expression	Assignment of role distances and authority relations to par- ticipants
2. Competitive drinking	2. Jar talk	Role expression and context defi- nition	Allocation of encounter re- sources (turns at drinking and talking)
	3. Discussion 3.1. Gossip 3.2. Deliberation	Topic	Exchange of information; dis- putation, arbitration; deciding issues on basis of cogent argu- ment
3. Game drinking	4. Display of verbal art	Stylistic	Establishment of euphoria. Deciding issues on basis of skill in use of special styles of dis- course (singing, verse)

Segments of a drinking encounter:

1. A turn (continuous drinking
by one person)
2. A round (a set of related
turns)
3. Encounter stage (a set of re-
lated rounds)

Segments of drinking talk:

1. An utterance (continuous
speech by one person)
2. An exchange (a set of related
utterances)
3. Discourse stage (a set of re-
lated exchanges)

pends to a considerable extent on one's verbal performance during drinking encounters.

Subanun society contains no absolute, society-wide status positions or offices which automatically entitle their holder to deference from and authority over others. The closest approximation to such a formal office is the status of religious specialist or 'medium' who is deferred to in religious matters but who has no special voice in affairs outside his domain (Frake 1964b). Assumption of decision-making roles in legal, economic, and ecological domains depends not on acquisition of an office but on continuing demonstration of one's ability to make decisions within the context of social encounters. This ability in turn depends on the amount of deference one can evoke from other participants in the encounter. Although relevant, no external status attributes of sex, age, or wealth are sufficient to guarantee such deference; it must be elicited through one's skill in the use of speech. Apart from age, sex, and reputation from performances in previous encounters, the most salient external attributes brought to an encounter by a participant are his relational roles based on kinship, neighborhood, and friendship with specific other participants. Because of consanguineal endogamy and residential mobility, the relationship ties between an ego and any given alter are likely to be multiple and complex, giving wide latitude for manipulation of roles within particular encounters. Moreover, most kinship roles permit a range of interpreta-

tion depending upon other features of the relationship such as friendship and residential proximity.

The strategy of drinking talk is to manipulate the assignment of role relations among participants so that, within the limits of one's external status attributes, one can maximize his share of encounter resources (drink and talk), thereby having an opportunity to assume an esteem-attracting and authority-wielding role. Variations in the kinds of messages sent during periods devoted to different aspects of this strategic plan mark four distinct *discourse stages* within the drinking talk of the encounter: invitation-permission, jar talk, discussion, and display of verbal art (Table I). The constituents of a discourse stage are *exchanges*: sets of utterances with a common topic focus. (Boundaries of exchanges in American speech are often marked by such expressions as "Not to change the subject, but . . ." or "By the way, that reminds me . . .".) The constituents of exchanges are *utterances*: stretches of continuous speech by one person.

1. Invitation-Permission. The Subanun designate the discourse of the initial tasting round as 'asking permission.' The provider of the jar initiates the tasting round by inviting someone to drink, thereby signaling that this person is the one to whom he and those closest to him in the encounter owe the greatest initial deference on the basis of external status attributes. The invited drinker squats before the jar and asks permission to drink of the other participants. He has two variables to manipulate: the order in which he addresses the other participants and the terms of address he employs. Apart from the latter variable, message form remains relatively constant: *naa, A, sep pa u* 'Well, A, I will be drinking.' (A represents a term of address.) Role relations with persons who are not lineal consanguineal or lineal affinal kin (Mo, F, Ch, Sp, SpPr, ChSp, ChSpPr) permit a variety of forms of address each with different implications for social distance with respect to ego (Frake 1960). The drinker's final opportunity to express role relations comes when he finishes tasting and invites another (ordinarily the person who invited him) to drink.

2. Jar talk. As competitive drinking begins, asking permission is reduced in scope and importance, and there is an increase in messages sent during drinking itself. The topic focus of these exchanges is the drink being consumed. The drinker responds to queries about the taste and strength of the beer, explanations are advanced for its virtues and defects, and the performance of drinkers is evaluated. During this stage the topic of messages is predictable. The informative aspect of the messages is the quantity and quality of verbal responses a drinker can elicit. This information signals the amount of drinking and talking time the gathering will allot him. Those who receive little encouragement drop out, and the encounter is reduced generally to less than half-a-dozen persons, who can thereby intensify their interaction with each other and with the beer straw.

3. Discussion. As the size and role-structure of the gathering becomes defined, discourse changes in topic to removed referents, usually beginning with relatively trivial gossip, proceeding to more important subjects of current inter-

est, and, finally, in many cases arriving at litigation. Since there are no juro-political offices in Subanun society, a legal case is not only a contest between litigants, but also one between persons attempting to assume a role of legal authority by settling the case. Success in effecting legal decisions depends on achieving a commanding role in the encounter and on debating effectively from that position. Since there are no sanctions of force legally applicable to back up a decision, the payment of a fine in compliance with a decision is final testimony to the prowess in verbal combat of the person who made the decision.

4. Display of verbal art. If drinking continues long enough, the focus of messages shifts from their topics to play with message forms themselves, following stylized patterns of song and verse composition. Songs and verses are composed on the spot to carry on discussions in an operetta-like setting. Even unsettled litigation may be continued in this manner, the basis for decision being shifted from cogent argument to verbal artistry. The most prestigious kinds of drinking songs require the mastery of an esoteric vocabulary by means of which each line is repeated with a semantically equivalent but formally different line. Game drinking is a frequent accompaniment to these displays of verbal art. Together they help assure that the festivity will end with good feelings among all participants, a goal which is explicitly stated by the Subanun. Participants who have displayed marked hostility toward each other during the course of drinking talk may be singled out for special ritual treatment designed to restore good feelings.

The Subanun drinking encounter thus provides a structured setting within which one's social relationships beyond his everyday associates can be extended, defined, and manipulated through the use of speech. The cultural patterning of drinking talk lays out an ordered scheme of role play through the use of terms of address, through discussion and argument, and through display of verbal art. The most skilled in "talking from the straw" are the *de facto* leaders of the society. In instructing our stranger to Subanun society how to ask for a drink, we have at the same time instructed him how to get ahead socially.

NOTE

¹The Subanun are pagan swidden agriculturists occupying the mountainous interior of Zamboanga Peninsula on the island of Mindanao in the Philippines. This paper refers to the Eastern Subanun of Zamboanga del Norte Province. Descriptions of Subanun social structure, festive activities, and some aspects of *gasi* manufacture are given in Frake 1960, 1963, 1964a, and 1964b. The ethnographic methodology of this paper is that described in Frake 1964b. Single quotation marks enclose English substitutes for (but not translations of) Subanun expressions.

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