

6

The Universal People

What do all people, all societies, all cultures, and all languages have in common? In the following pages I attempt to provide answers, in the form of a description of what I will call the Universal People (UP). This is a description of every people or of people in general. Bear in mind the tentative nature of this chapter: as surely as it leaves out some universals it includes some that will prove in the long run not to be universal, and even more surely it divides up traits and complexes in ways that in time will give way to more accurate or meaningful divisions. At the end of the chapter I will discuss how it was put together and the ways in which it will change in the future.

Although humans are not unique in their possession of culture—patterns of doing and thinking that are passed on within and between generations by learning—they certainly are unique in the extent to which their thought and action are shaped by such patterns. The UP are aware of this uniqueness and posit a difference between their way—culture—and the way of nature.

A very significant portion of UP culture is embodied in their language, a system of communication without which their culture would necessarily be very much simpler. With language the UP think about and discuss both their internal states and the world external to each individual (this is not to deny that they also think without language—surely they do). With language, the UP organize, respond to, and manipulate the behavior of their fellows. UP language is of strategic importance for those who wish to study the UP. This is so because their language is, if not precisely a mirror of, then at least a window into, their culture and into their minds and actions. Their language is not a perfect mirror or window, for there are often discrepancies between what the UP say, think, and do. But we would be very hard pressed to understand many aspects

of the UP without access to their thinking through their language. Because their language is not a simple reflex of the way the world is, we need to distinguish their (emic) conceptualization of it from objective (etic) conceptualizations of the world.

The UP's language allows them to think and speak in abstractions, and about things or processes not physically present. If one of them is proficient in the use of language—particularly if it is a male—it gains him prestige, in part because good speech allows him to more effectively manipulate, for better or worse, the behavior of his fellows. An important means of verbal manipulation among the UP is gossip.

In their conversations the UP manage in many ways to express more than their mere words indicate. For example, shifts in tone, timing, and other features of speech indicate that one person is or is not ready for another to take a turn at speaking. UP speech is used to misinform as well as inform. Even if an individual among the UP does not tell lies, he understands the concept and watches for it in others. For some UP do lie, and they dissimulate and mislead in other ways too. UP use of language includes ways to be funny and ways to insult.

UP speech is highly symbolic. Let me explain how this is different from animal communication. Many bird species vocalize a danger warning. The vocalization is substantially the same for the species from one location to another. Indeed, it is somewhat similar from one species to another. Humans have cries of fright and warning that are in some ways analogous to these bird calls, but between many, many members of our species our routine vocalizations are meaningless. This is so because speech sounds and the things they signify have very little intrinsic connection. Sound and sense, as a rule, are only arbitrarily associated. Equally arbitrary is the way units of speech that are equivalent to our words get strung together to make sentences. But in spite of this arbitrariness there are features of language at all basic levels—phonemic, grammatical, and semantic—that are found in all languages.

Thus UP phonemes—their basic speech sounds—include a contrast between vocalics (sounds produced in or channeled through the oral cavity) and nonvocalics (e.g., nasals). UP language has contrasts between vowels and contrasts between stops and nonstops (a stop, e.g., English *p* or *b*, stops the flow of air during speech). The phonemes of UP speech form a system of contrasts, and the number of their phonemes goes neither above 70 nor below 10.

In time, their language undergoes change. So it follows that the UP do not speak the language of their more remote ancestors, though it may be quite similar.

However much grammar varies from language to language, some things are always present. For example, UP language includes a series of

contrasting terms that theoretically could be phrased in three different ways, but that are only phrased two ways. To illustrate, they could talk about the "good" and the "bad" (two contrasting terms, neither with a marker added to express negation); or they could talk about the "good" and the "not good" (i.e., not having the word "bad" at all but expressing its meaning with a marked version of its opposite, the marking in this case to negate), or they could talk about the "bad" and the "not bad" (i.e., not having the word "good," etc.). Logically, these alternatives are identical: each arrangement conveys the same information. Similar possibilities exist for "deep" and "shallow," "wide" and "narrow," etc. But in each case the third possibility never occurs as the obligatory or common way of talking. So the UP are never forced to express, for lack of an alternative, the ideas of "good," "wide," "deep," and so on as negated versions of their opposites.

By virtue of its grammar UP language conveys some information redundantly. In English, for example, both subject and verb indicate number, while in Spanish both noun and adjective indicate gender.

Two final points about UP grammar are that it contains nouns and verbs, and the possessive. The latter is used both for what have been called the "intimate" or "inalienable" possessions, i.e., to talk about their fingers, your hands, and her thoughts, and for "loose" or "alienable" possessions too, e.g., my axe.

The UP have special forms of speech for special occasions. Thus they have poetic or rhetorical standards deemed appropriate to speech in particular settings. They use narrative to explain how things came to be and to tell stories. Their language includes figurative speech: metaphor is particularly prominent, and metonymy (the use of a word for that with which it is associated, e.g., crown for king) is always included too. The UP can speak onomatopoeically (using words that imitate sound, like "bowwow"), and from time to time they do. They have poetry in which lines, demarcated by pauses, are about 3 seconds in duration. The poetic lines are characterized by the repetition of some structural, semantic, or auditory elements but by free variation too.

Most of the specific elementary units of meaning in UP language—units that are sometimes but not always equivalent to words—are not found in all the rest of the languages of the world. This does not prevent us from translating much of the UP speech into our own or any other particular language: centimeters and inches are not the same entities, but we can translate one to another quite precisely; people who lack a word for "chin" and thus call it the "end of the jaw" still make sense.

A few words or meanings cut across all cultural boundaries and hence form a part of UP language. I am not saying, of course, that the UP make the same speech sounds as we English speakers do for these words,

but rather that the meanings for these terms are expressed by the UP in their terms. For example, the UP have terms for black and white (equivalent to dark and light when no other basic colors are encoded) and for face, hand, and so on.

Certain semantic components are found in UP language, even if the terms in which they are employed are not. For example, UP kin terminology includes terms that distinguish male from female (and thus indicate the semantic component of sex) and some generations from others. If not explicit, durational time is semantically implicit in their language, and they have units of time—such as days, months, seasons, and years. In various ways there is a temporal cyclicity or rhythmicity to UP lives. The UP can distinguish past, present, and future.

UP language also classifies parts of the body, inner states (such as emotions, sensations, or thoughts), behavioral propensities, flora, fauna, weather conditions, tools, space (by which they give directions), and many other definite topics, though each of them does not necessarily constitute an emically distinct lexical domain. The UP language refers to such semantic categories as motion, speed, location, dimension, and other physical properties; to giving (including analogous actions, such as lending); and to affecting things or people.

As is implied in their use of metaphor and metonymy, UP words (or word equivalents) are sometimes polysemous, having more than one meaning. Their antonyms and synonyms are numerous. The words or word equivalents that the UP use more frequently are generally shorter, while those they use less frequently are longer.

UP language contains both proper names and pronouns. The latter include at least three persons and two categories of number. Their language contains numerals, though they may be as few as "one, two, and many."

The UP have separate terms for kin categories that include mother and father. That is, whereas some peoples include father and father's brothers in a single kin category, and lump mother with her sisters—so that it is obligatory or normal to refer to each of one's parents with terms that lump them with others—it is not obligatory among the UP to refer to their actual parents in ways that lump mother with father.

UP kinship terms are partially or wholly translatable by reference to the relationships inherent in procreation: mother, father, son, daughter. The UP have an age terminology that includes age grades in a linear sequence similar to the sequence child, adolescent, adult, etc. Our first reflex is to think that it could not be otherwise, but it could: an elderly person can be "like a child"; an age classification that had a term indicating "dependent age" could break from the normal pattern of linearity.

The UP have a sex terminology that is fundamentally dualistic, even

when it comprises three or four categories. When there are three, one is a combination of the two basic sexes (e.g., a hermaphrodite), or one is a crossover sex (e.g., a man acting as a woman). When there are four there are then two normal sexes and two crossover sexes.

Naming and taxonomy are fundamental to UP cognition. Prominent elements in UP taxonomy and other aspects of their speech and thought are binary discriminations, forming contrasting terms or semantic components (a number of which have already been mentioned—black and white, nature and culture, male and female, good and bad, etc.). But the UP also can order continua, so they can indicate not only contrasts but polar extremes with gradations between them. Thus there are middles between their opposites, or ranked orders in their classifications. The UP are able to express the measure of things and distances, though not necessarily with uniform units.

The UP employ such elementary logical notions as "not," "and," "same," "equivalent," and "opposite." They distinguish the general from the particular and parts from wholes. Unfortunately, the UP overestimate the objectivity of their mode of thought (it is particularly unobjective when they compare their in-group with out-groups).

The UP use what has been called "conjectural" reasoning to, for example, deduce from minute clues the identification, presence, and behavior of animals, or from miscellaneous symptoms the presence of a particular disease that cannot in itself be observed and is a wholly abstract conception.

Language is not the only means of symbolic communication employed by the UP. They employ gestures too, especially with their hands and arms. Some of their nonverbal communication is somewhat one-sided, in that the message is received consciously but may be sent more or less spontaneously. For example, the squeals of children, cries of fright, and the like all send messages that UP watch closely or listen to carefully, even though the sender did not consciously intend them to communicate. The UP do not merely listen and watch what is on the surface, they interpret external behavior to grasp interior intention.

Communication with their faces is particularly complex among the UP, and some of their facial expressions are recognized everywhere. Thus UP faces show happiness, sadness, anger, fear, surprise, disgust, and contempt, in a manner entirely familiar from one society to another. When they smile while greeting persons it signifies friendly intentions. UP cry when they feel unhappiness or pain. A young woman acting coy or flirting with her eyes does it in a way you would recognize quite clearly. Although some facial communication is spontaneous, as noted earlier, the UP can mask, modify, and mimic otherwise spontaneous expressions. Whether by face, words, gesture, or otherwise, the UP can show affection as well as feel it.

The UP have a concept of the person in the psychological sense. They distinguish self from others, and they can see the self both as subject and object. They do not see the person as a wholly passive recipient of external action, nor do they see the self as wholly autonomous. To some degree, they see the person as responsible for his or her actions. They distinguish actions that are under control from those that are not. They understand the concept of intention. They know that people have a private inner life, have memories, make plans, choose between alternatives, and otherwise make decisions (not without ambivalent feeling sometimes). They know that people can feel pain and other emotions. They distinguish normal from abnormal mental states. The UP personality theory allows them to think of individuals departing from the pattern of behavior associated with whatever status(es) they occupy, and they can explain these departures in terms of the individual's character. The UP are spontaneously and intuitively able to, so to say, get in the minds of others to imagine how they are thinking and feeling.

In addition to the emotions that have already been mentioned, the UP are moved by sexual attraction; sometimes they are deeply disturbed by sexual jealousy. They also have childhood fears, including fear of loud noises and—particularly toward the end of the first year of life—of strangers (this is the apparent counterpart of a strong attachment to their caretaker at this time). The UP react emotionally—generally with fear—to snakes. With effort, the UP can overcome some of their fears. Because there is normally a man present to make a claim on a boy's mother, the Oedipus complex—in the sense of a little boy's possessiveness toward his mother and coolness toward her consort—is a part of male UP psychology.

The UP recognize individuals by their faces, and in this sense they most certainly have an implicit concept of the individual (however little they may explicitly conceptualize the individual apart from social statuses). They recognize individuals in other ways too.

The UP are quintessential tool makers: not simply because they make tools—some other animals do too—but because they make so many, so many different kinds of them, and are so dependent upon them. Unlike the other animals, the UP use tools to make tools. They make cutters that improve upon what they can do with their teeth or by tearing with their hands. They make pounders that improve upon what they can do with their teeth, fists, feet, knees, shoulders, elbows, and head. They make containers that allow them to hold more things at one time, to hold them more comfortably or continuously, and to hold them when they otherwise couldn't, as over a fire. Whether it be string, cord, sinew, vine, wire, or whatever, the UP have something to use to tie things together and make interlaced materials. They know and use the lever. Some of their tools are weapons, including the spear. The UP make many of their tools with

such permanence that they can use them over and over again. They also make some of their tools in uniform patterns that are more or less arbitrary—thus we can often tell one people's tools from another's. Such patterns persist beyond any one person's lifetime. Since tools are so closely related to human hands, we might note in passing that most people among the UP are right-handed.

The UP may not know how to make fire, but they know how to use it. They use fire to cook food but for other purposes too. Tools and fire do much to make them more comfortable and secure. The UP have other ways to make themselves feel better (or different). These include substances they can take to alter their moods or feelings: stimulants, narcotics, or intoxicants. These are in addition to what they take for mere sustenance.

The UP always have some form of shelter from the elements. Further ways in which they attend to their material needs will be discussed later.

The UP have distinct patterns of preparation for birth, for giving birth, and for postnatal care. They also have a more or less standard pattern and time for weaning infants.

The UP are not solitary dwellers. They live part of their lives, if not the whole of them, in groups. One of their most important groups is the family, but it is not the only group among them. One or more of the UP groups maintains a unity even though the members are dispersed.

The UP have groups defined by locality or claiming a certain territory, even if they happen to live almost their entire lives as wanderers upon the sea. They are materially, cognitively, and emotionally adjusted to the environment in which they normally live (particularly with respect to some of its flora and fauna). A sense of being a distinct people characterizes the UP, and they judge other people in their own terms.

The core of a normal UP family is composed of a mother and children. The biological mother is usually expected to be the social mother and usually is. On a more or less permanent basis there is usually a man (or men) involved, too, and he (or they) serve minimally to give the children a status in the community and/or to be a consort to the mother. Marriage, in the sense of a "person" having a publicly recognized right of sexual access to a woman deemed eligible for childbearing, is institutionalized among the UP. While the person is almost always a male, it need not necessarily be a single individual, nor even a male.¹

The UP have a pattern of socialization: children aren't just left to grow up on their own. Senior kin are expected to contribute substan-

¹Among some peoples, for example, a woman *A* may assume the status of a man, take a woman *B* as wife, and then arrange for the wife *B* to bear children to which *A* will be the social father.

tially to socialization. One of the ways children learn among the UP is by watching elders and copying them. The socialization of UP children includes toilet training. Through practice, children and adults perfect what they learn. The UP learn some things by trial and error.

One's own children and other close kin are distinguished from more distant relatives or nonrelatives among the UP, and the UP favor their close kin in various contexts.

UP families and the relationships of their family members to each other and to outsiders are affected by their sexual regulations, which sharply delimit, if not eliminate, mating between the genetically close kin. Mating between mother and son, in particular, is unthinkable or taboo. Sex is a topic of great interest to the UP, though there may be contexts in which they will not discuss it.

Some groups among the UP achieve some of their order by division into socially significant categories or subgroups on the basis of kinship, sex, and age. Since the UP have kinship, sex, and age statuses, it follows, of course, that they have statuses and roles and hence a social structure. But they have statuses beyond those of sex, age, and kinship categories. And while these are largely ascribed statuses, they have achieved statuses too. There are rules of succession to some of their statuses.

Although it may be only another way of saying that they have statuses and roles, the UP recognize social personhood: social identities, including collective identities, that are distinguishable from the individuals who bear them. The distinction between persons and individuals involves the entification of the former; i.e., the UP speak of statuses as though they were entities that can act and be acted upon, such as we do when we say, for example, that "the legislature" (a social entity) "punished the university" (another social entity).

Prestige is differentially distributed among the UP, and the members of UP society are not all economically equal. They acknowledge inequalities of various sorts, but we cannot specify whether they approve or disapprove.

The UP have a division of labor, minimally based on the sex and age statuses already mentioned. For example, their women have more direct child-care duties than do their men. Children are not expected to, and typically do not, engage in the same activities in the same way that adults do. Related to this division of labor, men and women and adults and children are seen by the UP as having different natures. Their men are in fact on the average more physically aggressive than women and are more likely to commit lethal violence than women are.

In the public political sphere men form the dominant element among the UP. Women and children are correspondingly submissive or acquiescent, particularly, again, in the public political sphere.

In addition to their division of labor, whereby different kinds of peo-

ple do different things, the UP have customs of cooperative labor, in which people jointly undertake essentially similar tasks. They use reciprocal exchanges, whether of labor, or goods, or services, in a variety of settings. Reciprocity—including its negative or retaliatory forms—is an important element in the conduct of their lives. The UP also engage in trade, that is, in nonreciprocal exchanges of goods and services (i.e., one kind of good or service for another). Whether reciprocally or not, they give gifts to one another too. In certain contexts they share food.

Whether in the conduct of family life, of subsistence activities, or other matters, the UP attempt to predict and plan for the future. Some of their plans involve the maintenance or manipulation of social relations. In this context it is important to note that the UP possess "triangular awareness," the ability to think not only of their own relationships to others but of the relationships between others in relation to themselves. Without such an ability they would be unable to form their ubiquitous coalitions.

The UP have government, in the sense that they have public affairs and these affairs are regulated, and in the sense that decisions binding on a collectivity are made. Some of the regulation takes place in a framework of corporate statuses (statuses with orderly procedures for perpetuating membership in them).

The UP have leaders, though they may be ephemeral or situational. The UP admire, or profess to admire, generosity, and this is particularly desired in a leader. No leader of the UP ever has complete power lodged in himself alone. UP leaders go beyond the limits of UP reason and morality. Since the UP never have complete democracy, and never have complete autocracy, they always have a *de facto* oligarchy.

The UP have law, at least in the sense of rules of membership in perpetual social units and in the sense of rights and obligations attached to persons or other statuses. Among the UP's laws are those that in certain situations proscribe violence and rape. Their laws also proscribe murder—unjustified taking of human life (though they may justify taking lives in some contexts). They have sanctions for infractions, and these sanctions include removal of offenders from the social unit—whether by expulsion, incarceration, ostracism, or execution. They punish (or otherwise censure or condemn) certain acts that threaten the group or are alleged to do so.

Conflict is more familiar to the UP than they wish it were, and they have customary, though far from perfect, ways of dealing with it (their proscription of rape and other forms of violence, for example, does not eliminate them). They understand that wronged parties may seek redress. They employ consultation and mediation in some conflict cases.

Important conflicts are structured around in-group-out-group antagonisms that characterize the UP. These antagonisms both divide the UP as an ethnic group as well as set them off from other ethnic groups.

An ethical dualism distinguishes the in-group from the out-group, so that, for example, cooperation is more expectable in the former than with the latter.

The UP distinguish right from wrong, and at least implicitly, as noted earlier, recognize responsibility and intentionality. They recognize and employ promises. Reciprocity, also mentioned earlier, is a key element in their morality. So, too, is their ability to empathize. Envy is ubiquitous among the UP, and they have symbolic means for coping with its unfortunate consequences.

Etiquette and hospitality are among UP ideals. They have customary greetings and customs of visiting kin or others who dwell elsewhere. They have standardized, preferred, or typical times of day to eat, and they have occasions on which to feast. In other ways, too, they have normal daily routines of activities and are fundamentally diurnal.

They have standards of sexual modesty—even though they might customarily go about naked. People, adults in particular, do not normally copulate in public, nor do they relieve themselves without some attempt to do it modestly. Among their other taboos are taboos on certain utterances and certain kinds of food. On the other hand, there are some kinds of food—sweets in particular—that they relish.

The UP have religious or supernatural beliefs in that they believe in something beyond the visible and palpable. They anthropomorphize and (some if not all of them) believe things that are demonstrably false. They also practice magic, and their magic is designed to do such things as to sustain and increase life and to win the attention of the opposite sex. They have theories of fortune and misfortune. They have ideas about how to explain disease and death. They see a connection between sickness and death. They try to heal the sick and have medicines for this purpose. The UP practice divination. And they try to control the weather.

The UP have rituals, and these include rites of passage that demarcate the transfer of an individual from one status to another. They mourn their dead.

Their ideas include a worldview—an understanding or conception of the world about them and their place in it. In some ways their worldview is structured by features of their minds. For example, from early infancy they have the ability to identify items that they know by one sense with the same items perceived in another sense, and so they see the world as a unity, not as different worlds imposed by our different sense modalities. Their worldview is a part of their supernatural and mythological beliefs. They have folklore too. The UP dream and attempt to interpret their dreams.

However spiritual they may be, the UP are materialists also. As indicated by their language having the possessive for use on "loose property," the UP have concepts of property, distinguishing what belongs—

minimal though it may be—to the individual, or group, from what belongs to others. They also have rules for the inheritance of property.

In addition to their use of speech in poetic or polished ways, the UP have further aesthetic standards. However little clothing they wear, they nonetheless adorn their bodies in one way or another, including a distinctive way of maintaining or shaping their hair. They have standards of sexual attractiveness (including, for example, signs of good health and a clear male preference for the signs of early nubility rather than those of the postmenopausal state). Their decorative art is not confined to the body alone, for the UP apply it to their artifacts too. In addition to their patterns of grooming for essentially aesthetic reasons, they also have patterns of hygienic care.

The UP know how to dance and have music. At least some of their dance (and at least some of their religious activity) is accompanied by music. They include melody, rhythm, repetition, redundancy, and variation in their music, which is always seen as an art, a creation. Their music includes vocals, and the vocals include words—i.e., a conjunction of music and poetry. The UP have children's music.

The UP, particularly their youngsters, play and playfight. Their play, besides being fun, provides training in skills that will be useful in adulthood.

The materials presented in this chapter—essentially a list of absolute universals—draws heavily from Murdock (1945), Tiger and Fox (1971) and Hockett (1973) and also from many other sources that are cited in the bibliography. In some cases I have added items to the list because my own experience or that of a colleague or student has convinced me that the items ought to be there even though appropriate references could not be found. In a few cases I have counted something as a universal even though that required setting aside ethnographic testimony. There are, for example, some reports of societies in which getting into other people's minds (empathizing, divining intent or inner feeling, and the like) is not done or even conceived as possible. My assumption is that these reports may be emically correct but not etically. For example, Selby (1974:106–107, 109) reports that the Zapotec, at least in some situations, do not think they can get into other people's minds, but he gives a clear case of this happening (1974:56). Similarly, to the Kaluli belief that "one cannot know what another thinks or feels," Ochs and Schieffelin (1984:290) comment that the Kaluli "obviously" do "interpret and assess one another's...internal states."

In an equally few cases I omitted items from this chapter that nevertheless do appear in the bibliography—because I was not sufficiently convinced by the references. For example, after surveying ethnographic literature on abortion, Devereux (1967:98) felt the evidence was so strong

for universality that he dismissed some reports of its absence. He may be correct, but his argument did not quite convince me and I decided to err on the side of caution and to count abortion as a near-universal. Similarly, Otterbein (1987) states in various places that the absolute universality of capital punishment is one of the major finds of his survey. But in other places in the same work he speaks more cautiously of the possibility that it is only a near-universal. I decided to accept the cautious judgment.

More important than uncertainties about the boundaries between universals and near-universals is the issue of adequate conceptualization or definition of particular universals. For example, the conceptualizations of marriage and the family that I presented are those that currently seem the most convincing to me; they have been differently conceived or defined in the past and may undergo further revision in the future.

There are also some general problems of conceptualization which, were they properly addressed, would have led to a different presentation than the one above. As was discussed in chapter 2, some scholars distinguish between the surface (or substantive) universals and those that lie at some deeper level. This chapter has been more concerned with the former. A more serious pursuit of universals at the deeper level of process or innate mechanism may presumably unearth universals that are at present wholly unknown and almost certainly would produce hierarchical orders among some sets of universals, orders that distinguish the fundamental processes from their more superficial consequences.

Setting aside the issue of hierarchy, there are other problems with how the list of universals is ordered: which to start with, which to put in a set with which. Murdock (1945) took the easy way out and ordered his list alphabetically. While it seemed appropriate to me to begin with culture itself, and then to explore language, the order in which the remaining sets or clusters of items is presented is arbitrary. There is arbitrariness in each cluster, too, partly because I wanted to minimize repetitions. Repetitions do occur, and a fuller and truer account would include more repetitions or perhaps would show the interconnections between items by means of a diagram. For example, empathy (phrased in different ways but with the meaning of understanding another person's inner states) occurs in the description of the UP in the context of communication, morality, and psychological personhood—and is implicit elsewhere.

In sum, a fuller and truer account of the UP would in various ways show the relationships between the universals. But then a fuller and truer account of the UP would list their conditional universals (and *their* interrelationships and hierarchies) and would also offer explanations of the universals and their interrelationships. Anthropology has scarcely begun to illuminate the architecture of human universals. It is time to get on with the task.