Lecture 32
Seeing an 'imitation'

Last time I made passing reference to 'imitative play,' and what I would like to do now is focus on the phenomenon of 'seeing an imitation.' Let's leave aside completely the theater; that's not what I want to be talking of. There are some ways in which the phenomenon of 'seeing an imitation' is of very large importance, and I'll bring that out, at least assertively. But I want first to point up what we're talking about.

If, for example, you see a rather young girl, three years old, perhaps older, behaving coquetishly, you may find that what you see is, her imitating a woman. And there are, of course, much larger collections of actions which one sees being done as imitations. One thing to notice is that you can see somebody doing an imitation although you've never seen that person before, or even if you've seen that person before, you're never seen them do that action. You don't see them doing the thing itself, you see them doing an imitation. And that raises some rather neat questions.

The matter is not restricted to young children. If you look especially at the pre-Civil War literature on slaves – and even, indeed, some current discussions, and certainly current lay talk on the matter – one gets something that can be summarized in the sentence, 'Negroes and children are great imitators.' There are some extraordinary things about that kind of an assertion, and, for one, it's perhaps related to a matter I mentioned some time ago, this thing of 'who owns reality' and what the import of owning it or not owning it is for some category of persons who are apparently not entitled to be seen to be doing some given action, which they technically are perfectly able to do. That is to say, the notion that, say, an adult Negro is a 'terrific imitator' is to say that what he's doing can hardly be distinguished from that thing which, if someone else were to be doing it, would be seen as the real thing. But he's not to get it seen as the real thing, but an imitation of it. Which is explained by the fact that he's very good at imitating.

Why should people be seen to be imitating? And not, now, for something where they do it badly, or the like. There are obviously a variety of things involved in seeing an imitation being done. For one, for example, when one sees an imitation, one apparently has an occasion for observing the technique with which some action is done, and considering the technique as to, for example, how close it looks to the ways of doing the activity that one does with that action. For example, making a request. Where there may be few occasions otherwise for observing the technique; one simply sees that somebody has done something. And of course adults with respect to children are constantly engaged in marveling at the technical proficiency of a young

child, without ever treating it that they're doing the thing that they're technically able to do.

Secondly, there is apparently a situation involving the incompetence of the doers to claim that they are performing the given action. Their relevant set of activities are seen, at best, as proffering such an action, where one can accept it if one pleases, or not – apart from whether it's done well. One might put it roughly that we had something of an inverse to category–bound activities, where there are some activities, otherwise doable by anybody, which for some category of persons are not doable by them, no matter how well they can 'pull it off.'

It turns out that such categories of persons, who can, in fact, often do the thing well, it being regularly seen as an imitation and therefore not the serious activity it might be, they develop related ways of proceeding with such activities, and we get a correlate to the fact that 'Negroes and children are great imitators,' which is 'Negroes and children are great mockers.' And what a 'mockery' is, is to do that thing which you would otherwise be seen as imitating, in such a fashion as to make it clear that you're not seriously doing it, but that you're competent at it – and, of course, treating it in a fairly negative way. Children mock their parents, lessers their betters, students their teachers, etc., when the given thing, were it to be done in an unmocked fashion, would be 'but an imitation.'

One of the things that is present with actions seen as imitated, is that one seeks to see where they got it from. So you could have people doing the following – I'll use an historical situation, it's more transparent, in a way: Suppose you have a situation of an adult Negro slave of the same age as his adult white master, who were brought up much together. The adult Negro slave does something, it's seen as an imitation, and it's explained by virtue of the fact that he learned it from the masters. How it is that his same-age master learned it is no issue. And of course routinely for children, one will explain some action seen as an imitation, by the fact that they learned it from such-and-such, where that the others also learned it from somewhere is no issue, either.

Imitation is apparently one special case where one is unsatisfied until one comes up with some 'how they got it' explanation, and that involves only finding someone who is entitled to do the thing, and for that someone who is entitled to do the thing it's quite irrelevant to seek to find how *they* came to do it.

In the case of children, the 'imitation' observation may be done at that point when the child is not a candidate for doing the activity that they've done. That would make it close to the situation of a slave, who would in principle not be a candidate for doing the activity they did. Such that if you have become, say, a candidate adult, it might well be that it would be no longer seen as 'imitation,' but as 'learning what an adult ought to be able to do.'

When one treats some activity that a non-candidate produces, i.e., something seen as an imitation, as a 'version' of the activity done by

somebody who is a Member in some sense, whose doing it is not seen as imitation, it is important to see that there is no question of treating the Members as otherwise setting a standard. The one that one copies it from can be pretty rotten at it, and nonetheless their thing is seen as quite adequate, and as defining yours as 'a version of it.'

One of the things that would of course mean is, if one had a transcript or a film and one saw some possible activity going on in it, then, as an outsider, one couldn't assert what was being done unless he was apprised of the fact that the person doing it was one who could be doing it. Otherwise it would be seen as an imitation.

And again, to do such activities mockingly, kiddingly, and the like, in play, is more or less explicitly to recognize that in doing them one is making no claim to doing them seriously.

What I've said so far means that when you see yourself seeing somebody doing an imitation, you could get a good sense of the ways that the categorizations you use will enormously control your perceptions of what's happening. You see right off, 'an imitation.' You see it even though you will say 'It's a beautiful job.' You'll see it even though you don't know the person who's doing it. And you'll be happy with an explanation that they learned it from their parents, though you've never seen their parents, though they may do it better than their parents. That means you're dealing with something quite powerful and orderly. If you don't see an imitation, a whole set of the questions you ask and find yourself able to solve, do not get raised at all. And indeed, would be quite irrelevant if they were raised, like, where they had acquired that habit might be askable and answerable, but it will be quite secondary and uninteresting; it's his.

And in that regard, one thing further about imitation is that no matter how many times one does the activity, no matter how well one does it, it's never a possession; it's always borrowed.

I don't think that the situation is much clarified by treating as prototypes those activities which are the special right of some people to do. For example, if you sign somebody else's name to a check, that's 'forgery' and perhaps not anything like 'imitation.' If you try to perform a marriage service, i.e., act as a priest or such a civil servant as can do it, that may be quite different than trying to be gracious and being seen as imitating your betters, rather than being seen as a gracious inferior, or gracious and thereby not inferior.

It's not a matter from which anthropologists, for one, are exempt, in that they will report, for example, things like the following. In an interesting though recurrently confusing (or confused, as you may like) paper by Ethel Albert called something like 'Logic and rhetoric among the Burundi,' she points out that Burundi are very big on very elaborate rhetorical techniques, for argument and other purposes, which the upper classes among them specialize in. If I recall correctly, when she considers the capacities of those who are not entitled to use these elaborate techniques, i.e., the lower classes, the peasants, remarking on the ability of some of them to do it, she treats it as an imitative matter. Though she also points out that even those who can

argue with considerable rhetorical skill, when arguing with upper-class persons, will be 'proper peasants' and argue very badly – though I suppose one could say then that they're imitating peasants.

As I've mentioned that article, I ought to note further about it (and it's about one of the only places I've seen it so far) she suggests that in apparently very routine conversations among the Burundi, when they are multi-party conversations, i.e., more than two persons, they have a formulated way of coming off. That is to say, there is a 'first speaker,' 'second speaker,' 'third speaker,' given by the social structure. And that order is supposed to recur throughout the conversations. The point is unclear, because she notices that if an elder, or 'proper first speaker,' at some point in the conversation refuses to talk, then the conversation stops. Now that makes it unclear as to whether the sequencing rules are the property of those people, or rules which they conform to as well, in that when they talk others follow in sequence and they may not interrupt. But if it were a rule that they all properly follow, then one might imagine that anybody could stop at their point, be silent, and the conversation ends. Or it would pause until they decide to speak.

But in any event, the phenomenon of a rule for sequencing without regard to the number of persons present, which not only controls first speech for each, but the sequence of later speech, is a matter of rather considerable interest.

It is also the case that members of some category that has its members seen as doing imitation when they do some activity, will see their peers as doing imitation when they do that activity well. And they put them down for it. So, field slaves are reported to have treated house slaves as 'putting on airs of the masters,' and 'thinking they're better than we are.' Which is to say, in part, that neither master nor field slaves were engaged in recognizing the possible assimilation of house slaves. For once they were assimilated, presumably one would no longer see that they were imitating; one would see them doing what such a person ought and can.