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SINCERE BACKHANDED COMPLIMENTS:
EXPLORING SOCIAL, SEMIOTIC AND COGNITIVE DIMENSIONS OF
CRYPTOSEMIC INTERACTION

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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In polite cultures, praise serves as valuable social currency, yet, some compliments can be counterproductive. My dissertation is dedicated to identifying and analyzing mixed messages in communication called “cryptosemes”, with the central focus on popular compliments erected on a problematic premise. A cryptosemic compliment is a message in communication that is routinely exchanged on the virtue of its good intentions, while closer, mindful scrutiny reveals other obscured dimensions of meaning that subvert the implied praise but go unperceived or ignored by all parties involved. Cryptosemic compliments are rooted in deeply internalized, reified notions of what is normal, natural and true and serve as a window into cultural stereotypes and double-standards operating under the veneer of praise. The problematic dimensions of meaning within a cryptosemic compliment lie not in the verbalized content but in the unspoken, “mythologized”, mindlessly taken-for-granted presuppositions underlying the words. Drawing on Goffman’s concept of “face-work” as well as Brown and Levinson’s framework on politeness, I argue that cryptosemic praise is a “face-saving” discourse strategy automatically deployed in reaction to “face threatening social themes” that arise in conversations that either touch upon “controversial” topics or involve socio-culturally diverse participants.

Referencing data from my empirical study, I further probe the hierarchical (vertical and horizontal) relationships and the power dynamics involved in giving, receiving and making sense of cryptosemic praise. Finally, a look at the cognitive structural mechanics of cryptosemes helps shine light onto the neuro-cognitive complexities involved in public self-expression and communication. Relying on Wilson's theory of the "adaptive unconscious", I suggest that there exists a cognitive dissonance on the level of cultural value systems: that popular cryptosemic compliments are a manifestation of an intra-personal conflict between "old" and "new" cultural posits as well as a "communication bypass" between the conscious and unconscious information processing / meaning-making faculties of the mind. An interdisciplinary analysis of cryptosemic praise exposes the subtle but entrenched language of inequality as well as the collective silences surrounding the uncomfortable social topics buried within these seemingly innocuous, socially sanctioned expressions of courtesy.

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Chapter One. What Are Cryptosemes?

Imagine striking up a conversation with a foreigner sitting across from you on a train. After some time of carrying on an engaging chat, touching upon a wide variety of social topics, your new acquaintance, smiling radiantly, turns to you and utters: “I must say, it is a true pleasure to meet you and speak with you – you are just so remarkably educated, well-informed and articulate for an American!” If you could tell that the statement was genuinely meant as praise, would you, at this moment, feel complimented? Odds are, even if initially there was an impulse to thank the person, the following thought would likely go be along the lines of: “Wait a minute, what are you trying to say here?” Something about this “compliment” rang wrong and created a sense of uneasiness. The reason why most of us would be less than thrilled by this statement is because, tipped off by the conditionality of “for an American”, we are made aware that, despite the sincere intention to pay a compliment, the speaker expects *less* from people of our nationality and, by association, this low expectation was applied to us, as involuntary representatives of the stereotyped group. It follows, then, that one is only seen as “educated, well-informed and articulate” in juxtaposition against one’s presumably ignorant compatriots and not against a more general, universal standard. And while we may feel a tinge of pleasure from knowing that someone sees us as a superior specimen of “our own kind”, we are too painfully aware of the speaker’s patronizing framework of thinking to accept this message as pure praise. After all, we were not so much told that we are “good” as being congratulated for being “not as bad as” those other ignoramuses occupying the same ethno-geographical area as ourselves.

And yet, there are plenty of examples of questionable “double-edged” praise we give and receive without pausing to take issue with what the words and the normative expectations behind those words mean. For example, it has been a popular convention to praise individuals – especially women – past the age of thirty for “looking great for [their] age”: the speaker means it as a compliment and the receiver walks away with the satisfaction of hearing something “nice” or “positive” about her or his appearance. This compliment utilizes the identical structure of the one about being “impressively well-informed for an American”. It offers a nugget of praise, but qualifies it by singling out a particular group against which one is being compared – a group that is understood to be at a disadvantage in some aspect. In the first compliment, the implied disadvantaged group is an entire nation presumed to be a people lacking the educational background and critical skills to discern what is going on in the world accurately. This unspoken assumption is obvious to the receiver of the “compliment” because the receiver’s sense of patriotic allegiance has been agitated by the mention of his or her nationality. A less easily detectable but, nonetheless, identical “elevate-by-comparing-against-lowered-expectations” formula is found in the second compliment example which congratulates one for looking great for one’s age: the disadvantaged group is people of the same age as oneself who “look their age”, which unequivocally implies that their appearance is judged to be inferior. The ultimate message is to tell you that you are not doing “as bad” as the other “people like yourself”. The phrase “you look amazing for your age” is qualitatively different from “you look younger than your age” because the latter is a neutral observation of the youthfulness of one’s appearance without passing judgment about whether it is a “good” or a “bad” condition to be in, whereas the former utterance

communicates a negative attitude towards appearing one's own age. Grice, in discussing conventional implicature in speech acts, points out that the sentence "She was poor but she was honest" conveys the same exact factual information as the sentence "She was poor *and* she was honest" but a powerful difference lies in the word "but" which implicates (suggests as true) that poverty and honesty are supposed to be at odds with each other (Grice 1989: 88, 234-235). And so, though both statements may be meant and taken as synonymous and, therefore, interchangeable, "you look amazing for your age" boasts a non-verbal connotation that if one wants to look good, one best not look one's age. To give and accept this statement as praise requires one to either turn a blind eye / ear to this less-than-kind premise or to be in agreement with it. Throughout this work, I intend to demonstrate that it is combination of both factors and that our cognitive faculties are wholly capable of supporting such an internal conflict of interests.

Perception and meaning-making in human interaction are made possible by a complicated web of social, psychological and biological elements and in this work, I attempt to untangle the ball of twine of contributing factors and causalities in the realm of mixed messages in communication. The above-mentioned pseudo-compliments are an example of a discourse phenomenon I term the **cryptoseme** (pronounced: /krīp'tə-sēm/, Greek for *kryptos*: "hidden" / "secret" and *sêma*: "sign" / "meaning"). A cryptoseme is a type of a mixed message in communication that comes across as a straightforward statement but hosts obscured, silent dimension of meaning that subvert or undermine – at any rate problematize – the overt "face-value" meaning of the statement. The hidden meaning comes not from what is articulated in the message, but, rather, from what is *left unspoken*: the "sabotage" originates from the taken-for-granted assumption behind the

spoken words. In the above example, when the speaker said: “you are incredibly well-informed for an American”, it is quite probable that she sincerely meant it as a positive statement, oblivious to her own rash stereotyping. Objectively, however, one could suggest that this element of insult, even if undetected, downgrades the entire statement from “praise” to what is colloquially known as a “backhanded compliment”.

One of the reasons why the above compliment did not succeed as a compliment is because there was a cultural incompatibility of normative expectations between the non-American speaker and the American receiver. The non-American did not think much of giving such a compliment because in her own country, such things may be routinely said about Americans with no second thought as to whether it is a fair generalization. In the U.S., on the other hand, such things are known to be spoken either in jest or to insult but not as praise. One of the key defining features of the cryptoseme is the socio-normative acceptability of the statement as a legitimate compliment. While snarky, sarcastic “cheap shots” that masquerade as compliments are as universal as they are timeless, the cryptoseme, while not a new phenomenon, is markedly different from other figurative expressions and tropes studied in socio-linguistics – in that its uniqueness (and, I would argue, elusive power) lies in its obliviousness to its own complex, multi-dimensional structure and its deafness to the silently implied meanings dwelling within. Consider the textbook “backhanded compliment”: “That dress is *so slimming* on you!” Even if this utterance is delivered in a structure and tone that convey praise and positive intention, basic logical analysis of the message tells a different story: the compliment is aimed at the dress, as opposed to the wearer who, on the contrary, is dealt an insult. In fact, the dress is praised *at the expense of* its wearer (i.e. the implication that she is overweight and

in need of “slimming” garments). This particular “compliment” has been, for some time, *socially flagged* as “backhanded” – in everyday speech as well as in popular culture – and we are not likely to make the mistake of speaking or receiving it without understanding that it is actually a “diss”. But there are many other equally “backhanded” compliments we continue to give and receive in all sincerity, disregarding the subversive content because the popularity and social acceptance of these statements lends legitimacy to their appropriateness. Cryptosemic compliments can be said to be not-yet-debunked “backhanded compliments”: the subversive content is there but has not been exposed as problematic. As the result, many social actors continue exchanging a dubious mixed message without “alarms going off” that something is amiss. This is not to say that, in order for a cryptoseme to be a cryptoseme, it is necessary that all people conversing must be completely oblivious of the hidden dimension of subversive meaning beneath the words exchanged. In fact, my research will show that people employ different meaning-making strategies in social exchanges (informed by a wide selection of cultural beliefs and personal motivations): their interpretations of cryptosemic compliments show marked differences in degrees of attuned-ness to the cryptic dimension of meaning and span a spectrum of diverse attitudes towards the importance, value and impact of that hidden meaning. What makes a cryptoseme (and sets it apart from other mixed messages) is that its psycho-linguistic structure (overtly positive, well-intentioned *form* of delivery obscuring the unspoken-yet-implied subversive *content* of the message) makes this sort of cooperative obliviousness the default outcome. And, while it can be argued that such mutual blindsided-ness in routine exchanges of courtesy is a “no harm, no foul” scenario, in Chapter Six, I suggest that, on the contrary, a mindless acceptance and repetition of

dubious content may serve to silence and subdue (rather than expose and confront) the very real social inequalities hiding in the unspoken recesses of the message. The very necessity to reach for a false compliment signals the presence of taboo, which is why cryptosemes are of great importance to sociology: where there is cultural taboo smoke, there is social inequality fire.

Bourdieu (1991) argues that language is much more than a means of verbal communication, it is a vehicle of establishment and assertion of power. Structures and mechanisms of social inequality are reproduced through the language which, in turn, confirms and reinforces the social actors' roles and statuses within the hierarchy of the given social milieu. This reproductive quality of language underlies the most principal foundations of human capacity to make sense of the world and ourselves in it, as well as means to get along and cooperate with others. Language shapes much of our life outlook as it is internalized in the earlier stages of human development. The internalization of language, according to Berger and Luckmann, is the foundation on which primary socialization is erected:

“With language, and by means of it, various motivational and interpretative schemes are internalized as institutionally defined... These schemes provide the child with institutionalized programs for everyday life, some immediately applicable to him, others anticipating conduct socially defined for later biographical stages... These programs, both the immediately applicable and the anticipatory, differentiate one's identity from that of others.” (Berger and Luckmann 1966)

Even as fully developed adults, the choices of language we adopt from popular talk become metaphors (Lakoff and Johnson 1980) for individual and collective imaginings of personal and social issues (e.g. the copious popularized vocabulary that frames the

process of romantic courtship in lingo of warfare, translates into strategically quasi-hostile behaviors and “take-no-prisoner” attitudes enacted by interested parties on the “battlefield” of love).

Situating cryptosemes in the framework of politeness (Chapter Two) further aids in the understanding of the ritualized (Goffman 1967), mindless (Langer 1989) elements of language, opening avenues for a multi-disciplinary discussion in subsequent chapters. Viewing cryptosemic communication as a defensive discourse strategy (Brown and Levinson 2009) shines light onto the asymmetries of power hidden within speech choices. The cognitive processes and mechanisms responsible for cryptosemic expression also point to inherent biases of cognitive information processing. More importantly, the human mind holds several separately (though precariously) contained pockets of conscious and unconscious beliefs and attitudes that are quite contrary to each other and threaten internal conflict, if they are ever to intersect (Wilson 2002).

Keeping internal conflict at bay is an essential human psychological necessity enacted on a cognitive level – a need so strong that, when threatened with cognitive dissonance (i.e. a disorienting clash of incompatible beliefs and attitudes, accompanied by acute psychological discomfort (Festinger 1957)), the mind is willing to bypass our conscious consent to liberally embellish the necessary details to reduce the fragmentation of the self (Giddens 1991) and make its biographical narrative more consistent and salient. Social and self- identities are in a dialectical relationship with self-expression: we relay our deliberate thoughts in speech to represent who we are, but studies also show that we fill in our narratives and rationalize our identifications post hoc to retrospectively make sense of things of how we act and what we say (e.g.: see Vaisey 2009 on the distinction

between cognitive processes of “motivation” and “justification”). The cognitive “consistency bias”, for example, leads us to “rewrite our past feelings and beliefs so that they resemble what we feel and believe now” (Schacter 2001:9). Numerous normative disruption tests such as Asch’s conformity experiments (Asch 1956) and Garfinkel’s breaching experiments (Heritage 1984), demonstrate how little it takes to disrupt a person’s sense of continuous self-identity and balanced reality – and what instantaneous disoriented and defensive behavior ensues from experiencing socially anomic states that threaten those psychological necessities. Garfinkel’s experiments with the “documentary method” of meaning interpretation, whereby student subjects crafted perfectly convincing, seemingly rational sense out of randomly generated “yes” and “no” answers thought to be offered by a live counselor (Garfinkel 1999 [1967]), lends very strong support to the theory that people will go great lengths to avoid taking an icy dip into normlessness and ontological uncertainty (Giddens 1991). Throughout this work, I will demonstrate that there exist social themes of conversation (intensified by the social make-up of the company in which they are spoken) that provoke in us the uneasy, anxious state of cognitive dissonance: the cultural double-standards and the social prejudices we have internalized throughout life come to clash with the social necessity to be “sensitive” and the friendly intention to say “nice” things. The cognitive relief is delivered by readily available scripts of cryptosemic praise: by relegating dissonant ideas into separate channels of meaning within the message, cryptosemic compliments allow us to speak up and yet *not* say the less-than-diplomatic things on our mind.

In Chapter Five, I map out the structure of some cryptosemic compliments within the geometric parameters of the semiotic square (Greimas 1987; Zerubavel 1987, 1997),

but another fitting conceptual visualization is parallel lines (layers of meaning) running along each other, without intersecting. In order to gain a fuller sense of meaning packed into a cryptosemic utterance, one must engage in a symbolic peeling of layers of meaning to uncover other dimensions obscured by the cognitively “flashier” layers. As will be seen throughout this work, everything related to cryptosemes is asymmetrically multi-dimensional: there are asymmetries in social attitudes (skewed towards “positivity”) and cultural double-standards (selective, uneven stereotyping); imbalances of power within conversational dynamics; implicit bias evolutionarily programmed into our cognitive meaning-making faculties; “laminations” of meaning (Goffman 1986a) within the structure of cryptosemic utterances; and finally, the “stratified” self (Giddens 1991) and the dissonant conscious and unconscious levels of the mind (and the asymmetry in processing power and speed) involved in crafting the cryptosemic output.

Defining the Cryptoseme

As stated above, cryptosemes are mixed messages that are exchanged as straightforward statements. In deconstructing cryptosemes, what is verbalized matters only in as far as it serves as a pointer to the content that is not verbally addressed. Consider, for example, one popular cryptosemic compliment, which happens in reference to women who are conventionally¹ viewed as “overweight”: those women are frequently

¹In this text, I make many binary generalizations about things and notions that, in physical reality, constitute a much, much more complex, wide spectrum of “shades of gray”. The term “overweight” is one such simplification: people exist in different sizes, shapes, health conditions, etc. – and our perceptions of what is “normal”, as opposed to “under-” or “over-” weight, vary dramatically as well. Therefore, the term could reference any number of different body weights that may or may not correspond with any single

reassured that they “look healthy and happy” or that they are a “beautiful person on the inside”. When the assessment “beautiful person” is qualified by the words “on the inside”, one can follow the semantic breadcrumbs to the inevitable conclusion that one is *not* beautiful “on the outside” – otherwise, why mention “inside” at all? The emphasis on the internality of beauty serves as a hint that there are other substantive presences in the message, and yet, conversationalists may focus solely on the “positive” element of praise within the message, walking away satisfied and unperturbed by the unspoken commentary about their exterior.

In this dissertation, the focus is largely on cryptosemic praise – a message delivered and accepted as a compliment that, upon closer scrutiny, reveals an undermining premise on which the praise is erected. However, cryptosemes can come in other varieties as well. There is the cryptosemic reprimand: a message that is intended to communicate reproach (i.e. something “negative”) that is actually built on a premise that may be flattering to the receiver. There also exists a neutral cryptoseme: an expression that is neither attempting to say something nice nor critical but is still wrought with self-contradictory content that muddles the straightforwardness of the statement. These three categories of cryptosemes boast different semiotic structures and deserve separate consideration, however their unifying property is that they are all mixed messages that are earnestly utilized as monosemic statements. Just as hypocrites are blind to their own hypocrisy, a cryptosemic expression – be it positive, negative or neutral – is unaware, so to speak, of the inconsistencies or contradictions within itself. Or, rather, the social actors

individual’s idea of what “overweight” means. It is quite a judgmental word and, elsewhere in this dissertation, I take socio-linguistic issue with the “fat” / “thin” dichotomy. This said, my main argument is that cryptosemic statements are rooted in popular cultural conventions and therefore, sweeping binary misnomers like “fat” and “thin” can be talked about as epistemologically “real” categories, even though they may be quite arbitrarily assigned and quite negligently used in conversation.

involved in exchanging a cryptosemic expression are not conscious (or, at least, not fully mindful) of the subversive content that undermines the intended “face-value” meaning of the statement. It should be emphasized here that, although this work focuses on critically deconstructing cryptosemic exchanges of everyday conversations, it is in no way meant to single out or judge anyone in particular. While analyzing popular cryptosemes may (and should) uncover some uncomfortable or painful-to-admit-to prejudices, because these messages are a product of the intersection of human cognition and deeply socialized culture, the aim of this work is not to point fingers at the select “offenders” but, on the contrary, to show that we are *all* complicit in perpetuating vocabularies of inequality.

There are three qualifications that apply to all cryptosemes at all times. One is that a cryptoseme necessarily hosts multiple, clashing dimensions of meaning (i.e. meanings, which, when put side-by-side, will somehow discredit each other or, at least, challenge the “positivity”, “negativity”, truthfulness or logic of the sentiment). Another necessary property of the cryptoseme is that it has a component of “mindlessness” – that at least some dimensions of meaning built into the expression are going to not “register” with the sender and, possibly, the receiver of the message, allowing for the tensions built into the statement to go unheeded. Finally, cryptosemic compliments are necessarily popular, socially sanctioned sayings: they evade the radar of our critical scrutiny because we hear and use them so frequently, automatically responding to their social designation as “compliments”. Let us parse out each defining property in nuance.

Cryptosemes have multiple dimensions of meaning, one undermining the trueness of the other

Not only do cryptosemes have multiple dimensions of meaning, those dimensions of meaning necessarily correspond with specific socio-mental designations. A cryptoseme always has at least two separate pockets of meaning and those pockets of meaning stand in some conflict with each other semantically, logically or ideologically. One of the most intriguing and complex properties of the cryptoseme is that words are the least interesting or meaningful part of its composition.

In the cryptosemic compliment, the dimension of meaning that is the most overt is the one that conveys the honestly positive intention of the sender. I make this assertion with the epistemological caveat that intentions are nearly impossible to study from the perspective of their originator since no human has the capacity to access precisely the idiosyncratic meaning enacted or felt by another individual. As Schutz formulated it: “within the common environment any subject has his particular subjective environment, his private world, originarily given to him and to him alone. He perceives the same object as his partner but with adumbrations dependent upon his particular world” (Schutz 1970:165). Furthermore, thanks to the complexity of the mind, not even the speaker is guaranteed to fully understand the full range of motivations behind her / his own statements and behaviors (Wilson 2002). Throughout this work, when I speak of intentions communicated through the overt dimension of meaning of the cryptoseme, I am referring to *perceived* intentions: what the speaker thinks she means by her own words and also what the receiver of those words thinks the speaker intended to say.

Generally, we are quite adept at “reading” other people, at least in familiar situations, and, though one cannot actually read minds, one can construct much meaning from non-verbal signs, local context and aggregate assessment of the speaker’s character. “[W]e learn to attribute intentionality to other people on the basis of the cues they provide,” write Newcomb, Turner and Converse, “that is, their behavior, as well as their words, contains messages, inferred from cues, about their motives and attitudes as referents, whether or not they intend to send such messages” (Newcomb, Turner and Converse 1965:189). Respondents’ feedback from my study suggests that people can be quite lenient towards verbal faux pas from others if they are certain that the sentiment was “meant well”, even if the clumsy verbal delivery of the idea left far more to be desired. This is to say that, though the intentions behind speech acts are impossible to prove, perceived intentions are the “next best thing” we have as a gauge of this elusive factor in communication.

The other dimension of meaning – the one I interchangeably refer to as hidden, silent or obscured – is anchored in unspoken assumptions rooted in normative beliefs about the “facts” of life. In linguistics, this is known as *pragmatic* meaning: it is the signification gleaned from the combination of antecedent knowledge and context rather than the words spoken. Virtually everything said in social interaction presupposes a number of “givens”. The rules governing our planet’s physics, for example, are so obvious and ubiquitous that they do not have to be reminded in conversation or even consciously accounted for. It is an indisputable fact that the sun rises in the East and sets in the West – hence, in speaking about observing a beautiful dusk sky, one need not spell out: “I had a great time seeing the sun set *in the West, on Earth.*” By the same logic, we

omit just as many *social* “truths” from our speech because to vocalize them is time consuming and seems redundant.

In communication, we rely quite heavily on faith in shared information and values: it spares us the time and tedium of having to recant every minute condition and back story behind each statement. Much of our conversational speech is, in fact, composed of what Searle refers to as “indirect speech acts”. Those are instances “in which one illocutionary act is performed indirectly by way of performing another.” (Searle 1999:31) Put simply, these are times when the intended meaning behind the utterance is not literally represented by words used in the sentence, but both parties understand each other with ease because they are privy to all the unspoken understandings necessary to make the conversation make sense. For instance, Bob says: “We have to go soon if we want to miss the traffic,” and Fred responds with: “Tania and Suzy are getting here at five.” Although Fred’s words did not literally state “We have to wait and deal with traffic as our dates are scheduled to arrive late,” he, in Gricean terms “implicated” this meaning (Grice 1957; Davis 2007) indirectly but, in the end, quite successfully to Bob. “In indirect speech acts the speaker communicates to the hearer more than he actually says by way of relying on their mutually shared background information, both linguistic and nonlinguistic, together with the general powers of rationality and inference on the part of the hearer” (Searle 1975: 60-61).

In cryptosemic compliments, the obscured meaning lurks in troubled conventional implicature: the underlying assumptions are not “stacked” in the receiver’s favor. Such is the case with the “you look amazing for your age” cryptosemic compliment which is nested in a negative attitude towards aging and sets unrealistic standards for beauty and

attractiveness. This manner of taking social norms (which are only arbitrarily assigned their “normalcy” through temporary social consensus) for granted as natural is the point of departure of cryptosemic trouble. “Social facts” are not as fixed or durable as the laws of nature, though they can certainly feel that way. A century ago no one questioned the “fact” that everybody is heterosexual (and any deviation from this singular prescription of sexuality was perceived not only as “odd” but also as a criminal anomaly against the “natural order of things”.) Today, the uphill battle for mainstream acceptance of various sexual orientations continues, but many of the previous “facts” about it have been debunked. At the very least, the general public has become aware that alternatives to exclusively “straight” sexuality are much, much more prevalent than originally thought and, therefore, have to be accepted as real options. The word “orientation” itself, as referring to sexuality, is a relatively new term because, until recently, sexuality was understood to exist in a singular normative incarnation and, therefore, did not have to be verbally specified in conversation. If Jack was said to have found a mate, to say “Jack found a female companion” would raise eyebrows because Jack’s heterosexuality is expected to be self-evident and, hence, does not require marking.

Cryptosemes Are “Mindless”

Cryptosemic expressions can be said to be mindless in two distinct ways. One is the way Langer employs the term to mean automatic acts and behaviors we perform when on mental “autopilot” (Langer 1989). Though we go through our everyday lives with instances of intense contemplating, evaluating and assessing, we also spend much of our

time performing routine tasks that require no conscious focus because they are habitual and take place in predictable environments. This does not only apply to “going through the motions” (e.g. realizing that you have completely “tuned out” most of drive home even though you were operating the vehicle the entire time) but also to instances when we rely on popular conversation fillers without putting much thought into their meaning because those sayings are very familiar to us. Praiseful statements can lend themselves to automatic speech because complimenting is a component of many social politeness rituals that are enacted frequently and routinely (Brown and Levinson 1987:43-47). “Discernment politeness” (as opposed to “strategic politeness”) occurs independently of the speaker’s deliberate discourse strategy / goal: “After assessing role relations and situational factors, the choice of the appropriate linguistic form is almost obligatory and automatic” (Geyer 2008:26). Knowing that social interaction demands routine exchanges of polite words, we maintain a mental archive of handy nuggets of familiar positive expressions to grease the flow of conversations and spare all present the awkwardness and potential offense. This “mindless” feature of cognition involved in cryptosemic interaction will be addressed in Chapter Five, where I will emphasize the *dis-attending* to one’s environment as one of the key contributors to the “success” of a cryptoseme.

There is another kind of mindlessness, however, that truly sets the cryptoseme apart from other figurative or indirect expressions: the cryptoseme engages both conscious and unconscious meaning construction and meaning interpretation, but the speaker and, frequently, the receiver of the cryptosemic message are aware only of the conscious aspects of the message overlooking all else. This is akin to speaking ironically without detecting one’s own irony or speaking euphemistically without taking account of

the figurative element of euphemism. Many of cryptosemic utterances, after all, can be said to be unconscious euphemisms. Recall our earlier example in which women who have gained weight are described as “looking healthy and happy” and being a “beautiful person on the inside.” Describing a person’s appearance as “beautiful on the inside” is just a figuratively crafty way to avoid addressing the person’s beauty on the outside, which is what euphemisms do. “[E]uphemisms are society’s basic *lingua non franca*,” writes Rawson, “As such, they are outward and visible signs of our inward anxieties, conflicts, fears, and shames. They are like radioactive isotopes. By tracing them, it is possible to see what has been (and is) going on in our language, our minds, and our culture” (Rawson 1981:1). Both euphemisms and cryptosemes are forms of polite speech, aiming to gracefully skirt social taboos; both function on the principle of diverting attention away from the object of controversy to something “safe”; both are embedded into our social vocabulary and are drawn upon systematically. Euphemisms, however, are often playful in the words and phrases that substitute for the “offensive” words, acts and scenarios they are covering up, while cryptosemic praise is never meant lightheartedly, as it is an earnest expression of support or personal endorsement. The defining difference between cryptosemes and euphemisms lies in the transparency and uncomplicatedness of the latter: even when employed in speech automatically and unconsciously, euphemisms do not make a mystery of what they are trying to “cover up”. It is generally understood that they “stand in” for something else, as there exists an unspoken social agreement that this “something else” can not be named. Such collective consensus in favor of circumlocution is quite pervasive and influential in the word choices we make in everyday conversations. Bourdieu, in fact, suggests that all social discourse is

euphemistic to some degree, due to the ever-present necessity to reconcile what one wishes to say with what one can “get away with” saying:

“Discourses are always to some extent euphemisms inspired by the concern to ‘speak well’, to ‘speak properly’, to produce the products that respond to the demands of a certain market; they are compromise formations resulting from a transaction between the expressive interest (what is to be said) and the censorship inherent in particular relations of linguistic production...” (Bourdieu 1991:78-79)

In this sense, both cryptosemes and euphemisms are dedicated to covering up or *silencing* some aspect of physical life or social reality by using words that redirect attention to something else (and, as I argue in Chapter Six, this element of subtle censorship may help cover up social problems.) Yet, in the act of silencing unpleasant realities, euphemisms are quite straightforward in their structure: although they rely on coded language, there is only one way to interpret those codes (hence, no multiple layers of meaning within the message), whereas cryptosemes contain a mixed, self-contradictory message stemming from multiple pockets of meaning, which can remain undetected in a conversational exchange.

What, then, is the purpose and function of the unconscious euphemism delivered by cryptosemic praise? Why do we need oxymoronic speech with hidden pockets of meaning? One of the main arguments made in this dissertation is that cryptosemes are a manifestation of unchecked cultural cognitive dissonance which is a byproduct of non-intersecting conscious and unconscious mental processes. In Chapter Two, I argue that cryptosemic praise is constructed and employed as a face-saving politeness discourse strategy in defense to anxiety summoned by controversial social themes that arise in conversations among diverse people. In Chapter Five, I pinpoint the root of that anxiety

as cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957; Aronson, 1969) created by conflicting cultural beliefs / normative expectations held by the same mind. Drawing on Wilson's framework of the "adaptive unconscious" (Wilson, 2002), I then suggest that the dissonant cognitions that give rise to cryptosemic expressions are, in fact, dissonant cultural / normative value systems occupying conscious and unconscious divisions of the mind. Cryptosemic praise allows for both cognitions to be true at the same time by verbalizing one and burying the other in unspoken assumptions and "second-order connotations" (Heck, 1996: 125) – all within seemingly coherent expressions of courtesy.

It is helpful to illustrate the distribution of attuned-ness to multiple meanings to separate the cryptoseme from other forms of indirect speech. Let us briefly take a look at the four types of cognizance towards mixed / obscured content within a verbal exchange between two persons. The following cross-section shows all the possible combinations of awareness / mindfulness – or the lack thereof – of the hidden / silent dimension of meaning within the message.

Figure 1: The Matrix of Pragmatic Cognizance

	AWARENESS OF OTHER DIMENSIONS OF MEANING WITHIN A MESSAGE BEYOND ITS INTENDED “FACE-VALUE”.	
	SENDER	RECEIVER
Type 1 Most figurative speech (e.g.: metaphor, irony, euphemism, sarcasm, etc.)	Aware	Aware
Type 2 Instances of indirect speech that “misses its mark” with the receiver	Aware	UNaware
Type 3 Cases of <i>obliviously</i> patronizing compliments or condescending help.	UNaware	Aware
Type 4 CRYPTOSEME (cases of <i>implicitly</i> patronizing <i>popular</i> expressions of praise or endorsement)	UNaware or only QUASI-aware	UNaware QUASI-aware Aware

The first diction (Type 1) depicts the communication occasion in which both parties, the sender and the receiver of the message, are aware of the cryptosemy (i.e. the presence of more than one dimension of meaning²) within a statement. Most instances of

² Cryptosemy is not to be confused with polysemy. Polysemy is a term for words that have multiple meaning: e.g.: the word “play” could mean engaging in a game, operating a musical instrument or, used as a noun, can signify a theatrical script one reads or performance one attends. In instances of cryptosemy, on the other hand, it is not about the multiple meanings of the same word, but the *potential meanings* dwelling

figurative speech belong in this category since their *raison d'être* is entirely hinged on all involved being privy to all extra meanings in the references and terms utilized. Take euphemisms, for example. If a person tells a story about “losing one’s lunch” after witnessing something vile, it will be understood by the audience that “losing lunch” is code for vomiting. The success of a euphemistic comment is contingent upon everyone deciphering this code accurately: the euphemism is employed not to fool anyone into imagining a misplaced lunchbox but to share a narrative while avoiding making direct mention of a bodily act considered inappropriate to address in plain terms. Double-entendres work this way too: puns about sexual topics wrapped in witty wordplay serve to entertain and playfully challenge, not to deceive the participants. Sarcasm and irony belong here: the aim to precipitate intellectual or moral defeat in the opponent is realized ever more dramatically if the target of the verbal bile is able to grasp, in its minute nuance, the brilliant cleverness of the orator, which necessitates a shared code.

Sometimes one party’s wit misses its mark with the intended target and this results in Type 2: the speaker intentionally layers the implied meaning within her message while the receiver remains deaf to it. This scenario, in the words of J. L. Austin (1962), is not a “felicitous” one as the performative function of the speech act is not realized (13-17) and it feels hollow and thankless to waste mockery or figurative eloquence on those who “don’t get it”. As with telling jokes that end up going “over” one’s “head”, between two speakers, this is an undesirable and, hence, mostly an accidental communication bypass. An exception should be made for the unfortunate instance when it is the intention of the speaker to belittle the receiver by deliberately

inside certain statements, activated by pragmatic context – meanings that are not fixed but contingent upon the cultural or personal framework of values and beliefs shared by the members of the conversation.

speaking in inaccessible code. This involves an agenda to humiliate or degrade the receiver *unbeknownst* to him- or herself (akin to the manner in which some take delight in spitting in another's food, all the while knowing that the victim will never find out.)

The third type of pragmatic cognizance is one in which it is the speaker who "does not get" the alternative meaning within his or her own statement, but the receiver, on the other hand, does. Irony can belong in this category because sometimes we do not account for the deeper meanings in our own speech, while it may be easily apparent to others. Statements or comments accused by others of being hypocritical may seem perfectly innocent and righteous from the speaker's perspective. The most pertinent example of Type 3 is the widespread occurrence of patronizing or condescending statements made by a person who is unaware of the air of superiority that permeates the statement. The receiver, on the other hand, is all too painfully attuned to the patronizing tone or premise of the statement and is likely to be, in some way offended, even if he or she understands that the speaker did not mean to insult. The example of "you are so incredibly well-informed for an American" is one such instance: the speaker may have quite sincerely been impressed, unaware of her own "mental coloring" (Brekhus 1996) of a whole nation, but it would be difficult for the receiver to not miss the offensively flippant "othering" of North Americans and one's own implied association with these presumably lesser people. What separates these displays of condescending attitudes from very similar sounding cryptosemic compliments is the pervasive normative-ness of the latter. Type 3 does not quite qualify as a cryptoseme due to a lack of dominant cultural support behind the presumptuous premise implied within the statement. This applies to individuals who are artifacts of either a different era or society, who innocently utter such

anachronisms as: “she is impressively intelligent for a lady,” or “he is quite an articulate Black man” offending and embarrassing the surrounding majority of people who do not subscribe to the gender and race biases implicated in such statements. The fact that the receiver is aware and, quite possibly, put off by the bias / double standard implied within the statement means that, at the very least, there is a diversity of normative assumptions at play in this conversation. A diverse cultural climate lacks the homogeneity of presuppositions that nurture cryptosemic interaction.

Finally, Type 4 is the category of pragmatic cognizance that represents cryptosemic communication: neither the sender nor the receiver of the message are attuned (not fully, at least) of the implied meanings beyond the intended meaning. Also, these statements are easily found in everyday conversations and enjoy popular approval as “praise”. The “you look incredible for your age” cryptoseme is a fitting example. This is a socially ubiquitous “compliment”, spoken with the intention to praise, though received in a variety of ways. As my research data will show, the degree of attuned-ness to the second-order connotations within cryptosemic praise varies dramatically among individuals: some of my respondents, for example, were satisfied with the praise and did not sense subversive hidden meanings, others detected problematic assumptions and took issue with them, others yet, reported being aware of the unspoken implicature but did not seem to have a problem with it. Therefore, it would be false to suggest that cryptosemic praise is strictly defined by the “unaware / unaware” dynamic between the speaker and the receiver. The speaker is not mindful of negative or critical elements in the message because the speaker genuinely means the cryptosemic statement well. The receiver’s attuned-ness to the un-verbalized dimension of meaning, on the other hand, spans a more

complex range of degrees of involvement. Members of nations as culturally and socio-economically diverse as the United States hold diverse priorities and motivations resulting in diverse levels of attuned-ness to obscured unspoken assumptions in speech. The key identifying factor is the *opportunity* for the “unaware / unaware” dynamic outcome (meaning that it can and does happen), uniquely made possible by the cognitive blind spots built into the structure of the cryptosemic compliment.

Cryptosemes Are Socially Legitimate Forms of Communication.

The last key distinguishing feature of the cryptoseme is its social momentum, its popularity in the capacity of either “compliment” or “reprimand”: positive cryptosemes are culturally prescribed utterances to be used as praise and negative cryptosemes are handy scripts whereby one can express criticism or disapproval towards another without “being out of line”. In fact, it is the cliché-ness of cryptosemic compliments such as “you look amazing for your age” that assists in their mindless usage: when an expression becomes a part of a routine script in daily speech, it becomes unnecessary to question its premise or appropriateness.

Method

In order to explore the subtleties and the nuances in the interpretation of popular cryptosemes, I designed a study to empirically probe reactions to cryptosemic

compliments. Forty respondents (twenty women and twenty men) were interviewed in a one-on-one setting, recruited from ads posted around Rutgers University and Princeton University campuses as well as the “classifieds” website craigslist.com. Respondents were presented with three imaginary conversation scenarios, each exchange containing a cryptosemic compliment, and were asked whether their reactions to hearing each statement were “positive”, “negative” or “mixed”. The following are the three scenarios used in this study:³

Scenario #1

Consider the following scenario: You and a friend are having an outing to catch up on each other’s lives. In the course of the conversation, you complain about feeling unattractive after gaining some weight in the recent months. Your friend responds with: “Don’t be silly, you are such a beautiful soul on the inside!”

If you had such a conversation, how do you think you would have felt about this exchange?

- a. Positive (e.g.: pleased, empowered, etc.)**
- b. Negative (e.g.: annoyed, offended, etc.)**
- c. Mixed (a combination of positive and negative feelings)**

Scenario #2

Imagine the following scenario: You have been working for days on a project for your job and have hit the proverbial “rut” when no new ideas are coming and you are growing more and more frustrated with yourself. “What is wrong with me?” you ask a friend who has stopped by to say hello, “Why is this so difficult? Am I stupid or something?” “Nonsense,” exclaims your friend, “you are the most diligent, hard-working person I know!”

³ Because these three conversation scenarios are widely referenced throughout the dissertation as “scenario #1”, “scenario #2” and “scenario #3”, it may be helpful to print them out to keep track of the cryptosemic compliments they contain. The chart containing the demographic information of the respondents, along with the entire interview schedule used in the study and the consent forms the respondents were asked to sign prior to participation – is included in the Appendix at the end of this document.

Is your reaction to your friend's comment:

- a. Positive (e.g.: pleased, empowered, etc.)**
- b. Negative (e.g.: annoyed, offended, etc.)**
- c. Mixed (a combination of positive and negative feelings)**

Scenario #3

Picture the following situation: You have been enjoying a conversation with a person you just met at a coffee shop and, in passing, your age is revealed. "No way!" exclaims your new friend, "You are not really (fill in your age here), are you? That's amazing! You look incredible for your age!"

What is your reaction to what this person just said to you?

- a. Positive (e.g.: pleased, empowered, etc.)**
- b. Negative (e.g.: annoyed, offended, etc.)**
- c. Mixed (a combination of positive and negative feelings)**

Each respondent was then prompted to elaborate on her or his answer about what, specifically, was "positive", "negative" or "mixed" about the conversation experience with follow-up questions designed to delve deeper into the respondents' framework for making meaning from cryptosemic compliments:

- What if I told you that there are other people who feel exactly the opposite than yourself about the same statement? Why do you think that is? What could possibly make them interpret it so differently?

- [For respondents who answered "negatively"] Supposing that this person meant to compliment you, what would a *real* compliment sound like in this situation? What would you have liked to hear in this instance?

- Do you think that *your* reaction to this exchange would be the same no matter who you were speaking with, or do you think it would vary depending on the relationship you have with the speaker (e.g.: would it make a difference if this person was your parent, your child, your boss, a stranger, etc.)?

The respondents were also asked general questions about their everyday communication practices and preferences:

- Do you have any pet peeves about what people say or how they say it? In other words – are there certain phrasings, or certain figures of speech or even certain behaviors that annoy you in the way some people communicate? What are those pet peeves? Why do you think such things “get to you”?

- When you speak with people, are you ever concerned about accidentally offending them? Why so / why not?

- In general, when you speak with people, do you pay more attention to what they said or to how they meant it? In other words, when you are interpreting your communication with another person, do you focus more on their verbal articulation of the message (words / phrasings used) – or – the intention of the speaker (the spirit in which the message was delivered)?

The interview schedule was designed to elicit maximum qualitative feedback concerning what people focus on when interpreting messages with multiple dimensions of meaning and to get a sense of how they negotiate and make sense of ambiguities in verbal communication. For the purposes of anonymity, each respondent was invited to pick her or his own nickname to be represented by in the reporting of the results. The responses generated a wealth of insight into discourse strategies and socio-cultural priorities dominating cryptosemic communication and will be featured throughout the following chapters to lend empirical backing to theoretical posits made along the way.

Types of Cryptosemes

To recap the unifying definition of the cryptoseme: it is a message in communication hosting silent dimensions of meaning that stand in contradiction (and, hence, become subversive) to the intended meaning / sentiment of the message. The cognitive structure of cryptosemic expressions, in tandem with the social sanction and cultural validation that normalize them, allows for both, the senders and the receivers of the message, to remain partially or completely dis-attuned to one meaning, while focusing on the other. In addition to the cryptosemic compliments or “positive cryptosemes”, there also exist “negative cryptosemes” (utterances intended as insults or reprimands that, nonetheless, hide a complimentary element within them that neutralizes the “offensiveness” of the message) and there are also instances of cryptosemic expressions that are neither “positive” nor “negative” per se, yet fall under the criteria of semiotic “mixedness” that qualifies them as cryptosemes. These three varieties of the cryptoseme follow different structural patterns and, therefore will be considered separately. Furthermore, though this work focuses mostly on verbal incarnations of the cryptoseme, it should be noted that it is more than a linguistic phenomenon and examples of mixed media cryptosemes do exist.

I focus on the cryptosemic praise because, thus far, I have observed it in social settings and mass / social media broadcasts with astonishing frequency, far outweighing encounters with negative and neutral cryptosemes. Praise serves so many social functions and designations, it carries much potential for cultural influence. It is a tremendous facilitator of getting what one wants (Silbermann 2000; Carnegie 1981)) protection

against losing face in public (Brown and Levinson, 1987) and an art form onto itself (Post, 2004: 289). It is also, however, a powerful obligator, creating social pressure to like the speaker, to reciprocate with something “positive” (Cialdini, 2001:152), binding participants into ritualistic exchanges of prescribed behaviors and verbal interactions. Cryptosemic compliments are a politeness strategy and politeness is a forceful currency in social interaction⁴.

Also, as my long-term aim is to pinpoint the subtle language of durable social inequalities and oppression, I find more use looking for unconscious, unintended bigotry in the quiet pauses and hushed silences lurking in praise than in the loud proclamations of deliberate disapproval in insults and reprimands. Power dynamics, as I demonstrate in Chapter Four, are an integral part of many instances of cryptosemic interaction and studying cryptosemic praise brings to light the complexity and subtleness of the intersection of power, ritual and silence.

Before exploring the cryptosemic compliment in depth in the subsequent chapters, let us briefly parse out the different kinds / types of cryptosemic expressions that populate our everyday personal speech and public dialog.

Cryptosemic Praise (Positive Cryptoseme)

Positive, friendly statements are in high demand in day-to-day social situations. The ubiquitous necessity to be polite to “save face”, frequently a face “shared” with

⁴ More research must be done, but surely there exist reciprocal cryptosemic compliments (ritual courtesy demands an *exchange* of niceties, and one is usually compelled to respond to a compliment with another compliment (Post, 2004: 287). An interesting follow-up study would be to test whether the cryptosemic language, with its hidden implicature, is reproduced in compliments given in response to cryptosemic praise.

others (Goffman, 1967: 5-45), lends itself to “diplomatic” handlings of precarious social situations with indirect and elusory language. Obligatory displays of concern are necessitated so frequently that the ceremonial *form* and sequence of those expressions becomes a priority onto itself and can cognitively overshadow the semantic content of the message. In this “ritualization of identificatory sympathy”, as Goffman terms it (Goffman 1971:65-66), cryptosemic praise offers an attractive option. Ironically, the social situations and personal conditions “provoking” ameliorative cryptosemic reactions would not call for sensitive handling, if one party did not presumptuously take it for granted that the other party is somehow deficient, lacking, problematic and in need to be handled gently or consoled with “nice” words.

Not all cryptosemic praise is of the same kind: it is expressed in different structural formats and arises out of different motivations (e.g.: to console, to endorse, to congratulate, etc.) Here is a sampling of some social conditions and settings that precipitate a fertile environment for positive cryptosemic activity, though this list is by no means exhaustive.

Cryptosemic Supportiveness: Clumsy Displays of Sincere Empathy

There are many times when one feels compelled to show support towards another. Because supportiveness usually entails being sensitive, positive cryptosemes can offer a solution. Scenario #2 (one of three hypothetical situations the respondents from my study were asked to consider) provides one such example:

Imagine the following scenario: You have been working for days on a project for your job and have hit the proverbial “rut” when no new ideas are coming and you are growing more and more frustrated with yourself. “What is wrong with me?” you ask a friend who has stopped by to say hello, “Why is this so difficult? Am I stupid or something?” “Nonsense,” exclaims your friend, “you are the most diligent, hard-working person I know!”

Even if you were certain that the friend intended to be supportive and comforting, would you be pleased or dismayed by this offering? On the one hand, one cannot deny that being considered a diligent hard worker is, indeed, praise of high order. On the other hand, aside from being called a hard worker, there also exists an unspoken agreement with the speaker’s original complaint about feeling “stupid”. The proposed “stupidity” of the complainer is not contested and, in fact, not addressed at all: instead, the focus of praise is redirected into the adjacent topic of diligently applying oneself to the task at hand. The very fact that the friend was compelled to shift the focus of the statement away from the topic of intelligence, lends silent support to the suspicion that she or he is, in some way, agreeing with the self-appraisal of being “stupid”.

Cryptosemic Speech Thrives in Public Discussions of Social Controversies

The most socially complex and politically controversial topics of public discussion can become mired in cryptosemic rhetoric before they even get off the ground, so to speak. This has been the case with the debate about sexual minorities’ right to marry as it quickly became dominated by the polarized argument of whether or not homosexuality is a choice. The conservative side held that homosexuality is a sin while the pro LGBT rights groups adhered to the position that homosexuality is not a choice but an inborn biological assignment and, as such, cannot be changed or “cured”. In the

attempt to reframe homosexuality as a natural and normal sexuality, this dichotomy inadvertently reframed homosexuality as being “okay” only if it is prenatally “wired”, but still not “okay” if claimed it as a personal choice. By going along with this framing of homosexuality as acceptable only as an uncontrollable affliction, a boundary is re-drawn between people who deserve civil rights as opposed to those who do not: now more people are included, but it is still not everyone. Actor Cynthia Nixon recently caused a social stir by stating that she is lesbian because it is her current preference to be lesbian:

“I gave a speech recently, an empowerment speech to a gay audience, and it included the line ‘I’ve been straight and I’ve been gay, and gay is better.’ And they tried to get me to change it, because they said it implies that homosexuality can be a choice. And for me, it is a choice. I understand that for many people it’s not, but for me it’s a choice, and you don’t get to define my gayness for me” (Kaplan 2012).

This is a rare instance in popular entertainment media coverage when a public figure boldly and unapologetically redirects the focus of the conversation to the root of the problem, to the insulting premise beneath the exclusivist reasoning: to insist that homosexuality must be biologically determined is to deny “normalness” to people whose sexuality is more complex or varied than an attraction to one sex (same or opposite) only. The affliction vs. volition dichotomy that appears in so many cryptosemic scenarios will be revisited in Chapter Two.

This example also shows that cryptosemes do not have to be solely verbal expressions but can also exist in the form of clusters of information such as public debates. The positive cryptoseme is manifest in the well-wishing, socially sanctioned claim that homosexuality is necessarily a fixed inborn biological fact. This framing of the cause brings overdue attention to the LGBT people’s strife for equality, all the while

implicating that not all LGBT representatives “belong” in the movement. Thus, the conversation is shifted away from human rights and into the territory of petty pseudo-bio-philosophy. Two problematic premises are assumed as true: that human sexuality is biologically determined, fixed and inflexible and that heterosexuality is the only natural orientation, while homosexuality must be scrutinized for biological proof and moral justification. The cognitive dissonance witnessed in the clash between intent to unite members of sexual minorities built on the premise that divides that very demographic into “us” and “them” may be symptomatic of macro-cultural divisions and contradictions within the movement and the confusions and inconsistencies in its complex group identity.

Moral Indignation as Impetus for Cryptosemic Communication

The individuals and groups that delight in accusing other individuals or groups of abnormality and social deviance, frequently rely on pompous cryptosemic tirades chastising the targets of their outrage unaware of also offending the integrity of those whom they think they are promoting. Political rhetoric is especially vulnerable to sliding into this very trap. As we tune in through various media and news outlets to hear political figures speak, a cryptosemic vocabulary is being established for us to employ next time we enter a debate about the issue at hand. For example, on February 9, 2012, the Pentagon announced the opening of thousands of jobs for women in combat positions closer to the frontlines than ever before in US military history. In response to this development, a then-hopeful Republican presidential nominee, Rick Santorum, asserted his protestation:

“...I do have concerns about women in front-line combat, I think that could be a very compromising situation, where people naturally may do things that may not be in the interest of the mission, because of other types of emotions that are involved. It already happens, of course, with the camaraderie of men in combat, but I think it would be even more unique if women were in combat, and I think that's probably not in the best interest of men, women or the mission" (huffingtonpost.com 2012).

As a firm conservative, Santorum is not violating any mores of his political base by applying professional double standards to women because from his perspective, he is only pointing out their natural lack of belonging in a traditionally masculine field of work.⁵ He seems unaware, however, that he is also implicitly denying men agency by implicating that male soldiers are too emotionally unstable to handle themselves around females in combat, that women's presence inevitably clouds men's ability to make correct judgment calls. The statement also undermines the protectiveness and loyalty men can have with other men. And so, under the guise of permissible sexism towards women, Santorum unwittingly insults the very audience he is pandering to: Santorum believes he is flattering the traditionalist machismo of his male constituents but builds his argument on the demeaning expectation that men are emotional wimps who cannot be trusted to

⁵ It is not unreasonable to suggest that, in denying them “masculine jobs”, Santorum may very well believe that he is not being dismissive of women but is, rather, doing them a service. An eye-opening discussion about gender normative logics from “pro-life” and “pro-choice” women is offered by Press and Cole who point out that, though inhabiting separate social realms, both sides construct narratives that indicate a commitment to protect women's well-being.

“Activists in both groups were trying to ensure that women would preserve some form of emotional and economic security in the face of rising divorce rates and women's continuing economic devaluation as workers. Pro-choice activists wanted to guarantee women's ability to complete in a social structure predicated on a ‘male model’; their pro-life counterparts believed they must assert and protect the primacy of women's roles as nurturers or this value would be lost to society.” (Press and Cole 2001:11; Ginsburg 1989)

control themselves around members of the opposite sex and are also incapable of making powerful, meaningful connections with each other.

In the footsteps of Santorum's speech came Liz Trotta, a Fox News' commentator, who also issued a response to the same news of female soldiers serving closer to the frontlines with their fellow male soldiers. Trotta referred to a US Army report showing a marked increase in sexual violence against women in the military as supporting evidence that women do not belong around men:

"I think they have actually discovered there is a difference between men and women. And the sexual abuse report says that there has been, since 2006, a 64% increase in violent sexual assaults. Now, what did they expect? These people are in close contact, the whole airing of this issue has never been done by Congress, it's strictly been a question of pressure from the feminists" (Huffingtonpost.com 2012).

Here, Trotta seems to quite deliberately imply that rape is the price a woman pays for seeking employment alongside men, but, in doing this, she, like Santorum, unintentionally insults men by denying them any agency or control over self and physiological impulses. Though she is appealing to conservatives who, presumably, despise feminists and disapprove of women doing "men's jobs", Trotta also takes it as a natural given that men, particularly men in the military cannot control animalistic violent urges when in "close contact" with females and therefore cannot be trusted to behave appropriately and legally on their own. From this vantage point, any man is a potential rapist, if placed in a particularly sexually charged, provocative environment. With this statement, Trotta is undermining the very values of "manliness" she is trying to flatter, yet she neither intends it that way, nor is her audience likely to interpret it negatively.

Cryptosemic Praise for Defying Low Expectations: Expressions of Being “Impressed”

Recall Scenario #3, in which you were just told that you “look amazing for your age”. Despite the well-meaning delivery, the compliment is aimed more at your impressive ability to withstand the unmerciful toll of time than anything else. The speaker is pleasantly surprised with you not because you are an above-average standout of beauty but because he or she had implicitly expected a person of your age to look worse for the wear than you do ⁶. The world of social interaction is full of such heart-felt congratulations for defying low expectations. This is an instance in which some occurrence or behavior that is (or should be) quite normal is treated as an extraordinary feat worth fawning over. This includes younger people congratulating senior citizens for having “such a lucid mind”, women gushing over men who are engaging in basic parenting activities for being “fantastic fathers”, self-important people congratulating each other for being “so open-minded” and “tolerant” towards those who do not require their tolerance in the first place and other popular morsels of “praise” built on condescending assumptions. Goffman offers an excellent illustration of problem behind

⁶ This very dynamic of praise given for surpassing lowered expectations is perfectly lampooned by a NBC comedy *30 Rock*, which had an entire episode (s07e03) revolving around a reference to a cryptosemic message. Jenna, a TV actor prima donna, desperate to draw attention to herself and boost her popularity by any means imaginable, tries to exploit the very assumption underlying the “you look amazing for your age” cryptosemic compliment for her benefit. Everyone at the television studio is aghast in anticipation of a huge temper tantrum, after seeing a tabloid that reports Jenna’s age as much older than her real age (which is already a topic of taboo.) It turns out, however, that Jenna, herself, planted the false story with the yellow press because she believes it will put an end to criticisms and, instead, everyone will be impressed with her looks, now that they think that she is older. She explains this to her coworker, Liz, with an example:

Jenna – I mean, how hot is Hellen Mirren?

Liz – Super hot. I mean, have you seen that picture of her in a bikini? She looks AMAZING for...

Jenna – Exactly – “for”! She looks amazing FOR a 67-year old. She’s actually not that hot. She’s got a gut and British legs.

Liz – Alright, settle down.

such expressions of being impressed in quoting an ex-con's story about receiving precisely such a compliment:

“‘You know, it’s really amazing you should read books like this, I’m staggered I am. I should’ve thought you’d read paper-backed thrillers, things with lurid covers, books like that. And here you are with Claud Cockburn, Hugh Klare, Simone de Beauvoir, and Lawrence Durrell!’ You know, he didn’t see this as an insulting remark at all: in fact, I think he thought he was being honest in telling me how mistaken he was. And that’s exactly the sort of patronizing you get from straight people if you’re a criminal. ‘Fancy that!’ they say. ‘In some ways you’re just like a human being!’ I’m not kidding, it makes me want to choke the bleeding life out of them” (Goffman 1963:14-15).

Cryptosemic Reprimands (Negative Cryptoseme)

A cryptosemic reprimand is the opposite of the positive cryptoseme: it consists of chiding someone with the express intention to say something negative or critical, but translates to the receiver as innocuous or even complimentary – because, despite the negative sentiment and tone, the underlying cultural premise is interpreted by the receiver as favorable.

One example is the popular practice of publicly criticizing young women for looking “sickly thin” or “anorexic”. While doing the same to women who are seen as “overweight” is considered very rude by today’s standards, telling “underweight” women that they look “disgusting” has become a convention in interpersonal speech and an institution in the yellow press. Interestingly, despite this being an indictment of her unhealthy lifestyle and appearance, if the object of this reprimand has body weight insecurities, she is likely to take this statement as a positive rather than a negative thing to

hear. She understands that this is a reprimand, but, because the mainstream culture puts the highest premium on thinness as a requirement for female beauty and only then (many other priorities later) health, she is not likely to be terribly offended and, what is more, will secretly feel validated: “anorexic” means very thin and very thin is linked with being beautiful. In the perception of the receiver, this genuine reprimand rings equivalent to the pseudo-insult “I hate you because you are so beautiful!” As a result, there is probably no higher compliment you could pay a girl who struggles with body image issues than to tell her that she looks “anorexic”.

The above-mentioned asymmetry in social attitudes that do not tolerate chastising women for being “overweight” but see nothing wrong with the volunteering of negative commentary about “underweight” women points to a macro-level skewed-ness in socio-cultural perceptions of body weight. As mentioned earlier, it is the thoughts and notions we do *not* want to voice openly that constitute a sign that social taboos are at hand and, conversely, if we are willing to talk about something openly and flippantly, it is probably a “safe” social topic. The willingness to publicly reprimand a woman harshly for being “too skinny” is a sign that thinness in women, no matter how extreme, cannot be “that bad” compared to fatness, the mention of which should, by all means necessary, be avoided.

Imagine what it would feel like being told by someone you knew intimately: “You are the worst person I know, despite being the best lover I have ever had”. Based on sporadic polls I have informally conducted in conversations and on social media platforms, the overwhelming majority of friends and acquaintances who were asked this question indicated that being considered the best lover by far outweighs the suggestion

that one is the worst person someone knows. There seems to exist a common order of priority progression: in this particular scenario, being an excellent lover, though spiritually and socially quite insignificant relative to being an all-around awful human being, trumps the value of seemingly more valuable character traits because of the intense socio-cultural anxiety and pride attached to sexuality. It strikes at the very essence of self-identity and it is also specific, while the “worst person” part is vague enough to be rationalized into meaninglessness. When asked to explain how one outweighs the other, a friend joked: “Well, they didn’t *really* mean that I am the worst person, but I’m sure they meant what they said about my love making skills.” Another friend wrote under the same question on my Facebook page: “Worst person = ‘opinion’. Best lover = ‘fact’.” The positive bias dominating interpretations of both positive and negative cryptosemes will be addressed in Chapter Two.

Neutral Cryptosemes

The concept of the neutral cryptoseme needs further development and empirical identification, as it is the least structurally understood / theoretically defined of the cryptoseme family. A neutral cryptoseme neither claims to praise nor criticize, yet, it boasts clashing dimensions of meaning characteristic of the inner workings of the cryptoseme: the semantic meaning communicates one idea and the pragmatic meaning hints at something quite contradictory.

The high-end designer fashion label Moschino offers a sub-line of clothing and shoes under the dubious name “Cheap & Chic”. Its fall 2012 footwear line featured

women's shoes ranging from \$295 to \$695, averaging at \$509 a pair. When one purchases shoes for \$500 under the label "cheap", one is paying for a very specific social status membership: to be one for whom \$500 for shoes is not just an acceptable price but a negligibly low one. Many other designer clothing and shoe labels sell the image of wealth and prosperity to their consumers, but Moschino Cheap & Chic goes a step further by selling "old money" which, paradoxically, cannot be bought as it can only be born into, by definition. Not only are these shoes not cheap, but they would not be considered so chic if they were not so expensive. Here, the cryptoseme is neither "positive" nor "negative" per se, but it puts forth an identity image that is actually opposite of what the business does in practice. This is not strictly a social communication cryptoseme because there is no one cognate human "sender" with complex motivations – instead, the message was meticulously crafted by marketing professionals to quite deliberately capitalize on the consumers' lofty class pretenses. Structurally, however, there are too many commonalities to dismiss it altogether. This message seems to be constructed with the intent to set up (or rather tap into preexisting) cognitive dissonance by the "cheap" label clashing with the very expensive price tag, thusly manipulating the very cognitive blind spots that compel people to spend unfathomable sums of money on a product that comes bundled with delusions of social grandeur.

Chapter Two. Cryptosemes and Culture.

When my family immigrated to the United States from the Soviet Union, the initial years passed in disorienting culture shock, much of it owing to the way people expressed themselves in this fascinating new world, so different from what we knew. For example, it seemed that asking “are you OK?” after watching someone stumble and fall made as little sense as asking a crying person “are you upset?” More puzzlingly, the accident victim would respond with: “I’m fine”, even when there was glaring evidence to the contrary. It is not that my native land is devoid of politeness or empathy, but Russian discourse strategies tend to fare on the passive-aggressive side and provoke further questioning as opposed to putting an end to the exchange. When someone asks a Russian “How are you?,” she will stop and recant exactly how she is doing, possibly in more personal detail than an average American would find comfortable because to a Russian, this question constitutes a real inquiry after one’s current state as opposed to a mindless greeting ritual⁷.

The goal of politeness is not to communicate our beliefs, feelings and desires as directly as possible: quite the opposite, to be polite is to deny and conceal the expression of those things, in order to avoid the social conflict that may ensue when emotions and opinions clash in social settings (Brown and Levinson, 1987). This is why, as Goffman mentions, answering the greeting “How are you?” with another “How are you?” may seem nonsensical but is a satisfactory exchange of greetings nonetheless because it is the

⁷ In fact, one of the most frequent criticisms I hear of Americans when I visit my native land is that they are so “fake” and disingenuous in their social interactions by being “too nice” and not meaning what they say. To many Russians, this lack of honesty in communication constitutes not friendly tactfulness but shifty, suspicious behavior (though, personally, I prefer the “phony” smiles of my fellow Americans to the “sincere” scowls of my fellow Russians any day of the week.)

ritual courtesy that counts, not the meticulous semantic logic of what is verbalized (Goffman, 1971: 81). Politeness enters our interaction when there is a need for a smooth, comfortable, non-threatening social exchange and it happens precisely at the expense of saying what is really on one's mind. Seeing a person slip and fall on an icy sidewalk, any number of mental remarks may go through the witness' mind (e.g.: "Ouch, he must have cracked his tailbone!" or "Geez, now I have to get involved," or "What a klutz," or "How comical! He fell right on his butt!" etc.), but she cannot say any of those things because it will add to the fallen person's distress and it will make her appear inconsiderate and insensitive. But, thanks to the above-mentioned "ritualization of identificatory sympathy", a generic "are you OK?" solves this dilemma: the ball is now in the victim's court and he can elect to either ask for assistance or to save face by shrugging it off with "I am fine" and release her from any further responsibility to act. In the context of the American cultural emphasis on individualism and self-sufficiency, this ritual handling of an awkward social scenario makes perfect sense: the spectator walks away feeling that she had done her civic duty of reaching out to a fellow human being in distress, and the person who fell can salvage a little dignity by acting as if the faux pas was not a big deal, no further follow-up necessary.

The felicitous resolution of an embarrassing social moment requires all parties involved to share an implicit understanding of how to cooperate in this situation, and this understanding, while deployed automatically at the moment of the social exchange, originates from a specific spectrum of cultural values and priorities shared by the participants. The reason why it took me, a product of Soviet upbringing, some time to adjust to practices of politeness in the U.S. is because, while politeness is a universal

phenomenon, the way one *does* politeness depends on the particulars of one's cultural background and setting. I remember being quite put off by the necessity to say "thank you" in response to being complimented. Where I came from, thanking someone for a compliment meant acknowledging the substance and the truth of the praise (i.e. saying "thank you" signifies "yes, I am as great as you say") and such egotism seemed damningly arrogant. Instead, one was supposed to either act very embarrassed by this spotlight and vehemently reject praise by saying something self-deprecating, pretend that the compliment was not heard or immediately pay the person an even bigger compliment to draw the attention away from oneself. In the American culture, however, some of those "tactful" approaches can come across as rude – as refusing to cooperate in the interaction by denying the speaker the satisfaction of paying a compliment, which many people take great enjoyment and pride in⁸.

This is all to say that culture is a key player in human communication practices and that being on the same "cultural page" with other speakers can make the difference between a smooth, enjoyable conversation flow and an awkward, tense or even hostile social stand-off. In this chapter, I explore the cryptosemic compliment on the basis of its two related properties: cryptosemic praise is part of politeness ritual and, as such, it channels the particular priorities, biases and double standards of the given cultural climate (in this study, the contemporary American culture.)

⁸ This very dilemma is accounted for by the utmost authority on etiquette Peggy Post (Emily Post's great-granddaughter-in-law) in advice on how to correctly respond to compliments:

"Receiving compliments graciously is difficult for people. Taught from childhood not to be show-offs, they have an impulse to negate praise by dismissing it. For instance, a typical response to 'What a great job you did!' is 'Oh, it was nothing.' But this kind of modesty can ring hollow and even suggest that the complimenter doesn't know what he's talking about. A simple 'Thank you' is the more suitable reply, especially when followed with, 'I'm so glad you think so' or 'Aren't you nice to say so?'" (Post 2004:289).

Cultural Presuppositions as Socio-mental Shortcuts

Cryptosemic expressions come in a variety of syntactic structures, but they are always constructed in response to a particular social condition – when the target of the utterance (i.e. the receiver of the message) appears to suffer from a perceived *deficit* of some important quality or condition and the sender is compelled to say something ameliorative and encouraging to compensate for it. The sender accomplishes this by shining a spotlight on a personal quality of equal or higher value that *is* present – in order to draw attention away from “what is wrong with” the receiver. The perception of “what is wrong with” the receiver is contingent upon prescriptions of “what is right” shared (at least, in part) by both social actors. In the sender’s mind, the receiver’s perceived deficiency is now taboo in need of special treatment.

The culprits behind this perception of deficiencies in others (as well as oneself) are the *cultural presuppositions* permeating communication. As Garfinkel pointed out, in any two-way conversational exchange “much that is being talked about is not mentioned, although each expects that the adequate sense of the matter being talked about is settled” (Heritage, 1984: 81), meaning that there is an unspoken a priori understanding that each party (likewise silently) expects the other to share. In linguistic pragmatics, “presupposition” is a term that references the unquestioned, taken-for-granted premise behind verbal expression. The meaning of any given utterance is derived only so much from the semantic meaning of the words being spoken: the actual point of departure of meaning resides in the speaker’s deep-seated, unarticulated assumptions about the world. As Stalnaker summarizes it, “A person’s presuppositions are the propositions whose truth

he takes for granted, often unconsciously, in a conversation, an inquiry, or a deliberation. They are the background assumptions that may be used without being spoken – sometimes without being noticed” (Stalnaker 1973:447). The key characteristic of the above-described presupposition is that it positions certain conceptual “truths” as the norm and does so automatically, without deliberation. In understanding cryptosemes, I am suggesting that intersubjective *cultural* presuppositions, buried in our unconscious and tapped on autopilot, account for the “silent” or “hidden” – or at any rate unspoken – dimension of meaning that can elude some or all parties involved in the conversation, because the “truth” of those presuppositions is not habitually questioned or re-evaluated.

Barthes called this acceptance of culturally constructed meanings as natural and hence fixed and eternal, “mythologisation” (Barthes 1972). A myth, as Barthes put it, “is constituted by the loss of the historical quality of things: in it, things lose the memory that they once were made” (142). Although social values, beliefs and trends shift and alter through history and geography, there exists a myopic tendency to treat the cultural norms of the “here and now” as if they are universal and timeless.

A cognitive explanation of the same phenomenon is put forth by Hofstadter who talks about mental “default assumptions”: ideas that “hold true in what you might say is the ‘simplest’ or ‘most natural’ or ‘most likely’ possible model of whatever situation is under discussion” (Hofstadter 1985:137). For instance, he suggests, the reason why many people say “woman engineer” or “female police officer” is because, despite those terms and social designations being technically gender-neutral, the mental images we summon when we hear “engineer” or “police officer” are automatically set on “male” and we are compelled, therefore, to provide extra description when speaking of females. These

default assumptions not only direct our perceptions but also provide us with a set vocabulary to express these preconceived notions. While some would argue that emphasizing the “femaleness” of members of these professions is a special marker of exceptionality and should be seen as an advantageous distinction, Hofstadter suggests that this necessity to “mark” betrays the invisibility of women in these professions, unless otherwise specified. This argument had already been made mid-twentieth century by de Beauvoir, who introduced the notion of women as “Other” (a sex defined in relation to men, not its own members)⁹ (Beauvoir 2011), and, in our day, her legacy is manifest in the popular slang term “othering”, which is used to describe acts of distancing (such as marked language described by Hofstadter) but not only in reference to women but to other members of minority groups that endure similar marking practices in popular speak.

Along similar lines run commonly encountered word pairings, such as “independent woman”, which presupposes that most women are “dependent” and its even less appealing versions, “emancipated” and “liberated”. The passive adjective suggests that the woman is necessarily freed from oppression by someone else, which is an agency-robbing statement that dredges up a past of civil inequality and abuse but stays mum about the present. Referring to an individual as an emancipated woman silently spells out: “I believe that I consider you an equal to myself, but I feel the need to emphasize that, in the past you were not equal to me”. Bigoted default assumptions are

⁹ Beauvoir, incidentally, suffered a tragic cryptosemic compliment in her own relationship with Jean-Paul Sartre, according to Thurman who writes in the introduction to Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*:

“Sartre’s work... and an objectified Other, gave Beauvoir the conceptual scaffold for *The Second Sex*, while her life as a woman (indeed, as Sartre’s woman) impelled her to write it. He had once told her that she had a ‘man’s intelligence,’ and there is no evidence that he changes his mind about a patronizing slight that she, too, accepted as a compliment until she began to consider what it implied. It implied, she would write, that ‘humanity is male, and man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself’” (Thurman in Introduction to Beauvoir, 2011:xiii).

also responsible for such still-popular terms as “reverse racism” (usually spoken by light-skinned individuals reporting racist treatment towards themselves), “white slavery” (presupposing that “normal” slaves are necessarily non-white) and “white trash”¹⁰ (a doubly offensive term presupposing that it is acceptable to refer to other humans as “trash” and that “white trash” is somehow different from “trash” of other races).

Markedness in speech can itself be an analytical marker of assumed inferiority / deficiency (Jakobson & Halle 1953). Few comments possess the power to make one revert into thumb-sucking infantile fury than hearing Mom say: “I’m speaking to you as an adult!” The need to mark one’s adulthood conspicuously signals the presence of a second-order dimension to the message: “I do not *actually* consider you an adult, but I am making an overt effort to treat you as one / take you seriously / give you the benefit of the doubt”. It is hard to imagine someone mistaking this passive-aggressive discourse strategy for a genuine expression of respect from a parent. But cryptosemes “get away” with their condescending assumptions un-debunked because the markedness in them is not so personal as to injure ego, and they are spoken by someone we did not spend a lifetime rebelling against.

Synthesizing the linguistic notion of presuppositions with Barthes’ proposed cultural mythologisation and with Hofstadter’s idea of cognitive default assumptions, I suggest that much of our communication is leveraged on internalized, reified *cultural default assumptions*, which are, essentially, default mental templates we automatically utilize when choosing or constructing social expressions. One need not reach for euphemistic cryptosemes if there is not a perceived problem (a deficit of something

¹⁰ “White trash” was suggested as an example of cryptosemic slang in a personal communication by Zerubavel, 2008.

important) that is judged to necessitate masking with attention misdirection and positive words (re-direction of attention and other cognitive “tricks” will be given their due platform in Chapter Five). The intersubjective presence of this perceived problem is an example of automatic culture. The compliment “you look wonderful for your age”, for instance, can only succeed if both the sender and the receiver share several cultural agreements: that a person’s aesthetic appeal begins to decline at a designated age; that physical appearance is of such significance that it merits or necessitates praise when it surpasses one’s expectations; that the speaker occupies a social position appropriate to make such a comment to the receiver. When presented with Scenario #3, the conversational exchange in which a stranger volunteers the “you look amazing for your age” cryptosemic compliment, respondents from my study indicated strong beliefs about “age” as a topic of conversation, with several patterns of cultural expectations emerging.

Of 40 respondents, 18 chose “positive” (45%); 3 chose “negative” (7.5%) and 19 (47.5%) reported a “mixed” reaction to Scenario #3. The irony of asking a predominantly college-age sample of people about age compliments will reveal itself throughout the following pages, as we observe young adults make sense of a statement they do not frequently hear in their own address. Many express confusion and bewilderment at being the object of such strange praise but this, in itself is indicative of normative expectations towards age, aging and the appropriateness of talking about it. Most notably, the majority implicitly understands that the compliment is not about “looking amazing” but about “age”, which is why they cannot fathom why it would be said to someone as young as themselves. Furthermore, while not necessarily believing themselves to be the appropriate target of such a compliment, all respondents had opinions about how to speak

about age. This is all to say that, while testing Scenario #3 on an older or more age diverse group of adults would yield more insightful data in some respects, the feedback from respondents overwhelmingly in their early twenties is very telling in itself because we can see dominant cultural suppositions shine through the speech of those who are not yet directly affected by the social stigma applied to aging. All respondents have beliefs about appropriateness and inappropriateness of age-related comments and each, in some way, indicates the normative expectation that there exists an age continuum threshold, when one crosses over from “still OK age” to “taboo age”.

But let us begin at the beginning. The most frequently reported “positive” aspect of the cryptosemic compliment in Scenario #3 was the suggestion that one looks younger than one’s age number or simply has a youthful appearance (i.e. is physically fit, has good skin, etc.), as expressed by Dennis, male, 26: “I would have to say that's positive. They obviously mean it as a compliment, they are indicating that I look younger than my age would indicate. And, I mean, there's no way to take that but as a compliment.” Most of the respondents, however, even those who picked exclusively “positive” reaction to Scenario #3, noted that there were also “negative” undertones to the statement, even if he or she felt largely positive about it. Two main “negatives” emerged: the first is the unflattering implication that one is actually *too old*. Jeremy, male, 48, had a “mixed” reaction to Scenario #3 and explained it as follows:

“And the ‘positives’ are that they think that I look ‘amazing’ – or, I’m sorry, ‘incredible’ for my age. Yeah, so I guess it’s a compliment that I looked younger or better than my age. And then, the sort of the turnside, the other side of that is they are sort of saying that you’re older than you look. I’ve actually had this quite often, where I get: ‘You’re not... You’re *that* old??’ And it’s not a changeable

thing. So... I actually usually am embarrassed and refrain from telling people about my age, 'cause I get a similar reaction.”

Sally, female, 36, reported a “mixed” response to Scenario #3, likewise acknowledging the presence of two seemingly conflicting messages:

“The positive aspect is: the person just offered you a really huge compliment and basically says that you look younger than you actually are... And that's a compliment. 'Cause I think that most people past the age of 21 would find that to be complimentary. Especially women... The negative aspect is – and I think women especially in our society deal with this – and it has a lot to do with, like, our own self-image – is: in this society, youth is really valued, so for someone to say; 'That's amazing! You look incredible for your age!', I mean, you might imply that they were saying 'Wow, 36 is over the hill! And you look really great for someone that old!' I would say that that would be the 'negative'.”

A sizeable number of respondents expressed the second “negative” concern: that the compliment about looking younger (the overwhelming majority of respondents indicated that “looking amazing for your age” means you look younger than one’s age) brings the worrisome connotation that one carries him-/herself in a manner inappropriate to his / her actual age number. Youthfulness, while being attractive, does not garner respect and can be a disadvantage, especially in professional environments. Liz, female, 32, had a “mixed” reaction to Scenario #3:

“The person is complimenting me on my appearance, which is flattering... Well, they’re saying that my appearance is good or attractive, while implying, that, you know, someone at my age shouldn’t really be that attractive... I guess, the negative aspect is it’s sort of an insult to my age or my age group and – and this is more personal to me – but I’m frequently told that I look younger than I am and it becomes irritating after a while... I find it irritating mostly in the professional context. Personally, you know, in a personal interaction, it might not bother me, but, you know, in my last job, I was very tired being asked if it was my first job out of college, when I’ve been out of college for ten years.”

Big John, male, 22, also had a “mixed” feeling about Scenario #3:

“You feel good because somebody felt that you look good for your age. That’s a compliment, you know what I mean – you weren’t expecting that and that shock, I guess, is a compliment in itself. But, say, personally you felt like maybe you wanted to look older and they said something like that – like, you wanted to look older [and now] you feel like you look too young... Until you get to about 25.”

Cookie, female, 26, picked a “mixed” reaction to Scenario #3 but emphasized that the assumption behind the statement can work against one in a professional setting: “It kind of annoys me when people assume I’m younger because I know, at the job, I kinda feel like that’s equated with – you’re not gonna be taken as seriously.” Shumy, male, 36, had a “mixed” reaction about Scenario #3, and, while he pointed out that it is mostly positive because “It’s just good to look young. Nobody wants to look old,” the statement still cast a “negative” shadow of a doubt on his public self-image:

“The bad thing is: you wonder how you present yourself -- if you come off as immature... Like, I told you, I’m 36. Sometimes people think I’m in my mid-20s and I [wonder], do I present myself as someone in the mid-20’s? I’ve actually, you know, I’ve accomplished more than a lot of people in their mid-twenties, not everyone, but it’s like, should I be carrying myself with more dignity or dressing better? That’s the negative – those connotations.”

The two reported “negatives” – the suggestion that one “is too old” and the implication that one may be “acting too young” are both concerns on the continuum of cultural expectations towards “age.” Clearly, age here is perceived as more than a numerical lifespan measurement: it is treated as a marker of socio-biographical status, with a set of unspoken normative prescriptions for how one is supposed to look, behave and present oneself attached to each age category. Age also connotes a certain reserve of

life experience accrued by any given individual and places expectations towards one's wisdom, professional skills, reliability and ability to follow rules. A famous quote, frequently credited¹¹ to Churchill, states: "If you're not a liberal when you're twenty five, you have no heart. If you're not a conservative by the time you're thirty five, you have no brain," thus illustrating the nuanced relativity of socio-cultural expectations attached to age group membership. Beliefs and behaviors acceptable and even encouraged at one age can be received as markers of failure or problem a decade or two later in life. To sum up, one's age is a piece of datum that summons a wide host of culturally dictated assumptions and expectations in all of us. Socially, the topic of age constitutes an anxiety-provoking paradox: on the one hand, we all want to know each other's ages (because this bit of information immediately fills so many "blanks" in our understanding of each other) and, at the same time, we know that when we reveal our ages, others will judge us just as generically and harshly. The cryptosemic compliment from Scenario #3, despite its popularity in social settings, conceals within it this very paradox: it praises one for something that, simultaneously can be seen as a personal boon in one sense and a social disadvantage in another, creating cognitive dissonance and confusion in its wake, summoning feelings of pleased-ness and vague disgruntlement all at once.

Dissonance and confusion were, in fact, expressed by many study participants in reference to Scenario #3: quite a few mentioned that there is an appropriate and an inappropriate age at which one can begin receiving such a compliment and some expressed genuine puzzlement towards why anyone would address such a compliment towards them in the first place. Greg, male, 23, expressed a "positive" response to

¹¹ Winston Churchill, it turns out, was never overheard saying this (according to The Churchill Center's online "Quotes Falsely Attributed" section (Winstonchurchill.org 2013)). The quote has been attributed to several other sources as well.

Scenario #3, but not because he took it to heart but because it amused him: “I think, if anything, I mean, it’d still be positive. But I’d be laughing... I mean, well, I’m 23. Um, this is ‘you look incredible for your age’ – it’s more like, if you’re 40 and you look like you’re 20.” Dee, female, 21, reported a “negative” reaction to the same scenario:

“It’d be negative... Well, because, you know, in general, 21 is not usually thought of, I mean, usually people only say that when it’s a much older person. Like, if you’re 60 but you look 40. So, that would be more flattering. But if I’m just 21, like, what do you mean I look incredible for my age? I’m only 21. So, yeah, because it’s such a relatively young age, I would actually be offended... ‘Cause I would wonder, like, then, how do I look?”

Dee is aware of the hidden dimension of meaning and the consolatory spirit of the “you look amazing for your age” compliment which is why she is certain that it is given to persons much older than herself. It is only due to the pervading default assumption that “much older age” signifies something extremely undesirable, that a younger person would find a compliment meant for an older person offensive.

A very similar response was given by Angel, female, 21, who had a “mixed” reaction to Scenario #3:

"Just because, I would think at 21, you know, I don't know how to, like, respond to that!.. Well, it would be like, you know, it would be like a confidence boost, like: 'Damn, I do look good', but then, at the same time, I would be like, geez, what do they expect me to look like for 21?.. I don't know if it would be 100% negative, it's more of, like, confusion. And I would just kinda take it in a negative way 'cause I wouldn't know how else to take it... I would be like, well, that's great that you say that I look great for my age, but what should I look like for my age?... You know and people are like, to my Mom: 'You don't look 40, there's no way you're 40!', and she's, like, 'Wow, that's such a compliment!', but I would think she's taking that as 'you look younger than 40' rather than, you know, 'you look older than 40' or, like, 'you just look good for 40.'"

Blue Bird, male, 23, reported a “mixed” reaction to Scenario #3, but could not identify either “positive” or “negative” elements in the statement, only confusion:

"It's weird because at the age I am now, the age, I feel like, doesn't really matter that much. Like when people say 'you look incredible for your age', it's kind of like, what does that mean? Because at my age now, it's not too young but not too old, it's like a mixed reaction, I don't even know what to say to that."

Buck, male, 32, expressed a “negative” response to Scenario #3 precisely because he did not consider himself to be an appropriate target of such an age-conditional comment at his current age:

"It would definitely be 'negative'. I mean because, it certainly depends on the age. Being that I'm 32, I'm not necessarily a baby but I'm not old either. It would just again seem patronizing. For somebody who's 32, I don't need to be told that I'm young or that I look good for my age. Of course, if I were 65, you could tell me that all day long."

Ben, male, 23, had a “mixed” reaction to Scenario #3, the positive aspect being that it was meant as a compliment and he would take it as such, especially if it came from a girl he liked, but also pointed out that it was simply an odd thing to hear at his age:

"It's a strange person who would say that to a twenty-three-year-old." – *What would be an appropriate age for this compliment?* "Thirty five. That's when I'd say that some people are beginning to show their age and if I wasn't, then I'd be happy to hear that."

Chad, male, 22, indicated a “mixed” reaction to Scenario #3, also attributing the “negative” aspect primarily to confusion:

"I would have to ask. That would be the next place the conversation moved – is: who could possibly look good for 22, and then, well, whatever they say will quickly determine what I think. Yeah, just complete confusion, no idea why"

anybody would look good for 22." – *What would be the appropriate age to begin getting such compliments?* "I think it would start at least getting less confusing around the 30's, 'cause that's when people start realizing, like, oh man, I'm not a young adult anymore, I guess I'm just some sort of an adult... I guess it would start really being a compliment around the 50's, I guess, because people, people look good in their 40, sometimes it just happens and that's normal but, by the time we get to 50, you can usually tell that people are moving up there..."

Jack, male, 22, had a “positive” reaction to Scenario #3, but, once again, expressed bewilderment at why someone would say this to him in the first place:

"I really have a hard time believing that, seriously, that somebody would go: 'you look incredible for your age' at the age of 22. That is more reserved for people who are, I don't know, almost at the age of differentiating between whether you're a dad or a grandpa."

In contrast to the respondents who deemed themselves too young to be complimented on their age, there was a subset of young respondents who expressed the belief that they have reached the appropriate, advanced age, when one begins to enjoy hearing praise of this nature, such as Angela, female, 21, with a “positive” reaction to Scenario #3:

"For me, because I am past 21, like, the older I get, then the older I feel. Before, when I was younger, it's like, oh, I can't wait to be twenty one! You can do this, you can do that, there is so much more freedom. But then, like, after twenty one, for me, it's like, you just, you get old... [The “positive” is] the fact that you still look young even though you're this old."

Eleanor, female, 19, had a “positive” reaction to Scenario #3, with the assumption that it means looking younger than her age:

"Because young is usually related to beauty, and, like, liveliness, passion and always good things. Old is, old has good parts like wisdom and everything but,

since I'm getting aged, I'm not a teenager anymore, so I think, I wanna say, as right now, whatever, I don't want to get old... Like, when I was young, I didn't worry about my future, I just enjoyed myself. Now, I'm thinking about the future and getting old and everything. So, when I hear that I look incredible for my age, I would be happy. 'Cause I would be staying at my age better than other people."

Roger, male, 22, likewise indicated a very "positive" reception of Scenario #3 for the same reason:

"I'm 22! Once you get past 21, it's like, you actually realize, you don't wait for your birthdays anymore! It's a little shallow, I would think. I guess it means that I'm doing something right... It's just, like, one of those easiest compliments. I never noticed how easy it was to give out this compliment until I was, like, 22."

One can see the wide range of opinions about the "right" and the "wrong" age for receiving the "you look amazing for your age" compliment, however some things almost all respondents had in common, such as the presupposition that the statement necessarily meaning looking younger than one age (except for one respondent who suggested it could also mean looking older than one's age and one respondent, Buck, who said it did not necessarily mean younger – just making the best of one's age condition: "It's like you're fat but you wear your weight well"). This is to suggest that, despite individual differences, all respondents are, in Hall's words, "*operating inside the dominant code*" of the current cultural hegemony (Hall 1996:136), in the sense that their different evaluations of the cryptosemic compliments are built on the same "naturalized" (132) premise. Another commonality is the ubiquitous acknowledgement that the conversation topic of age is a "loaded" one. Several respondents named "age" as one of the topics they try to avoid mentioning (when asked whether they practice any particular sensitivities when speaking

with others) and, whether they had a “positive”, “negative” or “mixed” reaction to Scenario #3, all respondents expressed cognizance of the sensitive nature of the subject.

For several respondents, any mention of their age in any context provoked anxiety or disdain: they simply did not like to speak of their age with others. Foo, female, 60, had a “mixed” reaction to Scenario #3, explaining that while there were “positives” such as the good intentions of the speaker and the implication that she looks “reasonable”, she was not happy about her age being the topic of the conversation in the first place: “I resent the idea that they wanted to know my age. It's one of those things that I don't like to talk about...” Those respondents who did not report feeling insecure about their own age still indicated awareness that it is a sensitive subject for others that must be approached with care. Jen, female, 26, had a “positive” reaction to Scenario #3 (“Because I'm young.”). However, she had no difficulty describing various ways other people may have a “negative” feeling towards the same words:

"I know some people, they're very sensitive about that because a lot of times when someone knows your age, it, like, taints the way that they interact with you. It might make them, if you're younger than they think, then they may start looking at you, like: 'Oh, you're not as experienced, you're younger, I'll treat you differently.' So, I don't know. I think it's just something that people are kind of sensitive about... Or, like, my husband, he's looking older, but for a while, he, he's got kind of a baby face, so he looks younger than he is. And so people always go 'Oh, no way! You're not 27! You look like you're, you're just a kid!' And it really bothers him... You're 27 and you look like 18. That's like, oh, I don't want to look like I'm in high school, I want to look like an adult."

Lucy, female, 35, had a “positive” reaction to Scenario #3, (noting that, as she gets older, she likes to hear compliments of this nature more and more – but only because she is still “okay” with her age for the time being) but, when asked to imagine how a different

person may have a “negative” feeling towards the same statement, she was not hard-pressed to come up with an explanation:

"Well, the subtext to this is that you are old. So, 'you look incredible for your age' means wow, you're really fucking old... And if I was really old, I mean, like, for example, if I was to say this to my mother-in-law who is 71, I would, I would not say these exact words to my mother-in-law, I would not say 'you look incredible for your age' to my mother-in-law. Because she is really sensitive about her age and she goes out of her way to look really young. And I would say 'you look incredible' but not say 'you look incredible for your age'... Because 'you look incredible for your age' has the subtext 'you are old' and she doesn't want to be old and she shops at Forever 21... and she goes way out of her way to be youthful. And she would be offended by this statement. And so, I would say 'you look really good'."

John K., male, 22, expressed a “positive” reaction to Scenario #3 but knew that age is a painful subject for many, who could interpret the same scenario negatively:

"Because it's as though... because you're a certain age, you should look, like a certain amount of "old", you should look "aged"... It could sort of be, like, annoying for that to be a thing... My Mom's, like, aged pretty well... no one knows that she's, like, 56... she looks like she's in her 40's... she dyes her hair to make it not gray, but, like no one knows, like, no one except me knows. It's like age is a secret."

Age is a secret. Or, rather, the unspoken harsh judgments about women on the basis of their age are a secret and it is this secret that the cryptosemic compliment tries to protect (i.e. keep silent) by coating it in the warm, misdirecting glow of praise. John K's quote echoes very closely a 1950's advertisement campaign for the Clairol home hair dyeing kit: “Does she... or doesn't she? Hair color so natural only her hairdresser knows for sure.” The ad copy goes on to urge the consumer to “use it *every* time to put lasting *young* color into fading hair... and to hide gray” (Pope 2013). Just as artificial hair color poses as natural hair color in order to cover up the embarrassingly faded *real* natural hair,

cryptosemic compliments try to cover up an embarrassing reality with a fresh glossy coat of preferable reality. In both cases, the embarrassing secret to be covered up is a pure figment of cultural imagination: gray hair is not objectively problematic, its only crime is that it betrays the woman's real "undesirable" age. A woman's age is only "undesirable" because historically and culturally, women's social worth is measured overwhelmingly by youthfulness – a currency, that, unlike other assets that come with age (such as knowledge and experience), depreciates in value each year. The cultural emphasis on physical attractiveness as a woman's primary "social currency" (Williamson 2002:20, 42), has been a lucrative one for peddlers of "beautifying" products and surgical augmentations (Haiken 1997), but, of course, the modern concept of female beauty is much more than just great business. It is a powerful framework for instituting and perpetuating a wide range of social inequalities by stressing the primary value of female beauty as the key in women's success in life – at home, at work and as a major marker of female identity in general (see Wolf 2002, Peiss 1999, Kilbourne 1999, Berry 2007, to name just a few). The unrealistic cure to the "sickness" of aging is to maintain the illusion of *not* aging (all the while, never admitting to putting any effort into creating the illusion), which presents an absurd dilemma with no solution. When asked to explain how someone else could walk away from the conversational exchange of Scenario #3 (which she found objectionable) with a positive feeling, Emily, female, 21, had no difficulty seeing it from a different perspective:

"Yeah, I know a lot of people worry about their age and looking old, especially women, you know. That's why they sell all those reverse aging things. Infomercials and all of that. And I can understand not wanting to, I mean, the

social perception of what it is to look like you're 50 is not what it is to look like you're 50. My Mom is 50 and she doesn't look like what 'TV fifty' looks like."

It is not a coincidence that virtually all anecdotes brought up by the respondents in reference to preoccupation with youthful looks had female protagonists. Aging is as subject to double standards as virtually everything in which gender is a factor. For women, beneath the obscured connotation built into the "you look amazing for your age" compliment (i.e. that she is "old") dwells a yet another unspoken level of meaning: the presupposition that the deterioration of a woman's physical attractiveness signals the diminishment of her overall social worth. Departing from this "truth", one may surely welcome hearing something positive about one's physical appearance: indeed, some women seem to draw a sense of triumph and empowerment specifically from this implicit acknowledgement of defying low expectations applied to their peers. In fact, it has been suggested that older adults maintain self-esteem and life satisfaction by gauging themselves against their peers, rather than against larger generic social norms (Heidrich and Ryff 1993), which helps explain the popularity of the "you look great for your age" cryptoseme, since the recipient can now take pride in being at the top of her cohort. The problem is that the implied "unfortunate circumstance" of a woman's "advanced" age is a socio-cultural staple that is quite unfavorable to women of all ages. In trading this "compliment", all parties involved are complicit in an unconscious conspiracy of denial of building social pleasantries on a problematic premise. This cryptoseme, though gratifying in the short-term, comes in tow with the perpetually mounting pressure to look younger than one's age to feel oneself (and be perceived by others) as a contender in the game of beauty and social worth.

One may make an argument that there is nothing unusual or deceptive about compliments that try to downplay people's age. After all, aging is an undesirable fact of life for everybody. A useful rule of thumb in checking for presence of sexist influences is to see if the situation unravels the same way and yields the same social outcomes when applied to the opposite sex. The question of the double standard of aging among genders has long been a source of debate. For instance, the double standard exists when applied to judging others' attractiveness through the aging process (Deusch, Zalenski, and Clark 1986) but not necessarily in *self-evaluations* of body attitudes (Wilcox 1997). Also, people seem to experience different attitudes towards aging and how it affects attractiveness throughout their own life course: Deusch, Zalenski, and Clark found that college-aged subjects were considerably harsher in their judgments of women than elderly subjects of both sexes who showed no discrimination. It is safe to say, however, that, in the Western conception of gender roles and values, the notions of age and aging carry significantly different socio-cultural connotations for men than for women. Contrary to being a major marker of decline in "freshness" in women, advanced age connotes accomplishment, worldliness and overall "distinguished-ness" for men. A number of respondents, in fact, brought up gender as a reason for possible different interpretations of Scenario #3. Angela, female, 21, had a very "positive" reaction to Scenario #3, when applied to herself, but explained that a member of the opposite sex has his reasons to interpret the statement negatively:

"If you are a guy maybe. I have this one friend. He's, he's always saying this phrase how, like, girls, they only blossom once, or something like that, and guys, like, they're like wine: the more they age, the better they look, or something. Maybe he's interpreting it as, like, oh, he looks younger than he really is. Maybe

he's like, 30, and he looks like he's 20 and then he might interpret it that way, he might get offended like that."

A similar explanation was given by Bill, male, 21, who also reported a "positive" reaction to the cryptosemic compliment in Scenario #3, but could imagine different interpretations, with emphasis on gender distinctions:

"Perhaps, I feel that only men would ever do that. Only men would have a negative effect from this. Because a lot of men aim to look older and more distinguished. And I've been mistaken for other ages than I am, I've been mistaken for much older, in fact, at times, so I, I've experienced this. And I don't mind, I mean, I'll take this compliment as being, as looking younger, but I also would appreciate a compliment of being older. But if you're strictly looking to be older and more distinguished – especially for someone younger – like, if you have someone 21-22 years old who wants to be around people in their mid-to-late 20's and they don't really wanna feel like a baby. So... they're basically saying you look young -- in which that could be taken the wrong way. I don't think anyone, any female would take it that way, though, because it's more of a social stigma for females to try and look younger, whereas males tend to be, they like to look distinguished and older. There's a very big gender gap."

The rift in age norms and roles being stratified by sex is bolstered by the repeated observations that men can feel uneasy in response to the same statements women find complimentary and vice versa¹². To tell a woman that she looks younger than her actual age is a traditional go-to, fool-proof compliment but to tell a man the same thing is frequently received as emasculating because the idea of looking younger than one's age summons a completely separate set of associations for a man: it hints at inexperience, immaturity and a potential lack of means – not beauty. As Sontag (1972) very astutely

¹² One year during college, I worked as a seasonal cap-and-gown outfitter of the entire graduating class of students. My job was to offer the students the right gown by making them try on different sizes. An instantaneous pattern emerged and persisted through the hundreds of students I outfitted: men, regardless of height and weight, wanted to be a size Large and women, regardless of height and weight, wanted to be a Small. Both sides, when necessary, settled for Mediums, but the Smalls for men and Large for women were a visibly sore subject for quite a few people.

noticed, the social conventions for masculine aesthetics allow for conceptions of both “boy” and “man”, whereas women’s standard of beauty only allows for “girl” and offers no counterpart for a more mature option. And so, though both sexes change physically overtime and no one is too thrilled with the health issues and physical limitations becoming more pronounced with aging, the stigma of age as destroyer of physical attractiveness and social worth continues to apply largely to women.

Cryptosemic compliments help us talk about “touchy” subjects with the express aim of avoiding having to address the origins of this fragility. Ironically, this method of handling “the problem”, in fact, contributes to perpetuating the framing of a given issue as “a problem”, *ad infinitum*.

Cryptosemes Are a Polite Discourse Strategy for Saving Face

The world of social interaction is a minefield of continually re-negotiated relationships whose fragile security hangs in the balance of mutually beneficial social co-operation and compromise. Because of the infinite fragility and precariousness of public image and “face”, we develop an impressive arsenal of linguistic expressions that allow us to engage in the interaction rituals of daily life while trying to maintain poise and dignity. Politeness is one of the strategic devices we utilize to navigate social scenes without “stepping on too many toes” and, hence, safeguarding ourselves from exposing something that can compromise our own social standing. Without considering it dishonest, we tell white lies when trying to spare people’s feelings (Feldman 2009:49-50), liberally embellish our own histories to gain social approval and rely on euphemisms

when attempting to avoid social taboos that may “ruffle feathers”. From early socialization, we are taught to choose our words wisely – not only for the sake of directness or clarity – but as a social survival strategy that will shield us from potential humiliation and conflict with others.

Cryptosemic praise disguises itself as a compliment to bring order into a social situation perceived to threaten one’s “face”. Compliments are a form of “positive politeness” (Brown and Levinson 2009). They allow us to connect to other social members through expressing solidarity and empathy. Many of the compliments we employ are generic, precisely due of their function as diffusing agents, intended to help build bridges to friendly relations. Just as “consciously reevaluat[ing] our political leanings, religious commitments, hygienic habits, and life goals on a daily basis would be cognitively overwhelming” (Vaisey 2009:1683), one simply cannot stop and tailor a new, idiosyncratic expression of courtesy for each individual situation that arises through life and we frequently rely on old formulas and scripts to meet that necessity.

My interest in cryptosemes started when I began noticing that I experience uneasiness and a dissonant combination of positive and negative intellectual and “gut” responses to some common pleasantries and praiseful descriptions of others, finding them, again and again, in everyday speech, all over the press (entertainment and news media alike), and all over the social media. The dissonance I felt did not seem to come so much from sensing a semantic contradiction between what was spoken and what was implied (that came secondary) but from the awkward sensation of not particularly liking what I am hearing but having to respond to it as to a kindness extended to me by a nice person. Politeness, at once, disarms and entraps into a cycle of reciprocal gratitude. Additionally,

knowing that the person's intentions were positive makes it very, very hard to respond negatively to backhanded praise.

In looking for distinguishing qualities whilst initially trying to define the phenomenon, I have observed that cryptosemic compliments tend to be given in social contexts in which the sender of the message feels the necessity to assume the role of a well-wisher, a supporter, to ameliorate a perceived deficiency in another person by offering a compliment that highlights a different, equivalently valuable trait the person does possess. Sometimes this compliment is provoked by the receiver's complaint (i.e. expression of insecurity) about this very deficiency (e.g. "I feel so overweight and unattractive!"). At other times, the person in no way solicits the "praise" but the sender feels obliged to point out something positive about the receiver's perceived deficient condition (e.g.: "How old are you by the way?" "I'm thirty four" "Ooof... It's okay, though. You're still young!") Regardless of whether or not the receiver of the compliment provoked this impulse to console, the sender is treating the situation as an *affliction* that calls for an empathetic response. To tell a person that she looks wonderful for her age is to cast aging in the role of an external condition that is attacking the person. In Scenario #2, telling a person that he is a "hard worker" is an attempt to veil the unspoken assumption that perhaps this person is not so *gifted* with intelligence. And the substitution of the old offending personal quality with the new "realistic" one is not a random or haphazard process at all: in looking for a suitable, redeeming quality to insert in the place of the old, dysfunctional one, we quite discriminately opt for certain kinds of traits over others – ones that imbue the receiver of the message with *extra credit for effort*

to distract from the unpleasant reality of lacking a valuable virtue the person is helpless to obtain.

Goffman introduced the notion of “face-work” as a set of social strategies enacted to maintain one’s own favorable image in social situations. Failure to maintain face results in embarrassment (Goffman 1967:97-112) – or “losing face” – and not only for a single individual but for all present. Therefore, conversational co-operation (Gumperz 1982:160) through bolstering not just one’s own, but the others’ face is a necessary component of any social interaction (Goffman 1967:27-31). In a given social exchange, all members must help each other maintain poise in order to avoid humiliation and conflict. Brown and Levinson contend that politeness is a universal social phenomenon that arises in defense to “face threatening acts” (Brown and Levinson 2009:65), those acts being a variety of perceived impositions upon one’s desires and freedoms.

Drawing upon those two complementary frameworks, I suggest that, in the realm of social interaction, there also exist “face threatening *socio-cultural themes*” that summon cryptosemic compliments to emerge as a measure of unconscious defense in the face of anxiety-provoking conversation topics. Face threatening themes are “touchy” subjects that are likely to hurt feelings or provoke judgment, carrying the threat to expose one as insensitive to people’s insecurities or be branded as “politically incorrect” – i.e. being intolerant or close-minded towards social topics and ideologies of the day (and being perceived as ideologically insensitive may spell out an even more dreaded loss of face than being considered a simple run-of-the-mill “jerk” in the modern-day U.S.).

The complex psychology of human interaction demands equally complex expressions to accommodate the nuance of the power dynamics involved. Cryptosemic

compliments reflect the tensions and constraints experienced by social actors when confronted with sensitive social subjects that threaten to shatter the precarious tranquility of friendly conversation. The dynamic that takes place in cryptosemic interaction is described by Goffman, when he talks about the face-work of face-work:

“One common type of tacit cooperation in face-saving is the tact exerted in regard to face-work itself. The person not only defends his own face and protects the face of the others, but also acts so as to make it possible and even easy for the others to employ face-work for themselves and him. He helps them to help themselves and him” (Goffman 1967:29).

Cryptosemic compliments function in this very way. It begins with the sender perceiving (consciously or unconsciously) some deficiency in the receiver and feeling “bad” about it (empathetic towards this unfortunate occurrence or guilty over the unfairness of the situation, for example) and finds herself in a state that calls for a diffusion of this internal pressure and social uneasiness. It should be emphasized that the object of this “olive branch of face” – the receiver – need not be initially aware that he is “deficient”; he only needs to share the same cultural premise on the basis of which this deficiency was identified by the sender. For instance, imagine conversing with a person whose pant-fly is open. Even if she is unaware of it throughout the entire conversation, you may still feel embarrassment for her (and, in the chain-reaction of face-work, embarrassed for yourself for witnessing her embarrassment) – possibly more so because her fly is open *and* she does not have enough self-awareness to realize this. What counts is that, upon eventual discovery of this *faux pas*, she becomes retrospectively embarrassed because she, too, considers the occurrence of open pant-fly a loss of face.

The face-work happens when the sender, in his or her attempt to draw attention away from the “deficiency”, compliments the receiver over a personal quality or a fact that specifically emphasizes personal control (agency) over his lot. This act can be seen as an extension of face to the object of this sensitive treatment, i.e. giving him the freedom to recover socially by being grateful for this mine-field-avoiding courtesy.

In the following section, I unpack the above-described “face-extending” practice in terms of the sociological conceptions of *ascribed* and *achieved* status in order to illustrate one of the formulas behind the term / fact / theme substitution that happens within the cryptosemic compliment.

Cryptosemic Face-Saving through Status Progression

While there are a number of factors contributing to the over-emphasis on “positivity” in cryptosemic compliments, the essential characteristic is the consistent replacement of the “lacking” trait with a quality that signals *personal achievement* – extending the receiver extra credit for merit or strength of character in the face of some taken-for-granted personal handicap. In sociological parlance, these quality categories correspond with Linton’s designations of “ascribed” and “achieved” status (Linton 1936:115-116). *Ascribed status* describes the social labels individuals are born, and hence, “stuck” with: these characteristics are socially superimposed on individuals as an inevitable reality of their social standing (e.g. one’s sex, age, race, ethnic, national or geographic origins, physical build characteristics, inborn talents and abilities, etc.) This category of social labels lacks any “extra credit for merit” value because these individual

qualities are understood to stem from natural and biological circumstances anteceding one's own choice. Conversely, *achieved status* corresponds with characteristics and values social members are believed to have earned – or failed to earn – through personal effort (e.g.: one's financial gains and losses, career successes and failures, political affiliations, social connections, etc.). Achieved status carries plenty of “extra credit for merit” value because personal characteristics in this category are considered to be the province of one's own willful decisions and actions.

The cryptosemic compliment from Scenario #2 (“hard worker”) provides an excellent illustration of the ascribed-to-achieved status shift described above – because it practically serves as a metaphor for the logic underlying cryptoseme construction in the setting of contemporary American culture. Diligence and hard work are, essentially, the pillars holding up the highly-prized ideal of merit-based, effort-earned respect. The American Dream prescribes relentless hard work as the singular grand act of free will that separates those who succeed in life from those who do not. It follows that, faced with a situation in which the sender wants to be supportive but does not actually believe that the receiver is smart (because if he believed that, he would have no problem saying: “Nonsense – you are not stupid – you are quite smart!”), he is instead compelled to recast the receiver in a “hard worker” narrative, where the receiver is not a passive deficient but an active forger of his or her own path in life. While stupidity is conventionally assumed to be an unfortunate side-effect of God's or nature's lapses of generosity towards their children, being a “hard worker” is largely perceived to be a character trait one actively cultivates in oneself. Being smart can be said to require nothing more than a passive acceptance of the hand of cards one is randomly dealt by life, whereas the label of the

hard worker is absolutely earned through one's own hard work, frequently, over an extended period of time. And, given that the American culture is, first and foremost, an ideology of meritocracy (Stark 2006), telling a person that he is a diligent worker can serve to outshine just about any other character shortcomings.

This last claim is largely supported by data from my study. Of the three scenarios tested, Scenario #2 ("hard worker") saw the highest number of "positive" reactions: (N = 40) "positive": 26 (65%); "negative": 2 (5%); "mixed": 12 (30%). In comparison to the above discussed Scenario #3 ("amazing for your age"), in which almost all respondents in some way expressed uneasiness about the social topic of age, the "diligent, hard worker" cryptosemic compliment was overall received with much less apprehension, as a much more welcome piece of praise. This is not to say that all respondents were unaware of alternative interpretations, but that the "positivity" of the praiseful element "hard worker", entirely or partially, trumped the "negativity" of other potential interpretations. Several respondents explicitly mentioned the "inborn vs. merit-based" value distinction as a consideration. Shumy, male, 36, had a "mixed" reaction to Scenario #2, but emphasized the positive parts over the negative:

"I would say, again, 'mixed', but leaning towards the 'positive' side. What's positive is it's a very nice thing if a friend of yours or anyone, a coworker, says: 'You're the most diligent, hardworking person I know.' Because, obviously, we're all given various tools in terms of our intelligence and our physical ability, but some people who are very intelligent and very able are not hard working, whereas some people, who have serious obstacles to overcome are hard working. So, I, that's the positive -- to be called diligent, hardworking is a very high compliment, I think... Even a boss, if a boss says you're hard working, you have a good work ethic, those are, those are high compliments, I think." – *And what's the negative aspect of this?* "The negative thing is that they didn't say: 'No, you're not stupid!' Right? It's what they didn't say." – *And when you said that this is really leaning more to the positive side, what makes the higher emphasis on the positive interpretation than the negative?* "I would rather be perceived as hard working

than intelligent. Because intelligence is a gift and hard working, that's from your effort. That's something you have control over."

Just as hearing oneself described as "the best lover" casts out the negativity of simultaneously being called "the worst human being", being considered diligent and hardworking, for many, seems to overshadow the parallel implication that one is not terribly smart. In both instances, personal qualities related to "being" are trumped by those linked to "doing" and, as Mullaney points out, when it comes to identity attribution (i.e. how behaviors and acts define our social and self-identity), some "doings" "count" a lot more than others (Mullaney, 1999) and some overt "non-doings" can count just as much and more (Mullaney, 2006). Chad, male, 22, despite his own "positive" response to Scenario #2, said that he could understand how the same statement could upset another person, if the success of the task at hand depended on the individual's natural acumen:

"If they really felt negative about it, I think it would be, I think they would have to be doing some sort of work that relies heavily on talent instead of work, or, at least they perceived it to be so. Because if you are in a situation like that, like, I don't know, maybe deep in the arts somewhere, where some people are sort of recognized as having a talent, then being hardworking or diligent means you'll always be second grade. Because you can get almost as good as a talented person at any given point. So, it's like saying 'ok, well you found your rut and this is where you're going to be as long as you keep working hard – there's an even deeper rut, if you stop."

Chad's answer reflects the implicit conviction that lacking natural talent is a life disadvantage one can do nothing to fix: if the work project depends on creative imagination, those with artistic gifts are at a natural advantage over others, who must try to compensate for this lack with a good work ethic. It is this belief in "natural talents" as an inflexible, rigidly fixed mental modality that prompts us to reach for cryptosemes

when we encounter a person we believe suffers from such a deficiency in “ascribed” skills. In paying cryptosemic praise such as that in Scenario #2, we try to make the person forget nature’s cruel stinginess by drawing his attention to practical skills and virtues in his possession that are earned through personal “doing” and, hence, reminding him about the things in his life that he can successfully control. In fact, several respondents mentioned the expectation of encouragement, enablement and empowerment from a compliment, as evidenced by a recurring complaint that the compliments in Scenarios #1 and #2 (the scenarios in which cryptosemic praise was prompted by the laments of “feeling fat and ugly” and being “stupid” respectively) – are “not helpful”.

Linda, female, 35, had a “negative” reaction to Scenario #2 ("I'm at this frustrating state right now. So, whatever my friend says, it's like it's not gonna help me. Because I'm in this frenzied state, right?"). When asked what kind of comment she would prefer to hear in this instance, she stressed the importance of practical advice:

“Maybe, instead of saying, describing traits about me, like I'm the most diligent, hardworking whatever, I think maybe another way is, a better way for me personally is maybe talk about how I can get out of the rut. So, something more concrete, something more helpful in terms of helping me get the job done.”

Angela, female, 21, who had a “positive” reaction to Scenario #2, had this to say, when asked, whether she can imagine why another person may take it negatively:

“Maybe that person was expecting the friend to help him out or give him some, like, advice and that person didn’t give him any advice, didn’t give him any tips on how to actually progress. He just told him, he just gave him a compliment instead of saying, like, do this or that.”

Sally, female, 36, had a “positive” reaction to Scenario #2 but could easily explain an opposite reaction from a different person: “Maybe because the friend is offering no constructive thoughts about what you might do about the project. You know, they’re just simply offering, like, these compliments with, really, nothing substantial for you to follow up on.” In these last few quotes, we see a pattern of expectation that the compliment will “do something” for the receiver: that the compliment is a performative “speech act” (Austin 1955) that should affect an outcome for the receiver. The utterance will not be felicitous (i.e. will not succeed as a compliment), if it fails to inject some dose of *agency* into the receiver’s lot.

Scenario #1 (in which a person complaining about gaining weight and feeling unattractive is told that he or she “has a beautiful soul on the inside”) (N = 40. “positive”: 8 (20%), “negative”: 8 (20%), “mixed”: 24 (60%)), elicited similar remarks about the uselessness of the compliment. Roger, male, 22, with a “mixed” response to Scenario #1:

“[The “positive” is] That my friend likes me. That my friend wants to be my friend. And thinks that I’m a good person.” – *And what’s negative about it, then?*
 “Um, it just seems like a cop-out. It seems like, it just like positive reinforcement that isn’t, like, actually, like, met. Like it’s just something thrown out there... ‘Cause, I mean, if you really wanted to get at the point of the situation – it’s that I gained weight – and you could say ‘It’s not that big of a deal, like, you know, we’ll go running,’ or, like, ‘you have a cute butt now’ or, I don’t know, that would be something that, you know, has substance to it.”

Ben, male, 23, who reported a “negative” reaction to Scenario #1, said that a favorable response to the lament about being overweight and unattractive would include useful advice: “They could, I guess, they could say: ‘Well, you haven’t gained that much weight, but if you’re worried about it, you know, you could go to the gym or eat healthier’, blah blah, you know, they could give suggestions or something. I guess.” In similar vein,

Blue Bird, male, 23, picked a “negative” reaction to Scenario #1 because it failed to improve the situation.

“Well, ‘cause when, generally, when people talk about attractive and unattractive, it’s more, like, physical. But the friend is, like, kind of disregarding, not, like, not making me feel more secure. Instead, like, he or she is saying that you have a beautiful soul – which is good, like, it’s good – but that’s not what you want to hear. What you want to hear is: ‘Oh, like, you still look attractive in my eyes,’ something like that.” – *What, specifically, makes you feel negative about it?* “Guess it didn’t really help the situation, like, didn’t help, like, how you felt.” – *What would you have said if the situations were reversed?* “I’d probably say, like, ‘Oh, I’ve been gaining, like I’ve been gaining some weight too but I’m going to try go to the gym more often. If you have free time, you wanna come with me?’ And then, just say, like... kind of relate to them on a personal level. And then try to help them out.”

The significance of individual control emerges in another commonality among respondents: as mentioned before, very few reported a singular interpretation of cryptosemic praise presented in the three scenarios, but quite a few reported “positive” reactions to these compliments, despite being aware of alternative interpretations. One of the most interesting findings of the study is the extent to which so many respondents stressed the *active* (as opposed to passive) interpretation of cryptosemic scenarios and everyday conversations in general. This was especially true for the “positive” reactions: quite a few respondents credited their own positive outlook and attitude for their positive reception of the message, thusly claiming ownership over the meaning of the message, that the positivity of the meaning came as much from them as from the speaker. For instance, Dennis, male, 26, took Scenario #3 as a pure compliment, but acknowledged that it was his own choice not to focus on the potential negatives other people could find in the same statement:

"I mean, 'you look incredible for your age' kind of, you know, might be hinting that you should look old, you know, you're really old. But, you know, there is no way I could take that and not take that as a compliment. Also, maybe, if people didn't want to look young, if they wanted to look older, you know, and thought that maybe this was kind of insulting for somebody to call them a kid, kind of. But I always try to see the good in what people are saying."

A similar willingness to focus on the positive in Scenario #2 and give it the benefit of the doubt was expressed by Bill, male, 21, when asked if he could think of why a different person would respond negatively to the same words:

"This is a little tougher because it's a more straightforward compliment. Um, I'm gonna say that, if someone was looking for more, for an idea from their friend or looking to commiserate, I can see someone taking that negatively. Like, if someone was: 'Oh well, this is terrible! You're in a rut. Everyone gets like this.' -- more if they wanted that -- more of that reaction. But I am more a, generally a positive thinking person. So, I take the compliment over that."

When asked why a different person may interpret the same message negatively, several of respondents guessed that a person's *preexisting* negativity and misery may stand in the way of seeing the positive in the statement. Syd, female, 21, had a "positive" response to Scenario #1 ("beautiful soul on the inside") and thought that a negative interpretation of the same praise would come from within:

"Maybe they feel like their friend might have been lying to them because they already have negative feelings about themselves. If they have, I feel like if they have negative feelings about how they look physically, they'll have, they'll feel like they're a bad person on the inside as well." – *Ok, so you think the negativity would come not from the person's comment but from the receiver's...?* "How they already feel about themselves – that they're not good."

This interpretation was relevant to at least one respondent, Gabs, female, 21, who admitted that pre-conceived insecurities would taint her (“mixed”) reception of the compliment in Scenario #1 (“beautiful soul on the inside”):

"It's positive because somebody outside of myself is telling me, like, I'm beautiful, so that's, like flattering. Yeah, it's just, because they're not myself, like, obviously I'm feeling, like, insecure about myself by having somebody else kinda reinforce, like: 'No, you still look fine,' it's like very empowering." – *You find it a compliment?* "Yes. As long as I think they're genuine about it." - *And what are the negative elements of this?* "I think that insecurity would still be there, kind of like you're your own worst enemy. So, even with somebody else telling you, like, you know, you're really beautiful and all that stuff, if you yourself don't feel that way, it's kind of hard to, like, believe it."

Cookie, female, 26, had a “positive” reaction to Scenario #2 (“hard worker”), but knew that others may see it differently:

“...And, I mean, it also has to do with the level of security in the person asking the question [‘Am I stupid or something?’] as well. Because some people, it’s like, even if you were meaning it to be nice, they would just take it negative anyway. There’s some people who will just naturally assume: ‘Ok, you’re just being sarcastic.’ That’s why I chose to see it as a positive. Because I was in between the ‘a’ and the ‘c’ [‘positive’ and ‘mixed’ answer options in Scenario #2], then I was like: You know what? It’s more positive than negative, you know? Because sometimes we just want to hear something negative, I don’t know... ..because maybe they’re just used to hearing negative things, so even if someone says something positive, they could still, you know, take it as being a negative thing. It would just immediately pile up, like it doesn’t even boost them, they’re still being mad and sad.”

Dennis, male, 26, had a very “positive” reaction to Scenario #2 but could also see the negative underpinnings for someone else:

"Yeah, I think, you know, what they said about being diligent and hardworking isn't necessarily dismissing my concern that I'm stupid but I think that the person who is speaking is attempting to speak to my concern about my stupidity or, rather, you know, dismisses it immediately with 'Nonsense', saying I'm diligent and hardworking – it doesn't necessarily mean I'm not stupid but I could imagine someone being peeved about it, but I certainly wouldn't and I would think that people who come away upset from that are probably reading too much into it and being too hard on themselves and maybe too hard on their friend."

Bob, male, 25, had a “positive” reaction to Scenario #2:

"I feel like this, it can be a mixed combination [of positive and negative elements] but that depends on how the personal outlook look at it." – *Your perspective: if you participated in this conversation, how would you personally feel walking away from it?* "I take everything as positive. I look at it as a positive, 'cause he's not saying nothing nasty that you don't probably think yourself." – *How would you explain that from a different perspective?* "It's probably because they've grown too frustrated with themselves. They're not trying to listen to no good advice. They just, they hit the rut so bad that they just put themselves down and down and down and feeling so bad about it that they feel though they're not working up to their potential. And it's not helping them."

Again and again, negative predisposition of the receiver was named as the cause for a negative interpretation of a cryptosemic compliment. Juice, male, 27, guessed that a person who interpreted Scenario #2 negatively is prejudiced thanks to ongoing low spirits caused by the frustrating situation: "They're already in a bad mood because they can't get the job done. They've been working for so long and they're already stuck. So anything that, they'll be more quick-tempered, to jump on anything that's not helping them solve the problem." John, male, 23, had a “positive” reaction to the compliment in Scenario #2, which he found encouraging and straightforward:

"The question of 'Why is it so difficult?' 'Am I stupid or something?' 'Nonsense!', etcetera, these are not true questions for the sake of seeking an answer but an expression of emotion and frustration, venting. And, thus, a person is just

expressing their already negative state of mind, they're already in, uh, negativity. So, at that point, it's kind of like, whatever would be said towards them is, most likely will be perceived as negative."

Insecurity was mentioned by several respondents as another key culprit in negative interpretations of cryptosemic compliments. Clu, male, 34, had a positive reaction to Scenario #2 but easily came up with an explanation for why someone else may see it negatively:

"The first statement the friend makes is 'Nonsense' in response to calling yourself stupid. The next thing he says is he describes you as the most diligent, hardworking person they know. The person may feel negative, might focus on the fact that the word 'diligent' was used, not 'intelligent', or something like that. And they are doing what I described from the first scenario, where people sometimes pick on specific components in a statement and focus on those. So, that can create a negative feeling. Maybe the person has insecurities about their intelligence, they need that reinforcement and that's why they take it in a negative way. – *Ok, so they would have to feel insecure?* "Yeah, because it means that, despite that you got two out of three good comments, you're focusing on the one negative one, so there must be something that might be like a button for you, potentially."

A similar assumption was made by Greg, male, 23, who reported an unequivocally "positive" reaction to Scenario #2 ("This person is trying to encourage me to do better. So, I would feel, you know, I would feel empowered by it.") but, when asked to explain another person's "negative" reaction to the same exchange, shrugged: "Yeah, I wouldn't be able to understand that. I feel like it's pretty straightforward. That person is probably, like, overly sensitive." Roger, male, 22, who had a "positive" response to Scenario #2, imagined that poor self-esteem would be the culprit in a negative interpretation: "There's a lot of people who're, like, self-loathing, and, like, kind of feed off that self-loathing energy. They'll be like: 'The most hardworking? The most diligent? Like, you're out of your mind! I know somebody else who is harder working than I!'"

Of those who reacted “positively” to the cryptosemic compliment in Scenario #3 (“you look amazing for your age”), several respondents also attributed negative interpretations of the compliment to negative circumstances in the receiver’s life, though, interestingly, in this case, the explanations focused on personal failures and a loss of control (or agency) somewhere along the way. Juice, male, 27, had a “positive” reaction to Scenario #3 and, when asked to explain a “negative” interpretation of the same conversation, attributed it to the person’s helplessness:

"If they, they haven't accomplished a lot in life. They're always looking back at what could have been. Because [they've] been using and failing a lot of skin treatments and does alteration to their face to try to look younger or older and whatever their age was, it made them upset when they received the compliment – that I think it's a compliment – but they may take it a different way."

A similar supposition (that one’s failed attempts at staying young are aggravated by the “beautiful for your age” compliment) was offered by Clu, male, 34, when asked why someone would interpret Scenario #3 negatively:

"Again, this is probably due to insecurities. For example, a person that tries to look younger than they really are, perhaps with make-up or other kinds of things to try to cover their age – it might be obvious what they're trying to do – at least to them sometimes. And if a person emphasizes: 'Oh, wow, you look incredible for your age!', they might take it as an insult, like, indirectly, like 'Oh, they can tell I'm trying to look younger!'"

Another respondent, John, male, 23, who had a “positive” response to Scenario #3, when asked if he could imagine why a different person would have a “negative” reaction,

guessed that it had something to do with highly individualized forces outside one's control:

"Maybe somebody had some experience with some kind of injury. Maybe they're deformed or handicapped, or, maybe a girl that went through pregnancy and gained weight. Or – for some other reason in their personal, physical, mental or social reasons – would feel feelings of inferiority."

Even forces of nature, however, could not stop some from maintaining a positive attitude.

Bob, male, 25, had a "positive" reaction to the compliment in Scenario #3, despite having always been mistaken for a younger person, due to insufficient facial hair:

"I know a lot of people who look at it as positive... It says you have beauty, it's complimenting your age. You can be older but you don't look old, you look younger... They're saying you look incredible, which means you're looking better. You know, looking at age, most people feel, like, a lot of insecurity 'cause a lot of people feel a lot of insecurity nowadays. About their presence, their age, they tell you different age 'cause they don't want you to know their real age. They don't want to feel like they're too old and some people feel like they're too young, so they just give you an age... Me being 25, everybody thinks I'm like 16, I got a baby face, I don't grow no hair on my face." – *Do you like hearing that?* "Yeah, it's a compliment! I can't help it, I just can't grow no facial hair! It's very, it's a good compliment."

These examples reflect a trend of framing a "positive" reaction to conversational comments as choice, as an intentional socio-psychological orientation, whereas a "negative" attitude is seen as a bit of a spiritual deficiency and a passive acceptance of defeat – at any rate, a path of least resistance marked by the absence of agency.

The emphasis on "positivity" as a means of controlling one's social environment is certainly an ethnically rooted one as not all cultures value positive life outlook as highly or weightily as Americans. In subsequent works, the inquiry into default

assumptions underlying cryptosemic face-work will benefit from a cross-cultural comparison. The concept of hard work or perseverance is, by no means, universally understood to be a redeeming fill-in for lack of intellect: the appropriate substitute is determined by what the cultural value measuring stick is set to. The “hard worker” cryptosemic compliment would fail to provide redemptive consolation to someone coming from a culture in which being considered lazy is *not* a fate worse than being called dumb. Consider, for instance, one of the most cherished Russian folktale heroes, Ivan the Fool, who is a composite of national values and virtues far different from those comprising the American Dream. Ivan is the endless target of mockery and disrespect from his Tzar father and allegedly smart, competent brothers. Yet, despite his lack of ostensible intellect, Ivan always triumphs over the cocky siblings, winning the riches and the throne at the end of each tale – but *not* via hard work and perseverance. Ivan’s victories are usually achieved through industriousness and trickery. Furthermore, quite frequently, Ivan out-sources decision-making to his beautiful and magical consort / bride, Vasilisa the Wise, who tells him to “sleep on it” and then takes care of everything by the time he wakes up. This problem-solving narrative pattern suggests that hard work and diligence are not highly prioritized when it comes to overcoming adversity. In Russian culture, the notions of resourcefulness, an ability to “think on one’s feet”, along with the willingness to cheat “the system” by cleverly circumventing rules and laws, possibly serve as the “special credit” equivalent of the American “hard work” ethic: they are seen as an admirable solution to the lack of legitimate means of access to socio-economic capital like money, formal education, titles, etc.

It should be noted that, in the realm of complex, messy social reality, the line between *achieved* and *ascribed* status is fuzzy to say the least. Qualities that are conventionally seen as inborn, like physical beauty, can easily fall on both sides of the nature / nurture divide: one cannot help one's height, pigment coloration or bone structure, but one can achieve a number of aesthetic changes through personal effort, such as exercise, dieting, grooming, accessorizing, prosthetics and cosmetic surgery. The same applies to intelligence: even if we take it for granted that humans are born with a certain fixed range of intellectual capabilities, one can advance her or his knowledge base and erudition through pursuing reading, mind exercises, research, travel and other intellectual exposure and engagement with the world. These conflicting ideas about what is natural and what is social are part of the cognitive dissonance underlying cryptosemic utterances. Age, for example, is both a biological number and a socio-cultural "look". Therefore, upon finding out that a person is biologically "old" ("old", of course, is a culturally relative notion as well), it makes sense to want to compliment a person on the aspect of aging that is within her or his control.

Patterns of Merit-Based Value Ascension in Constructing Cryptosemes

Not all but several types of cryptosemic compliments owe their face-saving success to agentically empowering the receiver by tacitly changing the subject away from a perceived flaw to the "positive" things the person has achieved, thus extending the receiver credit for individual control over his or her identity. It is not, however, a "one-size-fits-all" dynamic. Cryptosemes vary in the degree of "face-extending" value they

offer, depending on the sender's unconscious calculation of how much face-saving the receiver will need. The "merit value" of the quality being spotlighted by the cryptosemic compliment depends on how much "compensation" the undesirable characteristic being repressed calls for. In other words, the "extra credit" will depend on how badly the receiver wants for sympathy and agency in the sender's estimation. Thus far, two main structural variations in cryptosemic compliments have emerged.

Variation 1: "Inborn Quality" Substituted by "Personal Merit Quality" (i.e. Ascribed Status Substituted by Achieved Status)

This category of cryptosemes corresponds with the above-mentioned examples of "stupid vs. hard worker" and "beautiful vs. looking healthy and happy" substitutions. These frequently follow the consolatory formula: "you may be deficient in 'x', but at least you have 'y' going for you." The deficiency is an inborn quality (e.g. intellect) or an ascribed condition (e.g. age) and is being tacitly treated as an affliction. The agentic replacement is a self-cultivated quality (e.g. great work ethic) or an achieved condition (e.g. being very physically fit): those are matters of personal control and, hence, merit. In a different culture, one that values personal achievement less and, say, collectivism and team work more, the cryptosemic compliment would highlight a different category of valued human virtues, one that puts social service and conformity on a pedestal. However, within the confines of American cultural priorities, considering the lore of the self-made individual maverick, the cryptoseme gets its rush of positivity from merit- and effort-based praise.

Variation 2: “Personal Merit Quality” Supplanted by “Beating-Social-Odds Quality” (i.e. Achieved Status Boosted by Social Fact)

Sometimes a person’s qualities are not deficient per se but, thanks to the less-than-egalitarian social reality, are perceived to suffer from the threat of being overlooked on their own merit alone. The following is a clipping from a Colombian tourist publication heralding the international literary Hay Festival: it is a brief biography of a guest author holding a reading or a workshop at the event¹³:

“Ana Maria Moix: Spain. Spanish poet, writer and translator, born in Barcelona in 1947. Holds a degree in Philosophy and Letters and belongs to a group of newcomers, along with Gimferrer, Azue and Panero, to name a few. She was the only female author included in Josep Maria Castellet’s anthology of nine newcomer Spanish poets” (Donde: Guia Turistica de Cartagena 2008).

There is no doubt that the author of the blurb (who may have been Moix herself) brought up Moix’s inclusion as the sole female name in the literary anthology as a form of accolade. But does this factoid say anything about her personally? The implicature of the fact that other females were excluded from the prestigious publication is, apparently, intended to boost her professional credentials as a writer. On the macro-cognitive level, however, this “special mention of distinction” actually reinforces the invisibility and silence surrounding professional advancements made by women.

This kind of cryptosemic congratulations appears in social scenarios that call for professional praise of an accomplishment belonging to a member of a historically undermined social minority competing in the field dominated by a historically advantaged majority. Predictably, situations involving interactions between social

¹³ Translated from Spanish

minorities and majorities are rife with face threatening social themes that provoke no end of corrective face-work by all the social actors sharing the space. In these cases, we encounter countless cryptosemic “endorsements” such as: “she is the *sole* female director to showcase at the such-and-such film festival,” or “he is the *only* African-American senator to hail from such-and-such state,” or “she is the *first* lesbian scientist to...,” etc. In utterances such as these, the unspoken implication beneath the words is that the person at the center of praise, though deserving of full credit for the achievement in question, needs extra help getting the attention he or she deserves, due to the disadvantage of her or his minority status. Therefore, this individual’s achievement must be highlighted by emphasizing how difficult it was for this person to “come this far”. Again, the “hard work and perseverance” card is implicitly played within the message, creating the impression of adding gravitas to the endeavor: knowing that a person had to overcome extra difficult social odds prompts us to be more impressed with her achievement than had we been unaware of the obstacles. Furthermore, when we hear that a person is “the first” or “one of the very few” to achieve anything, we become subject to the “scarcity principle”, a psychological trigger mechanism that causes us to automatically value more that which is in short supply (Cialdini 2001:204-226) and because “pioneers” are rare, their achievements are more special.

The prevalence of these statements in our social interactions as well as their ubiquity throughout the wide spectrum of the media is testament to the power of situating a personal story in a context of macro-level social forces: viewed against the backdrop of unfair social realities, individuals seem more unique and their achievements, more awe inspiring and deserving of respect. However, the marking of minority status turns

everyone's attention to the fact of this person's implied "disadvantaged condition", which can be degrading¹⁴ to the receiver and may reinforce the general stigma towards "others who are not as special as this one". There may, indeed, be appropriate occasions in which highlighting of a person's minority status serves as a necessary piece of data in showcasing her or his achievement, but there are many other instances in which such dwelling on social adversity *undermines* the very individual in question – by placing the accent on the shared social journey as opposed to individual professional accomplishment.

¹⁴ "Special treatment" of minority status is not as welcome as so many members of non-minorities assume. The frustration over this lack of understanding is captured well in a quote by one of the respondents, Juice, male, 27, answering the question about pet peeves:

"There are matters. When I'm around people of different races and they feel that they have to talk to me in slang or say something of the hip-hop nature in order to feel like we're, we're, camaraderie together, like the only way they can talk to me is by saying: 'Yo bro'. Or just, there's time where I may be in a building somewhere and there will be regular, there will be, like, country music playing and I come in and they want to change it to hip-hop, like nodding their heads, like it's the only type of music I listen to." – *So, that bothers you?* "Yeah, that bothers me." – *If you had to break it down, what about it gets under your skin?* "They feel that African-Americans only act one way. And you can't talk, I don't want somebody to come out of their element just to make me – or think that it makes me – feel comfortable. Be who you are and talk to me and we'll find a balance in that manner."

Socially approved special consideration is usually extended to those who are disabled in some way: making conspicuous displays of "specialness" towards members of minorities implicates a perceived handicap. If one person believes the other person to be her / his equal, one will not feel compelled to be so condescendingly hyper-accommodating.

Chapter Three. Cryptoseme Case Study: Gender and Beauty.

Positive Cryptosemic Messages about Beauty

Recall the example of complaining about feeling overweight and unattractive and receiving a response about having a “beautiful soul”. Here is a variation of the same cryptosemic treatment of the uncomfortable topic of body weight gain:

-- *I've gained ten pounds since Thanksgiving, I feel so fat and ugly!!*
 -- *Nonsense! You look so healthy and happy now!*

Unfortunately, this type of lamenting one's weight is common and even customary for women, and so is the response. Such a reply is earnestly meant to ease the complainer's torment, yet, the total message does not transmit a contradiction to the complainer's statement about extra weight making her ugly. Instead, it offers a distraction by shining the spotlight on a set of seemingly analogous positive qualities this person possesses: appearing healthy and happy.

If we take it for granted that the woman in question did visibly gain weight and that the response was meant well, we can assume that the speaker was attempting to overcome a two-part challenge: to make the woman feel better about herself by saying something “confidence-building”, but to do so with deference to the rigidly unforgiving social standards for physical beauty and fitness that are not stacked in her favor. As such, the speaker comes up with something to say that carries the overall tone of positivity (to offset the negativity of the implied fatness / ugliness), while, at the same time, making

sure that it has a ring of realism to it – hence, the cryptoseme. Customary reliance on the “fat” vs. “thin” dichotomy, as if those terms were antonyms of each other, is telling in itself. Thinness is an external shape, the *form* of a person, while fatness references a specific *content* of lipids inside one’s body. This difference in focus on the external condition, in one case, and internal, in the other, betrays a bias that is already built into our language, and hence, into our perceptions and attitudes about body weight.

It follows that, if we were not so quick to call women fat in the first place, many a self-esteem would be salvaged. But this is only because, in contemporary Western cultures, the term and concept of “fatness” has secured itself an associative “baggage” of cultural stigmas like no other:

“In much of the industrialized West, where bodies are dominant and preferred symbols of self, slimness is associated with health, beauty, intelligence, youth wealth, attractiveness, grace, self-discipline, and goodness. Fatness and obesity are by contrast associated with ugliness, sexlessness, and undesirability but also with specifically moral failings, such as a lack of self-control, social irresponsibility, ineptitude, and laziness” (Brewis et al. 2011:269).

The overwhelmingly negative, culturally dictated a priori appraisal of a person on the basis of a single visual marker of “fatness” not only primes those who judge but, through life-long socialization, convinces the targets themselves that the judgment is fair, fostering a “false consciousness” that lends itself to gratefully accepting compliments of this nature. If the mainstream cultural language and imagery offered an option for being “fat and beautiful”, the speaker would surely not have any issue crafting a straightforward positive message by simply replying: “Not at all – you are quite beautiful!” Instead, the cryptoseme betrays the “double-bind” (Bateson 2000:206-212) of the speaker’s own

dissonant feelings and beliefs in reference to the issue of female body weight and beauty: the speaker wishes to reassure the woman that she is not “ugly”, but cannot quite bring him/herself to using the word “beautiful”, since “fat and beautiful” is not an entry in the mental catalogue of familiar cultural concepts. In this sense, a cryptoseme can be said to be an outcome of one’s conscious, deliberate intentions coming into conflict with one’s unconscious default assumptions. In social psychology, these instances of mismatch between “implicit” and “explicit” attitudes (i.e. unconscious and conscious dispositions) are referred to as “dissociations” which, not coincidentally are reported to be “commonly observed in attitudes toward stigmatized groups, including groups defined by race, age, ethnicity, disability, and sexual orientation” (Greenwald and Krieger 2006:949).

When confronted with the awkward dilemma of having to comfort a person who is insecure about weight gain making her ugly, the convenient solution is to employ a cryptosemic compliment, an automatic strategy that ameliorates both (conflicted) impulses: to offer something upliftingly positive and to do it sincerely (which is to say, it has to ring true). This is achieved by dipping into a parallel line of discourse on female beauty and summoning the point about looking healthy and happy. The topics of health and happiness have been socially framed as a positive way to talk about relative weight gain in women and, therefore, make a handy substitute for talking about physical beauty. Phrase it with an opener such as “nonsense” or “don’t be ridiculous” or any other indicator of contrariety (as in: “Don’t be silly – you don’t look fat and ugly – you look healthy and happy!”) – and the receiver is likely to imagine that “healthy and happy” is offered as a mere synonym for “beautiful”. Langer (1990) talks about automatic behaviors triggered by a particular structure and phrasing of a statement rather than its

semantic meaning. Langer's research team designed an experimental scenario in which an undercover researcher attempts to gain permission for cutting in line at an administrative office where clerks take turns at the copy machine. Langer found that asking: "Excuse me, may I use the Xerox machine because I'm in a rush?" and asking: "Excuse me, may I use the Xerox machine because I want to make copies?" yielded the same rate of success in being allowed to cut in line. This is because, when not engaged in active focusing, people demonstrate automatic "attention to structure rather than conscious attention to content" (14-15). In this request, the word "because" was the structural marker that prompted the office workers' mental autopilot to assume that the asker had a reasonable justification for wanting to cut in line, even when the words spoken were "because I have to make copies", which is no excuse at all. The same automatic response may happen in the mind of the receiver of our "healthy and happy" cryptoseme: if a person had just complained about feeling "fat and ugly" and her companion's response begins with a contrarian interjection "nonsense", she may easily assume that the statement that follows is a *refutation* of her lament. The word "nonsense" is, essentially, a misdirection trick: it sets one up to expect a rejection of the idea that one is "fat and ugly", cognitively priming the receiver to misinterpret the rest of the message as praise of physical appearance.

Several respondents from my study reported that they experienced mindless, automatic responses with the cryptosemic scenarios they were asked to consider, making them do a mental "double take" later. For example, Jen, female, 26, had a "mixed" response to Scenario #2:

"My first reaction is positive. Because, oh, you know: 'Oh nonsense! Don't think like that!' But then... rereading it the second time, it's, it's, you know, 'You're diligent and hard working' not 'Oh, you're smart and intelligent... Don't worry, you're smart, you'll be fine.' It's a little bit compliment to, like, the working aspect versus the natural intelligence... They started off by giving me the right answer and then, as they kept talking, it's: 'Oh, that's not what I wanted to hear'. It's: 'Thank you – that's nice of you to say that. But it's not the compliment I that was looking for, or the response.'"

For this respondent, the word “nonsense” served as the cognitive trigger to make her initially believe that it would be followed by a refutation of the proposed stupidity. When that did not happen, the respondent experienced a second-wave negative reaction to the statement, despite acknowledging the “niceness” of the gesture. Similarly, Chloe, female, 22, had a two-tiered “mixed” reaction to Scenario #1: "I feel like it's something, if she had said that to me when she said it, I would have been, like, ‘Oh, thank you!’ And then, once we left and I, like, thought about it later, I'd be like ‘What the hell’d she even say?’ you know?"

As suggested earlier, cryptosemic compliments tend to emerge in tandem with social themes that have been commonly framed as “sensitive”, particularly pertaining to notions of fairness, equality and meritocracy, all concepts with deep ethical and ideological underpinnings. Americans are a nation possessing, in Hartz’ words a “fixed dogmatic liberalism of a liberal way of life. It is the secret root from which have sprung many of the most puzzling of the American cultural phenomena” (Hartz 1991:9). Cryptosemic speech is one such puzzling cultural outcome, arising from a cognitive clash between deeply socialized ideological beliefs and freshly cultivated ideological ideas. Barthes notes that a myth is *depoliticized speech* (Barthes 1972:143): a message that pretends to lack an ideological basis by posing as a simple reference to undisputed,

concrete reality, as if no larger social issues are at stake. “Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact” (43). Cryptosemic speech is powerful because it is ideologically informed without appearing at all ideological. Althusser makes a similar statement in arguing that, contrary to popular belief, ideology is not a conscious value system but a “lived action”:

“In truth, ideology has very little to do with ‘consciousness’, even supposing this term to have an unambiguous meaning. It is profoundly *unconscious*, even when it presents itself in a reflected form... Ideology is indeed a system of representations, but in the majority of cases these representations have nothing to do with ‘consciousness’: they are usually images and occasionally concepts, but it is above all as *structures* that they impose on the vast majority of men, not via their ‘consciousness’” (Althusser 2006:233).

In short, ideologically influenced wishful thinking is quite un-deliberately packed into many of seemingly un-political behaviors and statements. The “healthy and happy” cryptoseme exemplifies this trend. In the recent decades, there developed a mounting public controversy in the U.S. surrounding the question of the price women pay for physical attractiveness, especially within the rubric of body weight. Women brutalizing themselves for the sake of beauty is not news, but the current concern has to do with women having to aspire to mass-media portrayals of beauty ideals that are either out of the scope of practical accessibility (such as the pressure to match the glamorous look of “stars” and “celebrities” (Blum 2003)) or actually do not exist in nature. The mainstream images and descriptions of what constitutes modern standards of female physical beauty are technological fabrications and fictions that cannot be achieved in reality, and yet the

pressure to reach them is quite real and women go to extreme lengths to do so, frequently at the expense of undermining their physical and mental well-being. Because women's perilous self-abuse for the sake of beauty has now been dubbed a social "epidemic", the topic of "beauty" has been publicly reframed into a "wellness" issue¹⁵.

The power of capitalizing on moral indignation and guilt about harsh beauty ideals has not been wasted on corporate advertising professionals: in the past decade, there has been an onslaught of products advertised under the banner of readjusting the female beauty imagery towards more realistic and diverse representations. The revolution was advanced by Unilever's Dove "Campaign for Real Beauty" launched in 2004, which was created especially for the introduction of a new line of "firming" cellulite cream, and

¹⁵ Not everyone overlooks the presuppositions obscured within cryptosemic praise, as evidenced by some of the respondents' reactions to praise in Scenario #1 ("beautiful soul on the inside"). Several insisted that hearing about the beautiful soul is not satisfying enough. Dee, female, 21, brought this up, when explaining her "mixed" reaction:

"Well, it's always great to hear somebody else, like, other than yourself know that you are beautiful on the inside... but... the negative aspect [is that] I will be slightly annoyed because anybody who's, like, self-conscious about themselves, like, I kinda don't want to hear that I have such a beautiful soul on the inside. I would rather – not to say 'rather' here but – I would also like to hear that I looked good on the outside too." –*So, the positive aspect of it is?* "It's great that somebody would think that about me, you know." –*And the negative aspect is?* "It is the fact that I still am gonna feel self-conscious about how I feel on the outside, I would also like to hear that I looked good externally too."

Blue Bird, male, 23, with a "negative" reaction to Scenario #1:

"Well, 'cause, when, generally, when people talk about, like, being attractive and unattractive, it's more, like, physical. But the friend is, like, kinda disregarding, and, like not making you feel more secure and instead, like, he or she is saying that you have a beautiful soul – which is good – but that's not what you wanna hear – you wanna hear 'Oh, like, you still look attractive, in my eyes,' or something like that."

Jack, male, 22, who also had a negative reaction to Scenario #1, had this to say, when asked if he can think of a better way a friend could have responded, assuming that the friend wanted to comfort him:

"Sure, just cut the words 'on the inside'." –*Ok, so, a beautiful soul?* "Yeah, that could work. Or, just, you, you know, a beautiful person, or anything. Um, yeah. 'Cause, also, 'on the inside' is kind of like saying: 'I acknowledge that your appearance is hideous. However, on the inside you're fine.' Like that, that is what it is essentially saying too. Like, 'Oh yeah, I agree with you that your view of yourself is kind of messed up and I'm reinforcing that idea that you're ugly.'"

became a tremendous success with consumers and media watchdog organizations alike. The multimedia marketing campaign, by virtue of featuring “real”, “average”-sized, “curvy” and allegedly un-airbrushed women, was touted (and widely received) as the new, socially conscious model for addressing and representing female beauty in advertising. It featured not-professional models with “real curves” who offered inspirational quotes, such as this, by Julie Arko, one of the “real” women of the campaign: “It’s okay to be you! Not every woman comes in a size 2 package. It’s who you are on the inside that counts; it’s the ‘whole package’!”¹⁶ The irony of peddling cellulite cream under the guise of “real beauty” was lost on many a fan of the ads: there are hundreds of online testimonials about switching to Dove brand as a measure of support of its “good cause” such as: “When I first looked the Campaign up, I was so inspired that I immediately switched to Dove products” (Sahar 2008). Likewise, many consumers overlooked the subtle cryptoseme underlying the entire campaign. Julie’s quote is a variation of the “you’re not ugly – you are healthy and happy” compliment. Though it comes across as empowering to some Dove fans, the whole message (semantics considered together with the unspoken implicature) is more humbling than elevating: “Because of your ‘normal’ size, you do not qualify for what is considered physically attractive – therefore, you should focus on your ‘inner beauty’ instead.” The opening line on the original website for this campaign read: “Firming the thighs of a size 2 supermodel is no challenge.” Throughout the ad copy, the word combination “size 2 supermodel” was juxtaposed against the notion of “women with real curves” and, as semiotic theory suggests, such a repetitive comparison is likely to place the two categories of “beauty”

¹⁶ Julie Arko’s quote was accessed on campaignforrealbeauty.com on November 14, 2005 but the website has since been hacked.

into polarized, mutually exclusive oppositions (Chandler 2002 98-121) in the perceptions of the audience. In a cultural climate that places a very high premium on female attractiveness, it is not unreasonable to imagine that, given a choice, many women would opt for the “supermodel” body type rather than whatever other body standard was offered as an alternative – which, in Dove’s case, happens to be “real women with real curves”¹⁷. Such deceptive cryptosemic advertisement only exasperates the double standard of female beauty: for those who do not fit into the narrow definition of conventional, mainstream beauty, the only “real” beauty is to be found “on the inside”. Incredibly, while it has been a long and infamous tradition amongst American men to say that a woman has a “great personality” as code for her absence of physical attractiveness, amongst women, essentially the same euphemism can be delivered and accepted as a positive, even empowering message. The Dove Campaign for Real Beauty exemplifies the hypocrisy built into much of cryptosemic expression: presenting itself as an agent of humanistic progress, while, simultaneously channeling the very way of thinking that thwarts the realization of those ideals¹⁸. Murray (2012) notes in her detailed semiotic and

¹⁷ It bears noting that, in the keeping with the above-mentioned tendency towards “analogical thinking”, the public backlash against social demands of unrealistic thinness from women has swung the pendulum of bias and exclusion to the opposite extreme: in this reactionary framework, “real” women have “real curves”, implying that a woman who lacks the said curves is, somehow, less of a woman or, at least, not as “real” a woman as those who are deemed “curvy”. The discrimination against “larger” women is counteracted by discrimination against “skinny” women – an approach that glorifies one kind of womanhood at the expense (i.e. mockery, demonization and, ultimately, exclusion) of another.

¹⁸ One may wish to ask, what would be a *not* hypocritical way for Dove to sell this product? Usually, honest, accurate representation of the good or service is the answer, but in this case, the product is a complete sham, falsely claiming to cure a disease that does not exist. Despite the cosmetic industry’s propagation of the myth, cellulite is not a disease but a natural uneven distribution of fat layers under the skin for many women and some men. “[Cosmetic surgeons] reclassify healthy adult female flesh as ‘cellulite,’ an invented ‘condition’ that was imported into the United States by *Vogue* only in 1973; they refer to this texture as ‘disfiguring,’ ‘unsightly,’ ‘polluted with toxins.’ Before 1973, it was normal female flesh” (Wolf 2002:227). “Firming cream”, at any rate, cannot deliver on the promise to smooth out the uneven skin because it attempts to treat a subcutaneous layer via topical means (111-112) True to the formula used by ancient snake oil peddlers, the cosmetic industry fabricates an “aesthetical” problem, which it, then, “treats” with chemical substances that are, essentially, placebo creams, designed to make

feminist deconstruction of said campaign that not only does Dove commit the irony of objectifying women in the name of celebrating their natural beauty (10), it capitalizes on the classical feminist themes as if it single-handedly invented them: “The copy emphasizes Dove, not the women – ‘it’s time to change all that...it’s why we started the campaign for real beauty’ – as the catalyst for change, thus usurping the power of the feminist movement (represented by the women) in this mission of ‘real beauty.’” (12) Although cryptosemic advertisements are quite intentionally contrived to persuade us into buying products (as opposed to the sincerely well-meant cryptosemic compliments people exchange in everyday social interaction, without commercial agenda), hermeneutic analysis of commercial cryptosemes is phenomenologically useful to us because it uncovers the same Trojan Horse principle the positive cryptoseme thrives on: planting a saboteur under the guise of a good will ambassador.

The Negative Cryptoseme: Reprimands about Beauty

Tabloid and pop culture texts show us that cryptosemes are not always constructed with “positivization” of the message in mind. Because of the unrealistic body weight ideal propagated by the fashion and entertainment industries and the countless commercial representations and definitions of what beauty should look like (Wykes and Gunter 2005; Grogan 2008), there has been a notable backlash in the mass media and public forums against what one blogger called, “the tyranny of the thin ideal” (Kite and Kite 2013). With the indignation against the destructive media imagery and amidst the

one imagine “results” based on false hope. Antecedent to the advertisement, the hypocrisy exists in the product itself and is, therefore, beyond salvage.

counter-movement for fat-acceptance (Donaghue and Clemitshaw 2012) also came a knee-jerk reaction against celebrities and fashion models who exemplify this problematic trend (an online search for keywords such as “sickly thin” or “disgustingly skinny” will provide countless examples of popularized hate speech directed at “underweight” people.) To pander to the mounting public anger, the yellow press routinely runs “human interest” updates on the body weight fluctuations of the rich and famous, condemning celebrities and professional models for being excessively underweight in statements that attempt to be critical of these women, yet fall short of challenging the status quo of the standards in place. In the same vein, it is very rare to come across a feature about a celebrity who has gained some weight and is said to look “beautiful”, even if the intention is to frame it as positive change. Instead, one frequently encounters subtly derogatory commentary such as that of Teen Vogue’s Editor-in-chief Amy Astley. In stressing the magazine’s commitment to feature teenage amateurs as opposed to professional models in its “back to school” fashion issue, Astley explains the logic behind this decision: “Models are freaks of nature with genetically perfect bodies, so to me, it’s important that girls can look to someone like us and see how to find jeans even though her legs aren’t eight miles long” (Tecson 2005). This quote was referenced on the Parents Television Council website as an *exemplary* message to young women. “Sadly, such enlightened and equal treatment of girls in today’s popular culture is far from the norm,” the “Culture Watch” feature article laments (Gildemeister 2006). The author of the article considers Astley’s statement an “enlightened” one not because of what she has to say about “normal” girls (she really does not say anything good about them, only suggests that they fall short of the ideal leg length), but because saying something negative about fashion models creates

the impression that something positive was said about their “imperfect” counterparts. A much less judgmental implicature would serve much better here, as would directness and transparency. The magazine’s interest in “real” girls as models can be formulated more directly, transparently and, hence, convincingly, such as: “We want real girls to have real, relatable fashion role models, to aspire to beauty that can be achieved and to have choices of fashion styles that fit bodies of all types.”

Astley’s commentary fails to shift the paradigm from unrealistic to realistic representations of beauty, succeeding only in creating the illusion that she said something “positive” and “progressive” about realistic beauty ideals for girls. It is, however, quite representative of the typical public discourse about female body issues: the tall, thin, light-skinned ideal is virtually never challenged, since there is a continued reference to the ultra-thin model body type as “perfect”. Instead, “normal” women are urged to give up on trying to achieve the unattainable and, instead, focus on loving themselves for who they are, even if their legs are short (with one’s legs being “eight miles long” presented as a real option, albeit a genetically extraordinary one). As with many cryptosemic statements, the incessant urging for self-acceptance has the condescending ring of a call for self-*settlement*. A very thin model can be referred to as sickly, unhappy, “a genetic freak of nature”, yet, underneath all the negative noise, it is still implicated that hers is the most desirable type of beauty. Hundreds of statements mirroring this trend can be found online, mostly in the entertainment press and subsequent public comment sections. The latest I came across was in the gossip section of the NYDailyNews.com, titled “Hunger Games: Skinny Stars Who Look Hungry”, which displayed a gallery of photos of celebrities deemed “too thin”. One caption reads: “Maybe it’s just great genetics, but

'90210' star AnnaLynne McCord and her sister Angel make a frighteningly skinny pair” (Sloame 2013).

The result is a culture in which being called “anorexic” is routinely taken as a compliment by girls and women who have come to implicitly understand that, despite being technically a “bad thing”, anorexia is a disorder that brings on thinness and thinness remains the golden standard of beauty. This is the intriguing property of the cryptosemic insult: the process of “decoding” (Hall 1996) the message by the receiver is the opposite of that of the positive cryptoseme. Take the example of criticizing a young woman for looking unhealthily thin, and doing so in a clearly negative scolding tone. Chances are, if this woman has struggled with body weight insecurities, she will be more flattered than unsettled by such a reprimand. This is an instance in which the sender’s negative tone and intent to criticize are actually the obscured, ignored component of the message, while the underlying cultural “myths” offset the sternness of the comment by being quite welcoming and accepting of extreme thinness as a positive female aesthetic. The logic of thinking in such mutually exclusive binary opposites (Jakobson and Halle 1952; Levi-Strauss 1972) leads one to make the following chain of inferences: if “thin” is beautiful, then “fat” is “ugly”; if “fat” women are “healthy and happy”, then “thin” women are “unhealthy and unhappy”; it, then, follows that, if “thin” is “beautiful”, then “unhealthy and unhappy” is “beautiful” (and, consequently, “healthy and happy” is “ugly”). As far as the receiver is concerned, she was indirectly called “beautiful” – because outside of the microcosm of this conversation, the macro-level cultural norms internalized by the receiver override the “local” intentioned negativity of the statement.

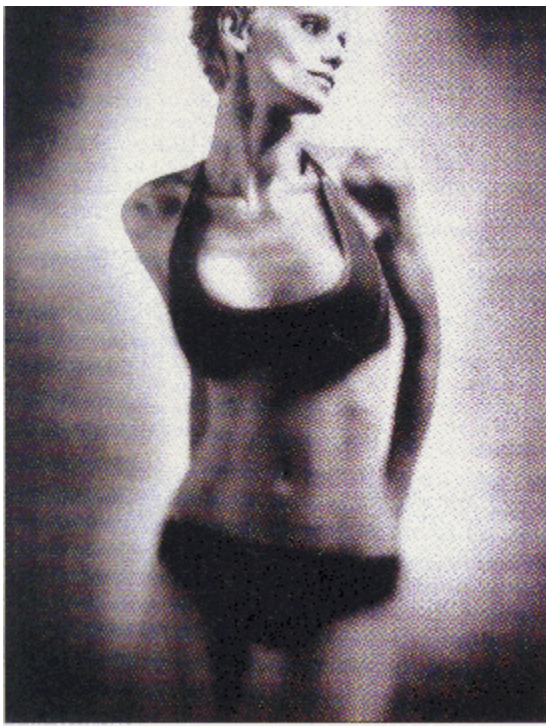
Why is the negative cryptoseme so diametrical to the positive cryptoseme in terms of form, not content, becoming suppressed into the “hidden” dimensions of the message? A separate inquiry must be made into the psychology and cognition of responding to compliments as opposed to insults but at least a part of the answer can be found in the “optimism bias”, an evolutionarily “wired” mental priority given to contemplating the best outcome, as opposed to the worst (Sharot 2011). The emphasized attuned-ness to positive content within the message originates from the “positive asymmetry” of the mind: a term coined by Cerulo (2006) to describe a “powerful convention of quality evaluation” (6) rooted in the human cognitive propensity towards focusing on the “best” while tuning out the “worst”. Cerulo offers a trinary typology of the ways in which the human mind tips the mental scales in favor of the positive (which happens, in some way, at the expense of the negative.) Of the three dynamics of positive asymmetry, “eclipsing practices”, “clouding practices” and “recasting practices”, “eclipsing” and “clouding” seem the most fitting to cryptosemic communication: the former renders the undesirable negativity “invisible” or “silent” by being completely put out of mind (i.e. released from attention), while the latter keeps the negativity present but too vaguely defined to jump to the forefront of one’s attention (73). “Shadowing”, a type of “clouding” focuses on manipulating the perceptions of the positive, rather than the negative. “In essence, shadowing spotlights and exaggerates the best... generat[ing] an overpowering image of excellence. As the best looms large, it casts the worst into perceptual darkness. Lost in the shadows, the worst remains present, but dim and indistinct, and thus easy... to ignore” (108). This socio-mental prioritizing of the positive over the negative may help explain why some individuals focus attention only on the positive / complimentary

dimension of meaning within both positive and negative cryptosemes. As Wilson reminds us, "...people are masterful spin doctors, rationalizers, and justifiers of threatening information and go to great lengths to maintain a sense of well-being" (Wilson, 2002: 155). The all-conquering power of rationalization for the sake of creating order out of chaos and sense out of nonsense is dramatically illustrated by the afore-mentioned "documentary method", whereby Garfinkel's students constructed reasoned, meaningful insight (seemingly fitted to their idiosyncratic, personal situations) out of randomly generated advice. This is to say that the human psyche is quite prepared to delude itself for the sake of maintaining a sense of balance and well-being and the cognitive practice of positive asymmetry ironically serves in the capacity of that equalizer.

The negative cryptoseme shows us that consciously or not, the cultural presuppositions underlying cryptosemic utterances *register on some level* and this raises the question of what, if any, latent effects they may have on our current and future belief systems. At the very least, cryptosemes can be employed by marketing experts to exploit the consumers' vulnerabilities to sell them the opposite of what they think they are buying. As early as the 1960's, feminism had been known in the advertising industry as "the perfect product pitch" used to sell anything from female vaginal deodorants to cigarettes (Frank 1998, 153), and it has become an updated marketing convention to capitalize on pandering to the righteousness and the wallets of shoppers by appearing to say something damningly negative about unrealistic beauty standards for women. Pedersen offers a poignant deconstruction in applying semiotic analysis to a sample from the *Look good on your own terms®* campaign put forth by Kellogg's Canada as a series of ads that claim to "[swim] against the cultural current, challenging the unrealistic body

image standards by which women judge themselves” (quoted in Pedersen 2002:169-181). One print ad shows a portrait depiction of a very thin woman in a bathing suit in a typical vulnerable model pose (arms twisted behind the back, head tilted up and to the side, neck exposed, etc.) as the title copy reads: “IF THIS IS BEAUTY, THERE’S SOMETHING WRONG WITH THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER.”

Figure 2



**IF THIS IS BEAUTY, THERE'S
SOMETHING WRONG WITH THE
EYE OF THE BEHOLDER**

We see models like this all the time. But that doesn't mean we should equate being beautiful with being underweight. Look good on your own terms. Exercise. Refuse to skip meals. Start with a balanced breakfast every morning and go from there. Kellogg's *Special K* cereal is low in fat and a source of essential nutrients so it's a light, sensible way to start your day. After all, a healthy body weight should be beautiful in everyone's eyes. And there isn't one of us who should aspire to anything less.



A healthy body weight looks good on everyone

At a first glance, one may get the impression that, by questioning the aesthetic value of the woman in the photograph, the makers of Special K are challenging the established beauty / body norm in place. They seem to be suggesting that there is something wrong with this representation of beauty. However, on a cognitive level,

Pederson insists, the message is quite the opposite: everything about the photograph is analogous to any other legitimate, conventional fashion ad (presented in a “portrait” format, which, traditionally emphasizes *being* over *doing*), because the model in it actually does represent the “ideal” body image and, thus, “this is her symbolic value” (172); because despite the implication that her shape may be objectionably thin, she resembles all the other models on the pages surrounding this very ad in Fashion magazine in which it appears (in glamour as well as submissive and exposed sexuality). The ad never dispels the notion that “this is beauty” – it only suggests that there is something wrong with people who think so (which is, presumably, the majority of us). The ad avoids explicitly stating that the image is “ugly”: it shifts that responsibility to us, the receiver, and goes so far as to suggest that it is our own fault if we see nothing wrong with this image. But, of course, we are already supposed to think that this is beautiful, so, in essence, the ad only presents us with something we already know: it does not make any changes to the notion of beauty, but passes (or, rather, forces) the torch for forward thinking onto the “beholder” of the ad. The “old” value the message is supposedly trying to improve upon is: “rail-thin women are beautiful”; the “new” message, however, does not reverse this notion, it does not directly assert that very thin women are unattractive or ugly and neither does it suggest that larger than very thin women are beautiful per se. Instead, while maintaining the overall rubric of body weight, it shifts the topic from physical attractiveness to the topic of social responsibility in appraising aesthetical worth. This is a very clever way to make us think that the ad is saying something negative about this image of supposedly self-destructive lifestyle, while, in fact, the word “beauty” still appears in the title copy in reference to the image without offering any new alternative:

cognitively, the association between the ultra-thin image and the term “beauty” is reinforced rather than severed. The image of the model, whose likeness is supposedly presented as an example of “how not to be”, simultaneously becomes, as Pedersen puts it, “insidiously appealing” (172).

“Insidiously appealing” is an expression that strikes at the heart of the composition and function of the cryptoseme. In social psychology, one encounters the term “halo effect”: a singular superficial, personal trait that overwhelms the others’ perceptions of a person’s overall character. If an individual is particularly physically attractive, others may find it difficult to suspect her or him of ill will or underhandedness, because it creates a cognitive strain to think that someone so aesthetically “good” could be “bad” at the level of character substance (Cialdini 2001:148). The cryptosemic compliment thrives on the very same magic trick by emphasizing some cosmetic aspect of its form, creating a halo effect that spreads the positivity of its attitude over the complex content of the message, muting the underlying premise (as in Cerulo’s conception of “shadowing”). But the halo effect is only an illusion and the positivity of the cryptoseme goes only as far to misdirect attention, rather than to actually replace an old vision with a new one. For that reason, cryptosemes are problematic in the same way dealing with any conundrum with avoidance can to be said to be counterproductive. The most subversive quality of the cryptoseme lies in relegating certain ideas into the realm of the hidden, the unspoken, which, if unacknowledged for long, comes eerily close to the psychological defense mechanism known as denial. Macro-scale social denial, in its turn, nurtures the status quo of the social structures and cultural notions in place (Zerubavel 2006:77). Cryptosemes on the topic of female beauty are highly suspect in terms of latent

cultural “fallout” since they serve to perpetuate the hegemonic social order that summons them to existence. Many women consider cryptosemic compliments about “beauty within” empowering because those utterances seem to suggest that superficial appearances do not matter as much as internal substance of the human being, which would indeed be a positive message, in a different world. In the U.S. today, however, women who fit the conventional standards of beauty are still primarily praised for their attractiveness (with their “internal” merits frequently disregarded or dismissed), while women who are considered less physically attractive are praised for their virtues “on the inside”.

A recent study has found that fat stigma around the world is on the rise and that this ascent may, ironically, be exacerbated by well-meaning educational media, such as global health campaigns that seek to educate the public by creating exposure to images of obese people with the intention of spreading awareness about health risks (Brewis et al. 2011:274). The problem is that imagery of obese people has, thus far, appeared in media contexts inviting ridicule and judgment, therefore, reintroducing similar imagery under a different banner is not enough to reverse the stigma because the populace is already cognitively trained to see these images in a negative or mocking light. Furthermore, treating a real contemporary source of inequality as if it were an artifact of the past that no longer applies to *us* is only going to allow the inequality to flourish unchecked in the “conspiracy of silence” surrounding it.

Chapter Four. Cryptosemes and Context.

Cultural default assumptions with a bias are the foundation on which cryptosemic interaction is built: if all parties involved subscribe to the same cultural double standards, they can continue to trade these pleasantries in civil company, even if they sense other, less pleasant meanings behind the nice words, implied by omission. But cultural beliefs, including clusters of conflicting values and priorities that coexist within the same “cultural toolkit” (Swidler 1986), are, themselves, shaped and cultivated by myriad circumstances. Our behavior and speech, likewise, is affected by the surrounding environment. As with all things in life, the larger socio-historical, psychological and physical climate – as well as local, idiosyncratic particulars – determine much of how social interaction plays out.

Contextual relativity emerges as the operative structure underlying meaning-making. Feedback from my study highlighted two main types of relational consideration: the speaker’s social position / status relative to the receiver of the compliment (i.e. whether the message comes from the position of superiority, equality or inferiority) and the receiver’s personal relationship with the speaker (e.g. emotional closeness vs. remoteness, degree of acquaintance, intimate knowledge, etc.). Relative positioning within one’s own perceived life trajectory also emerged as a significant consideration in making sense of cryptosemic praise: the same person, throughout the span of his or her life, can be focused on different priorities and will therefore be attuned and receptive to different dimensions of meaning in messages (recall the respondents’ comments about different points along the “young-old” continuum determining whether the cryptosemic

compliment from Scenario #3 is appreciated or unwelcome.) The next subsections parse out the considerations, guidelines and “rules of thumb” reported by study respondents in reference to making sense of cryptosemic compliments presented in Scenarios #1-3.

The Power of Social Relativity in Meaning-making

When Marshall MacLuhan coined the adage “the medium is the message”, he was referring to the technological media – the radio, the TV, and now, the internet. But humans also transform the messages as they transmit them: *who* spoke to *whom* can matter as much as (if not more than) the substance of *what* was spoken. The respondents’ comments reflected two main concerns in reference to how social hierarchies and power dynamics shape the way they address and understand others: “Is this person in the appropriate position to say this to me?” and “Does this person have the authority / expertise to make such a remark?”

Hegemony and Power

It is not an overgeneralization to suggest that nobody likes to feel judged or be spoken down to (with the exception made for those whose socially sanctioned role is specifically to pass judgment and moralize). Human dignity is a precious quality we go out of our way to protect in social scenarios: it can be said that the Goffmanian face-saving ritual is largely dedicated to protecting this fragile fire of self-respect burning in all of us from public extinguishing. For this reason, even those who claim healthy self-

esteem and are not usually “touchy” about words and social themes are still attuned to hints of undermining content in speech. Quite a few respondents pointed out a condescending note in the cryptosemic compliments they were asked to evaluate. Buck, male, 32, for instance, was quite plainly offended by the cryptosemic compliment in Scenario #1 (“beautiful soul on the inside”):

“It’s basically saying ‘You are fat’ without saying ‘You are fat’. There’s the old adage that if you tell somebody, you tell a woman especially, if she has a nice personality, that means that she’s unattractive... I mean everybody has their own interpretation of it. I mean a beautiful soul to me could be somewhat, I would just feel like it’s, what’s the word I’m looking for? Patronizing!”

Jack, male, 22, likewise, detected a patronizing element in Scenario #1:

“‘[A]nnoyed’ would probably be the most clear feeling that I would feel because the wording of ‘Don’t be silly!’ ‘You’re such a beautiful soul on the inside’ is a specific word choice that the person consciously makes – or unconsciously makes – so it would be something that they are, are specifically targeting towards my appearance versus the, uh, trying to, I guess, patronize a little bit. That, that is the annoyance that I would probably feel.” – *So what, if you had to really break it down to its element, what’s specifically patronizing about this kind of a sentiment?* “It reminds me of, like, a, like a baseball coach, after your team loses and he’s like: ‘Don’t worry! You’re still winners!’ Uh, that sort of feeling is, it’s what I think of when I read this.”

The same Jack picked a “positive” reaction to Scenario #2 (“diligent, hard worker”), but conceded that it was his own uncommonly high self-regard that made him feel this way and that others might see the same comment differently:

"Sure, 'cause they're not like me. I have a giant ego, so I already assume that everything that I do is diligent, hardworking and also almost perfection – so, when someone comments as such, I accept it as truth and then walk away happy. And, that's a very unique standpoint so, most people, I would assume, do not have that point of view of their own self, so I can see why they'd take it as negative: it

could seem patronizing, it could seem, uh, just dishonest, depending on who you are talking to."

Big John, male, 22, also interpreted Scenario #2 "positively", but still, could imagine how someone else may take it negatively:

"I guess, it is [negative], because it's a bold statement to say, to tell somebody that they're the hardest [working] person that you know and, at that time, if they're not feeling that about themselves, then they don't, they might not want to accept that comment. They might not want to accept that you're saying that. My friend is not, is not really making me feel better, you're just trying, it's more like you're showing me pity type of thing."

Foo, female, 60, listed being "talked down to" as a major pet peeve:

"I don't like people who are patronizing. I can't stand people who are very condescending and patronizing in their treatment... It implies that they are trying to set up a hierarchical relationship with me and I resent that. And it also implies that they're trying to manipulate a relationship with me and I resent that... People making assumptions about what I might like, what I might do, because they're basing their perceptions of me only on the physical me, without really having any kind of meaningful interaction. Um, you know, people might also be insulting because they disagreed with me or I responded in a way that did not feel was appropriate to them..."

The patronizing nature of a given statement does not reside in a fixed semantic meaning but in the position from which it is spoken. The speaker's "situation" as better, same or worse relative to the receiver's "situation" can, so to speak, make or break the "positivity" or "negativity" of meaning. This was pointed out by Xx, 21, female, who reported a pet peeve towards people who complain about light or imagined problems to people with harsher or real problems:

"I don't know if this is right, but one thing that really bothers me is someone that's, like, really smart or beautiful and they just keep thinking negative about themselves. Like, they know, I don't know, it's just... Ok, for example: let's say a friend that's, that has a fat stomach or whatever, just because she's been eating a lot lately, she felt like she's fat. Compared to my weight, she's skinny and that bothers me because you're fine, like, how, like, I don't know... It's just, 'What's wrong with you? You are fine!' Compared to other people, their weight is normal. But they're still complaining, like, they want to be thinner. That bothers me."

The same concern towards whether the sender of the message is beneath, on equal par with or above the receiver was crystallized best in reactions towards Scenario #3: the speaker's age relative to the receiver made a difference in the way the respondent was prepared to make sense of the statement. Kelly, female, 21, had a "positive" response to Scenario #3 and suggested that it would be even more positive if she heard it from a person who is younger than herself:

"If it's somebody who is younger than me and says it, I mean, that would probably be even more positive. Because if they're younger than me and they still, and they honestly don't think, like, if they thought I was their age, then I would take that as a compliment, 'cause it's like, wow, like, I'm two years older than you or whatever and I look like I'm, like, your age!"

Big John, male, 22, indicated "mixed" feelings towards Scenario #3, adding that the level of positivity would be affected by who spoke it:

"It would definitely depend on who you're talking to and if that person was either older or younger than your age. If it came from someone older, then that's when that respect issue comes in, that we were just talking about. But if it came from someone younger, I don't think that, I don't think that's as big an issue."

Sally, female, 36, had a “mixed” reaction to Scenario #3 and, at first, did not think it would matter whom the statement came from but, in the course of thinking about it out loud, changed her mind:

"Unless – it was another woman who was my age saying it to me... If there was someone really young who said that to me, I would feel just old. It would be a compliment but I'd feel old. If it was an older person saying that to me, it'd be the same thing: I think it would be a great compliment but I'd feel like, ooh, I'm just climbing the hill, I'm getting older. If it was someone who was the same age as me and maybe if it was a woman, I'd feel like, well, they're, they will know what it feels like, they're in my shoes. And so, I'd almost take it as a more honest compliment."

Quite a few respondents mentioned the relative social position of the compliment giver as a determinant of acceptability. Authority and expertise, it appears bring legitimacy to speaking from a superior position: a statement that comes across as condescending from a peer or a colleague can seem supportive and encouraging when spoken by a mentor. Kelly, female, 21, had a “mixed” reaction to Scenario #2 but said that her reception of the statement would very much depend on who spoke it:

"I think it would vary because, with my little 11-year-old brother was like: 'No, you're hardworking, Kelly!', like, I mean, I'm older than him, he probably looks up to me, so, he probably thinks that. But if my boss, like, I don't know, if my boss told me that, then I'd probably, you know, take it as a compliment. But if someone I'm working with on, like, a project told me that, I don't know... because maybe they're just trying to be nice to me."

Eleanor, female, 19, had a “mixed” reaction to Scenario #2, with a similar caveat:

“If I was speaking with my boss, then I would be very happy because the boss was trying to encourage me. But if I was talking to, like, family or a close friend, I would not be very happy.” – *What makes the difference?* “I guess because the boss is the one who is evaluating me and not friends, not the friends.”

The sentiment about being called “the most diligent, hardworking person” being more *meaningful* coming from an authority figure was asserted by at least eight respondents, who said that the compliment in Scenario #2 would sound “positive” or “even more positive”, if spoken by a boss, as opposed to anyone else. However, with authority and legitimacy comes high expectation, which may not necessarily be welcome. Chloe, female, 22, had a “mixed” reaction to Scenario #2 and added that, coming from a boss, she would take it even worse because the accolade would put more pressure on her, in her already frustrated state:

"If it was a boss, I'd probably think it was negative because I feel like they would have such high expectations, like: 'Oh, you're diligent, you're hardworking, you're intelligent!' But then, I'm like, I can't come up with, like, this proposal, or whatever it is you do at the job. So, you kind of feel bad because they have all these expectations of you and you personally don't feel like you're fulfilling them." – What would constitute a better response? "I kind of want no response... Yeah, just shut up. Nod your head or something."

Al, male, 21, with a “mixed” response to Scenario #2, also said it would sound worse coming from a boss – but only because he took the statement as a confirmation of his stupidity: "It'd probably hold more weight from a boss... Just because he's in an authority figure, just like, you're supposed to be working for that person and he says you're hardworking but he doesn't think you're intelligent."

At least one respondent referenced cultural relativity in interpreting meaning of a cryptosemic compliment. Kelly, female, 21, had a “mixed” reaction to Scenario #1 (“beautiful soul on the inside”), naming the speaker’s kind intentions to say something nice about her appearance the “positive” aspect of the statement, but also resenting the friend for using dishonesty as a means of sparing her feelings. She also pointed out that

she would not necessarily consider the compliment dishonest, if it was spoken by an individual of an older generation:

"I think it probably would vary because if it's, like, someone who is my age, then - - this might sound kind of weird -- but I think someone my age would view weight differently than someone, like, older, like my parents or my grandpa, so if they thought, like 'Oh no, you still look fine', then I'd probably believe that that's what they truly thought because they're older and they might be big, so they could think that I'm small."

Finally, relativism was illustrated in rich detail by a response to Scenario #2 from Clu, male, 34, whose formulation of meaning-making shows that what is "positive" is only defined in reference to what is "negative".

"I guess, most likely, I would take this positively. Despite the fact that they're not responding to your intelligence, per se. 'Cause you're asking – are you stupid? They're implying that due to your diligence and hard working perhaps you will come to a conclusion or a solution. That's how it can be taken. I mean, usually, the people you work with, coworkers, do have a fair idea of your abilities and things like this and there are people that you spend the whole day with, more so than even your own families, so... Well, people I deal with at work lie to each other all the time. They never say what they really think and it's really political. So, nobody would ever tell you anything like 'Yes, you're stupid' unless they're actually your friend." *[We both laugh and I ask Clu to follow up about what, specifically, is positive about this statement.]* "What's positive is that, if the person is being honest with you and even though they're focusing on your diligence and saying 'nonsense, don't worry about it!', they're at least telling you, you know, the truth, and how they feel, without necessarily emphasizing 'don't worry, you're brilliant, you'll come up with something!'. They are a person that's just in a work environment and everything. At least you know it's not a person that's talking to you in a derogative kind of way, putting you down, or saying something instead, like: 'Oh, you better come up with something, or your job is on the line!' or something else that's negative, you know? No matter what, that person's motivation, it's gonna be for a positive result, I think." – *So, intention matters?* "Intention matters, if you are actually a true friend of the person. If they're just a coworker who's friendly, which everybody has tons of, it doesn't matter, if they say something like this. 'Cause at least you're not working in a hostile environment and people are saying positive things to you."

Clu's quote is a fitting meta-illustration of the key structural property of the cryptoseme: one is actively or reactively impressed by someone or something because one harbors lowered expectations towards her/him/it. The reason given here: "At least you're not working in a hostile environment and people are saying positive things to you," betrays the expectation of being treated with less than "positivity" at one's workplace and it is relative to this sober premise that honesty and sincerity, flattering or not, are more precious than technically "nice" words spoken with indifference or false agenda. In an environment in which people routinely lie and backstab, it would take an actual friend to tell you that you are, indeed, stupid (but, at least, you are a hard worker!) In the sea of contrived smiles and hyperbolic brownnosing, that seemingly unflattering implication is the welcome morsel of honesty that brings a dose of "positivity" into the interaction.

Interpersonal Relationships: The Impact of Emotional Attachment and Trust on Meaning-making

Aside from the hierarchical positioning of social relations, we also take our horizontal relationships into consideration, when making sense of what people say to us. The question of honesty and trust has already been brought up in several quotes: one of the hard lines people take in deciding how to interpret a cryptosemic compliment is by gauging the truthfulness as well as the sincerity of the statement. And trust is measured, in large part, by the "closeness" of relationship. Eleanor, female, 19, had a "positive" reaction to Scenario #3 ("you look amazing for your age") and added that it would be

even more positively taken, if it came from good friends: "I think I'll get positive reaction [from anyone] but if I hear this from my friends, like, really close friends, I'll be more happy. Because my friends are my age and they're the ones that can share very candid. So, I think, I value their opinions more." Chad, male, 22, when elaborating on "negative" interpretation of Scenario #1 ("beautiful soul") also mentioned the qualitative value of being able to be candid and straightforward with close friends:

"Yeah, it would, it would absolutely change. I mean, if it was somebody extremely close like family or a close friend, you know, I would, I would just call them out, like "What are you talking about? You've never said these things before and that's why I hang out with you..."

Dennis, male, 23, had a "mixed" reaction to Scenario #1. When asked if his reaction would vary depending on who is speaking, he brought up (reflexively estimated) trust and respect as determining factors:

"It certainly would depend on the relationship. If they were a type of person who might tend to give a lot of backhanded compliments or something like that, I might suspect their motives were, were maybe not totally good, but I have a feeling if this is a friend that I'm catching up with – choosing to catch up with – it'd probably be somebody I really respect and would, would appreciate their comment."

Ben, male, 23, with a "positive" response to Scenario #2, when asked if it makes a difference who spoke the compliment, replied:

"If I never really met this person before and they told me I'm the most diligent, hardworking person they knew, I would think that was kind of 'bs', but if it was somebody that I knew and worked with often, then I'd be, it would feel more positive... I mean, it depends on if I felt that I have shown this person, you know, diligence and hard work from me, I guess."

For the other two scenarios, interestingly, the most objective and, hence, the most honest speaker emerged as the Simmelian “stranger”: the independent observer who has no stake in the situation and, therefore has no reason to lie, flatter or insult (Simmel 1971:149-149). Dee, female, 21, had a “mixed” reaction to Scenario #1. When asked whether she would feel the same about it no matter who it came from, she replied:

"It probably would be different. With a friend, I would expect that kind of response. Yeah, it would be more expected with someone I knew very well, or someone I had been around a lot, as opposed to maybe a boss or, or someone that didn't know me as well. It would be way more flattering and I'd actually probably forget about the whole weight thing." – *So, it'd be more flattering if it came from a person whom you didn't know very well?* "Yeah... Because, just because it was a family member or a friend, I would expect them to say that. You know, I would expect them to say, like: 'Don't worry about your weight! You're a beautiful person on the inside.' Like, I kind of feel like they're supposed to say that. Because they're such a good friend of mine or a family member of mine – as opposed to somebody who didn't know me – I don't necessarily hold them to that same, you know, standard."

Big John, male, 22, had a "mixed" reaction to Scenario #1. When asked if his reaction would depend on the person, he answered affirmatively:

"I think it definitely depends of the relationship you have with somebody. I guess when you get compliments from strangers it tends to mean, it tends to mean more because, like, a friend would tell you something to make you feel better but a stranger doesn't have to do that, so when you receive a compliment, you might feel a little better about yourself." – *Because it's more likely to be honest?* "Yeah, exactly."

Angel, female, 21, had a “negative” reaction to Scenario #1. When asked if her reaction would vary depending on her relationship with the speaker, she guessed that her take-away could only get more negative, the less she knew a person:

"I think if it was someone I was less close with, I would take it even more negatively, actually. Because, you know, you would think that your friend was gonna be honest with you, and the fact that you are meeting with someone you don't know as well and they're like: 'Oh, you know, you, don't worry about it, you have this beautiful soul,' I would be, like: 'Ouch!', like, 'Geez!', you know? I think I'd take it worse."

Shumy, male, 36, had a "mixed" reaction to Scenario #3 (mostly positive) and suggested that, coming from a stranger, the statement becomes more objective:

"Yeah, it would be different because people you know, if they're fond of you, usually wouldn't say you look terrible. So, a person on the street, like in this situation, it gives it much more weight than if you ask your friend. You know, how many friends are gonna say, like: 'Oh, you look awful. You need to go see a plastic surgeon,' or something like that... [Strangers] don't have to tiptoe around your feelings."

Be it positive or negative impression, the statement became was more meaningful when imagined being spoken by a stranger because the respondent expected a more neutral truth from an impartial commentator than from a close relation.

To each of us, some people's opinions and judgments count a little bit, some count more and others mean the world. This is a socio-psycho-cognitive heuristic Mullaney (1999) calls "mental weighing", whereby we, the observer of an act / receiver of a message, gauge the signification and the significance of that act / message on the basis of what we understand about who the agent / speaker is. In other words, one's own a priori assessment of the speaker's identity serves as a filter towards how one perceives the speaker's intentions and interprets the speaker's words. We have seen respondents emphasize special trust or special mistrust towards compliments from strangers. There were others, who asserted that the meaning of the compliment, and their consequent emotional reaction to it, would be very different if the statement was delivered by a love

interest / romantic partner, as opposed to any other social relation. This is consistent with Wolfson's "bulge theory" (1988), the term referencing the U-shaped distribution of speech events across the spectrum of different social distances in interpersonal relationships, the two extremes (intimates and strangers) receiving equal amounts of speech, with the dominant majority of speech exchanges being concentrated in the middle of the distribution, where the "middle-of-the-road" social relationships are concentrated. Those are non-intimate relationships with status-equal friends, acquaintances and colleagues and, unlike communication between lovers or strangers, where "the status and therefore the predictability of the responses is known" (Gass and Selinker 2001:247), interactions with those we know but are not very close with, carry a higher degree of uncertainty and require more verbal communication to establish understanding¹⁹ because "[n]on-deictic description becomes necessary in the absence of common ground" (Hanks 1992:69-70). The extreme closeness with intimates and the extreme remoteness with strangers, though opposites on the social distance continuum, both involve defined roles with defined trust (or mistrust) parameters, which are based on many shared understandings of and expectations towards each other, which in turn translates into language full of implicature, cryptosemic praise making a prime candidate.

¹⁹ Levels of trust and willingness to cooperate have a negative relationship with the amount of speech needed for a clear verbal exchange. Per Grice's "maxim of relevance" (a sub-condition of his umbrella "cooperation principle" (Grice 1989)), conversationalists ideally avoid burdening each other with excess information, vocalizing only the relevant, whereas when the spirit between the exchangers of a message is "not cooperative but adversarial, all of [the] missing information must be stated explicitly, which is why we have the torturous language of legal contracts with their 'party of the first part' and 'all rights under said copyrights and all renewals thereof subject to the terms of the Agreement'" (Pinker, 2007: 229).

In-Group / Out-group: Social Membership and Meaning-making

The importance and weight we attribute to cryptosemic praise offered by a stranger is markedly different from the way we receive the same statement from a person we know well, because, while we expect subjective feedback from our loved ones, we anticipate a special kind objectivity from a stranger whose “membership within the group involves being both outside it and confronting it” (Simmel 1971:144). However, by the same logic, in-group / out-group dynamics can also work against “the stranger”, when it comes down to “positive” vs. “negative” reception of a certain kinds of messages.

Certain jokes, for instance, are only positively received by in-members from other in-members of a given subculture and if the same exact joke is told by a person unaffiliated with the group, it goes from “hilarious and on target” to “unfunny and offensive” in a blink of an eye. Cryptosemic compliments are subject to the same potential for polarized interpretation depending on “identity attribution” (Mullaney 1999) between the conversationalists. Recall the opening example of being told that you are “really educated and well-spoken for an American”. Whether it was spoken by a compatriot or an alien makes all the difference. A fellow member of one’s national “in-group” is perceived to speak with legitimacy and authenticity about shared culture but the outsider who does not have the lived, “in-group” perspective on a nation and its citizens is perceived as judging rather than commiserating. Coming from a fellow American, even if one does not find the statement too complimentary, at least, it can be accepted as a democratic debate among equals. On the other hand, it is hard to imagine that many Americans would be positively receptive towards the same sentence delivered by a

foreign national: even with the well-meaning tone, it is hard to ignore the “us vs. them” attitude. The same verbal expression assumes different implicature depending on whether the speaker is a part of the same (implicitly stereotyped²⁰) group as the receiver.

Tajfel’s “social identity theory” (1969) suggests that personal identity is, to a high degree, rooted in group identity (which helps explain why we take slurs based on stereotypes *personally*) and that, as members of various sub-cultures, we feel proprietary towards our ways of self expression, such as vernacular or slang, the exclusive shared decoding practices of which reinforces group identity salience (Giles et al. 1987). Sensitivity to flippantly co-opted language of a sub-cultural group by outsiders was mentioned by several respondents, like Dee, female, 21, who was answering the question of whether she practices any particular sensitivities when speaking with others:

"Well, [it] usually depends on the race. If I'm talking to other black people or other African Americans, sometimes we use the "n-word" and it's ok, whereas if I was talking, if I was within a group of white or Caucasian kids or just non-black kids, I would never even use the word and if they used it, I would be offended, as much of a double standard as that is... I do it... to also protect myself too. Because, just the way I was raised, I automatically, I'm gonna feel incensed in some way, if they were to say it to me. Even if they didn't even mean it that way – if they're just using it the same way my black friends would use it, but still, they're not black, so, I'm still gonna get angry about it. "

²⁰ It is another of life’s ironies that we must rely on stereotyping in our everyday decision-making though, when the tables are turned, being stereotyped feels absolutely horrible. Stereotypes insult our individualism, reducing us to a predictable set of characteristics, robbing us of agency that comes with “owning” one’s personality and destiny. Stereotypes (Lippmann, 1997) become viral in conversation, drawing attention to usually negative elements, blindsiding others, and affecting selective perceptions with the general public (Noelle-Neumann 1993:143). We hate them as we instinctively sense that they powerfully shape the way we are perceived, as “[f]or the most part we do not first see, and then define, we define first and then see” (Lippmann 1997:54-55). “Positive” stereotypes can be just as unwelcome. First of all, their “positivity” can be highly questionable (I cannot begin to count how many “gentlemen”, upon hearing that I am Russian, feel the necessity to praisefully inform me that Russian women make the best brides, followed by a listing of all the fabulous services Russian wives allegedly render so well for their men that sets them apart from less accommodating nationals). Secondly, “positive” stereotypes are just as sweepingly biased as negative stereotypes, creating their own sets of indignities and pressures, as can be attested to by members of “model minorities” who must contend with being expected to de facto excel at everything, exhibit the most stellar, selfless work ethic and outperform everyone else (Wu, 2002).

Dee is trying to make sure that she does not provoke offensive language from others by setting a false example as she cannot take the risk of trusting the non-black kids to understand that it is appropriate for her but not for them to use the “n-word”. This discourse strategy reveals the catastrophic futility of expecting others to understand that racial slurs are not like regular nouns with fixed semantic value – all value and power of those insults lies in the pragmatic assumptions underlying them, otherwise, those words simply would not exist, as they do not correspond with anything objectively grounded in the “real world”. The utilization of these words by those against whom they have been historically used as weapons is an act of reclaiming power in the face of oppression, and not a demand for special treatment, as it is frequently framed in much of national, public conversation. In my study, “race” was the most frequently mentioned “sensitive” social topic in response to the question “Are you concerned about offending others in conversation?” (with “politics” and “religion” tied for the second most anxiety-provoking conversation theme). The mention of race came in tandem with expressions of confusion about appropriate vs. inappropriate racial terminology, as well as who is allowed to use it. Kelly, female, 21, when asked whether she practices any particular sensitivities when speaking with people said that usually she does not but, in some instances, she wonders about certain words:

"It just happened last week-end. I went out to eat with my boyfriend and the waiter we had was my boyfriend's friend. And we're both white and he's black. And I was telling him some kind of story – we went to see a comedian at Rutgers – and they said, one of the things that comedian was saying was: the only white guy who can say the 'n-word' is Charlie Sheen because he calls, like, objects the 'n-word', so he's like: 'yeah, this guys isn't trying to be racist, he calls everything the 'n-word'!' So, like, he's trying to be funny about it. But yeah, so I was trying to

tell my boyfriend's friend – his name is Larry – I was trying to tell Larry the joke and I was, I didn't know whether or not I should say, like, 'the n-word' or if I should, you know, actually say the word in front of him. But I ended up just saying it, 'cause, I mean, I said the 'n-word' and I said the actual word, I said them both. So, and Larry didn't seem to care at all... He knew I wasn't trying to be rude to him or anything. I was just trying to tell him what the comedian said and it was, I don't know, it was a funny joke, so."

This respondent senses that something about the joke may be off-putting to dark-skinned individuals but does not understand why (since she perceives the joke as objectively funny), and in choosing to share it, shows a prioritization of semantic meaning over the pragmatic assumptions beneath the words. If Larry's attitude towards the "n-word" was anything like the penultimate respondent's, he may have suffered a silent insult, with neither of the well-meaning light-skinned friends having any idea about it. But the bewilderment over appropriate vs. inappropriate racial and ethnic vocabulary is not exclusive to any one group, as diverse members occupying the "melting pot" of American society struggle to keep up with each other's terminologies. Sally, female, 36, expressed both, a personal sensitivity towards certain racial terms as well as confusion about properly naming other racial categories (when asked whether she practices sensitivity in speaking with others):

"I think I'm pretty sensitive about referring to people in certain racial categories because I definitely want to get that accurate. Like, for instance, I don't know, you know, some people, I think, I think I tend to say, I mean, most of the time, I'm pretty comfortable but, you know, you just never know, like, well, when should I use 'African American' versus when should I say 'black'? When should I say 'Hispanic American', when someone might say, well, 'Latino' is more accurate or Mexican or their country of origin, you know, things like... Oh! Back to the other question [about pet peeves]! I think I get offended when people – if you want to talk about racial categories – I do get slightly annoyed if people say, use the word 'Oriental' or 'yellow'... That tends to be, like, the most sensitive [topic], you know, because I'm particularly sensitive to that."

The confusion over correct terminology, coupled with a fear of being offensive and appearing ignorant was enough to motivate some respondents to reconsider speaking altogether to avoid putting their foot in their mouth. Angel, female, 21, expressed such an insecurity:

"I think, like, the obvious one is, like, race... I'm 21 years old and I still don't know how to approach, like, certain conversations. Whether you say 'black' or 'African American'. Or even, like, with homosexuality nowadays, like, I don't know if they wanna be called 'gay' or, like, they want to be called 'homosexuals'. You kind of step back and, like, things that you wanna say, you pull away from [them] because you don't want to offend anyone. So, I definitely feel, like, uncomfortable in those scenarios because I'm not sure what to say. Half the time, things that I wanted to say, I just won't say at all because I don't know how to say it."

Angel's answer hints at something that will be discussed as the key danger of cryptosemic communication in Chapter Six: social discomfort towards controversial, "face threatening social themes" leads to silence (and possible silencing of others) rather than fostering dialog or debate.

Given the overwhelming uncertainties about how we are supposed to address each other as well as what social topics are "safe" and, conversely, "unsafe" to mention in "mixed company", it was not surprising to see a concerted effort by some respondents to consciously designate rules and principles by which to navigate public communication. John K., male, 22, spoke about having "filters":

"I am almost always worried about offending people. And, I don't have any rules but I just try to consciously filter. 'Cause sometimes we all just have filter problems. That's the best thing I can say. It's a conscious process, like, I don't have rules, you just, like, 'Should I say this? Ok, you passed the second test'... Just

being conscious about what I'm saying. And just maintaining some political correctness... Don't sound like an ignorant bastard."

Shumy, male, 36, coming from a professional background that called for extra attention to language, indicated a very high commitment to carefully worded verbalizations in reference to vulnerable social groups:

"I think absolutely! I think that's part of the politically correct environment in America, especially at universities. And, being that I work at two universities, you have to be very careful. And, especially, I work in the disability services office, so, you have to, there's a whole language about the way you refer to disabilities these days. You can't say a 'blind person' anymore – you have to say 'a person with a visual disability' or 'a person with a visual impairment'. And the whole, the strategy is to put the person before the disability – so you wouldn't say, you wouldn't say 'a deaf person', you'd say 'a person with hearing impairment. Even, obviously 'midget', you know, is not a friendly term anymore. A lot of people think you say 'little people', but 'little people' is putting the people after, so you actually say 'a person of short stature', things like that."

Despite his fluency in politically correct terminology, however, Shumy admitted to having to lower his standards and expectations in speaking with people outside the linguistically sophisticated environment of his workplace:

"You know, around my friends, not so much, although sometimes my friends say things that, like, just bother me and stuff, so I do have to say stuff sometimes. And those cases would be, you know – and there is a campaign for it these days – you'll hear people, you'll see the campaign, like, don't use the word 'gay' to, like, say something is stupid, you know? I have gay friends, my boss in there is a gay man, so it's like – and I'm fond of these people! So when somebody says something is stupid when they call it 'gay', I'm like, you know, that's not really cool anymore! But I don't wanna be someone who comes off to my own friends as holier-than-thou or anything, so, again, you have to pick your spots."

Shumy did not necessarily relax his language around his friends, but also did not confront their word choices because he did not want to appear judgmental: this discourse

strategy allows him to stay true to personal principles without having to suffer a loss of face. Goffman notes the subtleness of signification in spoken interaction:

“An unguarded glance, a momentary change in tone of voice, an ecological position taken or not taken, can drench a talk with judgmental significance. Therefore... here is no occasion of talk so trivial as not to require each participant to show serious concern with the way in which he handles himself and the others present” (Goffman 1967:33).

Consistent with the above observation, many respondents indicated that they censor themselves in public interactions. However, as already seen in several answers, for some, censorship is not practiced equally in all situations: people watch their language around those who may be offended, but there are others, with whom they do not put on the same filters. Emily, female, 21, for instance, said offending others is a consideration, but not each time:

"I guess I just do it person to person. Like, I know, I have some friends that are really not concerned about sensitivity, like, they'll joke about anything, race, religion, they don't care, they're not offended. But I have other friends that are really sensible [sic]... Like, my Mom really hates it when people say, like, 'that's gay' or 'retarded' and so I don't say those things very much 'cause, you know, she raised me but I never say them around her. But the other people, there can be, like, whole topics they won't talk about. Like, a lot of my friends are kind of exploring their religion right now. You know, they were raised in whatever religion but they're not really sticking with it, and so, like, I can talk to them about that sort of thing but I have, like, a friend who is a devout Mormon and, at some point, the conversation is just not going anywhere. So, don't go down that path!"

It appears that while most individuals care about offending others with the way they speak,²¹ there is a marked difference in how “offensiveness” is conceived of and

²¹ In my study (n=39), 32 respondents said “yes” to the question about whether or not they worry about offending others when speaking, while only 7 respondents said “no” (and two or three of those respondents

who is expected to be responsible for it. Some avoid broaching “sensitive” topics or using “loaded” terminology around those with a “chip on their shoulder,” as a means of sparing feelings and avoiding conflict. Others believe the same words and phrasings to be ethically problematic and, hence avoid using them altogether: in the company of those who may be insulted by them, as well as around those who may not care about such things. It seems that the former group takes a cultural ritual approach to sensitive language (i.e. use when acceptable, avoid when inappropriate), while the latter group is driven by either empathetic relating (e.g. “this language is hurtful and I would not want to be spoken to this way”) or strict adherence to principle (i.e. believing that it is “wrong” to speak these words, no matter what). It is not yet clear what accounts for these differences and a detailed inquiry would be necessary before drawing any further conclusions.

Late American Modernity: The Role of Positivity in the Age of Ontological Insecurity

Though contextual pragmatics account for much of the variation in cryptosemic expression and the interpretation thereof, other socio-historical factors give rise to cryptosemic communication as well. As I will demonstrate in Chapter Five, humans are subject to cognitive propensities grounded in thinking of things in terms of polarized pairs: us/them, pro/con, friend/foe, good/bad, beautiful/ugly, etc. Such tendency is perpetuated by what Zerubavel terms “the rigid mind”: a type of mindset characterized by an “unyielding, obsessive commitment to the mutual exclusivity of mental entities”

conceded that there they usually do not censor themselves around others, but there are certain situations and people they are willing to adjust their “filters” for).

(Zerubavel 1991:34). Such a way of thinking, Zerubavel argues, is likely to arise at times of social instability and unrest – as a cognitive mechanism aimed to protect and maintain the status quo (55). Although socially acceptable backhanded compliments are not a new phenomenon, it appears that they flourish particularly well in the climate of late-twentieth-century American modernity because at no other time (and, perhaps, in no other place) have people been faced with more uncertainty about who they are and “where they are going in life.” Giddens characterized the late modern period as marked by “ontological insecurity” (i.e. existential anxiety brought on by increased exposure to “anomie”) and the ensuing “fateful moments” (phases of reevaluation of one’s beliefs, values and priorities) that happen with more frequency than ever before (Giddens 1991). The main emphasis of our culture is on individuality and personal responsibility which, apart from its attractive implications for personal freedoms, accounts for a major instability of the self, considering the astonishing variety of constantly shifting and morphing ideologies, lifestyles, identities and products to choose from and associate oneself with. Similarly, Swidler (1986) introduced the notion of culture as a “toolkit” which incorporates different (often dissimilar) values and beliefs and contended that in “settled lives” (i.e. periods of stability and tranquility), people rarely need to question their thus-far-accumulated solid set of cultural systems of belief, but those who are experiencing an “unsettled life” (i.e. a moment of crisis of considerable magnitude) develop a need to re-examine their ways of life and begin to dig around haphazardly in the larger cultural toolkit, looking for ways to cope. I suggest that the metaphorical toolkit of clashing cultural values is also summoned in instances of usage of cryptosemes, when a person experiences anxiety in references to face threatening social themes and

reaches for something to say that is “safe” or ameliorative but sounds relevant – without regard for substantive logic, but with particular attention to *tonal* and *attitudinal* consistency. Several implications follow.

First, in light of the ontological insecurity in the face of looming sense of normlessness, one’s top priority may be to squelch the anxiety by seeking out stability and consistency with one’s surroundings. This can be realized by putting the highest premium on the *tone* of “positivity”, both, as a “sender” as well as a “receiver” of a given message. Much scientific and pseudo-scientific research has been dedicated to the notion of “positive thinking” as a tool for a more well-rounded, balanced, self-confident identity. This is evidenced by the staggering popularity of a slew of “self-help” manuals touting the power of positive thinking, the most notable of which is Rhonda Byrne’s *The Secret*: the best-seller that claims that the power of positive thinking is the way to achieve *every* aspect of success one could hope for, cautioning that thinking negatively will, conversely, bring on sickness, poverty and disaster. Western Modernity sets a fertile ground for the self-help genre of literature because life trajectory and purpose are no longer as clearly defined for us by social institutions as before and the responsibility for finding them falls squarely on our own hands. Positive thinking as a self-cure seems to provide an excellent heuristic because it taps into the above-mentioned cognitive tendency to discriminate in favor of optimistic thinking and reintroduces a sense of agency over one’s own lot. Indeed, Americans, as a nation, are quite preoccupied with “positivity” as one of the central qualities in professional advancement as well as personal relationships and those who cannot muster up enough “positivity” are frequently urged to “get an attitude adjustment”.

The stress on “positivity” as a personal responsibility of the receiver of the message is manifest in several already quoted answers and it is brought up again, this time as the recommended social attitude / outlook on life as recipe for smooth, conflict-free social interaction. Buck, male, 32, claimed “positivity” as a rule-of-thumb in “sensitive” social situations:

"Yes! Be positive!.. Well, yeah, you have to try and put a positive spin on it... Sometimes you have to tell people what they want to hear... It depends on the severity of the situation. You know, I mean, weight gain. If somebody gains 10 pounds, I mean, you can be a little bit, you can be a little bit, if somebody gains 10 pounds, it's not a life or death situation, it's not a life changing event. If somebody loses a job, if somebody has a life changing decision that they're trying to make and which they made and they want feedback that tells them that they made the right decision -- that's when you're gonna tell them what they want to hear."

Dennis, male, 26, was able to list an array of deliberate discourse strategies he employs as a community organizer, positivity being mentioned as the attitude with which best to approach people:

"Well, in my work, I have often had to deal with the media and that has trained me – also just in politics in general – to be very careful what I say. So, I just, in general, always think about the person I'm speaking to, thinking about sort of their perspective, their loyalties and trying not to touch on any sensitive subjects unless I really think it's the right thing to do and want to go ahead with that. So, I try to be careful with my words and, sort of, focus on positive things, you know, definitely change the conversation topic, if it's something that I don't think is beneficial for us to talk about, but I don't have any hard and fast tricks."

One may also suggest that the practice of avoiding painful social topics coupled with the high prioritization of *tone* over substance of the message is a manifestation of the modern yearning for “good news” in the midst of a seemingly disintegrating moral

and cultural fiber of the society at large. The looming threat of anomie prompts us to grasp at any straw that brings a sense of hope and instant gratification to our unstable lives and identities. This may help explain why some women do not sense the underlying insult or logical discrepancy within cryptosemic compliments about the body / beauty ideal: they may be simply content to hear *anything* “positive” at all, in the tidal wave of confusing, contradictory reports of frightening health statistics, warnings of epidemic, incessant critical objectification and in contrast to everything else that is currently being said about the female form²².

Not to be overlooked in this equation is the already mentioned modern preoccupation with “correct” political and ideological attitude as a pillar of upstanding citizenship. Political correctness, a thoroughly modern phenomenon²³, is a manifestation of the developing social need to convey an attitude, an ideological alliance with others – by tweaking the superficial form (tone, semantics) rather than the pragmatic context / subtext of the message in order to reflect a more progressive take on “old” ways of thinking. Politically correct terminology has been widely criticized and lampooned for the absurdity to which it can be taken – because the “new and improved” terms are frequently built on the same “old”, offensive assumptions. For instance, changing the term for homosexual orientation from “gay” to “queer” appears to constitute a favorable substitute, but, essentially, it is a swapping of one euphemistic nickname that means “happy” for another euphemistic nickname that means “strange” or “abnormal”, which is

²² Objectification of women emphasizes the “male gaze” as priority over self-esteem. To borrow from the terminology of social behaviorism, the “me” becomes a higher priority to “I” (Mead 1967 [1934]). If women are, indeed, socialized to value the “me” over the “I”, it makes sense that so many seem to welcome expressions of appraisal of their appearance and other “assets”.

²³ The term “political correctness” has been perused by many a nation, notably appearing in Chairman Mao Zedong’s “Little Red Book”, but, here, I draw on the American version of the term, one implying a striving to use “proper” terminology when speaking about controversial social issues or controversial social minorities.

not a semantic improvement to the label. This is problematic because these “new” terms do not eradicate the antecedent practice of *marking* of the populations they attempt to honor with better names. A truly egalitarian society would not need to differentiate between the sexual orientation of its members, or to implement euphemisms for the word “homosexual” in the first place. Positive cryptosemes are guilty of the same sin of marking: either by naming the “deficiency” (e.g. “you look great for your age”) or by conspicuously avoiding of the object / topic of taboo (e.g. “you are a beautiful soul on the inside” deflects the attention from having to comment on the receiver’s physical appearance).

“Hot” polarized social topics can summon anxiety and spark a need to make a political stand or an ideological commitment, but cryptosemes provide a shortcut, not only from the serious consideration these issues demand, but also from the anxiety of having to redefine / readjust one’s social identity each time a complex social topic is introduced. They serve as mediators for the cognitive dissonance we experience in modern times in terms of the conflict of *who I am* versus *whom I should be* – the rift between ideal culture and real culture, if you will. Socially ingrained schemata (DiMaggio 2002) are difficult to trespass: despite the worldly views we may develop owing to our education and personal growth, we all remain products and propagators of cultural double standards in some way. Modern Western women, for instance, have reached a historical point of stalemate between strong pulls of patriarchal values still heavily infused into their socialization and democratic values of the ideal culture they have also been brought up to subscribe to intellectually. The body / beauty politic is just one of the many role strains women struggle to reconcile. This frustration is captured

well in a quote by activist Dana Densmore responding to the popular view that the act of cosmetic beautification helps cultivate women's self-esteem: "Somehow it always just looked painted, harsh, worse than ever, and yet real life fell so far short of the ideals already burned into our consciousness that the defeat was bitter too, and neither the plain nor the painted solution was satisfactory" (quoted in Peiss 1999:261). This statement points to the driving force behind the utilizations of cryptosemes: one may consciously acknowledge that cosmetic make-up is a "bondage", an artifact of an oppressive history, an imposition on women's liberties – that the bare, unpainted face should be "enough" to be beautiful in itself – but, at once, cannot truly believe it because the idea clashes with the social expectations one has internalized throughout life.

As a result, many women find themselves in a lose / lose situation: if they want to look "beautiful", they must feel shame for conforming to ridiculous social standards and if they wish to make a stand against these archaic values, they do so at the price of feeling less than socially desirable (and resenting themselves for feeling this way). Cryptosemes provide relief to this dissonance by allowing one to express a "positive" attitude towards any number of different types of beauty, while, burying other, not-so-politically-correct presuppositions about female beauty in the unspoken implicature within the praise.

Loaded Concepts and Meta-Conflicts: the World Is a Cryptoseme

As if communication was not cumbersome enough, the "tools" of communication – the words we use and the conceptual suppositions behind those words – can pave the foundation for cryptosemic trouble even before the sentence constructed. There exist, for

instance, widely utilized words that present a contradiction by their mere existence. It is a near impossibility, for instance, to overhear a very wealthy person use the word “classy” to describe a thing, an event or a person. This is not something one encounters because, to members of the highest socio-economic layers of a given society, using the term “classy” (or referring to “class” in any form) is considered in the utmost poorest taste possible. Although the colloquial word “classy” means “of high class” (generally used as an evaluation of impressive glamour or elevated taste), it is perused exclusively by less-than-upper-crust citizens who do not realize that talking about class is the un-classiest thing one can do. The act of utilizing the term, automatically disqualifies one of any lofty pretensions of belonging in said class. This is characteristic of the global culture of the elite: to be very rich means to never talk about how rich one is: it is supposed to be effortlessly self-evident and “natural” (i.e. wealth and social position are a “birthright”). Bourdieu theorizes this point in the description of “symbolic capital” (1993), an almost ethereal quality of entitlement claimed by members of the privileged classes as “a form of power that is not perceived as power but as legitimate demands for recognition, deference, obedience, or the services of others” (Swartz 1997:43). Members of the proverbial “99 percent” of the population who utilize the word “classy” commit the unthinkable faux pas of the “marking” of the superior social status in speech, drawing uncomfortable attention to the taboo of class privilege and, thusly, betraying the speakers’ pedestrian “outsidership” of this special club.²⁴

Such is the paradoxical nature of many of our popular cultural conventions. Certain things are seen as “real” and “legitimate” only if they remain veiled in silence. As

²⁴ Fans of Chuck Palahniuk’s book “Fight Club” (1996) or David Fincher’s same titled film adaptation of it (1999), know that the first rule of “Fight Club” is: “Never talk about Fight Club!”

mentioned before, “marking” something implies abnormality or un-naturalness, and some social conditions must be natural and normal to carry socially symbolic weight. High socio-economic status can be one of those instances: “nobility” is tied to biological, historical and geographical circumstance and the purity of this identity becomes compromised if extraneous factors enter into it. Essentially, cultural expectations tied to achieved and ascribed statuses are, again, the driving force behind determining whether or not a person’s social position is “true”, “authentic” or valuable.

Some words boast a high potential for unintentional condescension and superiority, by virtue of, once again, “marking” something that would be much more modest to leave unspecified. The words “help”, “charity” and “rescue” fall under this category: though these words signify good intentions and heroic deeds, they are also self-righteous and auto-congratulatory, when spoken in description of oneself. “Help”, for example, seems like an innocuous enough word, but its pragmatic context makes it problematic, when used in situations, in which the “helpful” act being performed is either not at all helpful or is an act that should, by all logic, be considered a person’s responsibility in the first place. We have all had experiences with “helpful” friends and family who would deliver, as the Russian expression goes, “a bear’s service” (i.e. no favor at all and most likely a nuisance), but framed it as if they are contributing an indispensable service one should feel grateful for. An even more painful scenario is when a partner offers to “help” with something that is her / his job or duty as much as the other person’s. “Helping” implies having the upper hand, the authority and the privilege to be dispensing favors – a completely different role than owning up to one’s share of the responsibility in the task.

The implicit power asymmetries involved in giving and receiving help are, according to Tannen (2007), what repels men (who, as a gender, are socialized to prize independence and self-sufficiency as a weighty measure of respectability) from accepting instruction or directions:

“When you offer information, the information itself is the message. But the fact that you have the information, and the person you are speaking to doesn’t, also sends a metamessage of superiority. If relations are inherently hierarchical, then the one who has more information is framed as higher up on the ladder by virtue of being more knowledgeable and competent” (Tannen 2007: 62).

Forced / pressured helpfulness, however naively well-intentioned, is a patronizing gesture of domination, not coincidentally, practiced by members of nations with known histories of imperialistic tendencies.

A dramatic example of the macro-level culture of “charity-as-industry” is the tragicomic story of the KONY 2012 viral movie, conceived by wide-eyed missionary youth who returned from Uganda shocked by what they learned about Joseph Kony, the infamous megalomaniac warlord best known for kidnapping hundreds of underage girls into sex slavery and capturing and training massive armies of child soldiers to fight his “holy” ethnic purification wars. The project was produced by the religious organization “Invisible Children Inc.” (the suspiciously high production value of also carries the stamp of military funding). Despite its instant viral popularity, with over one hundred million views on YouTube, the film provoked a hailstorm of backlash from scholars and social commentators around the world, especially those from African nations.²⁵ The feedback

²⁵ More analytical reviews of KONY 2012 can be found at: <http://blogs.independent.co.uk/2012/03/07/stop-kony-yes-but-dont-stop-asking-questions/> and

was so quick and brutal that a mere ten days after the film's release, the face of the KONY 2012 movement, the film's creator and star, Jason Russell, was arrested for obscene, wild public behavior widely believed to be an outcome of a psychological breakdown. Seemingly good and pure intentions to "help" were received as a yet another artifact of what has now been dubbed the "White Savior Industrial Complex." Ugandans did not seem pleased by the implication that it is up to the great white Christians to sweep in and "rescue" them from a problem that, in part, was created by Western involvement in the first place. Such obviously condescending gestures of "good will" are not likely to be received with gratitude because they come at the expense of disenfranchising the very people they claim to care about, essentially *denying them agency* in their own situation.

Another example of a cryptosemic word can be witnessed in the recent trend of talking about "rescuing" animals to describe the process of adopting pets from shelters. Framing this act as a "rescue" implies more than simply bringing an animal into one's home: one saves a life, performs a good deed, makes the world a better place. More starkly yet, each year at Thanksgiving, the President of the United States ceremoniously "pardons" a turkey bird, which is a cringe-worthy spectacle for those who perceive the condescending implicature. The symbolic act of "pardoning" implies forgiving and redeeming someone from incurring punishment for committing an offense. If one were not familiar with this cherished American tradition, one could mistakenly get the impression that the turkey was on trial and the President graciously let it "off the hook" for its crimes.

The above are examples of words encompassing dissonance between two mutually exclusive cultural posits. On the one hand, charity is a tremendous character trait appreciated universally, as well as being one of the cornerstones of the American value system. On the other hand, bragging about one's "goodness" shines negative light upon one's character because modesty is an inalienable component of the Judeo-Christian notion of goodness (the proverbial "good Samaritan" remains nameless for a reason...) One explanation for why we are so keen on our "rescues" and "pardons" is because the current cultural emphasis on self promotion, coupled with the modern sentimentalism towards stories of "everyday heroes", eclipse the other premium value in the American cultural toolbox: that of modesty and humility. And so, some of our most entrenched cultural concepts and prescriptions for ethics are rotten with internal contradictions that, by their very definitions, create impossible ideals of character and behavior to aspire to. This chapter discussed the pervasiveness of such contradictions all around us; the next chapter is dedicated to addressing the dissonance within.

Chapter Five. The Cognition of Cryptosemic Communication: Structural Elements.

“Do I contradict myself? Very well then I contradict myself (I am large, I contain multitudes.)”

– Walt Whitman (“Song of Myself”, 1855)

Although it is presented as a poetic metaphor, Whitman’s proclamation describes the mind’s capacity to be “large” enough to “contain multitudes” of clashing ideas and beliefs. So far, the cryptosemic compliment has been defined and explained as popularized praise erected on biased cultural normative expectations and presumptions. Cultural analysis remains the focal point of this thesis, but culture is not a purely social phenomenon: its foundations are rooted in the psychological and the cognitive labor of the mind.

In this chapter, I explore two separate structural mechanisms of the cryptoseme. First, I present a semiotic model that diagrams the progression of term substitution within the cryptosemic compliment, i.e. the process of re-direction of attention from one’s presumed defects to something else that is “positive”. Second, I initiate a theoretical discussion towards separating the notion of culture into conscious (deliberate) and unconscious (automatic) mental systems and spaces. The aim is to highlight the automatic, formulaic nature of the cognitive dynamics involved in producing socio-cultural associations and to stress the importance of proper accreditation of causalities: there is deliberate, principled bigotry and unconscious, incidental bigotry and, if we are to

battle the societal dysfunction of bigotry effectively, it is imperative to identify and methodologically develop this distinction.

The Cognitive Logic of Cryptosemic Expressions

The Semiotic Square

Although our perceptions and understandings of the world are shaped by internalization of socio-cultural concepts through primary and secondary socialization (Berger and Luckmann 1966), humans have cognitive predispositions towards employing fairly primitive heuristics to better navigate our social habitat, poetically described by Gusfield as “a forest of symbols on the edge of a jungle of fact” (1981:51). One such meaning-making heuristic is the perceptive splitting of the world into binary opposites. One cause of this is developmental necessity. The need to learn to see, to identify objects from the overwhelming soup of sensory experience is to acquire the skill to visually distinguish figure from ground, negative space from positive: in essence, to focus.

Duality is inherent in the fundamental neurological structures of information processing, predisposing us to polarized decision making and setting us up for cognitive dissonance. Antecedent to everything else is the bio-neurological structure of the brain: it consists of two (polar: left and right) hemispheres responsible for separate cognitive and physical specializations (Edwards 1989). Duality rules our nervous system as all stimulus is processed by the brain via a two-channel operation: very roughly speaking, the input is simultaneously relayed by the sensory thalamus to the cerebral cortex (responsible for logical, case-specific assessment and deliberation), and to the amygdala (in charge of

lightening-fast emotional processing, such as response danger with fear) (LeDoux 1994). As immediate judgment calls are sometimes necessary for staying alive and safe, the amygdala releases an instantaneous, unconscious (LeDoux 1996:17) emotional verdict of “pass” or “fail” – in terms of whether to brace oneself for a safe or a dangerous situation: “evolution has selected and conserved the neural machinery that supports instinctive ‘good or bad’ binary thinking, largely because of its survival value” (Wood and Petriglieri 2005). For this practical reason, the automatic emotional response takes less time to register in our “gut” (Gigerenzer 2007) than the logically devised conclusion of the cerebral cortex takes to register in our conscious mind. This reductive signal of “yay” or “nay” pumped out by our intuition before the conscious faculties make sense of the situation, establishes a cognitive prejudice towards dialectic thinking.

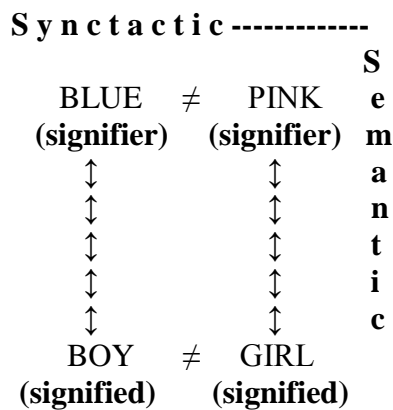
Binary thinking dominates perceptual compartmentalization of the surrounding social experience. From the early developmental psychological necessity to separate the “self” from the “other” emerge the next group categorizations of “us” and “them” (Chandler 2004:104-105), relational labels of “love” and “hate” and so on. The polarized nature of the two alternatives offered by binary thinking simplifies the decision-making process by presenting two mutually exclusive choices. Much of meaning-making is similarly informed by identification through juxtaposition: it is not enough to know what something means or represents – one must also know what something *is not* (Zerubavel 1997:72) and every “thing” must have its nega-twin, its opposite.

In the social world, binary terms, notions and ideas do not exist in a vacuum. “Analogical thinking”, as Levi-Strauss termed it (1972), yields itself to binary pairs becoming entangled with other binary pairs, forming “vertical” links (such as: male →

mind / female → body) (Chandler 2004:106) that can grow into a durable “cultural code... a conceptual system which is organized around key oppositions and equations, in which a term like ‘woman’ is defined in opposition to the term like ‘man’, and in which each term is aligned with a cluster of symbolic attributes” (Silverman 1983:36).

The best depiction of this cognitive dynamic of symbolic linkage between binary pairs is offered by Zerubavel’s *semiotic square* (1987:350-351, 1997:73-74). This version of the model is a variation of Greimas’s prototype of the semiotic square (1987). The semiotic square represents the intersection of two realms of meaning: the horizontal plane is the *syntactic* relationship within the binary pairs of “signifiers” (top) and within their “signifieds” (bottom); the vertical plane is occupied by the *semantic* links between each signified and its signifier²⁶. Consider the basic example of the “blue → boy / pink → girl” gender color dichotomy, as expressed in the form of the semiotic square in Figure 3:

Figure 3: Zerubavel’s Semiotic Square



²⁶ I would also suggest that what Zerubavel refers to as syntactic and semantic dimensions of the semiotic quadrangle, correspond with de Saussure’s respective *syntagmatic* and *associative (paradigmatic)* axes of structural analysis (de Saussure 1983:121-125).

In this model, each vertical pair of the signifieds (the “thing” being represented) and signifiers (the “thing” representing it) are horizontal opposites of each other. As such, their relationship with their polar opposite is of a syntactic (i.e. structural) nature. Vertically, each signified is connected to its signifier via a semantic association: the color blue is one of socially established and accepted symbolic signifiers that is used to reference / represent the “maleness” of an infant, while, conversely, the color pink symbolizes “femaleness”. Outside of this socially designated value, the signifiers’ connection to the signifieds is purely arbitrary (i.e. there is nothing intrinsic about the nature of these colors that links them to gender differentiation), therefore the pairs on the semantic axis rely on each other for definition and position within the square.

As the geometric shape of the figure suggests, the arrangement of symbols within a given square calls for a structural symmetry of content within both the syntactic as well as semantic dimensions of the square. In the provided model, the semantic value of the signifiers is maintained only because the syntactic content is consistent and orderly. BLUE is the (loose) opposite of PINK²⁷, just as BOY stands in binary opposition to GIRL. Since the relationships between the signifiers are always defined in relation to their signifieds, if the colors BLUE and PINK were not considered opposites of each other, they would fail to dramatically highlight the mutually exclusive designation of sex categories they are meant to represent: without this contrast, their very function as signifiers (and, hence, *raison d’être*) would be compromised.

²⁷ Interestingly, though we have come to think of blue and pink as opposite colors thanks to their polarized association with genders, on the actual color wheel, pink and blue are only approximately located on the “other” sides of each other. Pink’s opposite is actually closer to green, while blue’s opposite is closer to orange, which underscores the irony of framing genders as “opposites” of each other.

The Subtle “Switcharoo”

Zerubavel’s model is most useful for the purposes of harnessing and illustrating the mechanism of the normative communication in cryptosemes, one in which the original solid symmetry amongst all four corners of the quadrangle is disrupted by an attempt to “correct” the message by reassigning new signifieds to old signifiers. The cryptosemic compliment succeeds at obscuring the negative implicature of default assumptions underlying the statement by subtly changing the subject: it is this swap of the signifieds that accounts for the smooth misdirection of attention – from having to address some face threatening social theme – to a relevant sounding social theme that is much less “loaded” with anxiety. As illustrated in Chapter One, cryptosemic praise takes several structural forms and it should be noted that the formula of signified swapping offered in this chapter applies only to the type of cryptosemic praise I earlier referred to as “clumsy displays of sincere empathy”: when the speaker senses a “deficit” in the receiver and tries to say something supportively positive that compensates for the perceived negativity of the situation.

Let us consider this equation in reference to the example from the beauty cryptoseme from Chapter Three: complaining about gaining weight and feeling ugly and hearing back: “Nonsense, you look healthy and happy now!” If being thin has been, for decades, considered “beautiful”, then being fat must, by its diametrically oppositional place within the semiotic square, be “ugly”. One wants to find a way to say that “fat” is also beautiful but fails to locate a mental category “fat = beautiful”, since the signified “beautiful” is already taken by the signifier “thin” and the signified “ugly” is already

assigned to the signifier “fat”. The hesitation to say “nonsense, you have gained weight *and* you are beautiful” may be not only a personal bias but also a cognitive impasse, in which the mind refuses to compromise the structural soundness of the semiotic square in which these values are already assigned spaces on the basis of their oppositeness to each other.

The cryptosemic compliment offers a solution to this dilemma of binary values being trapped in the structural prison of the semiotic square. This solution is to dip into a parallel line of social discourse (represented by another semiotic square) on the same general theme that has something *positive* (as opposed to negative) to say about gaining weight – and to offer this substitute under the guise of the original theme. Any social issue of importance has more than one line of discourse surrounding it: these parallel discussions can be expressed as multiple semiotic squares: each having the same pair of signifiers on the top (because the general theme is the same) but with different pairs of signifieds at the bottom of each (because there are different topics of public discussion around the same issue.) Figure 4a-b is an illustration of this dynamic in which the message shifts from “weight gain = ugly” to “weight gain = healthy and happy”. There are two semiotic squares, each representing a different line of discourse within the same overarching rubric of body weight (i.e. weight loss vs. weight gain). The first square (4a) represents the discourse in which the rubric of body weight is framed in terms of a physical aesthetic: body weight loss is associated with physical beauty and, conversely, weight gain is linked to physical ugliness. The square in Fig. 4b represents a parallel line of discourse about the same rubric of body weight, only the signifieds are different because, in this conversation, the issue of body weight is framed in terms of physical and

mental health. In the recent public discussions of body weight and health, especially ones meant to counterweigh the adulation of the “stick-thin” body ideal, weight loss has been framed as a “negative” condition, one associated with depression and “wasting away”. Relative weight gain, conversely, is welcomed as the “positive” opposite: it signifies a betterment of one’s physical and mental condition (in juxtaposition to the implied price of misery one pays to be overly thin.)

Figure 4a: Focus on External Beauty

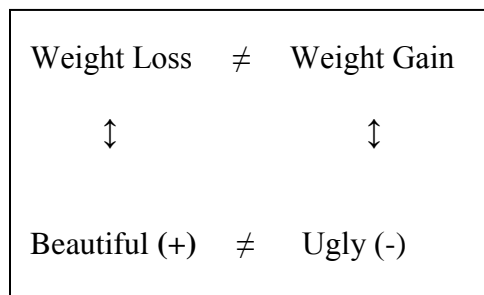
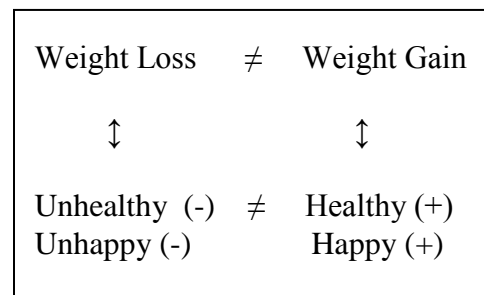


Figure 4b: Focus on Internal Wellness



Semiotic squares 4a and 4b represent *two lines of public discourse on the same theme (weight gain / loss) but tackling different topics*. The square in Figure 4a deals with the topic of superficial (external) attractiveness: here weight gain is associated with a negative signified while weight loss is associated with a positive one. In the second square, Figure 4b, on the other hand, the discussion revolves around the topic of internal well-being, physical and mental. The framework of square 4b emerged as a reactionary measure against the consequences of framework in 4a: so many women are presently suffering the destructive effects of trying to achieve the unforgivingly rigid thin beauty

ideal that it has become a national health / wellness debate, spawning a reversal of attitudes towards weight gain and loss, expressed in square 4b.

It is important to note the characteristic of the signified essential to this argument: that of *positive* or *negative* value, expressed as “plus” and “minus” signs. Although these values are socially assigned and are, therefore, just as arbitrary as the signifieds themselves, semiotic theory tells us that binary pairs are rarely untouched by power dynamics and are usually subject to hegemonic organization. Jakobson and Halle posit that, within a given binary pair, there is an “unmarked” default, primary term and a “marked” inferior term (i.e. “invisible” unless otherwise specified; of a lesser value of the two terms)²⁸ (Jakobson and Halle 1956). The signifieds at the bottom of the semiotic square have opposite values attached to them to further secure the oppositional structural integrity between the two pairs within the semiotic square. As seen in Figure 4a, “beautiful” is assigned a “plus” sign, while “ugly” is assigned a “minus” sign because, in a dynamic that calls for polar opposites, beauty has *positive* social value of the two, while ugliness, consequently, has *negative* social worth. Likewise, in the parallel line of thematic discourse represented in Figure 4b, the signifieds are also opposites of each other, except, in this square, weight gain has a positive signified in “healthy / happy”, while weight loss is attached to a negative signified “unhealthy / unhappy”. These pairs of signifieds are therefore binary opposites in two ways: they are perceived to be substantively opposite of each other and are counter-positioned as mathematical polarities in terms of their positive or negative *value*.

²⁸ In this dissertation, I focus on this property within the signifieds, but, according to Jakobson’s and Halle’s framework, the dynamic affects both, the signifier as well the signified and may help further explain the inherent hegemonic skewed-ness within the semiotic quadrangle that precipitates analogical thinking.

The structural integrity within the semiotic square is of essence here: the tendency towards speaking in indirect mixed messages signals cognitive restrictions in tampering with the organization of the semiotic square. *Theoretically*, one need not experience trouble disrupting both semiotic as well as the semantic structure of the square to say what one truly wishes to express. In practice, however, if one were to say that weight loss is beautiful *and* weight gain is beautiful as well, the syntactic structure of the square would suffer because the signifieds would no longer be opposites of each other (both would have “plus” signs / positive value) and the semantic relationship within the signified / signifier pair would be ruptured as well because of the removal of the original term and inserting the other pair’s signified duplicate in its place. If that were to happen, the new semiotic square depicting such an utterance would look like Figure 5:

Figure 5: A Topically Relevant Compliment

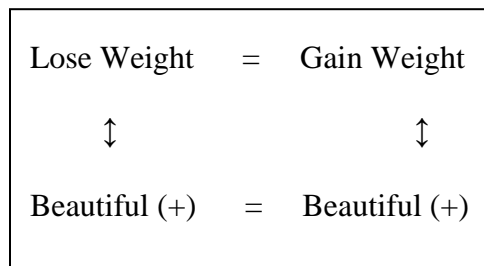


Figure 4 shows the ideal case scenario in which the compliment giver, upon hearing a complaint about feeling “overweight and ugly”, would not reach for a consolatory cryptosemic euphemism and instead offered something along the lines of: “Nonsense, you are quite beautiful.” But Figure 4 cannot be said to be a semiotic square as its defining property – the binary opposition between the pairs of signifieds and

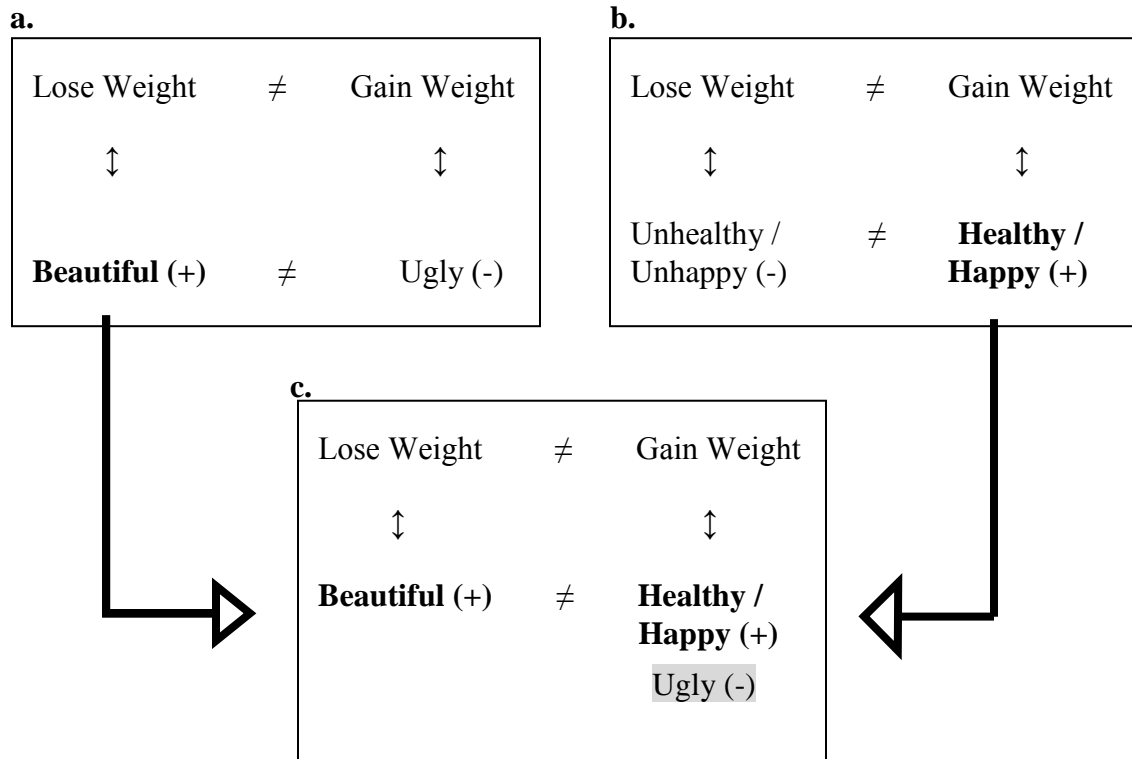
signifiers – is gone. The difficulty to construct such a pronouncement attests to some cognitive barrier in attempting to break out of the dialectical symmetry of the relationship imposed on the signified / signifier pairs by the geometrical structure of the square. Based on this observation, I am suggesting that, on a cognitive level, breaking with the laws of the semiotic square is not an intuitive function for humans: perhaps it may be overridden, but it requires active resetting of the mental “defaults”. The “clumsy consolation” cryptoseme only tempers with the semiotic square *semantically* (content-wise), but keeps the *syntactic* (form) structure of internal opposition intact. It appears that one has the cognitive “green light” to disrupt the semantic structure of the square by replacing the “offensive” signified with one that has the same value sign as the signified in the opposite corner, but one cannot necessarily just as smoothly replace the “offensive” signified with the signified from the opposite corner: such an act appears to provoke cognitive resistance²⁹.

And so, instead of speaking directly, for better or worse, in reference to the lament of gaining weight and feeling unattractive, one delivers the phrase: “You look happy and healthy” – in such a tone and demeanor that the receiver of the message has every reason to “hear” it as a “positive” statement. The cryptosemic compliment shifts the attention away from the topic of origin (beauty) and refocuses on a seemingly fitting alternative (health / happiness) – borrowed from a parallel discourse on the same theme.

²⁹ More research must be conducted to determine why form is so much less flexible than content when it comes to “reframing” ideas, but it can be hypothesized that the answer, at least in part, lies with earlier-mentioned dynamics of mindless attention which favor the structure-over-content heuristic (Langer, 1989). Cryptosemic speech acts can be said to be a defensive measure stemming from psychological denial of social taboos one is trying to avoid confronting. If denial is, indeed, the impetus behind cryptosemic messages, it makes sense that those messages are composed on mental autopilot, which prioritizes syntactic over semantic system of meaning.

The end result is a newly formed semiotic square that is *thematically consistent but topically incompatible*. The process of creating this new, third semiotic square (i.e. the cryptosemic compliment) can be traced in Figures 6a-c:

Figure 6: The Creation of a Cryptosemic Compliment by Merging Semiotic Squares



As can be observed in the above diagram, the process of composing a cryptosemic compliment involves taking the “positive” signifier / signified pair from the original square “a”. (weight loss → beauty) and combining it with the “positive” signifier / signified pair from a parallel discourse represented in square “b”. (weight gain → happiness / healthiness) to form the cryptosemic compliment, square “c”. In this newly formed semiotic square, the top half maintains the original pair of oppositional “weight

gain / loss” signifiers (hence, *thematically consistent*), but the bottom half is now logically unbalanced in the sense that the two signifieds are neither each other’s antonyms nor each other’s synonyms – their only connection is that, in their respective semiotic squares of origin, they are the signifieds of each of their respective signifiers, but, in this new arrangement, they are no longer relevant to each other (hence, *topically incompatible*).

To better understand the convoluted dynamic of the cryptoseme formation, let us note the fact that signifieds *antecede* signifiers in the original pair formation – they are the origin and the reason for the signifier’s part in the semiotic square equation (i.e. first comes the “thing” to be represented and only then comes the word / icon representing that “thing”.) In semiotic squares depicting cryptosemic messages, the signifiers are given precedence over the signifieds. In this sense, the process of forming a cryptosemic compliment is a deductive one: it starts off with the signifier and by reverse logic alters the signified to fit the situation better. Therein lies the crux of the deviousness of the cryptoseme: it obscures the *substantive* part of the message (the signified), while keeping intact the part (the signifier) that only made sense when it was attached to the original signified in the first place, now pairing it with a new signified that came from elsewhere, under the illusion of thematic continuity. By the time the message transitions from semiotic square “a” to semiotic square “c”, the topic of the conversation experienced a subtle shift: we are no longer talking about physical beauty – we are now talking about health and happiness, which feels relevant enough but is not at all what the conversation was supposed to be about.

The shift of topics from external beauty to internal wellness exemplifies the proverbial futility of attempting to compare apples to oranges: both fall under the same general rubric of fruit and we could indicate a personal preference for one over the other, but we could not offer a fair comparison between things that do not have anything in common, other than being fruit – especially if we must judge one based on its cosmetic aesthetic appeal and the other based on the quality of its taste.

Yet, cryptosemic praise successfully engages us in accepting the above-described subtle switch of topics as a normal aspect of the compliment by exploiting the cognitive confusion stemming from the anxiety experienced in anticipation of confronting face threatening social themes. The co-presence of dissonant impulses and beliefs results in the mind quite literally playing *tricks* on itself to shed the mental anguish created by this cognitive friction. Masking and misdirection have always served as operative coercive techniques of illusionists and con artists and the metaphorical similarities with cryptosemes are enough to give pause over the cognitive influence packed into the semiotic “sleight of hand” found in cryptosemic praise. Darren Brown, England’s brilliant celebrity mentalist, who routinely uses misdirection of attention as a disorienting technique to put subjects into a vulnerable state of suggestibility for public entertainment on his television show, tells of a time he had to utilize the same mental trick to gain psychological advantage over a dangerous aggressor threatening him bodily harm in the street. Brown addresses him with a disorienting narrative that puts the aggressor’s mind in a state of confusion (a mental lull coupled with a sense of anxiety that needs amelioration) and proceeds to contemplate the next step:

“The use of disorientating techniques to amplify a person’s responsiveness to suggestion is a classic ploy of talented persuaders. A politician knows that if he fires a set of confusing statistics at listeners, followed by a ‘summing up’, they are more likely to believe that concluding statement, rather than if he had offered it without the deluge of too-much-to-take-in information first. A salesman knows sometimes to overload a client with information to enhance how open they will be to a direction that follows. In effect, we are offered relief from the confusion and we happily do what we’re told. Until our normal equilibrium returns, we are putty in our manipulator’s hands. My plan, then, was to render this guy heavily suggestible so that I could deliver something like, ‘It’s OK, I don’t know if you’ll notice yet whether it was your right or left foot that stuck hard to the ground first, but you’ll certainly be relieved after a couple of minutes of trying so hard in vain to unstuck your feet to find that they eventually come unstuck...’ Layers of presupposition that his feet would stick to the floor would be lapped up as relief from the confusion, and I’d be able to leave while he struggled to free himself” (Brown 2007:215-216).

Brown ended up placating the bewildered aggressor with an even simpler mesmerizing approach, but the implications of his projected verbal spell casting are impressive. He expected (and has been recorded on many other occasions to elicit equivalent effect) to be able to psychosomatically affect a hostile individual to believe that his feet were temporarily stuck to the ground, allowing Brown to escape to safety. The ability to hypnotize someone this way, as Brown points out, lies in the power of the presuppositions built into the neuro-linguistic programming of Brown’s speech.

“Misdirection has an uncanny ability to blind us to the obvious,” writes Stone (Stone 2012:181), before retelling the famous “Invisible Gorilla” experiment performed by Simons (Chabris and Simons 2009). Film footage is shown of six basketball players, divided into groups of three wearing white shirts and three wearing black shirts, passing a ball between each other. The subjects in the audience are instructed to count the number of ball passes made by players in white. Halfway into the footage, a person in a gorilla suit enters the basketball court, stands in the middle of the game, beats her chest

repeatedly, then exists. The appearance by the gorilla suit lasts nine seconds, yet, more than half the subjects in the audience do not notice its appearance. The experiment is replicated hundreds of times with the same results: more than half of the viewers are too cognitively “tied up” counting ball passes to register seeing something extraordinary taking place for nine seconds right in front of their eyes. “Misdirection, in a sense, masks the image, rendering it invisible,” explains Stone, “Inattention blindness is a cognitive illusion as opposed to a visual one, an illusion not of the eyes but of the mind. (182).

To borrow Stone’s formulation, I suggest that the misdirection of attention from one topic to another built into the structure of cryptosemic praise cognitively *deafens* us to jarringly unflattering implicature underlying such compliments, rendering it *silent*. The practice of silencing and its consequences will be further addressed in Chapter Six, but first, the source of the cognitive discomfort that lends itself to cryptosemic expressions must be established.

The Adaptive Unconscious: An Intra-Personal Communication Bypass

“We are strangers to ourselves, the owners of highly sophisticated unconscious minds that hum along parallel to our conscious minds, interpreting the world and constructing narratives about our place in it” (Wilson 2011:27).

Throughout this dissertation so far, I have repeatedly referred to “unconscious” culture and the different levels of cryptosemic cognizance / awareness that are involved in interpreting different mixed messages and figurative expressions. Indeed, human cognition and epistemology works on different levels of self-awareness and other-awareness, conscious deliberation comprising only the tip of the metaphorical iceberg,

the rest of the apparatus' operations being submerged in the murky deep waters of unconscious processes. In this work, I hold that cryptosemic expression is the outcome of the dissonance between beliefs and priorities held by the conscious and the unconscious sectors of the mind, known by many names across disciplines (e.g., respectively: "System 2" and "System 1" (Kahneman 2011), "explicit" and "implicit" systems of motivation (LeDoux 2002), "discursive" and "practical" consciousness (Vaisey 2009), the metaphor of "the rider" and "the elephant" (Haidt 2006), etc). Wilson terms the latter mental cognitive space the "adaptive unconscious" (Wilson 2002). The conscious mind is a case-by-case evaluator, motivated to consider each stimulus in the larger social and physical context and to reach a conclusion on the basis of factoring in all the materials relevant to the specific case. The conscious mind takes care of operations "often associated with the subjective experience of agency, choice, and concentration" (Kahneman 2011: 21). The adaptive unconscious, on the other hand, while receiving the same stimuli as the conscious mind and doing the main bulk of the processing, is driven by a wholly different directive: its function is to come up with outcomes on the basis of aggregated knowledge, crunching out snap statistical probabilities without regard to the particulars of the situation at hand, "with little or no effort and no sense of voluntary control" (20).

The most alarmingly baffling revelation about the adaptive unconscious is that while two distinct information processing faculties exist and function parallel to one another within the mind, there is no bridge of communication between the two. We only have direct access to the deliberations and decisions of the conscious mind and, though our adaptive unconscious sends us plenty of ambiguous signals in the form of intuitive

“gut feelings”, there is no direct access to that part of our mind and, therefore, no way to know for sure “what it is thinking”, to decode its communiqués with certainty.

It is no wonder that we frequently find ourselves “of two minds” about something, feeling anxious but not being able to pinpoint the exact cause of the confusion. An enormous industry of psychological counseling is dedicated to helping individuals separate real, lived, current experiences and problems with romantic partners – from the post-traumatic insecurities and fears of past relationship “baggage”. The logical discrepancies between conflicting attitudes and beliefs existing within the same mind give rise to the uneasy psychological tension known as cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957). As cognitive dissonance is ego-based, in the sense that the conflict between values and feelings ruptures the stability of self-concept (Aronson 1969; Spencer, Josephs and Steele 1993; Heine and Lehman 1997), the psychological discomfort can be quite torturous and people will engage in all kinds of mental gymnastics to alleviate it (Schacter 2001:144). Cryptosemic expressions offer a reduction of cognitive dissonance by taking the conflicting beliefs and attitudes and channeling each into a separate channel of meaning within the cryptosemic message: the conscious attitude is expressed through the positive tone and words and the unconscious beliefs are transmitted in the silent space of unspoken implicature.

I assert that the dissonance that lends itself to cryptosemic expression is of cultural nature in the sense that the underlying conflict is between incompatible *normative* beliefs and *ideological* attitudes. Drawing on Wilson’s framework and keeping in mind the “naturalization” of primarily socialized cultural codes discussed in Chapter Two, it is not unreasonable to suggest that, given the two-channel processing of input into

the mind, the culture we absorb from socialization can dwell in two separate, unconnected mental spaces and that those two cultural value sets are not at all guaranteed to be of the same substance or form. Frequenting different social (physical or virtual) spaces and being a member in more than one social group (i.e. “cognitive subcultures” (Zerubavel 1997:12)) can establish dissonance of beliefs and attitudes within the self. There may be a temporal dimension to the cognitive dissonance behind cryptosemic expressions: developmentally, the culture of primary socialization becomes internalized (i.e. transforms from an interpersonal to an intrapersonal process) (Vygotsky 1978) in our early childhood and different beliefs acquired later in life may clash with the internalized culture pounded into us by our seniors. This would explain the “generation gap” between “old” and “new” meanings and assumptions within cryptosemic utterances. It has been suggested that culture clashes between generational cohorts are no less dramatic and “remote” than inter-ethnic differences. This is because the nature of cultural conflict dwells, above all else, in incompatible normative conceptions of social *roles* and identities (Kondo 1990), which vary as much from one generation to the next as from one country to the next (such as generational differences in conceiving of the role of “son” or “daughter” and his or her respective duties towards parents.)

“[T]he chief cause of our errors is to be found in the prejudices of our childhood,” wrote Descartes in *Meditations*,

“...And our mind has been imbued from our infancy with a thousand... prejudices... which afterwards in our youth we forgot we had accepted without sufficient examination, and admitted as possessed of the highest truth and clearness, as if they had been known by means of our senses, or implanted in us by nature” (Descartes 2009:168-170).

I suggest that the separate cultural belief systems occupying the overt and obscured dimensions of meaning within our cryptosemic expressions reside in the conscious and unconscious spaces of the mind respectively: the older culture of our primary socialization becomes suppressed into the automatic, unconscious depths of the mind, while the conscious culture is the living, fluxing culture of the “here-and-now” we deliberately subscribe to and, hence, take personal, agentic responsibility for.

The uneven conscious-unconscious duality of our mental processing is a crucial point to remember when analyzing manifestations of social prejudice. Currently, one of the most ubiquitously discussed social problems is the persistence of bigotry: racism, sexism, discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, age, physical condition, etc. So far, the public conversation has been framed as reductive polarizations: is he or isn't he a misogynist?; Is she or isn't she a racist? We are yet to see a public conversation in which we acknowledge the implicit truth behind our conundrum: we are all *both*, bigots and egalitarians (though, certainly, to very different degrees of one or the other.) “A number of researchers have argued that many people abhor prejudice and discrimination and try their best, at a conscious level, to adopt egalitarian attitudes – more so, perhaps, than at any other point in American history,” writes Wilson, “At a more unconscious, automatic level, however, many of these same people unknowingly adopted the racist viewpoint that still pervades American culture” (189-190). It is detrimental to factor this understanding of inequality as a multi-tiered mental phenomenon into our collective efforts to rid society of bigotry. The treatment of this “social epidemic” cannot end with the expectation that making a conscious decision to stop being a bigot is enough: most of us are unaware of our unconscious biases and judgmental finger-pointing and labeling

will not fix this and, instead (as we can see playing out in the public arena every day), promotes more denial and turns us defensive and apprehensive towards any resolution of the issue.

Chapter Six. The Trouble with Cryptosemes.

My empirical study was conceived as a pilot, when I was still etching out the definitions of the cryptoseme and the parameters of this work, and the exploratory nature of the study design is evident in the unruliness of the output. Although the feedback outlined a fascinating array of meaning-making practices, the interview did not include questions that would help us better understand under what conditions and with what frequency cryptosemes are spoken, who is likely to speak them and what measurable effect they have upon the hearer. Another distinction of great importance remains to be explored as well: what accounts for why some conversationalists are more attuned to the silent implicature of cryptosemic expressions than others. A more targeted study must be conducted to probe these questions and uncover more real-life occurrences and consequences of cryptosemic use.

Nonetheless, a number of relevant insights emerged that helps situate cryptosemic use in the grand scheme of everyday navigation of social discourse: people care about their communication styles and are quite actively engaged in the strategic consideration and enactment of the social interaction ritual. Several questions were posed with the intention to probe the respondents' discourse and meaning-making strategies, with one yielding the most fruitful feedback.

- In general, when you speak with people, do you pay more attention to what they said or to how they meant it? In other words, when you are interpreting your communication with another person, do you focus more on their verbal articulation of the message (words / phrasings used) – or – the intention of the speaker (the spirit in which the message was delivered)?

Though the detailed explanations were not uniform, certain regularities emerged, the key one being: people are quite particular about language but would also, generally, make many exceptions to taking offense, if a social or personal context called for it – and would do it even more willingly if they can confidently determine whether the words were spoken sincerely or falsely, with hostility or with friendliness, in judgment or in solidarity and good humor. Of the 39 respondents who answered the above question, 24 said they paid more attention to intention (how the person meant it), in comparison to the 6 respondents who emphasized the words (what the person said) and 9 who said they paid equal attention to intentions and words. The importance and the deal-breaking quality of *intended meaning* behind the words (gathered from a wide variety of non-verbal body cues and contextual influences) was highlighted in several answers. Emily³⁰ said she cared more about how a person meant the statement, rather than the particulars of what was spoken:

"I think I definitely pay more attention to the intention. Because I think what was actually said doesn't really matter... Like I was saying with some of the other scenarios, I don't know if it's just a slip and they didn't mean to juxtapose, you know, beauty with inner beauty, or hardworking-ness with intelligence, and if they didn't mean to, I wouldn't be offended. If I took it that they didn't mean to, I wouldn't be offended. Because it's not that they think something bad about me, it's just that they made a slip."

Jen, like several others, indicated a clear preference for trying to figure out intentions behind the words and relying on physical cues to do so:

"To me, someone may be looking for the right word to say but can't think off the top of their head. But if they're, it's something positive, or they say it really

³⁰ Because it is no longer relevant to the subject at hand, I will henceforth refrain from listing sex and age of the respondents. All of their demographic data can be located in the Appendix at the end of the document.

excitedly, or they smile, then it's, there's an intention behind it that maybe, like, verbally, they couldn't come to quick enough, yet you can still understand that they're trying to say something nice or, conversely, trying to say something negative."

A very similar response to the same question was offered by Dennis:

"I think I'm very careful with my words, I think that most people are not. And I think that most communication is non-verbal. And so, I really try to focus on the clues I'm getting from people's body language or, or the tone of their voice -- almost more so than the words that they're saying. Because, I just, it hasn't really led me wrong before. So, I tend to follow those clues and, you know, usually, if somebody is saying something with a positive attitude, I interpret it as positive and it's correct... Even if they're mis-speaking or something, maybe not saying the exact words I would want to hear, I'd still understand the sentiment is there."

Time and again, respondents expressed a forgiving lenience towards verbal blunders, conditional upon discerning that the person didn't mean it badly. Some respondents were willing to consider overlooking such offenses, pointing out that they themselves are not immune to the foot-in-the-mouth syndrome. Shumy admitted that he is in no position to judge clumsy verbiage:

"Because not everyone is great at expressing themselves. And sometime they might make a poor choice -- myself included -- might make a poor choice of words. But if the spirit, if it didn't come from a bad place, if it was meant, you know... with good intentions, that's one thing. You know, if they meant it derogatory, in a derogatory sense, then it would, obviously it's not a nice thing to say... But again, you know, I wouldn't completely disregard the semantic value. And sometimes that happens to me, like a day or two after I have a conversation with somebody, I'm like, you know, they said it in *that* sense or they said it with *those* words and *that* could have been meant a different way! And that's why I think the spirit in which it's said overrides that. Because, especially in casual conversation, you don't have time to pick your words. So, you have to go by the spirit of it, someone could just make a poor choice of words, I know I've done it several times."

There was a subsection of respondents who, like the previous group, preferred reading people's intentions rather than attending to their words but, unlike the previous group, did not overlook but, rather, saw words as a potential obstacle, a deceptive veneer that must be bypassed in order to find the true meaning of the statement. These respondents expressed mistrust in words and questioned the sincerity of their literal meanings, asserting that words can be misleading and even manipulative and it takes attending to non-verbal cues to interpret the true meaning of a statement. Foo, for example, was much more confident about reading physical cues like eye expressions and tone of voice than words, when trying to understand people:

"I think it's the spirit in which it [the statement] was delivered, the intention. Because people don't always speak with great precision, I know I don't... Word selection, it's just, it's something so spontaneous and so imprecise that it's not reliable... The whole physical, visual communication for me is what's most important, not just the words chosen. I mean, some people can be very, very... suave... they can manipulate their words in a way that will, you know, sound good, but you can tell that it's just not so. You can tell that it's ingenuine. And, you know, I've had that happen enough times that I know it: you know, false flattery."

Big John echoed the sentiment, about words acting as camouflage for true intentions:

"I put more [emphasis] on the intentions of where it [the message] came from. If they're not words [I'm paying attention to], they're usually gestures or the tone of voice that it comes from. 'Cause I can say something nice to you in a negative tone of voice. Yeah, I mean, it's just words masking my real intentions on the inside, that's how I look at it."

The above-expressed willingness to embrace compliments on the virtue of their perceived intentioned meaning rather than purely semantic meaning is quite consistent with the key rule in the social psychology of influence and persuasion: "we all crave appreciation and

recognition, and will do almost anything to get it. But nobody wants insincerity. Nobody wants flattery.” (Carnegie 1981:219). The cryptosemic compliment delivers both: something positive about the receiver (albeit off-topic), backed by a perceivable honest intention to say something “nice”. The effectiveness (and deviousness) of the cryptosemic compliment, then, is in the fact that the sender’s intention to say something good is, in fact, sincere and, hence, satisfies / “passes” the receiver’s mental vetting for dishonest flattery, making it seem safe to take the message at its face-value.

The overwhelming majority of respondents demonstrated an attuned-ness to their own as well as others’ conversational practices and several showed a profound insight into the nuanced dynamics and structural properties of meaning-making. For example, Linda explained that it has to be a balance of both words and intentions:

“I think that words can be very powerful when chosen, you know, selectively and astutely but, but how someone carries him or herself, the energy, I guess the sincerity, that's going to come across and I just, from what I've read and learned and from other people and what I've seen, I feel like, um, someone who is very passionate about his or her message, when giving a speech, whatever, very energetic, really believing what he or she is saying – that's going to, that's going to make the speech much more powerful.” – *Do you think it will impact the content of the message?* “Yeah, it's going to affect the way the content is delivered. On the other hand, you might, there could be a downside to that – the same overemphasis on energy... People may get distracted by the style, the form rather than the content. So, you need, I think you need to pay attention to both.”

Jeremy indicated the belief that it is the intention behind the words that is more valuable gauge of meaning than the exact words used:

“Because I think that it has more meaning behind it, has more latent or below-surface meaning, and you can sort of read into what the person really means and maybe their mood, or something they said, maybe how they said [it], maybe they revealed about themselves what they didn't mean, you know, what they didn't say

– but you get more meaning behind the words. You can say the same thing in five or ten different ways, and it could, literally the same words could have different meanings. So, it's not so important, the literal words."

Greg first said "both" words and intentions are important but then, in speaking about it, changed his mind: "I would probably put the emphasis more on how things were said, rather than what was said, because how, how things are said, that's really how you mean it and what you're saying is kind of just filling in the blanks, you know what I'm saying?" John revealed that, in making meaning of conversation, he is mostly preoccupied with a reflexive, introspective assessment of his own state of mind, rather than thinking about whom or with what agenda the words came from:

"I'm more focused on my own internal interpretation and perspective of what they said. Meaning, it's not so much what they said, you know, whether they said, you know, you look old or you look young or they meant it in a mean way or they meant it in an easy way – how, how my attitude towards and my perception towards the whole experience, the words and their perceived intention, is, will reveal to me about where I am at, you know, mentally, spiritually, emotionally. And so, that is the valuable thing that I would focus on more... I am studying myself in this world."

Sally indicated that she paid much attention to "how a person meant it" but, at the same time, used semantic cues for hints about the origins of the sentiment:

"I mean, I don't want to sound like I'm hedging, but I would say that, while I'm more concerned about the intention – like, the second option, meaning what they're trying to say – I think I would end up listening to the semantics to try to determine the second option. Meaning, how they phrase it, might clue me in as to what they mean. But a lot of times, I think, if these are people I know, you're kind of trying to judge them by their character and the way they kind of are behaving, to sort of figure out what they're trying to say. So, maybe, it's not so focused on the semantics."

Sally's comment captures best my own view of the role words play in communication: one need not take them literally (in fact, their literal meaning may be the least germane meaning in the message) but one can analyze the choice of vocabulary – or the markedness of some concepts over others – and let these semantic clues lead us to the pragmatic realities – the assumptions behind the verbal expressions, which, in turn, mirror problems and biases of the social world.

I included these quotes because they reflect many interesting facets of communication, yet all revolve around a core set of themes. One common thread is in the willingness to consider another's perspective as well as the ability to suspend the usual heuristics of interpretation to accommodate exceptions. Even more telling is the claim to agency when talking about the act of meaning-making. Many of the comments provided through the dissertation reflect ownership of interpretation of meaning as well as its production. They show that people think about social interaction, in some instances, quite thoroughly and strategically. The downside to such confidence, however, is the potential overstating of one's agency (and understating others' role) in creating meaning.

The Pitfalls of Cryptosemic Communication

In applying critical scrutiny to cryptosemic compliments, I did not intend to suggest that these are conscious acts of malicious intent on behalf of the sender to covertly bamboozle the unsuspecting receiver into mistaking an insult for a compliment. As demonstrated, much of the construction of our linguistic expressions happens mindlessly, automatically and formulaically, without deliberately making sense of every

nook and cranny of psychological complexity involved (Langer 1989). Speakers of American English rely on complimenting quite heavily as a strategy for creating and bolstering positive social relationships with people (Wolfson and Manes 1980) and the examples of cryptosemic praise provided in this paper seem to have been spoken in genuine earnest. Cryptosemes are a form of culture-based politeness, a universal phenomenon that spares no one. But though cryptosemic praise may come across as an acceptable and satisfactory compliment to all involved in the conversational exchange, it does not eradicate the problematic implicature communicated through the subliminal channels. Not too long ago, it was normal, for instance, for a man to tell a female associate that she is “impressively logical for a woman” and, given the beliefs dominating the time period, she may have been genuinely pleased by such a compliment. However, with historical hindsight, we can see that the mutual acceptance of this exchange as “positive” and complimentary represents the dynamic of the patronizing pseudo-compliment of an oppressor being met (and reinforced) with the “false consciousness” of the oppressed. Goffman references the hegemonic underpinnings of this dynamic when he mentions the tendency of the powerful to take it upon themselves to save the face of those they deem powerless, as the powerless, in return, respond with gratitude for this kindness, even when it does them no actual favor: “Thus one accounts for the *noblesse oblige* through which those of high status are expected to curb their power of embarrassing their lessers, as well as the fact that the handicapped often accept courtesies that they can manage better without” (Goffman 1967:28-29).

Micro-Level Problem: Cryptosemic Compliments are Condescending

The sincere positive intentions of the sender and the favorable interpretation by the receiver do not render cryptosemic messages innocuous and, in fact, this harmonious mutual acceptance of one meaning while ignoring the other is precisely the problem. It has been said (and the quote has been attributed to a number of controversial historical figures) that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. Well-meaning extension of status and “extra credit” to someone through cryptosemic flattery may come from a “good place” but is, ultimately, a problematic practice, even if both the sender and the receiver are not conscious of this false note within the interaction. Recall the section from Chapter Two, titled *Patterns of Merit-Based Value Ascension in Constructing Cryptosemes*. In the Variation 1 of cryptosemic status progression (*ascribed* status being supplanted with *achieved* status substitute), refusing to address the person’s intelligence and re-focusing instead on his other, supposedly merit-based virtues is to refuse to challenge the narrow definitions of the dominant concept of “intellect”, just as the “healthy and happy” compliment is emblematic of unforgiving cultural conventions of beauty.

Hermeneutic analysis of compliments to the elderly such as: “What a lucid mind you have!” can be used as a mirror of the current cultural attitudes towards age and aging. It is true that aging brings an onset of health problems and that some individuals experience deterioration of their memories and mental clarity as a product of aging. It is also true that advanced age is an accumulator of knowledge, skill, social capital, material comforts and many other valuable resources worthy of respect. A culture that produces

the cryptosemic compliment about impressive mental lucidity gives preferential attention to the pitiful feebleness of its senior citizens, rather than admire and appreciate their achievements and sacrifices. I have personally been privy to several instances in which the elderly person would, in fact, be pleased to receive such a “compliment” but this seems symptomatic of being a product of the same culture as the speaker, harboring the expectation that, by this age, they are damaged goods and must be praised for simple displays of competence. One does not encounter condescending praise of this nature in cultures that value age as a bringer of wisdom and enlightenment, rather than viewing it as a spiral into second infancy.

In the same vein, cryptosemic structures from Variation 2 (micro-level *achieved* status being supplanted with macro-level *social fact*) are problematic because offering “extra credit” for defying unfavorable social odds in praise meant to highlight personal qualities or professional gains actually takes attention away from the objective merit of the achievement being praised. Introducing the honoree at an awards ceremony with: “She is the first black woman to achieve [this or that]” may in fact be a well deserved acknowledgement of the struggles one has to overcome as a black woman in a work environment / social system dominated by white men. However, the unarticulated meaning within the same utterance implies that the mere fact that a dark-skinned female could compete with her light-skinned male counterparts is impressive in itself. This is quite a condescending assumption to make and it betrays low expectations being automatically applied to the entire social group this person has been involuntarily cast to represent. A statement that shines the light on the (macro-level) social inequality of this person’s circumstance serves to diminish the (micro-level) individual contribution she is

making to her profession. To try to boost personal merit by confusing it with larger social reality reduces the person to a social category and speaks nothing of him or her as an individual.

As suggested earlier, one must question the roots of the psychic gratification that comes with dealing out cryptosemic compliments. The double standards built into the cultural presuppositions underlying cryptosemic praise lend themselves to a certain self-congratulatory satisfaction for the sender, which blinds her to the hypocrisy of her own speech act. Extra credit in the classroom is generally offered to students who are already struggling to stay on par with the rest of the class. Extra credit is a form of help. Help is frequently volunteered (and at times forced) by those in positions of authority and superiority upon those who are seen as “disadvantaged” (recall Tannen’s theory (1986) about why men allegedly do not like to ask for driving directions: the person with information is the one with power). Likewise, expression of sympathy or pity can carry a demeaning note by highlighting the speaker’s relative advantage over the receiver. “Sympathizers have it better,” writes Clark (1997), an expert on the emotion of sympathy and its social expressions, “They are in the position of being owed, their life situations are comparatively less problematic, and by giving sympathy they increase their social and moral standing. Even when sympathizers do not consciously intend it, giving sympathy can have micropolitical consequences” (228). In short, if the sender of the cryptoseme did not depart from a self-assumed position of advantage over whomever is being thusly “endorsed”, he or she would not necessarily think to extend this “extra credit” to someone viewed as equal in the first place. This is the symptom of the “noblesse oblige” Goffman wrote about. The need to justify and scaffold someone else’s achievement with

linguistic expressions laced with merit-based value boost signals the sender's own low expectations towards the members of the minority group being addressed – even if the sender is a member of that minority group him / herself.

Additionally, as argued by Brown and Levinson (2009), the practice of face-work, no matter how co-operative, is a reflexively driven measure of self-protection – and defensive behavior is known to be a powerful but, by far, not the most peaceful nor fruitful means of communication. Though it is seen and intended to be a device of diplomacy and peace-making, ironically, politeness is also responsible for much miscommunication and misunderstanding among social actors on a regular basis. Brown and Levinson are the first to point out that “[i]n the case of *linguistic pragmatics* a great deal of the mismatch between what is ‘said’ and what is ‘implicated’ can be attributed to politeness” (2), while Gibson, in addressing the ritual constraints involved in face-work in social interaction, quips that “it is a marvel that people are able to accomplish anything in conversation” (Gibson 2000:374). The hypocrisy of cryptosemic compliments is further ironically exacerbated by the fact that their aim for politeness actually conceals the disrespect (i.e. “rudeness in disguise” (Post 2004:35)) built into condescending default assumptions underlying the praise.

And so, cryptosemic praise cannot be claimed to facilitate clear communication. And yet, unclear means of communication can carry powerful influence on our cognitive faculties. Cerulo suggests that, contrary to traditional postulates, non-normative devices in messaging – ones that communicate through distorting information and knowledge, rather than being direct and precise – can be used to enhance the potency of the message, if only on a subliminal level, which is why communication distortion is so popular in the

marketing industry (Cerulo 1988:93-101). Further research and experimental inquiries must be conducted, but it is not unreasonable to anticipate that the hidden dimension of meaning nested in double standards may register on an unconscious mental level, with possible negative effects on self-esteem (Kilbourne 1999).

Macro-Level Problem: Cryptosemes Perpetuate the “Spiral of Silence”

On the micro-level of individual interactions, cryptosemes are problematic because the halo effect of special “extra credit for personal merit” (coupled with the sincerely positive tone of the message) only masks people’s presumed “trouble spots” from themselves, rather than expose them as problems or address the reason why they are considered so problematic that they must be covered up with other euphemistic speaking and changing the subject to other virtues.

As social actors, we are both the products and the shapers of our culture: we are the inventors and the benefactors as well as the perpetrators and the victims of our belief systems. Berger and Luckmann argue that the relationship between structure and agency lies in a *dialectical* inter-dependency between the two; that meanings social actors assign to the world are then institutionalized into the fabric of the social order which, in turn, precipitates the internalization of those meanings into larger macro-cultural belief systems perused by those very same individuals (and their successors) (Berger and Luckmann 1967). This creates a “catch-22” in which individual and social meanings and perceptions are looped into an infinite cycle of mutual reinforcement. Therefore, in

participating in meaning-making, we are simultaneously acting as free agents *and* conformists to social structures we ourselves helped erect.

The problem with conducting face-work by relying on cryptosemic compliments is that they serve as devices of silencing inconvenient and unpleasant sides of social reality, instead of exposing, confronting or debunking them. Human history offers too many examples of cooperative silence begetting more social silence, having the potential to create mass-scale denial of social injustices happening in plain sight. Collective avoidance of social problems has been known to lead to heavy societal and psychological consequences, sometimes for generations to come, such as the collective blindness and muteness sustained by German citizens over the mass-scale atrocities of the Holocaust happening under their very windows (Zerubavel 2006; Bauman 2000). Silence has been a powerful vehicle for religious³¹ persecution throughout recorded history: the Holy Inquisition, quite notably, under the penalty of imprisonment, torture or death, imposed strict and brutal censorship on written materials and spoken conversations that in any way questioned the sacred institution of the Roman Catholic Church (Ginzburg 1992).

Of course, my native Soviet Union essentially “wrote the book” on implementing a nation-wide, iron-clad gag order as an effective means of social control. The erosive ills of post-WWII, post-Stalinist-purge mass poverty and utter institutional dysfunction did not exist in the schoolbooks, on television, in speeches of leaders or in any public conversations. The narrative filling the airwaves and public discourse was that of euphoric excitement over the incredible fortune to be living in the happiest and freest nation in the world. Because of my family’s dissenting ways, I grew up with the acute

³¹ I have come across a publication ironically titled *Silencing the Enemy with Praise* in which Pastor Robert Gay (2010) urges his followers to use praise as a “weapon of spiritual warfare” to silence the Devil with musical worship of the Lord.

awareness of the “walls with ears”, some of my earliest memories consisting of being instructed to never repeat any of the specially identified jokes or broach any of the “forbidden” topics of conversation outside of home and family or over the telephone. The most vividly poignant accounts of the terror of silence, however, came from my Grandmother, who raised my mother in Stalinist Leningrad and had no end of whispered stories to share. The one that impressed me the most as a child took place at some party my Grandmother was attending, when a visiting friend emerged from the restroom, pulled the hostess aside and, with the words, “I just saved your life,” handed her a piece of toilet paper. In Stalinist Russia (as well as during my entire childhood) toilet paper was a rare luxury and people utilized newspaper ripped into small squares instead. The piece of “toilet tissue” handed to the hostess was a shred of newspaper with a portrait photograph of Joseph Stalin printed on it. The symbolic slap in the face to the great leader delivered by this purely accidental appearance of his likeness on paper re-appropriated for hygienic purposes, could very well earn one a visit from a “black van” in the middle of the night, courtesy of a “tip” about anti-patriotic activity from a malicious co-worker or a vengeful neighbor. The Soviet policy to, on the one hand, outlaw all speech, text and imagery of “negative” realities while, in the same breath, ubiquitously implementing fantasy narratives to scare and seduce the emaciated populace into confusing them with a “positive” reality, is a fitting allegory for cryptosemic communication. The positive intention and the wishful thinking behind cryptosemic praise do not eradicate the “negative” realities of life, but succeed in distracting us away from either noticing or allowing ourselves to be disturbed by their existence.

A top factor contributing to the silencing power of cryptosemic communication is the popularity and the formulaic nature of cryptosemic praise. Having handy, socially approved scripts to utilize in social settings spares us the cognitive strain (Kahneman, 2011: 59-70) of having to engage deliberative mindfulness over every minute pleasantry and nicety. The downside, however, is that by burying cultural double-standards and social inequalities inside cryptosemic implicature – instead of developing socially acceptable language to debate them – we also silence the targets of the prejudice fostered by those double-standards. “The mass media provide people with the words and phrases they can use to defend a point of view,” writes Noelle-Neumann, a scholar of the “spiral of silence” theory, “If people find no current, frequently repeated expressions for their point of view, they lapse into silence; they become effectively mute” (Noelle-Neumann 1993:173). According to Noelle-Neumann, fear of social ostracism keeps us from voicing our (self-perceived) unpopular opinions, lending more social momentum to the already-popular opinions, thus hushing up social tensions and inequalities that may otherwise be expressed and debated.

The subject of silence was brought up several times in my study interviews. We have already seen a number of respondents express confusion and apprehension towards certain social themes and terms due to their potential for either offending oneself or offending others. Silence was brought up as a welcome substitute for words one does not wish to hear from others, but primarily, as a defensive, preemptive measure against potentially offending others and getting in trouble for it. Consistent with Noelle-Neumann’s “spiral of silence” theory, respondents report holding back on expressing

unpopular opinions for the fear of social backlash. Here is Cookie, answering the question of whether she worries about offending others when speaking:

"I am very careful about that, actually. Because I know sometimes I can be easily offended, so I don't like to be that way with other people. Sometimes, yeah, I'll slip up and say things and not even think about them. But, in general, I think before I speak, in general, very closely, like, you know, not to say things that will be – 'cause I have very strong beliefs and things like that – so I tend not to too much talk about things that concern religion or politics or my views on people and popular media. I tend to withhold my opinion because I know it's going to differ from most people, so I just generally will not discuss it if it's not necessary."

Answering the same question, Miki suggested that the less she speaks, the less she runs the risk of being misunderstood: "I guess yeah, sometimes I worry about it. I guess if the way I say something could be misinterpreted. Even if I say something I meant to say – if somebody takes it another way." – *And how do you try to prevent that from happening?* "I guess I just don't talk as much." Some advocated saying nothing at all as the best strategy for dealing with sensitive people and topics. Buck reported a "negative" reaction to Scenario #1 ("beautiful soul on the inside"). When asked what he thinks would have constituted a "positive" comment in this situation, his answer was: "You know what a positive response would be – or a good, I should say, good response would be?" – *OK?* "Nothing!" – *Nothing?* "There is nothing." – *Like, say nothing?* "Yeah." – *Just pretend you didn't hear it?* "Yeah... Just kind of nod your head. Yeah, there is, yeah, there is no good response to that." Clu, who also had a "negative" reaction to Scenario #1, when asked what would have been a more appropriate statement in this instance, also suggested making no statement at all:

“I would say, to not make a comment would probably have been better. Simply to take it in, especially if the friend really did feel, in fact, that you are, in fact, uglier or, you know, you have degraded in your appearance. Because you are opening up to them and also, they haven’t seen you for a long time. This is like a first encounter, you guys are catching up. So, you don’t know how the person’s gonna react to what you’re going to say when it comes to compliments and comments too – what they’re sharing with you. So, if you wanna maintain the least likely chance of offending them, it would have been better to not make such a comment at all. Simply nod and listen.” – *So, just not say anything? Nod and listen? Don’t say anything?* “Some people could argue that they are saying something by not saying something too, you know?.. It’s a question of tact.”

The psycho-cognitive strain from wanting to be polite *and* truthful is relieved and satisfied by silence: the speaker gets to tacitly agree (through silence) with the proposed unattractiveness of weight gain but the ambiguity of silence leaves room for interpretation of motive, which is hijacked by the positive tone of the cryptosemic declaration.

As mentioned earlier, “tact” and silence are intimately linked, as the latter is used as a means to achieve the former, with the final aim to avoid the mention of a taboo topic of conversation or a taboo assumption hanging in the air, so to speak. In this spirit, Chad suggested a passive, non-intrusive approach to testing the waters with “explosive” social topics:

"The terms 'polite' and 'mixed' company still have meaning. So, you know, when in polite or mixed company, you wouldn't talk about, you know, race, religion, politics, you know, sort of the cliché stuff. And I find in those situations, because I'm afraid of, like, offending somebody, I, I spend a lot more time listening instead of trying to say anything. I, I don't broach any subject matters by myself. I just try to respond directly to whatever the other person's saying, let them guide through the conversation because they probably got a better barometer for it than I do."

These responses reveal two shared practices: first, abstaining from speaking, is used, quite deliberately, as a discourse strategy and second, abstaining from speaking is seen as a *cooperative* part of the interaction ritual, assisting in smoothing out (or, rather, *not* triggering) potential flare-ups of social discontent. The respondents showed a strong desire to avoid the minefields of explosive social themes and an acute awareness of silence as an instrument of power and self-protection in those scenarios. Russians have a saying: “Silence is a sign of agreement.” While this crudely reductive formulation does not apply to all instances of social silence, it does accurately describe the dynamic beneath cryptosemic speaking: it is what we omit from saying in the cryptosemic compliment that we agree with the most (so much so, that we expect everyone else to de facto agree with it as well). Silence, then, is a form of implicit complicity in whatever we are keeping mum about: it is an agreement with the substance of what is left unspoken and the necessity to maintain this unspoken-ness for the sake of keeping up the illusion of “positivity” and stability where there may be none.

Collective silence about controversial, anxiety-provoking social themes signals an un-readiness to tackle the social issue in question, lending more legitimacy and power to internalized cultural prejudices. In a study conducted by Blinde and Taub (1992) on homophobia in women’s sports, the authors assert that, due to pressures of patriarchal, heterosexist cultural expectations dominating athletic institutions, the members of female sports teams face constant accusations of homosexuality (i.e. their “femininity” is questioned in light of the “masculine” nature of their sport) and the anxiety these accusations breed is shrouded in absolute silence. Blinde and Taub contend that this compliance in collective muteness on the topic of lesbianism has a corrosive effect on the

morale and self-esteem of the athletes: it forces them to go out of their ways to “prove” their heterosexuality to avoid stigma and rumors and it creates awkward, alienating rifts amongst team members on the basis of the implied divide in their sexual orientations. The fact that lesbianism is used (and responded to) as an *accusation* reinforces the pejorative connotations associated with homosexuals in general. “Conspiracies of silence” nurture the status quo of social structures and systems of meaning they are designed to conceal (Zerubavel 2006:77). It follows that collective denial of social problems carries the potential to influence cultural changes on a macro-cultural scale.

Cryptosemic compliments are a form of politeness and politeness, aside from its above-mentioned ability to distort communication, is a silencer of great power. Politeness is intended to smooth out the rough corners of social interaction and, in a world of cultural double standards applied to speech and behavior, it is not shocking to see unequal distribution of peace-making discourse strategies among different social groups, notably, along the gender lines. Lakoff wrote about this in her argument for why the term “lady” is a euphemistic dysphemism: “Little girls are indeed taught to talk like little ladies, in that their speech is in many ways more polite than that of boys or men, and the reason for this is that politeness involves an absence of a strong statement, and women's speech is devised to prevent the expression of strong statements” (Lakoff 1973:57). Women are socialized to be tactful managers of secrets for what is tact if not a “‘soft’ version of taboo” (Zerubavel 2007:29). Though politeness is an indispensable diplomatic discourse strategy in communication, the same discourse strategy can enslave us into reciprocally-bound interactions in which we may feel forced to say things we don’t completely mean and, on the other end, to seemingly eagerly accept messages we

are not truly thrilled to go along with. Like the joke in which you are socially obligated to attend a party to which you were invited out of pure social obligation, politeness can, by virtue of unspoken rules of social cooperation, drive all participants to engage in ritual exchanges that benefit none present.

Conclusion

The cooperative giving and accepting of cryptosemic compliments can foster and reinforce the aforementioned “false consciousness”: the targets of oppression accept and even embrace the values and priorities of their oppressors as their own – in spite of these values’ and priorities’ contribution to the reinforcement of their own disadvantage or exploitation. Inequalities will not disappear with simply giving lip service to “political correctness”. Instead of relying on the “flavor of the month” terminology to get one through the day without ruffling feathers, we can apply the principles of mindfulness to our thinking as we speak, re-examining the presuppositions behind the old, tired-and-true sayings and paying attention to the assumptions behind the phrases we create ourselves. Before we “practice what we preach”, we must analyze and make sense of what we preach, to make sure we understand and agree with it first.

A recommendable practice in screening speech for cryptosemic content is to see who is being juxtaposed to whom. Cryptosemic praise comes either directly at the own expense of its intended receiver (i.e. being compared against one’s own self, such as in “healthy and happy”, “hard worker”) or at the expense of the stereotyped social group the receiver supposedly represents (e.g. “you look amazing for your age”). Convention tells

us to search for the roots of the negativity in our speech and attitudes but it is an equally valuable rule of thumb to double-check the origins of one's "positive" impulses before speaking "well" of others. Diplomatic speech happens under (at least some) social pressure, the cognitive strain causing us to reach for all kinds of circumlocutions. More deviously, as discussed earlier, what we find pity-worthy and the remarks we consider consolatory can be either covertly demeaning or entirely beside the point. A useful illustration of such an instance was offered by an article on The Belle Jar blog, titled "I Am Not Your Wife, Sister or Daughter. I Am a Person" written in response to the media circus following the Steubenville High School rape case. In it, the author expresses frustration at the victim-shaming, perpetrator-pitying (the three rapists were student athletes with "promising futures") reactions expressed in the mass and social media, decrying the seemingly well-intentioned attempts to "sell" the "wrongness" of rape to naysayers by reminding them that the victim could have easily been their wife, sister or daughter:

"Framing the issue this way for rape apologists can seem useful... It feels like you're humanizing the victim and making the event more relatable, more sympathetic to the person you're arguing with. You know what, though? Saying these things is not helpful; in fact, it's not even helping to humanize the victim. What you are actually doing is perpetuating rape culture by advancing the idea that a woman is only valuable in so much as she is loved or valued by a man... The truth is that I am someone's wife. I am also someone's mother. I am someone's daughter and someone's sister. But those are not the things that define me, or make me valuable in this world. Those are not the reasons that I should be able to live a life free from rape, sexual assault or any kind of violent crime" (The Belle Jar 2013).

The author's solution is to make sure to verbally frame female victims of rape, above all, as "people", which is quite heartening. Ironically, this formulation leaves out someone else. Aside from doing women a disservice by stressing their proprietary value to men as a misguided appeal to the public's empathy, the "wives, sisters and daughters" argument also reduces rape to a social problem experienced exclusively by female members of society, silencing the male victims of rape into utter social non-existence. The cryptosemic message appears to come across as a statement in favor of rape victims but implicitly denies victimhood to both sexes, albeit in different ways.

Examples of partial / selective cryptosemic cognizance abound. In fact, finding *non*-cryptosemic texts about certain social topics like female beauty – even in seemingly infinite informational cornucopia of the Internet, proves quite difficult. Dominated by the polarized, politicized vocabulary, even seemingly friendly, positive talk about one type of beauty tends to happen at the denigration of another type of beauty. The most positive message I could recently find through image search is a viral "meme" of unknown origins (Nilsson, 2012), shown in Figure 7:

Figure 7

This poster perfectly represents the cultural cognitive dissonance surrounding beauty standards and the limitations of targeted mindfulness: while the semantic message reads quite egalitarian, the four images of women elected to iconize it, juxtaposed against each other cannot be said to represent diverse female beauty almost at all. There are two “regular” models and two “plus-sized” models, though an untrained eye may struggle to tell the difference between the two types, given the relatively negligible difference in their body weight. All models are Caucasian in appearance and are approximately the same age. Even their bodies, aside from differences in size, are quite similarly shaped. They still represent the current dominant standard of beauty. This meme can be assumed to be a response to the aggressive and vicious language used on the internet in appraising

female beauty, therefore it is focused on body weight differences, but in this narrow zoom on one issue, the bigger picture of beauty diversity is blocked out. These examples highlight the complex challenge of mindfulness: we can train ourselves to be mindful of some social ills and inequalities, but in focusing on those, we can easily overlook others. It will require a shift of paradigmatic cultural proportions on a macro-societal level to eradicate implicit bias from our language and thinking.

Considering what is at stake, it will serve us well, nonetheless, to make an effort to minimize cryptosemic expression. For speakers of English, fortunately, ridding speech of implicit bias is an easier challenge than for those whose languages come with an implicit bias built into their very structure, as pointed out by Shlain:

“[I]n all the major Continental tongues, most important nouns must be defined by gender articles... While there is a certain rustic logic to these assignments when it comes to physical objects, the classification of more abstract nouns by gender suggests a misogyny deeply rooted in the languages. Continental children learn to distinguish between masculine and feminine nouns between the ages of two and four, and parenthetically they learn that there is sexual value associated with each noun” (Shlain 1998:387).

The English language, on the other hand, by virtue of lacking feminine or masculine articles, has gender neutral nouns, sparing its native speakers from internalizing gendered associations with the non-gendered things of life. Gender-neutral language gives us a chance to overcome socially acquired gender prejudices without having to contend with structurally antecedent bias built into our language. The next step is to be willing to scrutinize our hearts, minds, language and normative expectations for preconceived notions. By now, we have learned to recognize some formerly popular cryptosemic

“endorsements” as appallingly condescending and not at all flattering: “he’s so articulate for a black boy”, “she is so intelligent for a woman”, “she is so educated for a foreigner”, “he is so normal for a homosexual”, etc. But there are so many more normalized, popularized statements in contemporary speech whose default assumptions may well be considered just as ill-conceived and unacceptable from the less forgiving retrospective gaze of future society. Goffman wrote that “one can try to work backward from the verbal consequences of presuppositions to what is presupposed” (Goffman 1983:3) and in the same vein, we can inductively identify the taken-for-granted social prejudices of our time by taking a close look at our popular compliments and insults as telling “vocabularies of motive” (Mills 1940). In acknowledging former cryptosemes for what they are – and debunking the still-existing ones – we expose the durable cultural stereotypes and double standards at their socio-linguistic foundation. By understanding how cryptosemes function cognitively, we develop a new gauge and framework for studying the interplay between language, culture and social inequality.

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APPENDIX: Empirical Study Materials

**“POSITIVE”? “NEGATIVE”? “MIXED”?
EXPLORING “DECODING” PRACTICES IN
CRYPTOSEMIC CONVERSATIONAL EXCHANGES**

In-Person Interview Schedule

IRB PROTOCOL E10-623
ATTACHMENT 7 – FINAL REVISION

PARTICIPANT’S NICKNAME _____

DATE _____

LOCATION _____

Hello and thank you so much for coming in. My name is Maria Malyk. I am a currently working on a project at the sociology department at Rutgers University and I am conducting interviews to collect data about how people make sense of certain commonly experienced conversations. First, I would like to ask you to read this confidentiality form (it has a brief explanation of this study and your role in it) and sign it, if you agree to its terms.

Let’s go over it very briefly [*hand the respondent a copy of the consent form and read out loud for them*]. Do you have any questions?

Then I would like to start by collecting some basic background information about you. [*Hand them the demographic info card*] This information is as confidential as the rest of the interview. Please take a few minutes to fill it out, while I set up here.

[*Upon receiving the card back*] Thank you.

“SCENARIOS”

Let us begin. I am going to start off by handing you this card. [*Hand the respondent the card with “scenario #1”.*] Please take a moment to read the scenario and answer the question. [*Wait for the respondent to finish.*] Now, so that we have it on record, would you please go ahead and read the scenario and the answer options out loud to me?

Scenario #1

Consider the following scenario: You and a friend are having an outing to catch up on each other’s lives. In the course of the conversation, you complain about feeling unattractive after gaining some weight in the recent months. Your friend responds with: “Don’t be silly, you are such a beautiful soul on the inside!”

If you had such a conversation, how do you think you would have felt about this exchange?:

- a. Positive (e.g.: pleased, empowered, etc.)**
- b. Negative (e.g.: annoyed, offended, etc.)**
- c. Mixed (a combination of positive and negative feelings)**

IF “POSITIVE”:

- Can you tell me what was positive about this experience?
- What if I told you that there are other people who feel exactly the opposite than yourself about the same statement – that they took it *negatively*? Why do you think that is? What could possibly make them interpret it so differently?
- Do you think that *your* reaction to this exchange would be the same no matter who you were speaking with, or do you think it would vary depending on the relationship you have with the speaker (e.g.: would it make a difference if this person was your parent, your child, your boss, a stranger, etc.)?
- Do you have any pet peeves about what people say or how they say it? In other words – are there certain phrasings, or certain figures of speech or even certain behaviors that annoy you in the way some people communicate? What are those pet peeves? Why do you think such things “get to you”?
- When you speak with people, are you ever concerned about accidentally offending them? Why so / why not?

IF “NEGATIVE”:

- Can you tell me what was negative about this experience?
- Can you think of a better way the friend could have responded? What would you have liked to hear in this instance? What would constitute a “good” or “positive” response to your complaint?
- If the situations were reversed and it was your friend that was upset about feeling overweight and unattractive, if you wished to comfort your friend, what would you have said in response to such a complaint?
- What if I told you that there are other people who feel exactly the opposite than yourself about the same statement – that they took it *positively*? Why do you think that is? What could possibly make them interpret it so differently?
- Do you think that *your* reaction to this exchange would be the same no matter who you were speaking with, or do you think it would vary depending on the relationship you have with the speaker (e.g.: would it make a difference if this person was your parent, your child, your boss, a stranger, etc.)?
- Do you have any pet peeves about what people say or how they say it? In other words – are there certain phrasings, or certain figures of speech or even certain behaviors that annoy you in the way some people communicate? What are those pet peeves? Why do you think such things “get to you”?
- When you speak with people, are you ever concerned about accidentally offending them? Why so / why not?

IF “MIXED”:

- Can you tell me what was positive about this experience?
- Can you tell me what was negative about this experience?
- Do you think that *your* reaction to this exchange would be the same no matter who you were speaking with, or do you think it would vary depending on the relationship you have with the speaker (e.g.: would it make a difference if this person was your parent, your child, your boss, a stranger, etc.)?
- Do you have any pet peeves about what people say or how they say it? In other words – are there certain phrasings, or certain figures of speech or even certain behaviors that annoy you in the way some people communicate? What are those pet peeves? Why do you think such things “get to you”?

- When you speak with people, are you ever concerned about accidentally offending them? Why so / why not?

Now, let's repeat the same exercise – but with a different scenario. [*Hand the respondent the card with “scenario #2”.*] Please take a moment to read and answer this question. [*Wait for the respondent to finish.*] Now, so that we have it on record, would you please go ahead and read the scenario and the answer options out loud to me?

Scenario #2

Imagine the following scenario: You have been working for days on a project for your job and have hit the proverbial “rut” when no new ideas are coming and you are growing more and more frustrated with yourself. “What is wrong with me?” you ask a friend who has stopped by to say hello, “Why is this so difficult? Am I stupid or something?” “Nonsense,” exclaims your friend, “you are the most diligent, hard-working person I know!”

Is your reaction to your friend's comment:

- a. Positive (e.g.: pleased, empowered, etc.)
- b. Negative (e.g.: annoyed, offended, etc.)
- c. Mixed (a combination of positive and negative feelings)

IF “POSITIVE”:

- Can you tell me what was positive about this experience?

- What if I told you that there are other people who feel exactly the opposite than yourself about the same statement – that they took it *negatively*? Why do you think that is? What could possibly make them interpret it so differently?

- Do you think that *your* reaction to this exchange would be the same no matter who you were speaking with, or do you think it would vary depending on the relationship you have with the speaker (e.g.: would it make a difference if this person was your parent, your child, your boss, a stranger, etc.)?

IF “NEGATIVE”:

- Can you tell me what was negative about this experience?

- Can you think of a better way the friend could have responded? What would you have liked to hear in this instance? What would constitute a “good” or “positive” response to your complaint?
- If the situations were reversed and it was your friend that was upset about feeling stupid, if you wished to comfort your friend, what would you have said in response to such a complaint?
- What if I told you that there are other people who feel exactly the opposite than yourself about the same statement – that they took it *positively*? Why do you think that is? What could possibly make them interpret it so differently?
- Do you think that *your* reaction to this exchange would be the same no matter who you were speaking with, or do you think it would vary depending on the relationship you have with the speaker (e.g.: would it make a difference if this person was your parent, your child, your boss, a stranger, etc.)?

IF “MIXED”:

- Can you tell me what was positive about this experience?
- Can you tell me what was negative about this experience?
- Do you think that *your* reaction to this exchange would be the same no matter who you were speaking with, or do you think it would vary depending on the relationship you have with the speaker (e.g.: would it make a difference if this person was your parent, your child, your boss, a stranger, etc.)?

Now, let us take a look at one more scenario. [*Hand the respondent the card with “scenario #3”.*] Please take a moment to read and answer this question. [*Wait for the respondent to finish.*] Now, so that we have it on record, would you please go ahead and read the scenario and the answer options out loud to me?

Scenario #3

Picture the following situation: You have been enjoying a conversation with a person you just met at a coffee shop and, in passing, your age is revealed. “No way!” exclaims your new friend, “You are not really (fill in your age here), are you? That’s amazing! You look incredible for your age!”

What is your reaction to what this person just said to you?

- a. **Positive (e.g.: pleased, empowered, etc.)**
- b. **Negative (e.g.: annoyed, offended, etc.)**
- c. **Mixed (a combination of positive and negative feelings)**

IF “POSITIVE”:

- Can you tell me what was positive about this experience?
- What if I told you that there are other people who feel exactly the opposite than yourself about the same statement – that they took it *negatively*? Why do you think that is? What could possibly make them interpret it so differently?
- Do you think that *your* reaction to this exchange would be the same no matter who you were speaking with, or do you think it would vary depending on the relationship you have with the speaker (e.g.: would it make a difference is this person was your parent, your child, your boss, a stranger, etc.)?
- In general, when you speak with people, do you pay more attention to **what they said** or to **how they meant it**? In other words, when you are interpreting your communication with another person, do you focus more on their verbal articulation of the message (words / phrasings used) – or – the intention of the speaker (the spirit in which the message was delivered)?

IF “NEGATIVE”:

- Can you tell me what was negative about this experience?
- Supposing that this person meant to compliment you, what would a *real* compliment sound like in this situation? What would you have liked to hear in this instance?
- What if I told you that there are other people who feel exactly the opposite than yourself about the same statement – that they took it *positively*? Why do you think that is? What could possibly make them interpret it so differently?
- Do you think that *your* reaction to this exchange would be the same no matter who you were speaking with, or do you think it would vary depending on the relationship you have with the speaker (e.g.: would it make a difference is this person was your parent, your child, your boss, a stranger, etc.)?

- In general, when you speak with people, do you pay more attention to **what they said** or to **how they meant it**? In other words, when you are interpreting your communication with another person, do you focus more on their verbal articulation of the message (words / phrasings used) – or – the intention of the speaker (the spirit in which the message was delivered)?

IF “MIXED”:

- Can you tell me what was positive about this experience?

- Can you tell me what was negative about this experience?

- Do you think that *your* reaction to this exchange would be the same no matter who you were speaking with, or do you think it would vary depending on the relationship you have with the speaker (e.g.: would it make a difference if this person was your parent, your child, your boss, a stranger, etc.)?

- In general, when you speak with people, do you pay more attention to **what they said** or to **how they meant it**? In other words, when you are interpreting your communication with another person, do you focus more on their verbal articulation of the message (words / phrasings used) – or – the intention of the speaker (the spirit in which the message was delivered)?

BASIC INFORMATION CARD

[to be filled out by the respondent at the very beginning of the interview.]

Before we begin the interview, I would like to collect some routine demographic information about you (this is standard information that is conventionally collected in a wide spectrum of sociological studies.)

1. What is your gender? Female___ Male___ Other (please define) _____

2. What is your age? _____

3. What is your race and / or ethnicity? _____

4. Were you born and raised in the U.S. or elsewhere? U. S. A. _____ Other (where?) _____

5. Do you have any academic degrees and, if so, what is the highest degree you have received?

- a. I do not hold any academic degrees
- b. High school diploma or the equivalent (GED)
- c. Associate degree
- d. Bachelor's degree
- e. Master's degree
- f. Professional degree (MD, DDS, DVM, LLB, JD, DD)
- g. Doctorate degree (Ph.D. or Ed.D.)

6. What is your current occupation or profession? _____

7. What is your approximate household income? _____

8. What is your marital status?

- a. Now married
- b. Widowed
- c. Divorced
- d. Separated
- e. Never married

9. What is your religion (if any)? _____

10. How often, if at all, do you attend religious services?

- a. Never
- b. Very rarely
- c. Sometimes
- d. Frequently
- e. Regularly

11. In terms of your political / social orientation, would you describe yourself closest to:

- a. Mostly to strictly conservative
- b. Mostly to strictly liberal
- c. Both (a balanced combination of both, conservative and liberal sensibilities)
- d. Neither conservative nor liberal (please explain what you mean): _____

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

You are invited to participate in a research study that is being conducted by Maria V. Malyk, who is a Ph.D. candidate in the Sociology Department at Rutgers University. The purpose of this research is to investigate how people make meaning out of different social interactions.

Approximately 40 subjects ages 21 and up will participate in the study, and each individual's participation will last approximately one hour. All participants in this study must be fluent in the English language.

Participation in this study will involve filling out a basic demographic information form and then answering questions in a one-on-one interview with me. In the course of this interview, I will read you several fictional scenarios and ask you to give me your reaction to and impression of this “exchange”. There will also be a set of questions that probe into your conception of differences and similarities between the sexes (norms, values and expectations.)

There is a \$10 compensation for completing this study. If you do not finish the entire interview, the fee will be prorated at \$5 per half-hour of participation (in other words, if you decide to leave before the interview is completed, you will be paid \$5 if you had participated up to half an hour, and \$10 if you participated longer than half an hour.)

This research is confidential. Confidential means that the research records will include some information about you. At the beginning of the interview, you will be assigned a single name (a nickname of your choosing) – to be used for the questionnaire. This “nickname” will be the only name used in reference to your answers, if they are published in subsequent works. The only information that could possibly link your answers to your identity is your voice – as the interview will be recorded by an audio device for the purposes of accurate recall. This information will be stored in such a manner that some linkage between your identity and the response in the research exists. Please note that we will keep this information confidential by limiting individual's access to the research data and keeping it in a secure location – at my home or my university office. The research team and the Institutional Review Board at Rutgers University are the only parties that will be allowed to see the data, except as may be required by law. All study data will be kept for the duration of this project – at least three years after the completion of the study. Afterwards, the data will be disposed of in a secure fashion (the recordings will be erased and the paper records will be shredded.) As I will only record your answers under your “nickname” and will have no way to contact you in the future, the results of this study will not be made available to you or any other participants in the study.

There are no foreseeable risks to participation in this study. Participation in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate, and you may withdraw at any time during the study procedures without any penalty to you. In addition, you may choose not to answer any questions with which you are not comfortable.

If you have any questions about the study or study procedures, you may contact myself and my co-primary investigator Sarah Rosenfield:

Maria V. Malyk
Rutgers University, Department of Sociology
Davison Hall
26 Nichol Avenue
New Brunswick, NJ 08901
Dept. Phone: (732) 932-4029
Email Address: mvm32@rci.rutgers.edu

Sarah Rosenfield
Rutgers University, Department of Sociology
Davison Hall
26 Nichol Avenue
New Brunswick, NJ 08901
Dept. Phone: (732) 932-4029
Email Address: slrosen@rci.rutgers.edu

If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact the IRB Administrator at Rutgers University at:

Rutgers University, the State University of New Jersey
Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects
Office of Research and Sponsored Programs
3 Rutgers Plaza
New Brunswick, NJ 08901-8559
Tel: 732-932-0150 ext. 2104
Email: humansubjects@orsp.rutgers.edu

You will be given a copy of this consent form for your records.

Sign below if you agree to participate in this research study:

Subject's Name (Print) _____	Date _____
Subject's Signature _____	Date _____
Principal Investigator's Signature _____	Date _____

AUDIO/VIDEOTAPE ADDENDUM TO CONSENT FORM

You have already agreed to participate in a research study entitled: “*“Positive”? “Negative”? “Mixed?” Exploring “Decoding” Practices in Cryptosemic Conversational Exchanges*” conducted by Maria V. Malyk. We are asking for your permission to allow us to **use an audio recorded** as part of that research study. You do not have to agree to be recorded in order to participate in the main part of the study.

The recording(s) will be used for ensuring the best accuracy in transcribing our in-person interview – to make sure that all of your answers are complete and accounted for.

The recording(s) will include our conversation in which I will refer to you by the nickname you pick for yourself at the offset of the interview.

The recording(s) will be stored in my home office as well as my university office – in a secure locked file cabinet – together with the paper records of our interview. These records will be retained for the duration of this project and at least three years after the completion of the study – and then disposed of in a secure fashion.

Your signature on this form grants the investigator named above permission to record you as described above during participation in the above-referenced study. The investigator will not use the recording(s) for any other reason than that/those stated in the consent form without your written permission.

Subject’s Name (Print) _____

Subject’s Signature _____ Date _____

Principal Investigator’s Signature _____ Date _____

RESPONDENTS' DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

RESPONDENT'S NICKNAME	SEX / GENDER	AGE	RACE / ETHNICITY	PLACE OF BIRTH	ACADEMIC DEGREE	OCCUPATION	HOUSEHOLD INCOME	MARITAL STATUS	RELIGION	ATTEND RELIGIOUS SERVICES	POLITICAL VIEWS	SCENARIO #1 "BEAUTIFUL SOUL"	SCENARIO #2 "HARD WORKER"	SCENARIO #3 "FOR YOUR AGE"
Marco Man	M	44	White	U.S.A.	Bachelor's	CHHA	\$75,000	Now married	Jewish	Never	Mostly to strictly liberal	POSITIVE	POSITIVE	POSITIVE
Linda	F	35	Asian	Taiwan	Bachelor's	Grad Student	\$30,000	Never married	None	Never	Both	MIXED	NEGATIVE	MIXED
Syd	F	21	Asian / Pacific Islander	U.S.A.	High School	College Student	n/a	Never married	Roman Catholic	Sometimes	Mostly to strictly liberal	POSITIVE	POSITIVE	MIXED
Jeremy	M	48	White	U.S.A.	Doctorate (Ph.D.)	Mental Health Counselor	\$100,000	Divorced	Roman Catholic	Very rarely	Both	MIXED	MIXED	MIXED
Greg	M	23	Jamaican American	U.S.A.	High School	College Student	\$45,000	Never married	Christian	Sometimes	Both	POSITIVE	POSITIVE	POSITIVE
Miki	F	21	Father Mexican, Mother White (other)	U.S.A.	High School	College Student	n/a	Never married	Christian	Regularly	I am not really involved in politics	MIXED	NEGATIVE	MIXED
Dee	F	21	African American / Haitian	U.S.A.	High School	College Student, lab consultant, community assistant, pet care specialist	\$5,200	Never married	Catholic	Frequently	Both	MIXED	MIXED	NEGATIVE
Xx	F	21	Black	Haiti	High School	College student	0	Never married	Catholic	Frequently	Both	MIXED	POSITIVE	POSITIVE
Liz	F	32	White	U.S.A.	Bachelor's	Part-time (college?) instructor	\$30,000	Now married	Atheist	Never	Mostly to strictly liberal	MIXED	MIXED	MIXED

RESPONDENT'S NICKNAME	SEX / GENDER	AGE	RACE / ETHNICITY	PLACE OF BIRTH	ACADEMIC DEGREE	OCCUPATION	HOUSEHOLD INCOME	MARITAL STATUS	RELIGION	ATTEND RELIGIOUS SERVICES	POLITICAL VIEWS	SCENARIO #1 "BEAUTIFUL SOUL"	SCENARIO #2 "HARD WORKER"	SCENARIO #3 "FOR YOUR AGE"
Emily	F	21	White	U.S.A.	High School	College Student	\$130,000	Never married	None	Very rarely	Both	MIXED	MIXED	NEGATIVE
Ashley	F	22	White	U.S.A.	High School	College Student	\$40,000	Never married	Christian	Sometimes	Both	MIXED	POSITIVE	POSITIVE
Angela	F	21	Chinese	U.S.A.	High School	College Student	0	Never married	None	Never	Both	MIXED	POSITIVE	POSITIVE
Kelly	F	21	White	U.S.A.	High School	College Student (fast food -- Gerlanda's)	n/a	Never married	Undecided	Very rarely	Mostly to strictly liberal	MIXED	MIXED	POSITIVE
Sally	F	36	Chinese-American	U.S.A.	Master's	Copywriter (academic publisher)	\$41,000	Never married	Former Catholic	Very rarely	Mostly to strictly liberal	MIXED	POSITIVE	MIXED
Foo	F	60	African American	USA	Ph.D.	Researcher, writer, fitness supervisor	\$30,000	Never married	Episcopalian	Sometimes	Both	MIXED	MIXED	MIXED
Blue Bird	M	23	Vietnamese	U.S.A.	High School	College Student	\$12,000	Never married	None	Never	Mostly to strictly liberal	NEGATIVE	POSITIVE	MIXED
Big John	M	22	African-American	U.S.A.	High School	College Student	n/a	Now married	Baptist	Frequently	Mostly to strictly liberal	MIXED	POSITIVE	MIXED
Chloe	F	22	Black / African American	U.S.A.	Associate's	College Student / waitress at restaurant	\$10,000	Never married	Baptist	Very rarely	Both	MIXED	MIXED	MIXED
Bob	M	25	African-American	U.S.A.	High School	None	None	Never married	Christian	Very rarely	Both	POSITIVE	POSITIVE	POSITIVE

RESPONDENT'S NICKNAME	SEX / GENDER	AGE	RACE / ETHNICITY	PLACE OF BIRTH	ACADEMIC DEGREE	OCCUPATION	HOUSEHOLD INCOME	MARITAL STATUS	RELIGION	ATTEND RELIGIOUS SERVICES	POLITICAL VIEWS	SCENARIO #1 "BEAUTIFUL SOUL"	SCENARIO #2 "HARD WORKER"	SCENARIO #3 "FOR YOUR AGE"
Lucy	F	35	White	U.S.A.	Master's	Grad Student	\$40,000	Now married	n/a	Never	Mostly to strictly liberal	MIXED	POSITIVE	POSITIVE
Shumy	M	36	Human	U.S.A.	Bachelor's	Disability Services / education	\$25,000	Never married	Secular Humanist	Very rarely	Mostly to strictly liberal	MIXED	MIXED	MIXED
Jen	F	26	Caucasian	U.S.A.	Master's	Dietitian / Nutrition Research Assistant	\$120,000 (?)	Now married	Catholic (not practicing)	Very rarely	Mostly to strictly liberal	POSITIVE	MIXED	POSITIVE
Al	M	21	Indian	U.S.A.	High School	College Student / Research Assistant	\$100,000	Never married	Catholic	Sometimes	Both	MIXED	MIXED	MIXED (CONFUSED)
John	M	23	White	Israel	Bachelor's	Dancer	\$4,800	Divorced	No religion	Never	Both	POSITIVE	POSITIVE	POSITIVE
Angel	F	21	White	U.S.A.	Associate's	None	zero	Never married	Agnostic	Never	Mostly to strictly liberal	NEGATIVE	POSITIVE	MIXED
Misty	M	22	White	U.S.A.	Bachelor's	Looking for work 'till September	\$25,000	Never married	Not religious	Never	Not sure, but probably slightly liberal	MIXED	POSITIVE	MIXED (NEUTRAL)
Buck	M	32	White	U.S.A.	Professional	Higher education administration	\$90,000	Never married	Good question	Very rarely	Both	NEGATIVE	MIXED	NEGATIVE

RESPONDENT'S NICKNAME	SEX / GENDER	AGE	RACE / ETHNICITY	PLACE OF BIRTH	ACADEMIC DEGREE	OCCUPATION	HOUSEHOLD INCOME	MARITAL STATUS	RELIGION	ATTEND RELIGIOUS SERVICES	POLITICAL VIEWS	SCENARIO #1 "BEAUTIFUL SOUL"	SCENARIO #2 "HARD WORKER"	SCENARIO #3 "FOR YOUR AGE"
Cookie	F	26	African American	U.S.A.	Bachelor's	Office Admin	\$70,000	Never married	Born-again (Christian)	Sometimes	I have an opinion on politics but don't consider myself conserv. or liberal	MIXED	POSITIVE	MIXED
Eleanor	F	19	Asian / Korean	South Korea	High School	College Student	\$30,000 - 100,000	Never married	Christian	Regularly	Mostly to strictly liberal	POSITIVE	MIXED	POSITIVE
Roger	M	22	White	U.S.A.	High School	College Student	\$100,000	Never married	None	Never	Mostly to strictly liberal	MIXED	POSITIVE	POSITIVE
Juice	M	27	African American	England	High School	Teacher	\$20,000	Never married	None	Sometimes	Mostly to strictly liberal	MIXED	POSITIVE	POSITIVE
Mia	F	22	Asian	U.S.A.	High School	College Student	n/a	Never married	Liberal Hindu	Sometimes	Mostly to strictly liberal	MIXED	POSITIVE	MIXED
Gabs	F	21	African American / Okinawan	U.S.A.	Associate's	College Student	\$10,000	Never married	Agnostic	Never	Mostly to strictly liberal	MIXED	POSITIVE	MIXED
Bill	M	21	White, Irish, German	U.S.A.	High School	Database Engineer @ Yahoo Inc.	\$80.00	Never married	Agnostic	Never	I identify as libertarian, socially liberal and financially conserve.	NEGATIVE	POSITIVE	POSITIVE

RESPONDENT'S NICKNAME	SEX / GENDER	AGE	RACE / ETHNICITY	PLACE OF BIRTH	ACADEMIC DEGREE	OCCUPATION	HOUSEHOLD INCOME	MARITAL STATUS	RELIGION	ATTEND RELIGIOUS SERVICES	POLITICAL VIEWS	SCENARIO #1 "BEAUTIFUL SOUL"	SCENARIO #2 "HARD WORKER"	SCENARIO #3 "FOR YOUR AGE"
CLU	M	34	Caucasian	U.S.A.	Master's	Arch. Engineer	\$100,000	Never married	Cylon	Never	I have a different view of the world and how things should be	NEGATIVE	POSITIVE	POSITIVE
Ben	M	23	Caucasian / Jewish	U.S.A.	Bachelor's	Doctoral Student	\$28,000	Never married	Jewish, non practicing	Very rarely	Mostly to strictly liberal	NEGATIVE	POSITIVE	MIXED
Dennis	M	26	Dominican / American	U.S.A.	Bachelor's	Community Organizer	\$30,000	Never married	Agnostic, but I believe in God	Very rarely	Progressive is the term I prefer	MIXED	POSITIVE	POSITIVE
Chad	M	22	White / Caucasian	U.S.A.	Bachelor's	Tutor	\$100,000	Never married	--	Never	Mostly to strictly liberal	NEGATIVE	POSITIVE	MIXED
Jack	M	22	Asian (Korean)	Seoul, Korea	High School	College Student	0	Never married	None	Never	Mostly to strictly liberal	NEGATIVE	POSITIVE	POSITIVE
JohnK	M	22	White	U.S.A.	Bachelor's	Student	\$12,000	Never married	Atheist	Never	Mostly to strictly liberal	MIXED	POSITIVE	POSITIVE
												Positive: 7 (17.5%)	Positive: 26 (65%)	Positive: 18 (45%)
												Negative: 8 (20%)	Negative: 2 (5%)	Negative: 3 (7.5%)
												Mixed: 25 (62.5%)	Mixed: 12 (30%)	Mixed: 19 (47.5%)