

Beeman, William O. 2014. Negotiating a passage to the meal in four cultures. In Szatrowski, Polly, Ed., *Language and Food: Verbal and nonverbal experiences*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins. Pp. 31-52.

# Language and Food

Verbal and nonverbal experiences

*Edited by*

Polly E. Szatrowski

University of Minnesota

John Benjamins Publishing Company

Amsterdam / Philadelphia

CIP data is available from the Library of Congress.

Pragmatics & Beyond New Series, ISSN 0922-842X ; v. 238

ISBN 978 90 272 5643 0 (Hb ; alk. paper)

ISBN 978 90 272 7088 7 (Eb)

© 2014 – John Benjamins B.V.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form, by print, photoprint, microfilm, or any other means, without written permission from the publisher.

John Benjamins Publishing Co. · P.O. Box 36224 · 1020 ME Amsterdam · The Netherlands

John Benjamins North America · P.O. Box 27519 · Philadelphia PA 19118-0519 · USA

## CHAPTER 2

# Negotiating a passage to the meal in four cultures

William O. Beeman  
University of Minnesota

Food plays a central role in hospitality in virtually every culture on earth. Eating together – “commensality” is perhaps one of the most basic human social acts, and is imbued with a special ritual quality. In this paper I show that there are several stages that participants in commensality pass through from the outside world to the communal meal. The passage from stage to stage is effected through the use of linguistic/ behavioral routines that I call “pragmemic triggers.” The form of these triggers is different for different societies, but their structure and use is the same. To demonstrate this, I compare the passage to the meal in four widely dispersed cultures: Middle East, Japanese, German and American.

### Introduction

In this paper I will show how language use functions to carry out cultural transitions from setting to setting and scene to scene in a very specific cultural event – namely the transition between cultural stages in the movement toward common shared food. Although I am dealing with a very special cultural event – “commensality” – the basic linguistic mechanisms detailed here have analogous functions in the conduct of the processual organization of stages of any cultural event. In short, “pragmemic triggers” signal the end of one stage of social action in an event, and the commencing of a new stage.

When we deal with linguistic pragmatics we are continually dealing with more than just grammar and semantics. Pragmatic dimensions of communication are integrated with social action and cultural institutions. Language accomplishes social “work” in distinct cultural settings. The Austinian notion of performative speech (Austin, 1962, p. 166) is here clearly an essential component of language use in social situations.

Linguist Hymes (1974) in his formulation of the “ethnography of communication” points out that language is embedded in cultural “events” within which social “scenes” and “settings” are integrated. According to Hymes (1974) a setting is a physical locus for linguistic behavior; a scene is a culturally defined gloss on the activity. Thus, one could be in the “setting” of a baseball game in a baseball stadium and the “scene” of an altercation between a coach and an umpire. Both take place within the “event” of the baseball game. Since, in Hymes (1974) (and Austin’s) view, language is functional, social movement from scene to scene and setting to setting is marked, or even effected by linguistic mechanisms that delineate the cultural and cognitive boundaries between these special events and sub-events. This is true whether social and cultural events are political, economic, legal, religious, social, or purely functional.

## 2. Stages of commensality and their pragmatic triggers

Food plays a central role in hospitality in virtually every culture on earth. Eating together – “commensality” is perhaps one of the most basic human social acts, and is imbued with a special ritual quality. Not everyone is invited to dine together. People must be in special relationships to other diners to be admitted to the table.

Commensality is thus the social event of people eating together. Whether as simple as sharing a drink or a snack, or as elaborate as a banquet, commensality has profound meaning in human society. Sociality and commensality are clearly linked. In fact, it is rare for people to come together and not share food in a private setting. Even the poorest people in the world will offer food or drink to a casual guest with the full knowledge that eating together creates a social bond. Concomitantly, most guests will accept something, even a small piece of candy or a drink of water in order to recognize and create that desirable social tie. To refuse food is to refuse a social relationship, which is why such a refusal usually requires an explanation or apology.

However, commensality is not an event that arises instantaneously in social life. There is a transition from the “everyday world” (Schuetz, 1945) to the state of commensality through a series of stages that mirror the stages of other social events, particularly those of ritual.

Movement from the everyday world to the state of commensality is pragmatic, and deploys “pragmemics” in its execution. Just as phonemes constitute meaningful sound units in language, pragmemes can be seen as meaningful linguistic and behavioral acts in social and cultural life. In this paper I use the term “pragmemic trigger” or “trigger” for short, to indicate the kind of performative, pragmatically

situated culturally defined linguistic and behavioral formulas that advance a social action from one phase to the next.

This kind of pragmatic event, embodying the pragmemic triggers I am positing is palpable in many other cultural situations, such as court proceedings, sporting events or religious rituals. The judge is announced in court – a pragmemic trigger, all rise, the trial begins with the utterance of another pragmemic trigger by the judge, attorneys are allocated turns to present their cases, witnesses are called, sworn, and interrogated all using pragmemic triggers to move from stage to stage in the trial. Objections to testimony are entertained, summary statements are made and a judgment is rendered. Each of these events is linguistically and behaviorally triggered. This kind of pragmatic transitioning is perhaps less apparent in the rituals of everyday life. Nevertheless, it is essential that certain behavioral and linguistic actions take place for a social event to proceed from beginning to end without consequence.

In describing these passages, I take into account three elements: (1) The “states” between which actors move, (2) The “transitions” between states and (3) the pragmemic triggers that initiate the transitions between states.

The rituals of commensality are of great interest here as a pan-human phenomenon. They show a remarkable similarity across cultures. Therefore I believe that a comparison of their pragmatic mechanisms will serve to illustrate the remarkable common pattern practiced by humans in most if not all societies.

The pragmatics of approaching and negotiating a meal is variable in each society. Commensality is a social ritual in which kinship relations, social hierarchy and the passage from the public “outside” to the intimate “inside” is negotiated by stages. Each stage is frequently marked by a ritual or linguistic act in which social differences between participants are gradually reduced, until all can approach the table in a relative state of social comfort, though hierarchy and social difference may still be ritually marked in the physical placement of participants.

In analyzing the social rituals of movement to the place of commensality, I identify eight stages summarized in Table 1 with seven transitions between stages and seven pragmemic triggers that initiate these transitions, thus moving participants from the outside world to commensality and back to the outside world. In Table 1 the pragmemic triggers in the middle column initiate the transition in the right column to each new stage in the left column of the next row. The process is cyclical. When the “reciprocating status” is reached, the process begins again at the top.

Each of these stages also constitutes a psychological “frame” such as identified by researchers such as Schuetz (1945), Bateson (1956), Goffman (1974) and Tannen (1993). That is to say, there are appropriate pragmatic behaviors and

Table 1. Stages of commensality and their pragmatic triggers

Stage	Pragmemic trigger	Transition
The "outside world"	The invitation	Outside world to threshold
The "invited state"	Greeting/Welcome	Crossing the threshold
The "gathering place"	Summons to "the table"	Passage to "the table"
The "arrival at the table"	The signal to eat	Beginning the meal
Commensality	Invitation to leave "the table"	Leaving "the table"
The "post commensal activity"	Statement of departure	Departure (crossing the threshold)
The "departing place"	Expression of gratitude	Re-entry into the "outside world"
The "reciprocating status"	(Invitation)	(Passage from outside world to threshold)

language that characterize each stage of movement, before and after the culmination at the "table" where "table manners" are practiced.

Thus, to repeat, in all in this model of commensality there are 13 areas of pragmatic communicative behavior. The eight "stages" and the seven transitions between stages activated by seven pragmemic triggers are described in detail in the following sections.

### 2.1 The "outside world" and departures from it

This is the world of the everyday, as identified by Alfred Schuetz. It is the world unmarked by any special relationship to a specific instance of incipient commensality. It is important to have a clear picture of this state, for it is the "ground" against which the specialized states in the process of commensality are experienced.

As Schuetz (1945) points out, the everyday outside world is a social construct. It is the state seen by actors as "normal," "ordinary" and "unmarked" by any special event. For human beings this is a "zero level" of normalcy. Humans then transform this world through the construction of special events. Schuetz wrote:

The world of everyday life is the scene and also the object of our actions and interactions. We have to dominate it and we have to change it in order to realize the purposes which we pursue within it among our fellow-men. Thus, we work and operate not only within but upon the world. (Schuetz, 1945, p. 534)

It is the inter-subjective processes mentioned here that create the social relations that serve as the basis for common social actions, and it is through these relations and common shared activities that humans create multiple cognitive realities. Schuetz continues:

James [1890, p. 291ff.] calls ...[such different cognitive realities] “sub-universes” and mentions as examples the world of sense or physical things (as the paramount reality); the world of science; the world of ideal relations; the world of “idols of the tribe”; the various supernatural worlds of mythology and religion; the various worlds of individual opinion; the worlds of sheer madness and vagary. (Schuetz, 1945, p. 533)

Bateson (1956), Goffman (1974) and Tannen (1993) among others have developed the notion of different cognitive realities further, pointing out that virtually any shared social activity – even a simple conversation – creates a cognitive frame that contains its own temporary reality. These frames demarcate states that are differentiated from the ordinary outside world. Transitions to and away from these states are marked by clear linguistic triggers that mark the beginnings and endings of such events, and by extension, the openings and closings of the cognitive frames that demarcate them.. So, the pragmemic trigger “Hello” opens a conversational encounter – a special state different from the ordinary world. The “Hello” must be matched by “Goodbye” or the equivalent, as a pragmemic trigger to close the conversational encounter, and move either back to the ordinary world or on to another state, for example, a game. In the everyday world of the individual there are multiple instances of these kinds of small cognitively framed events initiated and concluded with pragmemic triggers.

Many cognitive frames are embedded within others. So, for example, in a job interview one enters an office [open frame 1], usually introduces oneself and is greeted by one person [open and close frame 2], is ushered into an interview space [open frame 3], where the interview [open frame 4] with another person takes place, and on completion takes leave in a sequence of closings [close frame 4, close frame 3, close frame 1]. All of these transitions from frame to frame are marked by pragmemic triggers.

As can be seen, some frames are open and held open as the individual transits into subsequently embedded, or nested, frames until, reversing the process, each of the frames is closed in turn and the individual re-emerges into the everyday world.

So the pre-existence of a zero-level “ordinary world” from which the individual departs into different cognitively framed events is the point of departure for understanding how the passage into and out of specialized social and cultural situations, such as commensality.

### 2.1.1 *Pragmemic trigger: The invitation*

The movement from the everyday world into the world of commensality is first triggered by an invitation on the part of one party to another. Invitations can be evaluated according to their appropriateness and their effectiveness. They also come in many forms and styles, ranging from a *simple* informal suggestion to a highly formal written message. The invitation is a trigger that requires a response. It is culturally unacceptable in most societies not to answer an invitation.

In some cultures, of course, invitations are insincere or simple expressions of good will. (“Let’s do lunch sometime!”). Distinguishing genuine invitations that will lead to actual commensality from those that are mere gestures is a matter of cultural expertise. Many persons encountering another culture for the first time often lack that expertise and either feel miffed when commensality does not materialize, or embarrassed when they arrive for a meal or other event and are not expected.

## 2.2 Transit: Outside world to threshold – The “invited state”

When one receives and accepts an invitation to a commensal event, and thereby becomes bound to a future occasion of commensality, one’s social status changes. It is, incidentally, incumbent on those invited to respond to an invitation positively or negatively. The pragmatics of this situation are frequently problematic in the United States today where many hosts complain that people do not respond to written or even oral invitations, or try to modify them to include contingencies. These matters are widely debated and the cause of some social friction. Note this recent interchange between popular columnist Miss Manners (2011) and a reader:

DEAR MISS MANNERS: I guess I’m just a grump, but I’m tired of hearing people endlessly whine that no one wants to come to their parties. People who repeatedly do not get a reply to their party invitations should maybe stop having parties. I know that sounds harsh. ...

GENTLE READER: The problem is not that invited guests are saying no. The problem is that large numbers of them are not saying either yes or no, but simply ignoring invitations. Even those who do answer might say yes and then not appear, or say no and show up anyway. ... (Miss Manners, 2011)

Being invited to a commensality event creates the need for preparation on the part of the guest. Scheduling, arranging transportation, and care of children or pets are just a few of the arrangements that must be made in advance of the event. In many societies a guest is expected to bring a gift for the hosts, and this must also be prepared in advance. In terms of cognitive framing, the most salient aspect is that the incipient guest is in a state of anticipation of entry into the commensality event. The event really starts when these anticipatory preparations are made.

Of course many commensality events do not involve the social roles of “guest” and “host.” Individuals are equal participants in the event, and preparations are made accordingly, but they still may require extensive preparations.

#### 2.2.1 *Pragmemic trigger: Greeting/ Welcome*

When participants in commensality approach the time and place of the event, they cross physically into the place of gathering. This crossing is marked by a variety of pragmemic triggers which are culturally variable. Generally this involves a verbal greeting between hosts and guests, exchanges of gifts, change in attire (such as removing shoes and outerwear). When there is no host/ guest distinction, such as friends meeting for a meal at a restaurant, nevertheless there are mutual greetings and a transition in physical state between the everyday world and the sphere of the commensal event.

### 2.3 Transit: Crossing the threshold – The “gathering place”

The commensal participants gather at some point other than the table where commensality will take place. The pragmatics of behavior in this setting are variable. Physically an ante room or living room serves as a gathering space. In a restaurant, a lounge or bar may be a place to wait until the group is escorted to the table. In many societies the social gathering and dining space are the same, but one is transformed into the other by a change in furniture or accoutrements.

Generally, conversation consists of light pleasantries, and light refreshments such as cocktails or other beverages and “snack” food is offered. This stage generally continues until all guests have arrived and the meal is ready to eat. If the gathering place and the dining space are the same, some food may be removed or placed to the side in preparation for the more substantial food to come.

#### 2.3.1 *Pragmemic trigger: Summons to “the table”*

When all have gathered, a pragmemic trigger is issued: an announcement that the commensal meal is to be served. This announcement fulfills the definition for a pragmemic trigger: a performative, pragmatically situated speech act. Individuals

then proceed to “the table” in accord with social custom (cf. Visser, 2008, pp. 167–168). Virtually always there is a social ranking that governs the movement to the table. This can be flexible in many societies, but since it is processual, the gathered participants must decide who is going first and who is to follow, either through guidance on the part of the organizers or hosts, or as a result of personal judgment. The American military and diplomatic corps have strict protocol about these matters, and in many societies the social order is ingrained in social consciousness.

#### 2.4 Transit: Passage to “the table” – The “arrival at the table”

The commensal participants take their place and prepare to eat. In some societies they are offered water or a moist towel to wash their hands. They spread their napkins if it is customary to use them. They settle in their chairs. In more formal settings guests are assisted into their chairs, or they assist each other. This is usually a time of minimal conversation.

In many formal settings seating is pre-arranged by the organizers or hosts. Place cards or informal direction determine where people will sit in the west. In other societies guests may be ushered to a pre-determined place. In Victorian England wives and husbands were not allowed to sit together to insure conversational variety – a rule that seems to be largely ignored today.

##### 2.4.1 *Pragmemic trigger: The signal to eat*

There is usually an invocation, prayer or set phrase that signals the participants that commensality may begin. A toast is a frequent feature of this pragmemic trigger. In most societies the toast is a ritual activity with set roles for the offering of praise, thanks and kind words. In some societies toasting continues throughout the meal. The most prominent of these is perhaps Russian and Russian-influenced societies where everyone in turn at the table offers an orchestrated toast to an individual, to the group or to some ideal such as “friendship.”

#### 2.5 Transit: Beginning the Meal – Commensality

During commensality a variety of pragmatic behaviors, unique to different cultural traditions ensues. These are sometimes glossed as “table manners,” which are highly variable microcosmic reflections of wider cultural attitudes and practices, such as rank, status, aesthetics, historical practice, cultural ideas of purity and pollution, and regard for the host(s) or guest(s). Breaches of table manners can create ill-will, so there is a virtual industry of training young people and people traveling in cultures other than their own in the pragmatics of commensal behavior.

One important divide in the world's cultures has to do with the permissibility or desirability of conversation within the commensality frame. Some societies insist on pleasurable conversation while eating, and indeed engineer the placement of participants to insure that it will happen. Other societies prefer silence, or minimal conversation while consuming food.

It is important to note that the activities that take place in the commensality frame are largely rule governed. In many societies young people receive special instruction in these rules, and may not be admitted to adult company until they are competent in carrying them out. Elaborate utensils for specialized purposes were evolved in Europe for formal meals, and the specialized knowledge required to use them properly resulted in the virtual exclusion of those who didn't command the skills. That said, specialists in etiquette are fond of saying that the best "manners" at the table are those that are the most logical and comfortable for all. This may be small comfort for someone wondering how to consume an unusual culinary item, like an artichoke, in a formal setting.

#### 2.5.1 *Pragmemic trigger: Invitation to leave "the table"*

In many societies participants in commensality take their cue from the host as to when the meal is "over." A suggestion is made to move to another space, or water or a moist towel is brought for individuals to clean their hands. At this point diners rise from the table, or the food is removed.

### 2.6 Transit: Leaving "the table" – The "post commensal activity"

In many cultures there is activity following a meal. Entertainments, games, further conversation, and other amusements can prolong the event. Frequently food and drink continues to be served. In some societies there is a quick departure following the meal.

#### 2.6.1 *Pragmemic trigger: Statement of departure*

The transition to the outside world is signaled by leave-taking. This is marked linguistically by a series of verbal formulas that mark departure and thanks to the host for the commensal event, or to each other if there is no host. Usually, though not always, the guest initiates the departure with a pragmemic trigger expressing the need or time to go. The hosts usually express some reluctance to let the guests leave but then support the move to depart.

## 2.7 Transit: Departure (crossing the threshold) – The “departing place”

Behaviorally, clothing suitable for the external world is put on, and mutual pleasantries about the event just concluded are exchanged along with promises to meet again. This takes place at the threshold of the location of commensality.

### 2.7.1 *Pragmemic trigger: Expression of gratitude*

Expressions of gratitude to each other are exchanged, the guests for the meal and entertainment and the hosts for the trouble the guests have taken to come. Finally, leave taking in the form of departure expressions are exchanged, and the guests re-enter the everyday world, transformed by the commensal event.

## 2.8 Transit: Re-entry into the “outside world” – The “reciprocating status”

Guests at a commensal event leave in a transformed social state on many levels. Their relationships to each other are altered. There is no neutral outside world after an event of commensality. Here we must remind ourselves of Schuetz’s (1945, p. 534) formulation of the “everyday [outside] world.” The outside world is continually being transformed through experience. Therefore it is impossible to go back precisely to the psychological world from which one has departed in participating in commensality (or any ritual or framed act). This does not make it any less “normal.” A new normal everyday world reality becomes established from which future experiences will depart.

The commensal event changes the social universe permanently for all participants. They also enter a state of obligation. In most cultures a commensal event implies reciprocation at some level. A telephone call or thank-you note to a host is frequently sufficient for good friends. Extravagant individuals may send flowers the next day. However, a return invitation from the guests to the hosts is frequently expected. In this way commensality perpetuates itself as a social practice, and the pragmatic routine replicates itself. The guests incur an implicit obligation to issue the pragmemic trigger: invitation, and in the next cycle of commensality the roles of guest and host are reversed.

## 3. A ritual approach

Taking a look at the schema presented in Figure 1 we can see that commensality has a structure that is familiar to anthropologists everywhere. It looks very much like the structure of a ritual process. The structure of rituals has been known to be

remarkably similar across all human cultures for more than a century. The basic schema was established by Arnold van Gennep (1909, 1960) in his classic work: “*Les Rites de Passage*” in which he posits three processual stages of ritual: preliminary preparation (Status 1), liminality and post-liminality (Status 2). In his schema the person or persons engaged in ritual first have a preparatory stage, then they enter a state of liminality in which the normal rules of social life are suspended and replaced by special procedures and observances. Then they emerge into the everyday world in a transformed state.

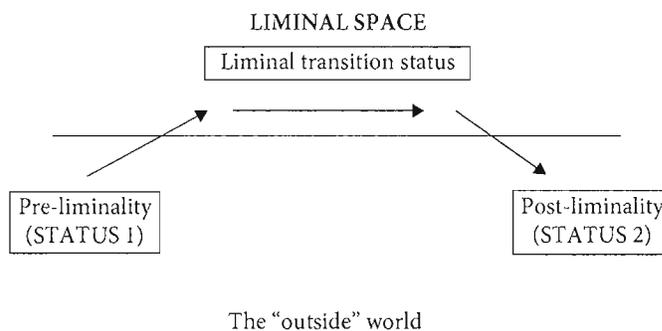


Figure 1. Van Gennep (1909, 1960) on Ritual

Van Gennep’s (1909, 1960) work inspired Campbell’s classic text: “The Hero with a Thousand Faces,” (Campbell, 1956 [1949], pp. 334–356) in which he shows how the heroic journey, (such as the vision quest undertaken as a passage to adulthood in many American Indian tribes) consists of three stages: departure, initiation and return. In this schema the journey results in a change of social status for the person embarking on the quest.

Most important for anthropology is the inspiration van Gennep’s work gave to Turner (1995), whose essential work, “The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure,” added several important dimensions to van Gennep’s schema that are important for the description of commensality. For Turner (1995) the period of liminality in the ritual process corresponds with a feeling of “*communitas*,” an intense, pleasurable feeling of social bonding, togetherness and social unity. *Communitas* occurs when people experience liminality in a common setting. He also equates this feeling of common bonding between people with sacredness as opposed to the secularity of the non-ritual world.

In the external world there is a range of social differentiation based on many culturally defined dimensions, such as gender, age, social status, group membership, formal professional title and achievement. Each society will have its own

distinct set of social divisions and weighting criteria for each. In the ritual world of liminality these differences are partially or completely eliminated. An excellent example is the pilgrimage to Mecca, called “the hajj,” for observant Muslims. Briefly stated, persons making the pilgrimage are stripped of their social differences during the time of pilgrimage. They all wear the same plain garment and undergo the same ritual activities before emerging back to the secular world in a state of ritual purity. They then receive a social title: *hajji* (one who has made the hajj) to indicate their new social status.

### 3.1 Ritual and commensality

It should be eminently clear how the process of commensality fits the schema of the ritual process as seen in van Gennep (1909, 1960), Campbell (1956 [1949]) and Turner’s (1995) work. Individuals in the secular world come together in one place and proceed by ritual stages to the “table” where all social distinctions are eliminated in the process of eating together. They then move by stages back to the everyday world, transformed by the process. Figure 2 shows how the stages of commensality and their pragmemic triggers shown in Table 1 (a few features are omitted to save space) map on to the ritual structure outlined by van Gennep (1909, 1960), Campbell (1956 [1949]) and Turner (1995).

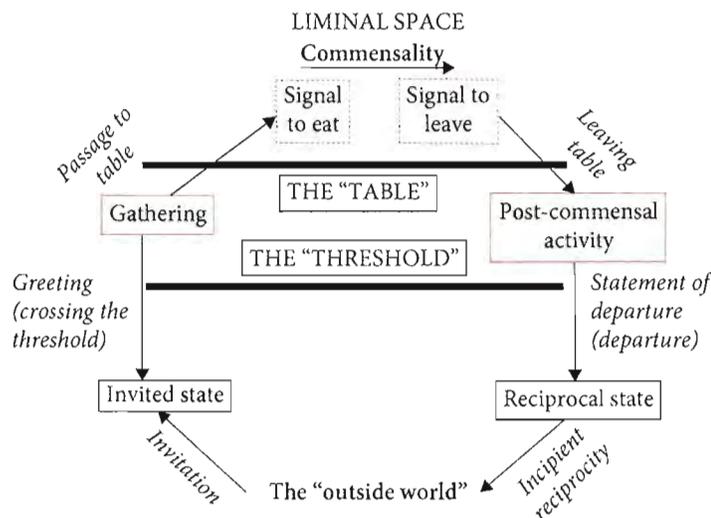


Figure 2. The commensality ritual

In Figure 2 we can see the “guest” moving from an “invited” state over the threshold of the locus of commensality to the gathering spot, over a second threshold to the “table,” departing from the “table” to the post-commensal activity, finally re-emerging over the “threshold” in the real world with an expectation of reciprocity that did not exist before the commensal activity.

Clearly not everyone is admitted to the “table” (or even over the “threshold”) in commensality. Only the chosen (invited) individuals can join those dining together, just as those who participate in a ritual must be qualified to do so. (Non-Catholics cannot take communion in the Catholic Church, for example). An interloper may be tolerated, but may also be stigmatized or cause disruption. Invited guests who insist on bringing companions to the commensality event without permission in modern times frequently are cause for negative comment or unhappiness. Others are inadequately prepared to observe the expected behavioral and linguistic norms of the occasion. Some may claim that such people have “spoiled” the event – the equivalent of rendering a ritual ineffective.

#### 4. Pragmemic triggers in four cultures

Pragmemic triggers, as already discussed, are the utterances that signal the transitions from one stage to another. Just as there is special language and behavior in rituals, often times pronounced by an officiant, in most commensality events the host or hosts take this role. However, in many cases all participants issue the pragmemic trigger language and behavior that moves the event from stage to stage.

I have already cited the specific pragmemic triggers that move the commensality event forward as shown in Table 1. These pragmemic triggers are virtually universal. Every society has expressions that correspond to these functions. I will analyze these utterances in four separate cultures to show not only the functionality of these expressions, but also the symbolic imagery that is used in the formulation of these expressions. I will examine each of these triggers, providing examples from four distinct cultures: German, Japanese, Middle Eastern and American – all societies in which I have conducted fieldwork.

##### 4.1 The invitation

In Austinian terms an invitation is a speech act. It has distinct “felicity” conditions. (1) There must be an event to which people are invited. (2) The person making the invitation must be empowered to do so. (3) The invitation must be issued to (a) suitable individual(s). Don Giovanni may have thought his invitation to the statue

of the Commendatore to dine with him in Mozart's opera was not legitimate, therefore a "joke." The invitation turned out to be an entirely proper one with an inviter, an event and an invitee. The Don may have thought that a statue wouldn't be able to accept the invitation, but the joke was on him. The statue not only came to dinner, but dragged Don Giovanni to the underworld.

There is a great deal of cultural variation in issuing invitations:

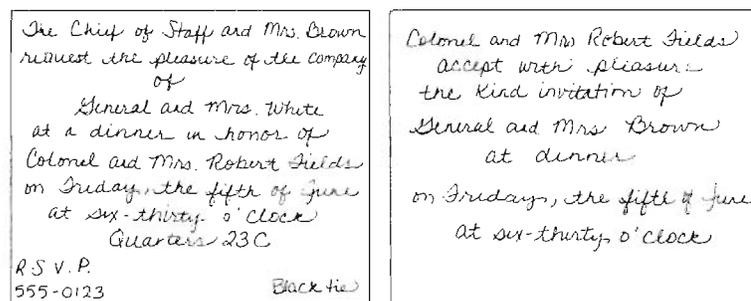
Middle East: The custom is generally to repeat the invitation more than once. A single, non-repeated invitation is generally not taken seriously. Even so, a specific time for a meeting often is interpreted with great flexibility.

Japan: The invitation is best made specific, not placing the invitee in too much discomfort at having to choose the time and place. The time is usually observed exactly as stated.

German: Only close friends and relatives are invited into the sanctity of the house, so this is the one place where more informal communication may occur. It is a great honor to be invited to a German household, as it shows that you have achieved a more than superficial relationship. The time of an invitation is generally observed exactly.

American: Invitations are often informal and oral, but on many occasions they are written. Wedding invitations are nearly always written as are other more formal occasions. Unless a specific time and place is set, an invitation is often a pleasant, but meaningless social gesture. The time of an invitation is generally semi-relaxed unless there is a specific starting time for an event, such as a theater starting time or specific restaurant reservation. For home entertaining, fifteen minutes to a half-hour after the stated time is normal.

Figure 3 shows an example of a written invitation, and a reply from an American military etiquette manual. Such formality is rare these days, but still proper.



**Figure 3.** Examples of formal invitations  
(Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, 2001, pp. 2-15)

## 4.2 Greeting/Welcome

Middle East: The host welcomes the guest with *Ahlan wa sahlan* 'Being and health' [Arabic], *Xosh amadid* 'You arrived happily' [Persian], and *Merhaba or hosh-geldiniz* 'Welcome' [Turkish]. Men and women kiss arrivals of the same gender on both cheeks. In many traditional Muslim households women and men do not make physical contact. The guest removes his/ her shoes and may present a gift of sweets or flowers. The guest is shown to a place to sit. In a traditional home, the most honored place is furthest from the door. The guest will be offered this spot, and should refuse it, moving closer to the door.

Japan: Guests enter, remove their shoes and bow. In a restaurant, the personnel of the establishment will take the role of implied hosts, saying *Irassyaimase* 'Command your presence!'. In private homes, simpler greetings are used. Both hosts and guests bow. Guests present a gift to the hosts. Hosts welcome the guests into the household and sees to the guests' comfort.

German: The host welcomes the guests with *Wilkommen!* 'Welcome' and shakes hands with the guests. Bringing a gift for the hosts is part of German etiquette. Consider flowers, but be sensitive to colors. Carnations symbolize grief or mourning. Red is for romance. Yellow roses are perfect German gift flowers. Choose an odd number. Not only is it a European custom, but Germans believe they are easier to arrange. Guests may or may not remove their shoes depending on the family custom. They are then shown to a place to sit. (cf. Weber, 2011)

American: The hosts welcome the guests with *Welcome* or simply *Hello* followed by an inquiry about health, and either shake hands or engage in an informal hug. Men and women are allowed to hug and even kiss. Guests may present a small present to hosts. Guests are then ushered into the gathering space.

The remarkable similarities in these greeting rituals show the universality of these ritual structures, which must be extremely ancient in human civilization. Some variability is seen depending on environment, season and weather. For example, in the winter, there will be a removal and storage of coats and other outerwear before guests are shown to the gathering place.

## 4.3 Summons to "the table"

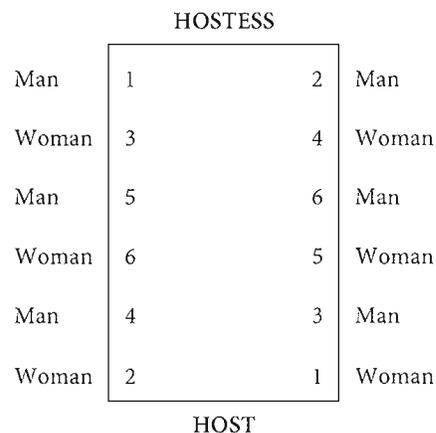
Middle East: If guests are already seated in the commensal space, a dinner cloth will be spread, and plates, cups and eating utensils (if used) will be placed before the guests followed by plates of food. It is common in the Middle East for the food to be parceled in several dishes and spread around the table. To usher people to the table from another space the verbal formulas: *Tafazzal* 'oblige (us)!' [Arabic],

*Befarma'id* 'command (us)!' [Persian], *Buyurun'* 'command (us)!' [Turkish]. People proceed in order of prominence. It is customary for people to avoid being the first to proceed to the commensal space, so there may be a polite "struggle" to avoid being first. In Iran a buffet is common at large gatherings.

Japan: Because of limited space in many Japanese homes and establishments guests may already be seated where food will be served. In this case, the hosts will transform the space from a gathering space to a space of commensality by placing eating implements such as chopsticks, cups, sauce dishes and other accoutrements. In the case where the commensal space is in a different location, guests are ushered into that space in order of prominence. In case there is a movement to the table, the all-purpose Japanese pragmemic trigger for inviting someone to proceed in this and other situations is *doozo* 'please/ go ahead'.

German: A simple *Bitte!* 'Please!' may signal the move to the commensal space. A more informal phrase is *Mahlzeit!* 'Time to eat'. In formal settings seating may be assigned.

American: There is no set formula for the invitation to the table. One may simply say *Dinner (Lunch) is served* or *Dinner (Lunch) is ready*, which is a signal for the guests to move to the table. The hosts may assign seating to the guests or leave them to their own devices. In more formal settings there may be place cards showing where guests are to sit. In the most formal occasions there may be a procession to the commensal space with men escorting women. At formal dinners men and women are interspersed at the table. Figure 4 is from a military etiquette manual showing the proper seating of guests.



**Figure 4.** Formal Seating Arrangement  
(Office of the Chief of Naval Operations 2001, pp. 3–2)

The various cultural routines for movement to the table are similar in that there is a clear pragmemic trigger in the invitation to assemble for the meal. There is attention to social order in both the arrangement of guests, and in the procession to the “table.” The transition between pre-commensality and commensality is signaled by both words and actions.

#### 4.4 Signal to eat

Middle East: Occasionally a ewer of water and basin will be brought to each guest, and water poured to clean the hands before eating. The meal commences with *Bismilla ar-rahman ar-rahim*, ‘in the name of God, the merciful, the compassionate’, sometimes shortened to *bismillah*. In Turkey one begins the meal with *afiyet olsun*, ‘may you be healthy’. In some areas food is eaten by hand, or with a fork and spoon. The fork is used to scoop food into the spoon, which is then taken to the mouth. One never eats or takes food with the left hand. When seated on the floor, one never turns the soles of one’s feet toward others. Burping is not considered impolite. In Arab nations there is frequently little conversation during the meal.

Japan: Often a hot or chilled towel will be presented to guests before starting to eat. The meal commences with the formula *itadakimasu* ‘(I) will humbly receive’, usually repeated by all, at which point all may begin eating. Many rules apply at the table. Toasts are made with the formula *Kanpai!* ‘dry cup’. Individuals do not pour their own drinks. Chopsticks must be handled carefully. They can only be used for eating, not pointing at others, and never stuck upright in a rice bowl (as this use of chopsticks occurs in funerals). Slurping (especially noodles) is allowed as a sign of enjoyment.

Germany: The meal commences with *Guten Appetit* ‘Good appetite’, with the response *Danke* ‘Thanks!’, or *Mahlzeit* ‘Mealtime’. It may also be preceded by a toast using the pragmemic trigger: *Zum Wohl* ‘To Health’ or *Prosit* (from Latin) literally ‘may it prove beneficial’. The fork is held in the left hand and the knife in the right, and food is lifted to the mouth with the left hand. Silverware is placed parallel on the plate diagonally extending from “4:00 to 10:00” when one is finished, and placed crosswise in an X when one is merely pausing eating during the meal. Potatoes are never cut with a knife.

America: The meal commences with either an invocation or a prayer and/ or a toast using a formula such as *To your health!* or a European formula such as *Chin Chin!* A variety of commencement phrases are used for the main meal, but the French *Bon appétit!* is very popular. Americans may use the European manner of handling silverware or the “American” pattern where the fork is held in the left hand, the knife in the right, and after the food is cut, the knife is laid down and the

fork is transferred to the right hand for transfer to the mouth. Bread and rolls are broken into small pieces which are buttered separately before eating.

In all of these signals to eat the structural principles are the same. Eating and drinking both commence with pragmatic triggers in the form of set phrases and formulas invoking health or enjoyment of the meal. At the table there are clear rules for handling implements and for transporting food to the mouth. Some selected noise is tolerated in the process of eating.

#### Toasts

Arab	<i>Fi sahtek(um)</i>	To your health
Persian	<i>Be salamati</i>	To health
Turkish	<i>Sherefe</i>	(your) honor
Japanese	<i>Kanpai</i>	Dry cup
German	<i>Zum Wohl (wine)</i> <i>Prosit (beer)</i>	To health May it prove beneficial (Latin)
American	<i>Cheers</i>	

Figure 5. Pragmatic triggers for toasting

#### 4.5 Invitation to leave “the table”

The pragmatic trigger for leaving the table is complex. When guests are finished they may signal that they have had enough with a verbal formula. They are then invited to remove themselves from the place of consumption. Additionally, food may be removed from the table and the host may rise, signaling the others to rise as well.

Middle East: Guests signal that they are finished eating by proclaiming *Al hamdu li-llah* ‘Praise be to God’. They usually engage in a gesture of raising their hands to their face and performing a “wiping” gesture over the face, not touching the face itself. At this point if they have been seated on the ground before a dinner cloth, another ewer with water and a basin may be brought for them to clean their hands. In Arabic speaking countries it is also customary for the guest to say *Dayman*, ‘Always’ or *Sufra dayma*, ‘May your table always be thus’ to the host and hostess. The most common responses are *Teesh* ‘May you live’ and *Bilhana wa shifa* ‘to your happiness and health’. This shows the kind of love that the family gives to its guests. Iranian guests typically say in Persian: *Dast-e shoma dard nakonad*,

'May your hand not hurt', and the reply is *Sar-e shoma dard nakonad*, 'May your head not hurt', i.e. don't think about it. Turkish guests express simple thanks with *Teşekkür ederim* 'thank you.'

Japan: After the meal, it's customary to say *Gotisoo-sama desita*, 'It was an honorable feast'. The last item consumed is usually tea.

German: A simple *Danke*, 'Thanks!' on completing the meal is often used by guests. In some areas the term *Mahlzeit* short for *Gesegnete Mahlzeit* 'blessed mealtime' is used at the end of a meal, or in some areas even as a casual greeting on the street. German hosts take their cue from their guests at the end of the meal, although historically the nobility set the protocol for the end of the meal. Friedrich the Great of Prussia ate very little and ate very fast. In dinners at court he would finish his meal and rise before anyone else had the chance to begin theirs. Court protocol required that all guests then rise and leave the table as well. This led to a series of post-court suppers in Berlin where people could satisfy their hunger.

American: The dinner usually winds down to a lull. Guests may express their appreciation for the meal. When there is a noticeable lack of activity at the table the hosts will suggest another activity, such as '*Shall we move to the living room?*' or '*Shall we take a walk?*'

In all of these cases there is coordination between guest and host. The guest expresses appreciation for the meal, and the host reciprocates. It is then clear that another phase of the event will begin, and the host organizes the movement from the table to the next activity.

#### 4.6 Statement of departure

Most societies frown on an immediate departure after eating. There is virtually always a period of activity following commensality (The "post commensal activity") after which there is a pragmemic trigger for departure. Those who must leave immediately after eating usually apologize or make an excuse.

Middle East: Arabs, Turks and Iranians all encourage their guests to remain after the meal and extend conversation. After a meal, one will be served tea or coffee, often pre-sweetened. Conversation continues for a while longer, perhaps an hour, and then the guests prepare to leave. When the guests announce their intention to leave, the host and hostess usually exclaim, 'Stay a while; it is still early!' This offer is ritual, and one may stay a few more minutes, but this expression need not be taken literally and does not mean that one will give offense by leaving. Generally, one can follow the example of other guests, except that one should probably not stay after midnight.

Japan: Frequently drinking continues after the meal with perhaps a few light snacks to accompany the drinks. In traditional “geisha” houses, a variety of games and entertainments followed the meal. In traditional business entertainment (more common than “geisha” houses in the present day), guests will be ushered from night locale to night locale long into the night, extending the evening for many hours, and occasionally “hostesses” fulfill some of the functions of the historical geisha.

German: hosts may offer coffee or an after-dinner drink, like Kirschwasser or brandy. Guests should enjoy this, but not linger too long after a German dinner. Hosts expect the guests to signal when it is time to leave.

American: Americans may have a wide range of activity after a meal from simple conversation to games, dancing and watching movies or television. Drinks and snacks are usually provided during this period.

The pragmatic trigger for departure consists of a series of verbal and behavioral routines for leave-taking. In general all leave takings have the following structure. (1) The guests announce that they are leaving and the reason for it. (2) There is a response from the host, often an exhortation to stay longer (which in most cases can be ignored). (3) The routine of putting on shoes and outdoor clothing to emerge into the “ordinary world.” (4) Chitchat at “the threshold.” (5) Eventual departure.

Middle East: Leave taking is accompanied by hugs and kisses between people of the same sex, promises to meet again and a departure formula: *Ma’ salama* ‘(go) with peace’ or *fi aman Allah* ‘(go) in the protection of God,’ uttered by both host and guest [Arabic], *Xoda hafez* ‘God protect,’ also uttered by host and guest [Persian], *Allahaismarladik* ‘God guide you.’ (The automatic reply to this phrase is *güle güle*, ‘bye-bye’) [Turkish].

Japan: Guests bow and use a leave taking formula. Casual friends say *Zya mata*, ‘Well, later’. In the evening it is permissible to say *Oyasumi nasai*, ‘it has become night, good night’. The commonly understood *Sayonara* is used, but not so often because it implies a kind of finality to the relationship. The presumption in Japan is that the parties will always meet again.

German: The leave taking is usually *Gute Nacht* ‘Good night’ or *bis später*, or *bis bald*, ‘until later, until soon’. The host may then say *Komm gut nach Hause*, ‘Get home all right!’.

American: The simple *Goodbye* is an all purpose phrase for leave taking, accompanied sometimes by *See you soon* or other expressions of a desired reunion.

All of these pragmatic triggers share the same semantic purpose, namely to issue a wish for health and protection as one re-enters the real world, and a desire for reunion at a future time.

#### 4.7 Expression of gratitude

Although thanks may have been expressed at many stages during the commensality event, it is common for a final expression of gratitude to be expressed as guests depart and re-enter the “ordinary world.” However, they have been transformed by the commensality experience, since their relationship to their hosts has been forever changed by the experience.

A debt of gratitude for the commensality event extends beyond the point of departure for the guest. In general, being entertained incurs a debt for the guests. This can be dealt with through a return invitation, or a simple note, message or gift – but most often a return invitation at some future time. A person who never reciprocates will be dropped from any given social circuit.

Reciprocity is one of the most potent behavioral forces in human life. The act of commensality incurs obligations on all who attend to repeat the process at a future date. This is true in every known society – something anthropology has known for a very long time, memorialized in the classic work by Marcel Mauss, *Essai sur le don (The Gift)* (Mauss, 1954). Thus the Commensality Ritual is really a cycle, where guests take on the role of hosts in the next cycle.

### 5. Conclusion

Commensality has such a central place in human social life it seems utterly commonplace and uninteresting in its ubiquitous nature. However, when it is examined it can be seen to be highly structured. Not only does it proceed in stages from the external world to an inner luminal space where *communitas* unites those who eat together in pleasurable communion, but the linguistic formulas, which I have called pragmemic triggers, move the participants by stages through the ritual process and back to the external world in a transformed state. These pragmemic triggers have accompanying physical and behavioral actions that are equally important for their effectiveness, such as shaking hands, bowing, kissing or hugging during a greeting. The pragmemic triggers and their companion behaviors constitute ritual actions just as surely as one would find the language and action in a church, mosque, temple or synagogue moving religionists through a sacred ceremony.

The pragmemic triggers are speech acts in that they accomplish social action. However, it is startling to see that in widely divergent cultures – as different as Japan, the Middle East, Germany and the United States they have a similar semantic purpose and a similar functionality. The universality of human experience is thus evident for anyone to see.

It would be a mistake to conclude that all instances of commensality are the same. There are several other dimensions to this study that encompass scales of formality, scales of intimacy and scales of utility. The construction of commensality will vary depending on its embedding in all of these scales. One thing remains. However simple, however informal or intimate, the act of commensality is transformative of social relations. It is one of the ways that humans make meaningful connections with each other. Just as it conforms to the pattern of a ritual, it is in its own way a sacred act.

## References

- Austin, J. L. (1962). *How to do things with words*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Bateson, G. (1956). The message "this is play". In B. Schaffner (Ed.), *Group processes. Transactions of the second conference* (pp. 145–242). New York: Josiah Macy Jr. Foundation.
- Campbell, J. (1956 [1949]). *The hero with a thousand faces*. New York: Meridian Books.
- Goffman, E. (1974). *Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Hymes, D. H. (1974). *Foundations in sociolinguistics: An ethnographic approach*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- James, W. (1890) *Principles of psychology*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Mauss, M. (1954). *The gift; forms and functions of exchange in archaic societies*. Glencoe, IL.: Free Press.
- Miss Manners (Judith Martin). (2011). Miss Manners: No response to invitations? Stop sending them! *Washington Post online August 27, 2011*. [http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/miss-manners-no-response-to-invitations-stop-sending-them/2011/08/11/gIQATyKBjJ\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/miss-manners-no-response-to-invitations-stop-sending-them/2011/08/11/gIQATyKBjJ_story.html)
- Office of the Chief of Naval Operations. (2001). *Social Usage and Protocol Handbook*. Washington, D.C.: Department of the Navy
- Schuetz, A. (1945). On multiple realities. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 5(2), 533–576.
- Tannen, D. (1993). *Framing in discourse*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Turner, V. W. (1995). *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.
- van Gennep, A. (1909). *Les rites de passage; Étude systématique des rites de la porte et du seuil, de l'hospitalité, de l'adoption, de la grossesse et de l'accouchement, de la naissance, de l'enfance, de la puberté, de l'initiation, de l'ordination, du couronnement des fiançailles et du mariage, des funérailles, des saisons, etc.* [The rites of passage; A systematic study of the doorway and the threshold, of hospitality, of adoption, of pregnancy, of child delivery, of birth, of childhood, of puberty, of initiation, of ordination, of engagement, and of marriage, funerary practices, the seasons, etc.] Paris: É. Nourry.
- van Gennep, A. (1960). *The rites of passage*. London: Routledge & Paul.
- Visser, M. (2008). *The rituals of dinner*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Weber, M. (2011). "My German Travels" <http://mygermantravels.com/2011/05/german-etiquette-dinner-guest/>