

9 Space and its role in social stratification in Pohnpei, Micronesia

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1 Introduction

Space is an integral part of social life and social reproduction, made meaningful through 'practice' (Bourdieu 1973). Spatial concepts are used as resources in representing ideas about time, music, mathematics, emotions, and social structure including kinship (Lakoff & Johnson 1980; Levinson 1992). This article examines the role of space in formulating relationships of social hierarchy in Pohnpei, Micronesia, and how the idea of social inequality, which is not intrinsically spatial, is expressed through physical space and linked to spatial metaphors in language. Pohnpeian is rich in linguistic resources which construct and interpret stratified space as well as conditioning activities and relations within those spaces.

Social activities shape local understandings and conceptions about space (see for example, Hanks 1990; Choi & Bowerman 1991; Brown & Levinson 1993; Duranti 1994; Senft 1997). The significance of a particular location in space derives from processes which link it to or separate it from other locations (Women and Geography Study Group 1997:6). As social asymmetries are interpreted through physical space, they are situated within a habitualised, historical practice. This paper discusses how horizontal and vertical relations are organised to reflect social relationships between individuals, and how hierarchical structures of authority or privilege are communicated directly through the language and forms of spatial organisation. Bilateral relations and vertical relations are zones of difference, spaces of separation in Pohnpei.

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2 Ethnographic background²

Pohnpei is an island nation in Micronesia, part of the Federated States of Micronesia, with a population of approximately 30,000. The island is divided into five chiefdoms which are united under a form of democratic government. The two forms of governance, democracy and chiefdom, coexist coherently, with different and overlapping spheres of influence in the daily life of Pohnpeians. Another dual set of complementary governance structures exists within the traditional polity, one headed by the Paramount Chief and Paramount Chieftess and another by the Secondary Chief and Secondary Chieftess. These stratified 'bureaucracies' encompass nearly every adult on the island, and nearly every adult has a particular position of authority and responsibility in the hierarchy (instantiated by a particular title). Many of these titles were originally priestly titles (Mauricio 1993), and titles have proliferated as they have been secularised. Women hold important positions throughout the hierarchy, though their title is in most cases dependent on their spouse's (Kihleng 1996), and if their husband dies, they lose their title and status. The political relationships instantiated through titles are constructed spatially through seating arrangements in the community feast-house, linguistically through language use, and through food distribution practices (see Garvin & Reisenberg 1952; Shimizu 1982; Keating 1997, 1998 for more discussion of these aspects). In most of my fieldwork on Pohnpei, I have lived in the chiefdom of Madolenihmw. In this paper I will be using data collected during fieldwork periods in 1990, 1991, 1992-1993, and 1995. Some of the data is from video recorded interactions of spontaneous activities in Pohnpeian daily life, other data is from video recorded elicitation tasks for the purpose of ascertaining information about spatial descriptions.³

Pohnpeian is an Austronesian language, belonging to the Micronesian subgroup (for a more complete description see Rehg 1981).

3 Space and social reproduction

Concepts fundamental to human thinking are organised in terms of spatial metaphors such as up-down, in-out, front-back, deep-shallow, central-peripheral (Lakoff & Johnson 1980:17; Brown & Levinson 1993). Ways of seeing these relationships or 'visual ideolog[ies]' (Cosgrove 1985:47), however, are culturally produced. We move in space that has been shaped by others, that has history as well as unrealised possibilities (Durand 1997:322). Nevertheless there appear to be some ways of seeing vertical relations that are at least partly shared by more than one society. A common use of up and down, for example, is to indicate superior v. inferior social standing. In the 'naïve model of physics that underlies superiority' (Frawley 1992:266) lower objects sustain and support higher objects. A semantic relationship between the objects often suggests contact between the two (Frawley 1992:266). Sometimes an expression for superiority implies 'covering' (Bennett 1975; Brugman 1981).

² This description is necessarily brief. For more on Pohnpei see Garvin and Reisenberg (1952), Reisenberg (1968), Petersen (1982), Shimizu (1982), Falgout (1984), Mauricio (1993), Kihleng (1996), Pinsker (1997), Keating (1998).

³ This latter data is part of a larger study by the Cognitive Anthropology Research Group at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, Nijmegen, The Netherlands, looking at the influence of language on cognition. See for example Levinson (1992), Brown and Levinson (1993), Danziger (1993), Pederson (1994), Pederson and Roelofs (1995), Wilkins and Hill (1995), Senft (1997).

In Pohnpei an up-down spatial relation is a resource for delineating status between individuals, groups of individuals, and communities or locales.

The notions of superiority and inferiority are not only analogous to up and down in Pohnpei, but to the front/back axis in a plane parallel to the horizon. Front v. back is a key marker for status in other Pacific societies (see Duranti 1981, 1992, 1994 for Samoa; Toren 1990 for Fiji; Hoem 1993 for Tokelau). The front/back relation is connected to an up/down relation in Pohnpei by analogy with body parts. The cardinal points for east and west are hierarchically realised in the terms for east 'side of the face' (*palimse*) and west 'side of the tail or end' (*palikapi*). East is described as having a vertically superior relation to west. The island is volcanic in origin, with a central mountain peak or peaks, and flatter land along the circular shore. To move inward is described with the morpheme *-long*, to move outward as *-lei*. The symbolic elevation of the east side is reflected in descriptions of movement throughout the island. Going to the west side of the island is referred to as 'going down' *koh-di-la* ('go-down-there') whereas travel to the east is referred to as 'going up' *koh-da-la* ('go-up-there'). Most travel from one side of the island to the other is actually undertaken around the island at the same height near sea level. Dahl (1993) reports that 'up' and 'down' as descriptive of directional travel in Pohnpei are also influenced by the speaker's relative location to the ancient ceremonial centre Nan Madol, which is located on the eastern side of the island. The first rulers of an island-wide political system lived in the basalt-walled community of Nan Madol beginning in the 10th or 12th centuries (Hanlon 1988:9).

The symbolic re-imagining of the landscape as higher in the east and lower in the west is evidenced in the names of two communities in the south of the island. One settlement is called Enipein Pah ('Enipein Below') the other is called Enipein Powe ('Enipein Above'). Enipein Below is actually higher in elevation than Enipein Above, but it is also more westerly. The eastern community is also historically 'superior' having been founded before the newer settlement, as well as being closer to Nan Madol. The description of east as higher is shared by other societies (see for example Hertz 1973; Fox 1993; Sather 1993). While the other two cardinal directions, north (*paliepeng*) and south (*palieir*), can be reconstructed from Proto Micronesian, *palimse* and *palikapi* appear to be unique to Pohnpei (Dahl 1993 citing Rehg). The mapping of a superior/inferior relation (face v. bottom, up v. down) onto the horizon is further elaborated through a hierarchy of horizontal space within the structure of the *nahs*—a feast-house or meeting house also used as a dwelling.

4 Built space: vertical and horizontal relations

Houses are constitutive of principles of social organisation in Austronesia and elsewhere (see for example Bourdieu 1973; Moore 1986; Low & Chambers 1989; Fox 1993; Duranti 1994). Buildings are organised as systems of social relations, for example into male and female sides or areas, public v. private, sleeping places according to age or marital status, and so on. In Pohnpei the *nahs*, a flexible structure which serves as dwelling and feast-house, is an important site for the social reproduction of status difference. The structure is horizontally and vertically differentiated according to surface type and surface height. The structure consists of a U-shaped raised platform surrounding a dirt floor on three sides. The fourth side is open to the outside and is the common entrance. Seating position on the floor, vertically

See Mauricio (1993) for a fascinating account of this structure.

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6 See Keating (1998) for a discussion of this phenomenon.

To face the interior world brings in its wake the land and cause hardship in production and cultivation (Mauricio 1993:326).

5 To face the interior would bring ill-fortune since a *nahs* that faces the interior is thought to 'eat' the fruits of the earth. This is mentioned in the legend and cultivation (Mauricio 1993:326).

nouns which index low status. High v. low paths, regions, and relationships are constituted through status-marked speed in choice of lexical item. Planes of low-status movement and location in space, for example,

Possession, which can also be thought of as a form of location, is also a frequent site for status marking. Nouns are marked for high status but there are few nouns which index low status.

possession, knowledge states (knowledge is also thought of as a form of possession, which can also be thought of as a form of locative (for example, 'my village'), and speaking. Movement and location in space are especially frequent sites of status marking. Nouns are marked for high status but there are few

Status-marking clusters around the domains of body location and movement in space. Status-marking knowledge states (knowledge is also thought of as a possession in Pohnpei), food possession, knowledge states (knowledge is also thought of as a possession in Pohnpei), food

The most frequent type of status marking in the interactions is low status marking, that is, low-status members of the society marking their own activities and possessions or those of peers as low status.

However, the instances where three levels are actually marked in some languages (e.g. *the case of food, eating, and some nouns*), are far fewer than the instances where two levels are constructed. The most frequent type of status marking in transcripts of videotaped conversations that is low-status members of the society marking their

some cases three status levels are indexed: high status for parliamentarians, second high level for lesser chiefs and chieftesses, and a level of low status for everyone else. However, the instances where three levels are actually marked in conversation (primarily in the 1990s) are far fewer than the instances where two levels are marked.

The Pohnpeian language is an important tool in the creation of a marked vocabulary organises the society into those of high status and those of low status. In some cases three status levels are indexed: high status for paramount chiefs and chieftesses, a level of low status for everyone else.

5 Space and language: status-marked movement and location in space

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several indexes of status. Space and status are also linked linguistically in status-marked language, which stratifies location and movement in space.

term for chiefs, chieftesses and other high-ranking members of the chief's clan, who are called *sopheidi* (literally 'facing downwards'). Point of view or frame of reference is thus one of

downwards from the highest and most inward point on the platoon, while lower status members face upwards from lower, more outer locations. This facing relationship is expressed in the

In the *na'is* there is a canonical relationship between chiefs and chiefesses (and other high status members of the chief's clan) face downwards from the highest and most inward point on the platform, while lower status people face upwards from the lowest and most outward point. This facing relationship is expressed in the

In the *nahs* there is a canonical facing relationship between those of high status and those of low status (and other high status members of the chief's clan) face each other and chiefs (and other high status members of the chief's clan) face those of low status.

house (*nghs*) can be inferred from the size of the structure (Mauricio 1993:325).

platform. The paramount chief sat behind a wall of bamboo and the public; the paramount chiefess was also screened from view. As mentioned previously, cross linguistically the semantics of superiority can imply 'covering' (Bennett 1990: 107) and the occupant of a house, including a feast or meeting

platform. The paramount chief sat behind a wall or a screen and smoke was directed between that smoke would blow inside and obscure the visibility of the high chiefs on the rear platform. The paramount chief was also screened from view. As mentioned

direction than the interior of the house. The Madolenihmw chiefdom faces outward and eastward. In former times fires were built in the interior of the house, and the smoke was directed between the high chiefs on the feast-house

palikohahiek/sokohahiek, according to native speakers, contains the term *hahing* ('left') as also used for status-marked speech and behaviour (it was not possible for consultants to discern any additional meanings for *maun*). The terms *palimeing* and *palimann* are used in the Bible, which is written in status-marked language. The term *meing* can be reconstructed for Proto Micronesian (Reh pers. comm.). A third set of terms for right and left are *palikehlap* ('right hand') and *palirirlap* ('left hand'), which are used for the paramount chiefs right and left. The morpheme *lap* means large or important, while *ke* is a form of the causative prefix. The form *rir* can mean 'concealed'.

Not all speakers have full control of all three right and left terms. During descriptive tasks designed to elicit and record Pohnpeians' use of spatial terms, tasks in which native speakers described spatial arrays¹³ to each other, some speakers only used *pali-koahiek* and *pali-sokoaahiek*, and some only *pali-meing* and *pali-imaan*. None used *pali-kehlap* and *pali-rirap* during this activity, presumably because there was not a chief's right- or left-hand side to refer to. Interestingly, some speakers shifted between two of the sets of terms, even though there was no change in social context, that is, participants and location of the task remained the same, even though they did not use any other status-marked terms in the interaction. This suggests that the interactants may share some understanding about how differences in social status can be translated into (or analogous to) certain differences in spatial perspectives and arrangements. As mentioned previously, differences in gaze perspective indicate differences in social status in Pohnpei, and this difference in gaze perspective is lexicalised in the name for high-status people.

An example of speakers' code switching among two of the left/right systems is shown in examples (4), (5) and (6). In example (4), *meing* ('left') is used for the facing direction of a person, whereas *sokoaahiek* ('left') is used to describe where a person is located ('standing') in relation to the frame of a photograph.

- (4) a. *kisin pwatak plasitik riemen-o kilikilang-la pali-meing*
small boy plastic two-there looking.DUR-there side-left
two small plastic boys are looking towards the left [status marked] side'

- b. ... *emen keskesihin pali-sokoaahiek*
one standing.DUR side-left
'... one person is standing at the left [incapable] side'

The speaker in example (5) also uses members of two different pairs for 'right', first using *maan* (plus a directional suffix), and then 'capable' (plus the same suffix), for the side of the photograph where a person is standing. This instance is a reiteration or repetition, it could also be a self-repair or correction of what the speaker considered an inappropriate lexical item, that is, repairing *pali-imaan*. In any case, the speaker is using code switching between both sets of left/right resources to communicate a spatial relation.

- (5) *ahpw pwatak me mih pali-maan-o de pali-koahiek-o*
but boy the.one stay side-right-there or side-right-there
'but the boy is on the right side [status marked] or the right side [capable]'

In example (6), the speaker changes to the more polite or status-marked form to emphasise a reversal or change in spatial location from right to left sides.

- (6) a. *e uhd dadadah-ki pali eh meing*
he/she/it switch-role using-with side eh left
'he switches places and uses the uh left side [status marked]'

¹³ The tasks were designed to elicit data about how Pohnpeians express spatial relationships in language. The project was designed by members of the Cognitive Anthropology Research Group at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics. The tasks consist of asking one member of a pair of speakers to describe objects in a photograph so that the other can choose the photograph which exactly matches it from among a number of photographs of different spatial arrays.

b. *koahiek ukapwan* ah *meing mei* right a moment ago but left now
the right [capable] a moment ago but left [status marked] now

Speakers' shifts between casual and status-marked pairs of terms are in some cases strikingly systematic, however more research is needed to determine patterns of these code switches in order to analyse what, if any, specific features of a spatial relationship a register shift encodes. Some of the data suggests that speakers are using an alternation between a spatial-plus-status term and a spatial-minus-status term to signal something about a particular social relationship constructed through language that in the Pohnpeian world view is analogous to or indexical of a spatial relationship. Work on relationships between language and cognition has shown that there is good evidence that linguistic coding correlates strongly with the way spatial distinctions are conceptualised for non-linguistic purposes (Pederson & Roelofs 1995:66). I include these code shifts here because they are another instance of building superior and inferior relations into space and because they show the richness of the resources Pohnpeian speakers have to describe spatial relations.

The spatial locations left v. right are dependent on point of view or facing direction and susceptible to rotation of the body (Miller & Johnson-Laird 1976; Levelt 1984; Levinson 1992). Left and right can refer to two quite different spatial regions among the same interactants. These regions are not only sites of status marking through choice of register in Pohnpei, but are also used in a complex way to manipulate certain ideas about social difference between chiefs and others. In certain activities done for the chief, the left is valued over the right and the inversion is itself a symbol of social difference and the creation of a zone of separation. This will be discussed in more detail below as a final illustration of the elaboration of rank through forms of spatial organisation and reorganisation, and the importance of space in the social reproduction of difference.

7 Redefining space: symbolic inversions

Just as is the case with the social valuing of east and west, the symbolic valuing of one side of the body over the other is shared by more than one society. As discussed previously, more commonly the right is valued over the left (Needham 1973), though the two sides are dramatically similar mirror images of each other. In Pohnpei, the right side is valued in casual speech (right or *koahiek* is 'capable', *sokoaahiek* 'incapable') whereas the left side appears to be valued in status-marked speech. This revaluing of the left side is described as a symbolically appropriate part of doing service for a chief. As described by one consultant, doing service or making honour/respect for a chief involves a set of difficult and demanding practices, and using the left (or less skilled hand), *palimeing*, is 'the hard way'. The hard way is seen as congruent with ritual practices which require hard work. In ritually cutting meat at a feast, for example, men reportedly use the left hand. The term *meing*, as previously noted, is used both for 'left' and for the practice of speaking in status-marked speech (which is also viewed as difficult to master). The word *meing* is also an address term of respect for individuals. That the term *meing* is used for the left side often surprises native speakers who habitually use *palikoaahiek* and *palisokoaahiek*. At one point in the spatial description tasks, one of the participants stops and explains to her partner that *meing* is left and *maun* is right in

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order to correct a misconception projected from the partner's knowledge of *koahiek* ('capable') and *meing* (respectful behaviour and speech) as both positively valued.¹⁴

The inversion in valued sides can perhaps be understood not only in terms of a symbol for activity, but possibly also as a result of the different perspectives or points of view constructed by the spatial organisation of the main feast-house platform. As described earlier, the sides of the *nahs* are divided into male and female sides. Chiefs and other men sit on one side, chieftesses and other women on the other. From the perspective of the chiefs (looking downward towards the common entrance) the men sit on the left, women on the right. However, from the perspective of those coming in the common entrance (virtually all other members of society), the women sit on the left and the men on the right. Right and left are of course viewpoint-dependent positions, and a facing relation between two people entails an inversion of these relationships. With a symbolic revaluing of left over right when indexing high status (taking the point of view of high status) or referring to status-making activities (such as serving the chiefs), the viewpoint-dependent (and thus different) perspectives can be made congruent. The *same* physical side of the feast-house can be the valued side from each perspective.

Practices of inverting the symbolic valuation of locations, including alternately inverting the symbolic valuing of left and right, can be found in other societies. For example, the Atoni of Timor typically emphasise the primacy of 'inside' space over outer spaces. But there exists a competing reversal of this valuing which is enacted on social occasions: '[R]espect to guests is mandatory, and the hosts must strive to reverse this primacy of the "house centre" by stressing the nanan [inner section] as subordinate "inner" opposed to outer, rather than superordinate "centre" opposed to periphery' (Cunningham 1973:227-228). The usual inner/outer spatial division is reversed to pay respect to guests; this 'redefinition of space is accomplished by means of a politeness code' (Wolfowitz 1991:204). Other inversions reported by ethnographers are based on divine v. secular status. According to Needham (1973:307) the Batak of Sumatra, for example, believe that everything in the spirit world is the reverse of the nonspirit world:

the way of life of certain spirits, *begu*, including the ghosts of the recently dead and the spirits of distant ancestors, is materially the same as on earth, only everything that they do is reversed: when they go down steps they climb (*klettern*) head first ... they sleep by day and go about at night. (Needham 1973:307)

Similarly the Ngaju of southern Borneo believe the language spoken in the afterlife is the reverse of the language in this life: "'right" there becomes "left", "straight" is "crooked", "sweet" means "bitter" for "stand up" one says "lie down" and so on' (Needham 1973:307). The Toraja of Celebes also believe everything the dead do is the opposite of the practice of the living. Not only do they use words in their opposite meanings, but they even pronounce them backwards. They use the left hand on occasions when the living use the right and the living use the left whenever they do something for or in connection with the dead (Needham 1973:307). In Pohnpei, the chief is a representative of the deities/ancestor spirits. He is addressed in the third person plural because he embodies these entities. These spirits are also materialised in the space in the feast-house behind (and more superior to) the chiefs and chieftesses, a space which is set aside for their habitation during feasts. The spirits share the

¹⁴ There is much variation in Pohnpeians' knowledge of status-marked language, partly due to its late acquisition and partly due to the frequency with which one interacts with chiefs and chieftesses.

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chief's perspective, looking downwards. A dichotomy between sides of spirit and body is constructed in the terms *paliwahlr* 'side of the body' which is opposed to *palingehm* 'side of the spirit'.

The inversions or revaluing of sides mentioned for various societies show how spatial concepts can be shaped and reshaped by social activities, how spatial concepts can be used to formulate and reformulate relationships of difference and similarity, and how space can be a dynamic resource through which structures of authority and privilege can be imagined and reimagined. The concepts of right and left and their elaboration through language and other social practices in Pohnpei are fine examples of the role of the body in interpreting and mediating the phenomenon of space and spatial reference. However, more research is needed to better portray the complexity of local conceptions about space in Pohnpei and elsewhere and the role of language in mediating these understandings.

8 Conclusion

In this article I have discussed several ways in which spatial concepts are used as resources in representing ideas about hierarchy in Pohnpei. These include the hierarchical valuing of east and west as a projection of the verticality of bodily relations, the construction of status levels of superior and inferior through grammar, including the case of right and left relationships, as well as the importance of the facing relation of the chiefs and the people—a relation which also entails a vertical component (chiefs and chieftesses face downwards, others face upwards). I have also discussed some cases where the hierarchical valuing of space can be reversed, and this too conveys important local ideas about hierarchy, and shows how ways of seeing are culturally produced. Buildings are organised as systems of hierarchical relations, as are topographies and even individual bodies. Spatial relationships are not fixed or enduring, but are constantly negotiated and reinterpreted through language and other social practices.

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