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TALKING ECONOMICS IN TAHITIAN: A FEW COMMENTS

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This article presents some of the semantic specificities of economic categories, while exploring their possible translation into a given language, in this case, modern Tahitian as spoken in the Society Islands (French Polynesia). It draws attention to the semantic and linguistic aspects of international economic relations. It also stresses the importance, to this day, of the translation issue in anthropology. (English version of "L'économie décrite en Tahitien: quelques remarques," trans. Cynthia Schoch, *L'Homme* 121 [Jan.-Mar. 1992]: 143-164.)

How does one talk about economics when one speaks only Tahitian?¹ With no claim to comprehensiveness, this article addresses that question by examining problems of translating into modern Tahitian a number of categories used in modern economics.²

The question lies at the intersection of two different approaches. The first sets out to give what could be called an ethnographic description of the cultural and social apparatus and processes used in what is commonly referred to as "development" aid in various areas of the globe. Among these processes, linguistic and semantic interinfluences should be carefully weighed, though they are often underestimated or even dismissed.³ The second, drawing on previous studies on Pacific Polynesia, focuses mainly on the relations between semantics and history in contemporary Tahitian society. Among the areas examined, special attention is devoted to what is known in modern Tahitian as "things from the outside" (*ohipa no rapae*). Owing to this dual approach, the subject of this article could be qualified as "applied" but more exactly refers to economics, from a broader investigation of language and culture. The underlying intentions and the difficulties involved in such an undertak-

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ing as well as the framework in which it is grounded are outlined in notes so as not to encumber the discussion.⁴

It is often forgotten that modern political economy is not only a set of analytical tools of undeniable, though relative, descriptive value. It is also a specific linguistic corpus arising from the equally specific history of "industrialized" countries in the Western sense. In fact, the value of this corpus may stem from the transformation and treatment of ancient semantic categories. Many of them, such as "growth," "debt," "loan," "margin," or "profit," reveal characteristics that liken them in many ways to "indigenous" anthropological categories, as the work of Emile Benveniste on Indo-European languages reveals (1969), and as I believe I have shown in regard to semantic groups in economic discourse (development theories and aspects of international financial vocabulary; Baré 1987b, 1991). Whatever the actual aspirations of contemporary economics to attain the status of an applied science, an essential feature, cleverly pinpointed by R. Laufer and common to all social sciences, sets it apart: "The laws of political economy differ from physical laws in that they must be instituted in order to function" (1986:111). Because one can institute only by means of words, these laws convey the characteristics of language and culture.

It follows that to talk about economics in any language foreign to the historical location where a specific linguistic corpus was constituted is to engage in the process of *translation*, a process that, as Georges Mounin underlines, above all involves confronting not words but linguistic *structures*. The correspondence between structures is partial by definition, but speakers can improve it through a variety of means including "the dialectics of contact" (Mounin 1963:277), that is, the ability of speakers of different languages to detect maladjustments in cultural structures with which they are faced and to rectify them insofar as thought universals coexist with these nonhomologous structures. As a result, all utterances are translatable to varying degrees of precision. The existence of divergent semantic structures implies constellations of equally divergent semantic associations in the original language and the target language. Such associations can lead one *de facto* rather far astray from the subject one believes one is dealing with, not because of a poor translation, but simply because translation has taken place.

The aim here is to take a look at economics in reverse, so to speak, from the perspective of modern Tahitian, and to examine the specific semantic form certain categories of economics take on when treated within the particular semantic systems of the language in question. We will limit ourselves to the sort of spontaneous translation any speaker

performs when dealing with foreign concepts, that of converting them into his or her language and experience. The limitless possibilities of paraphrasing will be disregarded in favor of the categories existent in common vocabulary.

But the Pacific island context occasionally seems to provoke such drastically chivalrous attitudes that some individuals fly to the rescue of people who are not even under attack. In the course of a lecture, an American colleague, for instance, raised the question of the potential danger, in treating the semantic remoteness of modern Tahitian to Western economic concepts, of inducing a wariness among the public of the Tahitian people's economic ability. Of the various comments that might be directed at this type of remark, which is more common than one might think, let us at least mention the following: if it made any sense to assert that Tahitians are in general paltry economists, such a presumption would be prevalent among investors, and there would not be much anthropologists could do about it. But this assertion compels me to make one observation: that nonbilingual contemporary Tahitians,⁵ when speaking about economics in their own way, demonstrate an acute sense of what is involved in "real" economic arithmetic is to my mind indisputable. It is derisory to fear that they lack such an ability, especially if one reflects on certain aspects of French Polynesia today. Still, why would it be considered dishonorable not to be familiar with this type of arithmetic in the first place?

A speaker of Tahitian is obviously capable of "thinking economics" and in doing so uses specific semantic tools. I will not deal with the ability to make cost-benefit analyses for a given activity (customs, watermelon crops, and so forth) but will consider the semantic forms within which such analysis acquires meaning. The broad debate on "economic universals" will have to be left aside, and I will concentrate instead on the forms taken on by categories of meaning that by definition have universalizing tendencies in a given linguistic world.⁶ Indeed, syntactic features—perhaps more appropriate to a discussion on economic universals—will only rarely be mentioned, the discussion being limited to lexical issues.

"Outside" and "Inside"

One of the categories in political economy that contains the most semantic ambiguity is also one of the most essential from a logical standpoint: it involves delimiting a given economic sphere in relation to what lies "inside" or "outside" it (e.g., GDP, in French PIB or *produit inté-*

rieur brut, an aggregate that includes foreign economic actors, which are “outside,” or nondomestic from other points of view). These ambiguities have been pointed up in standard macroeconomic textbooks and will not be reviewed here (see, for example, Jessua 1982).

Tahitian, for reasons having a common logical basis, presents similar difficulties that are all the more deserving of attention in view of the lively debate on contemporary French Polynesia’s “dependence” on the “outside” (external dependency). In Tahitian, anything perceptible can be qualified as either *no rapae*, “from the outside,” or *no roto*, “from the inside,” these categories not being reserved for defining geographic limits. “Traditions” (actually “ways of being,” *peu*), ways of thinking, and long-standing institutions such as the Protestant Evangelical Church can be considered as “[coming] from the inside of the Ma’ohi people” (*no roto te nuna’a ma’ohi*). Hawaiian speakers too talk about “things from the inside,” *ka mea o loko*.⁷ The notion of “outside” is used in an economic sense; the expression “food imports” would be translated today as *te mau ma’a e tonohia mai no rapae*, literally, “plant products (as in other Polynesian languages, the notion of food in Tahitian derives from edible plants) sent from the outside to the speaker.”⁸ From the outside of what? Outside a given territory? But we have already seen that the notion of *rapae* is not exclusively geographic. Furthermore, recent creations of the economy, such as Hotel Tahara’a, would then be qualified as *no roto*, “from the inside,” which it seems they should not be.

Macroeconomics and national accounting run into the same problem, partially solved by adopting the legal categories of “resident” and “non-resident.” While the Tahitian language deals with the perceptible world, political economy deals with the definition of people in this world. Although economic categories may differ from common perceptions, current Tahitian usage (that, for example, of French Polynesian government translators) extends these perceptions to the economy. It is hence necessary to investigate semantic associations or concepts to which Tahitian usage implicitly refers but that are not strictly speaking part of economic vocabulary. In Tahitian, to be “from the inside” is associated with “having roots,” nearly a literal rendering of *ta’ata tumu*, “man root,” in that nothing “outside” can be qualified by the word “root.” The qualifier “outside” is variable. In certain contexts, it tends to mean “foreign” as it is used in Western national law; however, in economics “outside” is not exactly “foreign.” It can also refer to nonresidents, but from a territorial point of view regardless of the individual’s nationality. A Polynesian sailor from Rurutu (Austral Islands) who had

"taken root" on Huahine (Leeward Islands) was once described to me as not being "from here" (*no unei*), as a "man from the outside" (*ta'ata no rapae*).

These ambiguities arise from the absence of semantic configurations referring to the specific political form of "nation-state" implicit in basic macroeconomic concepts (Baré 1987b). This observation does not, however, preclude the establishment of a Tahitian nation-state in the Western sense; it just points up the impossibility of introducing in Tahitian a semantic form like nation-state together with the implications of "nationality" and "citizenship" as interlocking pieces of a puzzle. Similarly, a notion such as *ai'a*, which in many folk songs refers to something like "homeland" (the theme of *ai'a here* or "sweet homeland," the name of a former autonomist movement), derives from a specific semantic evolution relating it to the former territorial divisions, not to any fortuitous Tahitian version of culturally connoted concepts such as "state," "nation," and "country."⁹ Despite the growing influence of French and Anglo-Saxon political-administrative models in Tahiti, it is territoriality—the fundamental and intimate relationship between an individual's identity and territorial marking—that continues to define through ordinary language what is or is not "outside," including the economy. In terms of semantics, that Tahiti's European community is clearly referred to, even cursed, using the word *popa'a* (also used as an adjective for things foreign) sheds no light on the problem; this category refers to "kinds" or "species" (*huru*) of people, not to the structure of things economic. (The Chinese settled in Tahiti, *timito*, are not *popa'a*, nor are the Samoans, who nevertheless come from the "outside." It is likewise meaningless, economically speaking, to talk about tuna imported from New Zealand as *popa'a* tuna.)

The quality *ta'ata tumu* is acquired through residence in the anthropological sense: exercising customary rights over land. This principle plays a major historical role in forming families called "*demis*," so important in French Polynesian economic activity today. In these families the principle of nationality (e.g., British, American, French) remained for a long time secondary to the principle of residency in accordance with Polynesian cultural models. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that the expression used to translate "citizenship," *ti'ara'a*, originally referred to the idea of standing (*ti'a*), in other words, of being located territorially. When the subject is history, it still refers to what might be called the functional identity of a titular chief, also closely linked to a given territory.¹⁰ One would say that X had another name, Y,

i tona ti'ara'a ari'i, "in his position (*ti'ara'a*) of chief." *Te ti'ara'a farani* is less an expression of French citizenship (as a legal status) than it is of the "territorialization" in France of the individual in question.

The notion of "root," *tumu*, suggesting a direct relationship between the earth and what is qualified as such (also meaning the reason for or the cause of), can be applied to a number of aspects perceived as "inside." Copra, sometimes considered the epitome of the colonial crop, is described as *'ohipa faufa'a tumu*, "root economic activity." Copra production is indeed one activity that links contemporary Tahitians to "old times" (*tau tahito*) through a series of historically connected shifts: from the use of coconut oil in the eighteenth century for body care, to the export of coconut oil to England in the context of the new economic order established by the London Missionary Society (LMS), then the nut's desiccation for the European food industry from the 1860s on, and finally its role as the basic agricultural crop subsidized by the French government. In the course of this process, the strictly European origin of copra production has perhaps been forgotten or disregarded;¹¹ the fact remains that coconut trees are rooted in Tahitian soil. Here the principle of territorialization, which originates in earlier cultural models, is perpetuated by the use of a single term to translate a variety of basic economic categories.

Market Economy and Exchange

Merchandise or Goods

Political economy refers primarily to a market, hence a monetary, economy. It took progress in "economic" anthropology to identify a distinction between monetary and nonmonetary economic systems (spheres of exchange, pseudo-currencies, and so forth) (see Godelier 1966 for a review of the field). Modern political economy is therefore inseparable from the existence of goods measurable in currency without reference to their specific physical features: no matter how different a licorice roll is from a nuclear missile, each will always have a price.¹²

The definition of economics generally includes a reference to the "allocation of scarce resources." Finding an exact equivalent to "scarce resources" or "merchandise" in Tahitian is difficult, though one *moneme* seems suitable: *tao'a*. The use of another notion that may also come to mind, *faufa'a*, "wealth," is quite different.

In the mid-nineteenth century *tao'a* meant "property of any sort;

goods" (LMS 1851:248). This broad definition is still found in current usage, where *tao'a* means "*objet, bien, propriété.*" Trade can be construed as *'ohipa ho'ora'a tao'a*: "the activity of circulating (*ho'o*) *tao'a*" (we will return to the concept of *ho'o*). *Tao'a* can also have the extended sense of "thing" or even "thingamajig" (then synonym to *mea*), but also means "gift," quite a different, even antonymous, meaning from "*bien marchand*" (merchandise) (Lemaître 1973:117).

The semantic fields would coincide well enough if all "scarce" and/or "market" goods could be perceived as *tao'a*. However, certain undeniably "scarce" or "market" goods are not *tao'a*, they are *tauuha'a*, "*ustensiles, objets usuels, meubles*" (utensils, common objects, furniture) (Lemaître 1973:121). If asked to think about his or her language, a Tahitian speaker might see in *tauuha'a* particular forms of *tao'a*, but in the course of ordinary conversation it will be noticed that *tao'a* are opposed to *tauuha'a*, as "exported agricultural produce" is opposed to "imported manufactured products." Several examples attest this particular use of *tao'a*. As early as 1823, when Tahitian production first integrated the market economy, the Protestant deacon-chiefs on Ra'iatea, after several unsuccessful attempts to market cotton and coffee, anxiously asked the LMS office in London: "What are the right *tao'a*?" (*eaha ra te tao'a maita'ip*), meaning "what exported agricultural produce is lucrative?"¹³ Today, this acceptance of *tao'a*—and the opposition of *tao'a* and *tauuha'a*—is an organizing element of historical time. The chronicle of an island and the biographies that constitute it constantly compare the prices of *tao'a* and *tauuha'a* (Baré 1987a: part 2, "Une vie polynésienne dans l'histoire"). *Tauuha'a* are thus identified with products imported to the islands. This being the case, any Tahitian discourse on merchandise implicitly deals with the classic "terms of exchange," not the notion of a value attributed to undifferentiated goods.

The term *tauuha'a*, though perfectly common today, is absent from the LMS dictionary (compiled during the first half of the nineteenth century). Unless this absence is due to a missionary's omission, the identification of *ustensiles* with imported goods apparently dates to this period, as already well-established exchange networks with the "outside" took shape within the context of a monetary economy. These exchange networks are clearly identifiable as early as the eighteenth century in a nonmonetary form. They include textiles, weapons, and many iron tools (Baré 1985, especially ch. 7). By separating market goods into two main categories (as basic elements of economic forms), modern Tahitian in fact evokes a major process in Tahitian history.

Change, Exchange

It is impossible here not to mention a related concept that inherently describes this diachrony hidden within a semantic structure. The term is *taii*, which provides the radical element for the word *taiiha'a*. Whereas *taii* once meant "a price, compensation (see *ho'o*); to exchange a thing for another which does not suit" (LMS 1851:260), the word is currently defined as "*changer*" and "*échanger*" (Lemaître 1973:121). In fact, the term *tairā'a* is used today to refer to the notion of social change, making the exchange of goods inseparable from the Tahitian view of diachrony as it manifests itself in the language. The economist P. Couty sees in this Tahitian conception an illustration of the general principle of "compensation" inherent to the social world, advanced by such philosophers as Emerson (Couty 1987).

Distribution, Price, Exchange

The central concept relating to the distribution of goods is *ho'o*. Though this term is commonly used to describe the value or the price of an article and, as we shall see, any monetary transaction (buying and selling), it is indissociable from the idea of exchange. In the nineteenth century *ho'o* meant "price, exchange, equivalent; to buy or sell, exchange property" (LMS 1851:108). Whereas *tapiho'o* (literally, "to try *ho'o*") meant simply "to make an exchange" (ibid.:252), it has become the equivalent of *troquer* (to barter) (Lemaître 1973:118), hence apparently the opposite of monetary transaction. The central concept relating to economic distribution appears therefore to have led logically to two acceptations, one referring to the exchange of customary values, the other associated with value itself.

But the semantics of exchange—as a basic representation independent of the participants' specific position—extends to encompass everything referred to. *Ho'o* refers simultaneously to the price of something exchanged, its purchase, and its sale. A purchase is described as "a *ho'o* toward the speaker" (*ho'o mai*), a sale as "a *ho'o* that moves away from the speaker" (*ho'o tu*). This polysemia implies the idea of a sphere of general reciprocity in which purchase, sale, and measure of value are all considered aspects of a broader process of distribution. What might appear "lost" in total value on one end of the exchange cycle can be regained on the other. This notion is reminiscent of the rhetoric of exchange found throughout the ancient Polynesian world described by many observers.¹⁴ The notion of *'ohipa ho'o*, "*ho'o* affairs," traditionally

translated as "commerce," in no way overlaps the rather derogatory notion of *'ohipa moni*, "money affairs," money without which "commerce" makes no sense.¹⁵ Moreover, the aristocratic disdain with which representatives of the contemporary Tahitian community have often viewed commerce is no secret, their virtual absence from this activity being ascribable not solely to fierce economic competition in French Polynesia.

But it must also be noted that in the case of market distribution as opposed to the notion of merchandise, the Tahitian language sketches a more general semantic form than the terminology of economy in the Western sense. Whereas the latter requires two asymmetrical relations (purchase and sale) and the particular concept of price, modern Tahitian encompasses the whole in a single term. One might object that an expression like "monetary transaction" does not indicate the respective directions in which currency and goods circulate. And though "transaction" implies "price," the two terms are not synonymous as they are in the case of *ho'o*—except when talking about the price of copra, *pene puha* (literally, "the copra penny"), which would require a separate discussion.

Loans, Debts, Salaried Employment

That the movement of goods is an exchange cycle that "breaks even"—a principle basic in the very structure of Tahitian semantics—is also observable in the translation of "loan" and "debt" by a single term: *tarahu*. In the nineteenth century *tarahu* meant at once "hire, wages, to hire or engage for a compensation" (LMS 1851:254); in modern Tahitian, its definitions are "*dette; . . . emprunter, louer, engager quelqu'un*" (debt, borrow, rent, hire someone) (Lemaître 1973:119). The only congruence between these two semantic configurations can be found in the French term *location*, which, as in Tahitian, does not indicate the direction of the transaction, contrary to "hire" and "let" in English. But the other meanings are totally different, since "to engage someone" cannot be taken as "to borrow," an association that the semantics of Tahitian performs.

The implicit existence of general reciprocity appears in the notion of *utu'a*, which formerly meant "reward, compensation, wages; the payment either of merit or demerit, penalty or reward" (LMS 1851:305), and now means "*punition, amende; dans la Bible récompense, sanction*" (punishment, fine; in the Bible, reward, sanction) (Lemaître 1973:134). This latter shows greater precision because the Tahitian used

in the Bible has retained much of the Ma'ohi usage of the nineteenth century, when former models of the distribution of goods were still in effect.

So here again the idea of a general cycle of exchange is emphasized in the semantics of the language without particular focus on any one constitutive element. That "wages" could have been a synonym for "compensation" (once pertaining to a transgression) and that *utu'a* now refers to "a reward" and "a fine" illustrates a particular conception of reciprocity, not the movement of goods. We shall see that the characteristics of the semantic fields for *utu'a*, especially where the meaning of "wages" is concerned, are very similar to those of *tarahu*.

As is the case with *ho'o*, the semantic fields for *tarahu* presuppose both general and closed-circuit reciprocity. Associated with all sorts of transactions deferred in time, *tarahu* seems, when it comes to wage earning, to underline the precariousness of salaried employment as the wage earner sees it. It may even go so far as to manifest a radically different perception of what it is supposed to refer to. Though *tarahu* means "to employ" someone, it would be more appropriate to say "to borrow" someone. That variability is moreover what is implied in the former acceptance of the term: "engage for a compensation" (not for "wages"). In any case, it so happens that, given identical conditions, Tahitian labor is described as particularly "undependable" by many employers.

The locution that translates as "wages" (*'aufaura'a 'ava'e*) is formed from the word *'aufaura'a*, which is generally translated as "payment" but which has always referred to asymmetrical contributions. In the nineteenth century *'aufaura'a* applied to tribute paid to the former chiefs, later to "voluntary" contributions to island churches. The expression *'aufaura'a mē*, or "May dues" (the month was believed to be the arrival date of the first missionary boat), meaning dues paid to the Evangelical Church, retains this notion. The word *'aufau* also refers to a "tax," thus constantly raising the Tahitian worker to a sort of lordly position if the language is interpreted literally. In fact, the term *'aufaura'a*, having once specified the asymmetrical nature of a certain type of movement of goods, has come to refer to another type of payment that can also be described as asymmetrical: when a boss opens his cash drawer, the absence of an immediate contribution in return assigns his contribution the status of *'aufaura'a*.

That Tahitian wage earners receiving their monthly pay are aware that it relates to the work performed is of course unquestionable. The problem is to understand how this awareness is perceived and talked

about. Since the language describes salaried employment as initiating a cycle of reciprocity (*tarahu*), it requires that this cycle be completed by a contribution in return (*'aufaura'a*), which better explains how *'utu*a, a "fine," could also refer to "wages." The semantics of the language makes a wage earner someone who has consented to give (of one's time or one's "drive"—*'itoi'to*) and expects something in return in a relationship that differs from wage earning in the economic sense.

The relation between semantic instruments and empirical and statistical reality is complex. It is, in any case, apparently relevant to the various areas dealt with here, particularly to that of "debt" or "loan," the importance of which is recurrent throughout Tahitian society and history. Historical and contemporary examples abound of what could be termed, in a perhaps ethnocentric fashion, a model of nonchalance: take for example the comparatively gigantic debts of the two Polynesian "kingdoms," Tahiti and Hawaii, which played a major role in negotiations with the European powers. As a result of the behavior of the titular chiefs or "kings," these debts were constantly renewed or augmented.¹⁶ Further examples can be found in the often astronomical tabs Tahitian farmers constantly ran up with Chinese shopkeepers, for instance when the price of vanilla skyrocketed in 1926; the equally legendary tabs mother-of-pearl divers would accumulate in the cabarets of Pape'ete up until the 1960s; or later, the frequency of overdrafts among Tahitian checking account holders, which prompted bankers to take remedial measures in the 1960s–1970s. The behavior described in these cases concerns actors in the "outside" system considered, rightly or wrongly, to be endowed with excessive wealth that should be hastily redistributed—not "loaned"—according to the ancient mode of distributing foodstuffs on the spot. But initiating a contribution cycle among rural Tahitians themselves has long been remote from the arithmetical relationship implied in the notion of debt. The acceptance of the word *horo'a* is highly illustrative in this respect: once meaning "to give or bestow some good" (LMS 1851:109), *horo'a* now means both *prêter* (lend) and *donner* (give) (Lemaître 1973:62–63).

In any case, what is called "debt" in both French and English is apparently not usually described as such in Tahitian.¹⁷ Here again general reciprocity is implicit: what is lost by one who cannot be called a "creditor" is either immediately repaid (but then it is not a "debt" but an exchange), or deferred to what cannot be called an indefinite "due date," or considered to be "regained" elsewhere. In a social sphere considered to be finite, if everyone has debts, then no one has any, and it is impossible to know what to call a "debt." This situation is indicated

rather remarkably in D. Oliver's various observations on similar models in eighteenth-century society.¹⁸ In the historical "long run," this view is also suggested, though in a different fashion, by the attitude of former chiefs who were largely responsible for the distribution of goods. They would conceal some of the goods from their dependents and even their families for fear of having to distribute them immediately.¹⁹ This sort of debt related to hierarchy seems to be constantly floating; it can be called debt only for lack of a better word, but the identity of the borrowers and lenders remains ambiguous. Chiefs can be considered eternally obligated to the people to remain chiefs, or the dependents considered eternally obligated to the chiefs for what the latter distribute to them. However, the obligation of unilateral redistribution was far from limited to hierarchical relations, but was so widespread that a person in the habit of accumulating (a person who was at once "miserly," "tough," and "adul": *pa'ari*) was perceived in the 1820s as an "evildoer" (*ta'ata hamani 'ino*),²⁰ which would correspond to today's *horo'a 'ino* or "bad giver" ("*chiche*," "*avare*,"—"stingy" or "miserly"—according to Lemaître 1973:62).

Spend Not, Refuse Not

One might then be led to believe that the semantic world of "spending" would be implicitly enhanced. But such is not the case. In modern Tahitian spending can be translated as *ha'apau* (cause something to be *pau*—"vidé," "*épuisé*," "*anéanti*"—"emptied," "exhausted," "wiped out"), but the usual term is *ha'amau'a* (Lemaître 1973:158), cause something to be *mau'a*, "*gâché*, *ou gâté*" (wasted or spoiled) (*ibid.*:76). This Tahitian definition of "spending" seems to call into question the stereotype sometimes applied to Polynesians that "money burns a hole in their pockets." Whereas "to refuse" to loan can be translated as *pato'i*, which means refusal in general, the translation that indicates the economic relation is *'opipiri*, which presently corresponds to "*peu prêteur*, *avare*; *ne pas vouloir prêter ou donner*" (a nonloaner, miserly, unwilling to lend or give) (Lemaître 1973:89; emphasis added) and once meant "bashfulness, shame; . . . also to appear modest" (LMS 1851:169). In current usage the sentence '*ua 'opipiri 'ona tona moni* could be rendered by "he *misered* his money." The radical *piri* implies an idea of "clinging" to something, as in the expression *tapiri mai*, which urges one to join a group but means more literally "come cling to us," or refers to groups that under the protectorate supported French rule: *te ta'ata piri i te mau farani*, the people who "cling" to the French. The former meaning

of *'opipiri*, less overtly derogatory, had to do with cardinal "shame" in traditional morals, rather similar to our "decency," and also evoked the idea of someone who is trammled up or "retained," especially if one realizes that *'opi* meant "to shut; to close up" (ibid.:169) and was given as a synonym of *oopi* (ibid.:167), "close, niggardly, as to food, etc."

If "to spend" is "to spoil" or "to waste," but "to refuse" is to be a miser, what remains is exchange, hence distribution.

Earning Is a "Novelty"

The term in question is *'api*, which means "*neuf, frais*" and "*jeune*" (new, fresh, young) (Lemaître 1973:37), so that a Chinese shopkeeper who makes "ten francs on each canned item" (*'ua 'api te tinito e piti tara i ni'a i te punu*) adds, so to speak, "ten francs of youth" (ibid.). Instead of implicating the speaker as in the French *gain* or the English "earning"—the former also including a reference to victory, the latter referring more specifically to merit and both to what one gets from the world—the Tahitian idea of "earning" is defined as a measure of passing time, which can easily enough be associated with barter and exchange, since it is this very category that defines what changes (*tauirā'a*; see the earlier discussion of change).

Wealth, Meaning

It is not surprising, then, that no concept can be associated with the idea of "tied up" wealth, as in "capital," without resorting to recently formulated periphrases. The closest notion to wealth is *faufa'a*, which also means "possessions," including socially acquired possessions as opposed to *tao'a*. Thus the expression *faufa'a feti'i* refers to undivided "family possessions," particularly land.

But *faufa'a*, when it means "wealth," does not appear to differ in usage value. Whereas in the nineteenth century this term corresponded to "gain, profit, advantage" (LMS 1851:83), the modern definition first mentions "*utilité, importance*," then "*richesse, biens*" (Lemaître 1973: 53), so that a very common Tahitian expression describes something that is "uninteresting," even "senseless" (in the idiomatic sense), as having "no wealth," *'aita e faufa'a* or *faufa'a 'ore*. A promising enterprise would be described as "something *faufa'a*" or "rich" (*mea faufa'a*), which is close, but not identical, to the French/English acceptance of the word "rich." A speech can be qualified as "rich in ideas" or a project as "rich in potential," but something that lacks interest would never be

referred to in English as lacking “richness.” (The polysememe “interest” of course also contains a reference to banking as in interest rate, but not to “capital.”) To qualify an enterprise as “something *faufa’a*” is a figure of speech of which Tahitian Protestant pastors are particularly fond, which is all the more understandable when one realizes that the same term refers to the Scriptures, thus defined as both rich and full of interest in the full sense of both these qualifiers.

We are dealing here with a vast array of particular semantic associations. It is remarkable that something uninteresting can be designated as being both “without richness” and “without the Bible.” It has moreover been noticed by various observers that a state recognized as poverty (*veve*) meets with disapproval in rural Tahitian circles (Levy 1973). This polysemia operates in a semantic world where someone who refuses is also a miser (see above), but “someone who gives” (*ta’ata horo’a*) is simply “generous” (Lemaître 1973:62). It must also be mentioned that another term corresponding to “rich,” *rava’i*, once meant simply “to suffice, *to be adequate at the end designed*” (LMS 1851:224; emphasis added) and is currently defined both by “*riche*” and by “*suffisant*” (Lemaître 1973:109). To speak in Tahitian about “national wealth” would thus be to speak about the “adequacy of the land” (*rava’ira’a fenua*) as well as the “usefulness/interest that the country has” (*te faufa’a no te fenua*), which could also be construed as “the biblical nature of the land,” quite far removed from some amount of “added value at factor cost.”

*Business and Enterprise: The Eternal Absentee*²¹

It is hardly surprising after all that the concepts on which political economy has been founded since Adam Smith such as “enterprise” and “industry,” or those that grew out of them like “production function,” “added value,” and “depreciation”—not to mention “current assets” or “capitalistic intensity”—are nonexistent in the semantic world of a unilingual Tahitian, even in periphrastic form, just as they are in any bilingual dictionary. Though, as has been pointed out to me, they are also absent from the semantic universe of a nonspecialist French or English speaker, there is a seemingly slight but decisive difference: these categories vaguely evoke something even for French or English speakers who haven’t a clue about economics, because they are part of their language. Various and often remarkable American studies on entrepreneurship in the Pacific, especially in Polynesia, often note with a tinge of regret that

“for many Pacific islanders business remains an alien concept” (Hailey 1987:66–68; see also Fairbairn 1987).

Though business may be an alien concept, it is not because there is some kind of semantic void that places contemporary Tahiti out of the reach of, say, General Motors or Darty S.A. On the contrary, the density of Tahitian semantics pertaining to economics is organized in such a way that there is, so to speak, no room. In order for “enterprise” to exist, there would have to be “capital.” There is already “adequacy, sufficiency, wealth, Bible, etc.,” and none of these terms precisely corresponds to “capital” or implies this concept. There should also be “employment” where there is already “loan/debt, engagement for a compensation”—*rave 'ohipa*, which refers to “worker” but more literally means “doer of something”; and there should be “wages” whereas there is “asymmetrical contribution that completes an exchange cycle,” and so forth. Though *moni 'api* is generally translated as “profit,” this locution meaning “young/new money” is used to refer to all kinds of added value (the difference between purchase and sale price) and also covers what is known as “hard cash.”

Yet such is the error—believing that for Tahitian semantics to include “enterprise” it is sufficient to fill a void—into which falls the only lexicon that to my knowledge contains an entry for “entrepreneur” by opting for a particularly inadequate definition of the term: *ta'ata fa'atere 'ohipa*, or “man supervisor of work,” probably in contrast to the notion *rave 'ohipa* (“doer of work”) mentioned above (Cadousteau 1965). The problem is that the same expression can refer to a foreman or any other individual who oversees a group task. Actually, the notion of entrepreneur or company manager can symmetrically appear as a “local” category, even as a lexeme (an untranslatable minimal unit of meaning, such as “bake” or the “junk” in “junk food”). Thus a word like “business,” which is not exactly equivalent to “*affaires*,” has come to be commonly used in French.

Similar remarks apply to a notion like “industry,” which has taken on a specific twist in the context of highly singular processes (Europe’s industrialization) in which, according to such eminent specialists in economic history as Eric Hobsbawm (1962, 1986), much of the “how” and the “where” remains unexplained.

To account for the relative absence of an industrial sector and enterprise formation in unilingual communities in the Pacific islands, it is obviously neither necessary nor sufficient to invoke the exceptional alienism of Tahitian categories and their semantic environments. Vari-

ous studies, including those mentioned previously (Hailey 1987; Fairbairn 1987), show the importance of factors such as restricted markets or the lack of available land, which have no apparent relevance to linguistics. But such analysis could be seen as delineating implicitly the specificity of the European industrial revolution with other words.

The fact remains that the particular form of Tahitian enterprises managed by bilinguals, nearly always involved in networks historically defined by the activity of trade more so than manufacturing (i.e., ocean freight, import-export), likens them to *'ohipa ho'ō*, the term by which they are moreover usually designated. Like the personal fortunes of their holders, they appear to be characterized by specific methods of financial management, which are worthy of examination, that I believe can be summarily described as giving priority to swiftness (stock rotation, securing high trade margins) or what modern Tahitian designates in positive terms as "quick" money (*moni vitiviti*). Whereas I long believed that the word *vitiviti* was a "Tahitianization" of the French *vite*, it is indeed a Polynesian term, similar to the Hawaiian *vikiviki*, "swift, brisk, avoiding delays" (Pukui, Elbert, and Mookini 1975:158). The idea that "swiftness" in the exchange cycle was a positive quality in ancient society is mentioned by Oliver (1974:1083). It is all the more significant that in the nineteenth century *vitiviti* was defined as "well set, clever, well finished" (LMS 1851:314). Thus the specificity of enterprises in Tahiti may indirectly be determined by semantic instruments of people who do not grasp exactly what an enterprise is. This is an interesting field of research, to which C. Robineau has contributed useful references (especially 1984).

In any case, one condition seems vital for unilingual Tahitians to set up enterprises: they must be able to perceive what this word is all about.

Last but Not Least: "Economics"

It would be vain to seek a Tahitian definition of "economics" or "economy," the science or the activity, even in such specialized publications as the Académie Tahitienne's recent *Petit vocabulaire des mots techniques* (1981).²² But one expression comes close to making a distinction between the economic aspect, or, if it be preferred, economic "activity," and social relations: *'imira'a moni* or *'imira'a faufa'a*, the search for money or *faufa'a*. The economic aspect of an island's history can be specified in the expression *i te pae 'imira'a moni*, "the search-for-money side," similar to the expression *i te pae 'orara'a*, which could translate as

“the life side” (in contrast to “the soul/faith side,” *pae fa'aro'o*). Specifically economic relations are thus distinguished—in a rather functional fashion—from other social relations, which runs contrary to the very concept of economics. In an economic system it makes little difference whether a franc is spent by a Polynesian pastor to buy communion bread or by a Chinese merchant to buy a can of beer; the main thing is that the franc circulates.

But the expression *'imira'a moni* indicates economic activity in a different manner. Contrary to the case of *ho'o*, it presupposes a given speaker on whose “side” it is pronounced, a speaker—an “individual-looking-for-money”—placed in an exchange network to which he or she is foreign. *Imi*, as Lemaître points out (1973:67), is translated “*rechercher, chercher (quelque chose qu'on a égaré ou oublié)*” (seek, look for something lost or left behind) in opposition to *ti'i*, (“*aller chercher [quelqu'un ou quelque chose]*”), “go seek out someone or something” (ibid.:124), someone or something one is implicitly sure to find. What would correspond to economic activity is thus viewed as a seminomadic process comparable to hunting and gathering. This view is all the more significant when one takes note of the mobility characteristic of rural Tahitian residential models, hence of their economic activity (see especially Robineau 1984).

Furthermore, if the economy is “*imi* money,” then there is a search for something absent or rather “outside.” It is highly unlikely, in view of the preceding remarks, that modern Tahitian would refer to its community of speakers as poor (because they “seek money”), though their income is among the lowest in French Polynesia. It is rather a question of distinguishing a monetary world from a nonmonetary one, as is often observable when describing the development of exchange with the “outside” (Baré 1987a), which continues to manifest an implicit but surprisingly detectable reference to the form of exchange.

It is to be hoped that case studies such as the present one will shed some light, or side lighting so to speak, on debates concerning “insular” economies in the Pacific. It is indeed hard to imagine that linguistic worlds have not, to degrees that remain to be defined, lent a certain specificity to the existing economic mechanisms. That these mechanisms originate primarily (though not exclusively) in the specific patterns of organization and implementation used by the “powers” in this region is scarcely deniable. But even if it made sense to talk about shifting from a policy of domination to a policy based on contracts, when talking about economy one would have to make sure all involved were talking about the same thing. If there is a contract, hence an encounter, it is evidently

one of "ships that pass in the night."²³ And the fact is that the Pacific island natives vested with political and economic responsibility are bilingual.

If such is the case, it can only be because of the semantic "framing" and associations to which Sapir and Whorf, so often quoted by Mounin, once drew attention. An anthropologist who ignores these concerns runs the serious risk of dissociating culture from language and language from communication. From this standpoint, it is hard not to fall back in step of what has been called culturalism in areas such as the one discussed in this article.

GLOSSARY

- 'ai'a*: nineteenth century: land (as territory); twentieth century: nation.
'api: young, fresh, new; *moni 'api*: hard cash, profits.
'aufaura'a: nineteenth century: tribute, voluntary contribution, asymmetrical contribution; twentieth century: payment; *'aufaura'a 'ava'e*: wages; *'aufau*: tax.
faufa'a: nineteenth century: gain, profit, advantage; twentieth century: usefulness, importance, wealth, richness, goods; *mea faufa'a*: something rich (in potential); *faufa'a 'ore*: lacking *faufa'a*, uninteresting; *te faufa'a*, the Bible; *'imira'a faufa'a*: search for *faufa'a*, economic activity.
ha'amau'a: spend, waste.
ho'o: nineteenth century: price, exchange, equivalent; to buy or sell, exchange property; twentieth century: price of an object, purchase, sale; *tapiho'o* (lit., "to try *ho'o*"): to barter.
horo'a: nineteenth century: to give or bestow some good; twentieth century: lend, give; *horo'a 'ino*: bad giver, stingy, miserly.
moni: currency, money (from the English); *moni vitiviti*: money earned quickly; *vitiviti*: clever, well set, well finished; *'imira'a moni*: lit., "the search for *moni*," economic activity; *moni 'api*: see *'api*.
no rapae: from the outside, foreign.
no roto: from the inside, genuine, indigenous.
'ohipa: job, occupation, activity, position, things as in the "things of life"; *fa'atere 'ohipa*: supervisor of work, in contrast to *rave 'ohipa*: doer of work, worker, labor; *'ohipa ho'o*: commerce; *'ohipa moni*: "money affairs"; *'ohipa no rapae*: things from the outside.
'opipiri: nineteenth century: shameful, reserved, shy; twentieth century: unwillingly to lend, miserly; *piri*: to cling, retain.

pa'ari: adult, tough, miserly.

peu: style, ways of being, customs.

rava'i: nineteenth century: sufficient, adequate; twentieth century: rich, sufficient.

tahito: ancient, but has left a trace in memory (in contrast to *matamua*: primordial, "mythical").

tao'a: precious item, gift, "thingamajig"; export goods; '*ohipa ho'ora'a tao'a*: the activity of circulating *tao'a*, trade.

tarahu: loan, debt; rent, engage someone.

taui: nineteenth century: a price, compensation; to exchange a thing for another that does not suit; similar to *ho'o*; twentieth century: change, exchange; *tauiraa*: social change.

tauiha'a: utensils, common objects, furniture; imported manufactured goods.

ti'ara'a: lit., "the fact of standing up"; nineteenth century: functional identity of a titular chief; twentieth century: citizenship.

tumu: root of a tree; cause and origin of things; *ta'ata tumu*: lit., "man root," autochton due to use of a parcel land from birth.

utu'a: nineteenth century: reward, compensation, wages; the payment of either merit or demerit, penalty or reward; twentieth century: punishment, fine; in the Bible: reward, sanction.

NOTES

1. This article, originally published in French as "L'économie décrite en Tahitien: quelques remarques" in *L'Homme* 121 (January-March 1992): 143-164, develops in part work carried out from November 1988 to January 1989 when I was a visiting fellow at the Pacific Islands Development Program of the East-West Center for Cultural and Technical Exchange (Honolulu, Hawaii, U.S.), including a lecture series and a mimeographed report entitled "Tahitian Meanings." The linguistic examples presented were collected during field study from 1975 to 1978 for ORSTOM-Institut Français de Recherche Scientifique pour le Développement en Coopération. I would particularly like to thank John Charlot, Alan Howard, Alex Spoehr, Hardy Spoehr, and Jack Ward in Hawaii; and Robert Chaudenson, Gérard Lenclud, and Claude Robineau in France for their comments and critiques. Translation of this article from the French was done by Cynthia Schoch. I am solely responsible for the content.

2. By modern Tahitian is meant the language spoken in the Society Islands in the twentieth century as described in Y. Lemaître's lexicon (1973). Though not comprehensive, this lexicon is to me the most reliable reference. By Ma'ohi is meant the language described by the dictionary compiled in the first part of the nineteenth century by the London Missionary Society (hereafter abbreviated LMS), published in 1851. The noticeable difference between these two forms of the language spoken in the Tahitian archipelago owes more to the disappearance of specific terms (in the field of religion, for instance) than to funda-

mental linguistic changes (J. Ward, pers. com., 1989). Contrary to a rather widely held opinion, early nineteenth-century writings on nonspecialized topics are perfectly comprehensible to Tahitians today.

3. I would like to draw attention to the research conducted on these topics by R. Chaudenson and the Centre International de Recherche et d'Étude en Linguistique Fondamentale et Appliquée (CIRELFA) under the auspices of the Agence de Coopération Culturelle et Technique and to emphasize the need for economists specializing in the informal sector (unrecorded economic activity) in various countries to take linguistic factors into account. Accounting is often done in a language other than the main languages used in economics: English and French (Charmes, pers. com., 1987). Lastly, there is no doubt that statistical categories bear the marks of culture and language.

4. This article presents a preliminary study for a book to be titled *Ce qu'on dit en Tahitien*. It draws its basic inspiration from what is commonly called the "cultural current" in anthropology, especially the work of B. L. Whorf and E. Sapir, though a noncultural approach to anthropology is hard to envision. Furthermore, as P. Boyer notes (1991), it seems difficult to delineate clearly the field of cognitive anthropology (see, for example, Tyler 1969; Dougherty 1985), though the body of research appears to have historical connections to the earlier cultural current. It is awkward therefore to invoke analytical methods that supposedly belong to a subdiscipline of a field of study that is itself subject to debate. Equally problematic is the closely related field of "ethnosemantics." One might legitimately ask if, to a large extent, it simply covers ethnology itself. In this regard, it is hardly necessary to cite the name of Clifford Geertz. The problems related to "culturalism," hence to the points discussed here, can be posed as follows:

(1) Is the world as it is perceived the same when described in different languages, and are the resulting modes of action identical? The view espoused here, which largely reflects the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, answers in the negative for reasons that will become clear. Although this hypothesis has become unfashionable, any other view would heavily mortgage the very existence of anthropology, not to mention that of linguistic differences, reducing them to a sort of insignificant blabber.

(2) Are not what are known as homonyms in a language often instead polysememes that sketch the inherent framework of meanings? The hypothesis here is in agreement, for any other answer often leads to serious logical contradictions or absurdities, as notes M. Sahlins (1976). As to problems of translation, although the work of G. Mounin is often considered by linguists to be somewhat dated, no equally vast and precise survey appears to be available. Directions in research on financial aid to development are reviewed in Baré 1987b.

5. This expression refers to most of the rural population in French Polynesia. French-Tahitian bilingualism, further complexified by the peculiar type of French spoken in Tahiti, particularly by pluricultural groups known as "*demis*" (halves), or '*afa*, will not be dealt with in this article.

6. A fine presentation of the problems related to the concept of economic rationality can be found in Godelier 1966. Paul Fabra, the eminent financial columnist for *Le Monde*, frequently denounces preconceptions in this area, particularly what he recently termed the "elastic definition of rational." An eloquent example concerned the theory of "rational prediction" ("*anticipations rationnelles*"), unable, other than by way of tautology, to

account for phenomena such as the "tulipmania" that developed in Holland around 1625, causing the price of rare bulbs to increase twenty-five-fold in the course of one year ("La bourse expliquée à Candide" [2], *Le Monde*, 14 August 1990).

7. See, for example, Charlot 1983:115. For Hawaiians these "things from the inside" pertain to various identity markers such as the desired consistency of taro paste (*poi*). In Tahitian these markers correspond to the notion of *peu ma'ohi*, "Ma'ohi way of being."

8. Translation taken from Blanchet 1985.

9. The word *'ai'a* once meant "a country or place where one makes his abode; an inheritance or portion of land" (LMS 1851:14). This term has the same root as a variety of others used in Polynesia to refer to territorialized groups, like the Samoan *'aiga* or the Maori *kainga*.

10. It might be recalled that "citizenship" refers to belonging to the "city" in the Greek and later Roman sense (Benveniste 1969).

11. The processes of desiccating the coconut and using copra for oil were introduced by a German engineer in 1865-1870.

12. This remark obviously pertains to the notion of price itself, not to pricing systems, which naturally differ in each case.

13. *Eaha ra te taoa maitai* in the original spelling (Council for World Mission, South Sea Letters 3, 1823, quoted in Baré 1987a:196). A similar semantic opposition apparently exists in Samoan between "ceremonial goods" (*olo'a*) and imported goods (Tcherkezoff, pers. com., 1989).

14. See, for example, Firth 1936; Oliver 1974, 2.

15. Unless one is thinking of social "commerce," which apparently is not contained in the term *ho'o*.

16. See, for example, Kuykendall 1947; Sahlins 1985; Danielsson 1978.

17. *Dette* and "debt" derive from the Latin *devere*, "to owe" (Dauzat, Dubois, and Mitterand 1989; Hoard 1986; Benveniste 1969:185).

18. "The only generalization I can offer concerning the time factor in gift exchange is that . . . it appears to have been only loosely defined, and characterized by little or no time of urgency. . . . A generation or more seems not to have been considered excessive for the balancing of certain exchange accounts" (Oliver 1974:1088). An anthropologist specialized in both New Guinea and Polynesia related this anecdote: He "helps out" a Tahitian passing through with some local currency; five years later he receives an invitation to a *tama'ara'a* organized by people he'd completely forgotten. Conversely, when on another occasion he "helps out" a New Guinean planter, a few days later he receives the amount plus interest computed at the going rate.

19. Many examples are given in Baré 1985, ch. 8.

20. Crook, 4 December 1824 (Council for World Mission Archives, South Sea Letters, 4).

21. "The Eternal Absentee" translates the French idiom "l'Arlésienne," from a famous character of a nineteenth-century theater piece, a character who never appears. It refers more to something that could likely appear (but does not) than to something "absent."

22. The Académie Tahitienne translates a notion such as “economic development” by *fa’arava’ira’a fenua* (make the land *rava’i*, “adequate” and “rich”), which is particularly inappropriate since this definition presupposes, among other implicit semantic associations, a final state. However, the various acceptations of the word “development” have in common that they describe it as a process, which is by definition endless (Baré 1987b).

23. “Ships that pass in the night, and speak to each other in passing, / Only a signal shown and a distant voice in the darkness; / Only a look and a voice; then darkness again and a silence.” (Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, “The Theologian’s Tale,” *Tales of a Wayside Inn*, 3)

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