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SOCIAL VALUES, THEIR LINGUISTIC CODING AND CHANGES THROUGH TIME AUSTRALIAN PERSONAL ADS OVER THE SPAN OF ONE HUNDRED YEARS

Shared joy is twice the joy, shared sorrow is half the sorrow.

This paper explores some of the close connections between language and social life in Australia as they are reflected in personal, (singles') advertisements. It looks at social attitudes and recognized values encoded in the language, and at habitual ways of interpreting the world through linguistic, mostly lexical, patterns. It considers some of the differences in usage over the span of one hundred years, namely from the 1890s to the 1990s. The advertisements were excerpted from both serious newspapers and tabloids published in Sydney and Melbourne.

As personal advertisements are submitted by both sexes, the discussion will also consider the differences and the ways language relates to gender: related studies demonstrate that men and women practise a sort of cross-cultural communication when talking to each other. Messages sent by a person of one gender are perceived through 'an asymmetrical filter'. (Langsdorf 1994.11) This means that the semantics of an expression can be different for men and for women, there may be different connotations and thus different aspects may be less appealing for one or the other sex: '...connotation is just as important as referential meaning, and often more so' (Stubbs 1996.195). Tannen has argued that 'men communicate in order to be respected while women do so to be liked' (quoted by Langsdorf 1994.11).

Personal advertisements are printed in a more or less standardised form. The format is set and one cannot even make use of the layout, the writers cannot choose which part of their advertisement they would like to stand out. They can only rely on words.

The method applied in this study draws on the observation that 'the lexicon is the clearest possible guide to everyday cognition' (Wierzbicka 1997.31), 'meanings are conveyed not only by individual words but also by the frequency of collocation' (Stubbs 1996.89) and that language can influence thought especially through repeated codings which then constitute 'semantic habits' (Halliday's term quot. Stubbs 1996.235). In order to obtain as accurate a picture as possible, a computer program was used for data processing.

The text of a personal advertisement

Humans are social beings, and as such, they need to be in an environment which enables contacts, interactions and subsequent relationships with other humans. Successful communication provides the answer to the individual's need for belonging and is decisive for a person's self-esteem, confidence and satisfaction in life.

During an interaction each individual performs a role in which s/he wants to be recognized, i.e. a 'public image' (cf. Yule 1996). Whether other people reply positively to this communicated public image depends largely on the context (i.e. 'context of situation') in which its manifestation, verbal or/and non-verbal, spoken or written, takes place. The context in particular reaches beyond what is said or written. The participants in a culture make inferences from the *situation* to the text and vice versa. They also project the text against a broader background, i.e. against the context of culture, which means that assumptions and interpretations are conditioned by the knowledge of the speaker's/writer's culture, as there are culturally given rules that stipulate what can be said where, by whom and to whom, when, and in what order.

Personal advertisements, which *are* pieces of communication, reflect the rules observed at the time of their origin. 'Language does not exist in a vacuum. It is embedded in the culture of a people and reflects the totality of beliefs and sentiments' (Rauf 1988.44). The way the advertisers present themselves, wished-for partners, offered and required qualities, gives a mirror to period cultural linguistic coding of social standards and norms; in other words, they reflect characteristics that are most valued in any given place at any given time.

Personal advertisements originate in people's need to find a solution to their loneliness whatever its cause may be: on the one hand, there is the urban environment—anonymous, ignorant and alien, where you hardly know your neighbour and, on the other hand, the distances between settlements may be so vast that contacts with other people are rather sporadic. The situation resulting in loneliness and a need for company leads people to look for a solution: some of them will turn to various matchmaking agencies, others will attempt to be the architects of their own future and use media for advertising of which—in spite of new technologies and the internet—newspapers and journals are still the most popular.

Unlike commercial advertisements, which are created by advertising specialists and address a wide public, personal advertisements are produced by laymen in the field of advertising who wish to present themselves in ways which will attract the 'right' person's attention. In these pieces of phatic communication, the writer ('speaker', usually one person) addresses an unknown, 'ideal' reader ('listener', usually also one person). The main goal is not so much to provide information but to mediate contact. Everything the text conveys is to serve this goal.

Stolt (1976.27) says that for a personal advertisement to be successful, it is important that:

- (1) The text is being read by the 'right' person. This factor can largely be controlled by the choice of newspaper or magazine;
- (2) The reader feels himself/herself to be personally addressed, which encourages him/her to respond; and
- (3) S/he writes a reply.

In other words, the text should stimulate the reader emotionally and/or intellectually and motivate him/her to respond.

Like other texts in contemporary society, personal advertisements have become multi-semiotic; they increasingly combine language with other semiotic forms: written texts incorporate photographs; the graphic design of individual pieces and later of the whole page also help to create images and thus affect the evaluation by the reader. The advertisements, though designed by laymen who usually follow a set of conventions, reflect the strategy current in commercials which is summed up in the acronym AIDA:

ATTENTION – the reader is attracted

INTEREST – the reader is tempted to continue reading

DESIRE – the reader wishes to meet the advertiser

ACTION – the reader responds.

The first phase, i.e. drawing the reader's attention, seems to be the most important. The writers attempt to put 'the most appealing' aspect/s of their personality in the initial part of the advertisement.

Every text has two semantic levels: one that is literal and another that is implied. For example, 'a blonde' may be just a description but may also carry the emotional connotation of sex appeal. Pieces of information become thus arguments which are to be persuasive. It is important for the success of the advertisement that the meaning (the level) understood by the reader coincides with that intended by the advert-writer (Stolt 1976.27).

Australian ads of 1890s

Personal advertisements were already well established and the constant demand Australian newspapers to introduce separate columns for 'Matrimonial Services'. Their structure followed the model of British newspapers, that, though modified, has survived until today. Written in the third person singular to give an illusion of objectivity, they started with the writer's self description, including marital or social status, age, religion, financial situation, the intended form of the first contact, continued with the prospective partner's description and specific requirements and finished with stating the viewed relationship, which was marriage:

Example 1: HOTELKEEPER, 50, rich, R.C., owning and keeping largest

hotel leading country town last 25 years, wishes introduction R.C. Lady with income, view matrimony. #Argus 4.4.1896#

Example 2: ACCOUNTANT, leading institution, city, 35 tall, handsome, Protestant, bachelor, £400 and property owner, wishes introduction spinster or young widow with £150 yearly, view matrimony. #Argus 11.4.1896#

Example 3: SPINSTER, 30, Baptist, good dressmaker, owning 100a fenced land, wishes introduction tradesman, farmer, other means or permanent employment, view matrimony. #Age 9.10.1897#

As the theory says, the reader should feel emotionally and selectively motivated to answer. So what was seen as a possible stimulus? Property was obviously a very important factor, something that made the person more attractive than any other quality, in some respondents at least. Religion was a selective factor. Australian society at that time was divided into three groups, namely Protestants, who were the most numerous and who carried the traditions of the Mother country, i.e. England and looked to England for models and ways to follow, the Catholics with their Irish heritage, and finally secularists with their enlightenment ideals.

To see what other qualities were thought to be attractive for the opposite sex and important for a relationship, we can look at the ways the writers describe themselves and their prospective partners.

Women identify themselves most frequently by their marital status: 60% were widows; 24% were unmarried women who proudly called themselves *spinster*. Apart from being a legal term as the *Oxford Dictionary* of 1926 still suggests, the word obviously had a positive connotation of chastity and therefore was also used by mature women as shown in the next example where the advertiser was 45 years of age.

Example 4: LADY 45, irreproachable character, spinster, tall, well educated, accomplished, property valued £2000, income £100 yearly, wishes introduction educated Man, good financial position, view matrimony. Holt's. #Age 3.10.1896#

Both *widow* and *spinster* are frequently complemented with *lady*, so there is (was) a *lady spinster* and a *lady widow/widow lady*. 'Lady' was introduced instead of 'gentlewoman'. By identifying themselves as *lady* (usually with capitalized 'L'), the advertisers implied that they were respectable people (cf. *OD* 1926) of no 'obscure' background.

Example 5: WIDOW Lady, young, accomplished, refined, children provided for.... #Age 8.9.1900#

If the advertiser did not add *lady* to her self-identification, she mentioned her religion, which, I would say, should have also implied that she was an honourable person.

Example 6: LADY, 50, educated, income £150 yearly, Protestant, without family, wishes introduction partner, under 70, similarly circumstanced, view Matrimony. #Age 8.9.1900#

She would frequently (in 56%) describe herself as *educated*, sometimes *musical*. To strengthen the connotation of ladylikeness she may say that she is *refined*, which means no vulgarity in her, that she is of *irreproachable character*, implying thus her chastity and good reputation, and only then would she mention her economic situation.

We may wonder why education was so highly and openly valued at that time. The generation we discuss here are people born between 1840 and 1875, which means that for the older age groups education was not compulsory. In Clark's *Short History of Australia* we read: 'By the late 1860s the bourgeoisie, the squatters and the working classes believed in education as a means to ensure careers open to talent as well as on the principle that knowledge was both a foe to vice and a source of power. Where all previous generations had subscribed to the slogan that world belongs to the brave, this generation believed that in an industrial civilisation the world would belong to the well informed. So all but the lunatic fringe agreed that education should be free and compulsory' (1963.135).

It is the 40+ groups that mention their education. Education was not free when they were children, and may not even have been considered important or desirable for women. It is possible to presume that women who mention their education, which was probably beyond literacy, imply that they do not come from a poor background. The collocations they use are *fairly educated*, which meant 'properly' or 'completely' (courteously?). They may have implied 'in domestic science'. In general, they reflect the situation in the Australian educational system then: there were no trained teachers until the 1880s, only 'pupil teachers'. 'A pupil teacher learnt by a kind of apprenticeship system: he taught children younger than himself under the supervision of a master while at the same time building up his own knowledge' (Wood 1944.271). The situation in the country was even worse—there were travelling teachers, part-time schools, correspondence schools etc. In spite of legislation not everybody had access to a decent education.

Their wished-for partners should be able to provide for a secure home: they are described in a position that suggests high income (*doctor, tradesman, businessman*). If a general identification, such as *gentleman* or *gent* or *man* is used, there will always be something added and this 'something' again suggests either constant income, like *gentleman in constant employment* or *civil servant*, and even by saying *educated man*—the advertisers convey that they expect the man be properly paid for his qualification. Sometimes they do not require any *constant employment* but only say *with means*, which again implies a man in a (relatively) high social position.

Example 7: Lady, 40 widow, educated, private income, £250 yearly wishes introduction educated man, £350, member of some Protestant Church indispensable, view matrimony. #Age 6.5.1899#

The picture we get is that the advertising woman will make herself attractive by her chastity, literacy, and property. There is no reference to her appearance, whether it be height, colour of her hair or build. This information may deliberately be lacking under the influence of the Church which saw the body as a 'vessel of sin' that did not need any explicit promotion. The female advertiser of the late nineteenth century is looking for a partner who is quite high on the social ladder, thus superior to her, which means more powerful in the relationship.

The way men present themselves almost mirrors the requirements voiced by women. They all present themselves in positions that evoke respect, i.e. positions with good income. Unlike women, men usually put their good economic situation or position immediately after their self-identification:

Example 8: COMMERCIAL Traveller, young, tall, £250 per annum, wishes to correspond with lady, domesticated, with means... #Age 10.10.1896#

Again unlike women, some men make references to their body, namely body height. They say they are *tall*. Being tall means to be above the others—the connotation is that of strength and power, of someone who can provide protection.

It also meant 'in good health' because only healthy and well nourished children could grow tall. Good health was highly valued as it implied good working potential. Another frequent word in male advertisements is *young* (51%) and *educated* (26%). The first refers to female partners in 29%, and only 22% to the self-description, the latter in 18% and 8% respectively. Other specifications refer to religion and property. The partner's identifications are accompanied by the same items mentioned, i.e. property and faith. Some advertisers wanted a *domesticated lady*, which meant someone who enjoys housework. The image is that of a man who can provide for his wife but some dowry is usually expected from her. She should be *educated*, which may imply that she is of a good family background. She should be able to manage the house and share his faith. The only specified requirement related to the body is that she should be young—this requirement however, comes from younger advertisers, i.e. groups under 39.

To sum up. The language gives a picture of a patriarchal society: puritan, the man being the head and provider for the family. Property, religious faith, Protestant or Catholic, are highly important, as is education.

The only possible way of living with a person of the opposite sex is marriage. All the advertisers are of the same race, nationalities are Australian, English and German.

Ads at the turn of the millennium

Considering the same factors as in the ads from the turn of the century will provide us with a contrastive view of the situation at the turn of the millennium and show which phenomena are still preserved and which are new.

Here are a few examples:

Example 9: AUSSIE GUY, single, working class live Western Subs .Looking for a special lady to care for. Likes movies, drives, BBQ's, being happy, quiet times, smoker/social drinker, Single mums welcome, nationality open, view permanent relationship. #Sun.Telegraph 26.5.1996.#

Example 10: PROFESSIONALLY EMPLOYED financially secure, intelligent 28 yo Aussie male, slim, nice looking, clean cut, blond hair, blue eyes, seeks nice looking lady 18-32 for perm. relationship. #Daily Telegraph 14.3.1996#

Example 11: ASIAN LADIES very attractive and stylish, caring and kind hearted between 25-35, live in Melbourne, would like to meet professional gentlemen between 35-45 for permanent relationship. #Age 20.7.1996#

Example 12: BLONDE slim attractive professional medium height, late 30's, enjoys sport, gymnasium, the arts, dining out, seeks and intelligent, professional, mature, caring unattached man 37-55years with a view to friendship/relationship. #Age 29.6.1996#

The usual structure of advertisements keeps the pattern of self-description first, verb phrase (nineteenth century *wishes introduction* changed into twentieth century *seeks*), partner's description and sometimes, viewed relationship and code. Some of them, however, testify to the impact of the modern world: exposition to commercial advertising in the media inspires some advertisers to take over some of the techniques of commercial advertising including exaggeration:

Example 13: DATELESS? YES! Desperate? Almost! You too? Are you 48-58 non smoker, with sense of humour? Why not call me and let's find out what else we have in common. #Daily Telegraph 4.4.1996#

Some advertisements are rather interactional:

Example 14: HI! My name is Adrian & I am 24. I am a hardworking guy who does not smoke & only drinks socially. I am 5'9?, slim, clean cut a bit shy & sincere. I don't have the opportunity to meet many girls. I am looking to meet a girl to mid 20's, any nationality, well presented, fit and most importantly genuine, single mums OK ... If you think this could be you take a chance and give me a call. #Daily Telegraph 4.4.1996#

Still, most advertisements follow the traditional, impersonal, detached mode of the third person as documented in examples 9-13.

While women at the end of the nineteenth century were identified as *ladies*, *widows*, *spinsters*, and exceptionally and only by men as *women*, and men by their status or as *gentlemen*, *widowers*, *bachelors*, less frequently as *men* and exceptionally *gents*, a hundred years later the picture is as follows:

	lady	female	woman	I	other
women: self-identification	57.6%	6.6%	3.4%	5.0%	27.4%
men: partner's identification	69.3 %	9.3%	6.2%	2.2%	13.0%

	gentleman	gent	guy	male	man	I	other
men: self-identification	2.5%	16.5%	18.3%	28.7%	4.4%	6.1%	23.5%
women: partner's identif.	19.6%	20.4%	12.9%	7.8%	19.8%	5.1%	14.4%

The way people identify themselves and their prospective partners indicates that there are different perceptions of the semantics of the words. These are then clearly manifested in the different attributes that accompany the identifications. For example, *lady* seems to be fully acceptable for both sexes while its counterpart, *gentleman* is more acceptable for women, and, as our samples indicated, especially for women of an ethnic background other than Australian. Women understand the term in the traditional concept, i.e. educated, financially secure professional with a sense of humour, while men primarily stress their Australian nationality, (non)drinking and non smoking habits. Men have replaced *gentleman* by *male* and *guy*. They seem to think of *gentleman* as being too formal. *Bachelors* have almost completely disappeared. *Spinster*, which has gained a negative connotation over the years, is not used any longer.

Guy is usually to be found in the younger and youngest age groups and it has come into Australian English from U.S. The American influence can also be traced in 'HI!' in the opening of some advertisements, again in the youngest group.

Men who identify themselves by their profession are people quite high on the social ladder, like Managers, or Business Executives, i.e. in respectable positions. None of the women identifies herself by her job, but rather by a physical feature she considers attractive. Sometimes women will say they are *professionals*. The word has obviously lost its negative connotation, which was 'a prostitute'.

Another specific feature of Australian advertisements is that almost 40% of male advertisers put in the first position, usually in bold letters, expressions which refer to nationality (usually Australian), and only then comes the information on age, physical attractiveness, professional career or some other personal trait (cf. example 9). In women, physical attractiveness comes first in 34%, nationality only in about 14%, 40% of which are other than Australian (usually Asian), i.e. 5.6% of the total. The data suggest that 'Australian nationality', especially in men, adds to the social status of the advertiser, and is, in a number of cases, nearly as important as physical, mental and other personal qualities which are considered attractive for the prospective partner (cf. Vlčková 1999). Other frequent words indicate that body appearance is highly important

(cf. examples above: *clean cut*, *slim*...). The body cult put the human body in Australian on a pedestal (cf. Walker 1994.194). This is manifested in the high occurrence of *attractive* and *slim* in women and about women while men usually state their *build*, usually *medium* or *slim*, but also *athletic*.

The male body is not so important for women who rather state character or mental qualities, such as *sincere*, *intelligent*, and *educated*. About 20% of advertisers, both men in self-description and women in partner's description mention a non smoker and non- or occasional drinker. *Non-smokers* may be a response to the general health awareness. But drinking? This has obviously long been a sore point in Australia. Literature describes the situation with drinking in Australia at the end of the nineteenth century. Here is a picture presented by R. E. N. Twopenny in 1883: 'The quantity of spirits drunk in Australia is appalling... And what about drunkenness? Statistically it is not very much worse than England, but the difference lies in the class who get drunk. Here it is not merely the lower classes but everybody that drinks...' A report from the Brewer's Society of Britain in 1964 says that '... we (i.e. Australians) have become the world's third largest beer drinkers (after Belgium and West Germany)' (Baker 1996.225). This word obviously appears under the influence of historical experience. It was very probable that a person, a man probably more than a woman, would be a drinker. Still, none of the advertisers from the end of the nineteenth century mentions this phenomenon. Drinking has become a public concern with the rapid increase in divorce and broken homes.

Though the purpose of personal advertising is clear to all involved, about one third of the advertisers mention the goal of their looking for a partner; they do so in describing the viewed relationship, whereby *friendship* and *relationship* occur most frequently (males 35%, females 26%).

Wierzbicka (1997) includes 'friendship' in her study of key words that are culturally revealing. She looks at collocations with 'friend' and finds that they may be controversial, such as a 'faithful friend' but also a 'false friend', a 'steadfast friend' but also a 'fair weather friend' or a 'summer friend'. 'Friendship' is viewed as something permanent, as reflected in collocations such as 'eternal friendship'. Other collocations included the words 'steady' and 'constant'.

The advertisers in our sample 'challenge' Wierzbicka's claim of 'friendship as something permanent' as they do not see 'friendship' as something 'eternal' or 'steady'. 'Friendship' seems to have slipped into the same usage as Wierzbicka describes in 'friend':

in the old usage of the word *friend*, people were usually expected to 'love' their friends... (Now) there is a qualitative difference, which roughly speaking, can be linked with the contrast between 'affection' and 'enjoyment'.... In the older English literature, people 'loved' their friends, or felt and thought of them as 'dear' and 'dearest'. By contrast, in contemporary English..., people are more likely to talk about 'friends' in terms of 'enjoyment', 'pleasure' and 'fun'. (1997.51, 52)

These terms can be observed in collocations such as *fun & friendship*. The collocation *casual friendship* even denies the fundamentals of the traditional concept of 'friendship': *casual* does not presume 'commitment' and 'faithfulness' to another person. Nor do the advertisers who leave *friendship* unspecified bring any evidence to their understanding of the word in its traditional meaning, as most of them see it as the 'first stage' which may develop into *relationship*.

Example 15: PROFESSIONAL woman, early 40s, large, attractive, sense of fun and humour would like the company of a genuine, warm and communicative man. Friendship first, view permanent relationship. #Weekly Southern Courier 2.4.1996#

About 10% of women and 16% of men would like to experience this course of development which is 37% and 45% of those who mention friendship and/or relationship in their ads.

The definitions in *The Macquarie Dictionary* suggest that 'friendship' is a different thing than 'relationship':

friendship: 1. friendly feeling or disposition; 2. the state of being a friend; 3. a friendly relation or intimacy; *relationship*: 1. connection; 2. connection by blood or marriage; 3. an emotional connection between people, sometimes involving sexual relations.

Some advertisers would go for either of them:

Example 16: QUIET LIVING LADY would like to meet tall, 5'10" plus gentleman, who is well presented, n/s, social drinker, with a touch of class, good personality and sense of humour, for friendship or relationship. Age 53+... #Weekly Southern Courier 31.7.1996#

Relationship thus seems to be understood as involving more commitment, as being lasting or permanent, as a word that substitutes for the 'old fashioned' 'marriage'. And indeed, the most frequent collocate is *permanent*, i.e. *permanent relationship*. One can thus presume that 'relationship' may, in some situations replace the traditional 'friendship'. Western culture sometimes denies the existence of lasting friendship between the opposite sexes. Some of the collocates are identical with those Wierzbicka mentions in 'friendship': *steady relationship*, *everlasting relationship*, *permanent relationship*. *Permanent relationship* is usually sought by women of other nationalities (usually Asian and Italian) and by men who mention their Australian nationality. Other collocates specify the quality of *relationship*: *meaningful relationship*, *loving relationship*, *romantic relationship*.

There are, however, also examples which contravene the hypothesis of stability and permanency of 'relationship'. Some advertisers do not see 'relationship' be limited in the terms of time and/or commitment as most collocates sug-

gest, but allow it a rather free course even allowing the interpretation of 'an occasional date':

Example 17: AUSSIE 40, seeks Aussie or Asian, 30-40, casual to permanent relationship. Sports, beaches, ... #Weekly Southern Courier 31.7.#

Marriage is almost a 'taboo' word among the viewed relationships, used by only 2% of males and 2.5% females. 'Marriage' seems to be out of date: its place has been taken over by 'permanent relationship' and 'lasting relationship'. "Marriage" is a legal union of a man with a woman for life' (*Macq.Dict.*). Words suggesting life-long commitment are not popular today as anything that may sound restricting 'personal freedom'. Unlike marriage, one can always walk out of a relationship as there are no documents, no authorities one would be liable to. 'Relationship' is not the final stage. Most (80%) advertisers who mention *marriage* see it as the culmination of some preceding phase, i.e., of *companionship, friendship or relationship*:

Example 18: ASIAN LADY good looking ...well educated, ...seeks educated man – preferably businessman 39-46 y/o with similar interests for a long term rel/ship, marriage ... #Sun.Telegraph 26.5.1996#

All the females who mention *marriage* are of some foreign origin, usually Asian. We can presume that they are affected by their ethnic culture that is not so open to free cohabitation. Marriage may also ensure permanent residency and some income in case the marriage breaks up. On the other hand, men who advertise for *marriage* are frequently those who give their Australian nationality. They usually want to address Asian or 'any nationality' partner. Thus they convey that they respect the traditions of other cultures and that they are ready to take the commitment. Other advertisers mention their Christian religion. The Church does not approve of cohabitation in a 'relationship' without marriage. By saying *marriage* the advertisers signal they are practising believers.

The table below indicates the percentage in viewed relationship:

	f/ship	f/ship → relationship	rel/mar	mar
Males	5.2%	15.7%	12%	2%
Females	3%	10%	11%	2.5%

The era at the turn of the millennium is being criticised for its materialism. The words in the advertisements from the 1990s suggest that people who advertise do not see the basis of their relationship in materialistic values. They seem to be happy with what they have. They do not want to be bound to any physical property (though women look for financial security in men). On the contrary, they want their life be enjoyable without too many worries and perhaps also without many responsibilities. Chastity is no longer required but stress is put on a person's appearance. People look for partners to share cultural events and

other experiences, such as walking in the bush. They do not want to make any lifetime obligations such as marriage, the lexical expression of which has been replaced by *relationship*, usually *permanent*, i.e. without being confirmed legally. Some other collocations support this claim of freedom from obligation even more (*casual relationship*). To be able to do this, to be relatively free, perform enjoyable activities, requires one precondition be fulfilled, and that is a person's material or financial security which will enable such a way of life. This phenomenon is not explicit in the advertisements but presumed. Only the future will reveal what these approaches to life in individuals will bring to Australia and how much they will shape the society then.

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Programs used:

Wordcruncher (ETC Provo, 1989)
TACT/tact1.html