CHAPTER 3

Message Symbols in Theory

The introduction described President Mandela's eloquent gesture of inviting his white jailer to his inauguration. It was indisputably symbolic, but the puzzle is how we could understand it. It was not an expression in an established language or a convention based on precedent. Nor was the action of French president Mitterand, who, during the 1992 siege of Sarajevo, flew into the city's airport, announcing that his act symbolized the need to help people in danger. Mitterand compared the city to the Warsaw Ghetto, which had been a short flight from Paris but was ignored by the European leaders at the time. After his speech at the airport, he flew home. His action was symbolic rather than directly functional—he might have done more direct good for Sarajevo by staying in Paris and arranging for substantial measures. Its symbolic meaning was immediately understandable, even though there was no convention that leaders visit the airports of countries in distress.

This chapter asks: How can a nonlinguistic action carry a message? How can an unprecedented action be understood without a grammar? And what does it mean for a message to be delivered "symbolically"? As to the third question, one cannot say that symbolism is simply communication outside a natural language. The last chapter cited condolences, apologies, and congratulations delivered verbally that the press described as symbolic. Conversely, if I frown at someone's remark, I am communicating outside an established language but not symbolically, except in the weakest sense of the word. Communicating outside of a natural language is not necessary or sufficient for symbolism.

This chapter defines the concept of a communicative act, possibly delivered outside of language, and then defines a symbolic message as a kind of communicative act. The elements of the definition are explained through three international examples. Finally, the chapter discusses the symbolic communication/conventional language distinction as a continuum. The Gulf War practice of dis-
playing yellow ribbons has moved back and forth along the continuum over its evolution and shows the advantages and limits of sending messages symbolically.

**Definition of a Communicative Act**

The first step is to define communication without language. This issue was analyzed by the philosopher Paul Grice (1957) and those who developed his ideas. Grice distinguished different kinds of meaning. The weakest sense, called natural meaning, involves simple inference, the way in which red spots “mean” measles. As an example of the second sense, suppose we are having a spat on the telephone and I hang up on you, and later I do not invite you to my party. My actions mean something to you as messages. Of course, they also “mean” something in the weak sense, as information relevant to some significant fact, that you will not be going to my party. But hanging up the phone is more than a piece of evidence that I am angry, it is my way of saying it. The meaning intended by the sender in a communication is utterance meaning. However, the term utterance is not apt here, since message symbols are often not uttered, so I will use communicative meaning. In line with this terminology and with Recanati (1993), I use communicative act, in place of “utterance,” for an action that has this kind of meaning.

The third sense is semantic meaning, where a sentence in a language means what it literally says. It is different from communicative meaning. “It’s getting late,” taken semantically, refers to the time of day, but when whispered to someone at a party, it has the communicative meaning that the person wants to go home.

The focus here is on the second kind of meaning, communicative meaning, since it allows an action to carry a message. An action carries a message by virtue

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1. Grice’s idea is adapted here for the present purpose. Schiffer (1972) revised Grice’s definition to deal with speech acts other than assertions, and his modification is relevant here since future chapters will treat the meaning of challenges, apologies, and other performatives. Grice’s definition was revised in another way by Strawson (1964), Schiffer (1972), and others in response to a series of increasingly complex counterexamples as to whether the sender was communicating simply an intention or an intention to communicate an intention, etc. The version here is close to Harman’s (1974), which circumvented these complexities using recursiveness—the speaker is viewed as having an intention to communicate that very intention. Some philosophers find recursiveness objectionable, but I do not, since it places clear limits on the concept’s meaning and can be understood and manipulated easily. Avramides (1989) and Recanati (1993) review developments of Grice’s idea.

2. The distinction is similar to Austin’s idea that saying something involves both an illocutionary and a locutionary act (1962).
of the actor's intention. An intention possesses three components: an initiating action, a chain of causes and effects, and a goal. The actor performs the action because of an expectation that it will trigger the causal chain and so bring about the goal or at least increase its likelihood. An initiating action is a communicative act if it is meant to initiate a causal chain of a certain kind. The sender must hold the intention that the action will cause the receiver to become aware of that very intention and that, on account of recognizing that intention, the receiver will believe something or do something. That is, the sender wants the receiver to follow a certain sequence of logic, one step of which is recognizing that the sender intends the receiver to follow it, and the conclusion is a belief or an action.

The self-reference in the definition makes it confusing, but an example will clarify it. When Sylvania withdraws an ambassador from Freedonia, that is likely to be a communicative act meaning displeasure. Freedonia forms certain expectations about Sylvania's viewpoint, and Sylvania intended Freedonia to do so and intended that Freedonia thereby recognize that intention. Recognition of the Sylvanian intention was a necessary step in Freedonia's thinking, otherwise it would miss Sylvania's meaning. Contrast this with Sylvania making military preparations that Freedonia observes and takes to mean that Sylvania is planning a war. Here Sylvania's intention in making the preparations does not necessarily include that Freedonia recognize that intention. Sylvania may be unconcerned about what Freedonia does or does not conclude. The military preparations have "natural" meaning in that they are relevant evidence but are not a communicative act.

The war preparations would constitute a communicative act if they were diplomatic signals, and this fact might suggest a simpler criterion: a communicative act is one intended to convey information. However, a modification of the example shows that this condition is not enough. Suppose Sylvania's military preparations were discovered by a Freedonian spy who sends word back home. In fact, it is a trick: Sylvania knew the spy was watching and would convey the information. The whole point of Sylvania's preparations was to convince Freedonia that it was planning a war. The military preparations are not a message, even though they were performed to send information. The sender's intention must be to communicate by having that very intention recognized.

**Definition:** Sender X's action A is a communicative act to receiver Y, means that X holds an intention whose initiating action is A, whose goal is to induce Y to believe something or to do something, and whose planned causal chain involves action A causing Y's knowledge of this intention.
The sender’s “reflexive intention” will be called the communicative intention. The definition allows that a communicative intention might not be just that the receiver believe something—it might be that the receiver do something in response to a question or an order or a request, as with Mitterand’s visit to Sarajevo. A communicative act meant to produce a belief is called an assertive communicative act, after Schiffer (1972), and one calling for an action is an imperative one. The meaning of a communicative act is the propositional content of the intended belief or the action to be done, and a receiver who recognizes the intention understands the meaning.

The Interaction of Metaphors, Prototypes, and Metonymies in Message Symbols

Three examples show how the elements work together to produce a symbolic message.

Clinton’s Hospitality

In February 1994, Britain’s prime minister John Major visited the United States. In what the press described as a “symbolic gesture,” President Clinton suggested that he stay at the White House and that they take a ride together on the presidential plane and travel to Pennsylvania to see places where Major’s ancestors had worked. Clinton’s message seemed to be that the nations were close allies. It was an important one to send in the context of recent frictions—against British objections, the United States had granted a visa to a Sinn Fein leader, and Britain had resisted U.S. calls for air strikes in Bosnia.

Clinton’s action involved a metaphor, a prototype, and a metonymy. Clinton was appealing to a metaphor that maps nations into persons. The persons were the nations’ leader, Clinton or Major. Relations among elements are also
mapped: one nation being an ally of another is mapped into friendship between the leaders. Clinton’s prototype involved the everyday concept of friendship. If one were asked for ways to express friendship, they might be the following: associate with the person; call, write or visit; engage in pleasant activities together; extend hospitality; eat meals with the person; express interest in the other’s personal life; and so on. The symbol’s metonymic aspect was the choice of items from this list. Some choices were more suitable than others in the situation—writing a chatty letter would not have had a public effect, so Clinton invited Major to stay at his house.

These are the ways to be a friend in stereotype, but there are ways to be one in fact. A person sometimes prefers to be alone. Could Clinton have announced that he was letting Major stay home and rest in the English countryside, to show Anglo-American friendship? This would have made a poor symbolic gesture because it is not part of the friendship prototype. One says, “I’m his friend, but I didn’t invite him over.” “But” signals that this is contrary to expectations (Lakoff 1987).

The structure of Clinton’s symbol is shown in figure 1. To generate it, he worked bottom to top, but to decode it the audience goes downward. For a symbol to be understood, the decoding path must be reasonably unique given evidence from the context and other clues. Clinton made remarks that steered the audience to the right meaning. Also helpful was the prevalence of the technique of having leaders stand for their nations in international symbolic messages.

Definition of a Symbolic Message

Recalling that a communicative intention is the one the receiver is intended to recognize as a step in understanding the meaning, the definition follows.

**Definition:** X’s action A is a symbolic message (or message symbol or symbolic communicative act) to receiver Y, means that A is a communicative act from X to Y, and X’s communicative intention involves Y understanding the meaning by recognizing that X chose A as a metonymy from a prototype of the meaning or from a prototype transformed by a metaphor.

Prototypes and Prototypical Scenarios

Mitterand’s and Mandela’s symbols are more complicated than Clinton’s, and to analyze them, some elements in the definition must be developed. The first notion is that of a prototype. Prototypes and allied concepts have been increas-
ingly used in cognitive psychology to explain how our thought processes organize and manipulate categories (Lakoff 1987; Medin and Ross 1992). They are alternatives to the classical view of categorization that saw concepts as having boundaries, usually specified by a list of features. A classical category would be triangles, which are plane figures, closed, with three straight lines. If each requirement is met, the object is a triangle. One alternative to this is the concept of family resemblances, discussed for the definition of symbolism (chap. 1), where a concept is defined by some number of a set of attributes. The notion of prototypes is more radical. One version is that we hold in mind a typical member (a prototype) of the category, then determine an object's membership by comparing it for similarity with the example. The understanding of the concept of a bird, for instance, draws on the properties of a typical bird. Just how the prototypes are chosen and just what rules of comparison are used to determine membership are deeper issues—adequate theories of categorization can become complicated—but most modern approaches are based on the idea of a prototype or a related concept like an exemplar, a stereotype, a scheme or a script.

Fig. 1. The train of thought that deciphers Clinton's invitation to Major

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**Message symbol:**

**Metonymy from a prototypical scenario:**

**Direct interpretation:**

**Metaphor:**

**Symbolic meaning:**

SHOWING-FRIENDSHIP prototypical scenario

- shake hands with, or
- give gifts to, or
- invite to house, or
- eat with, or
- share leisure activities with

FPO

U.S. is allied with U.K.
The modern theory was prompted by a number of difficulties with the classical approach. A theory that a category is a list of features was put in doubt by the difficulty of coming up with such a list even for simple concepts. What are necessary and sufficient conditions to be a chair or an elephant? If an elephant with wings flew over, would it be an elephant with wings or some other kind of animal, like an elephant but with wings? The claim that prototypes are psychologically real draws support from different experiments, beginning with those of Rosch and her collaborators (1976, 1978). Subjects showed reliability in rating specific objects as “typical” of their category. They were ready and consistent in answering questions like, Which is a better example of a fruit: a pineapple or an orange? These questions do not even make sense under the old view, where something is either a fruit or not. Other evidence for the reality of prototypes comes from studies of concept acquisition by young children, who learn the prototypical members first. The concept of a prototype also seems to have a role in psychological tasks other than categorization, like logic, induction, generalization, and remembering.

A category of objects often relies on a prototypical member, but a category of emotions or activities relies on a prototypical scenario. Anger or romantic love, for example, evade definition and are understood by semispecific stories centering on a typical event of anger or love (Koveces 1986, 1990; Lakoff 1987). In the case of anger, the cast includes two people, the transgressor A and the transgressee B. The story starts with A committing an unjust harm against B. Then B takes offense and becomes emotionally and physically agitated. B’s state causes and somewhat excuses the next event in the scenario, B’s taking an action against A. In taking retribution B “gets even with” A, that is, does something back more or less proportional to the transgression. Through this response, B’s anger is released and stability is restored. This is the prototypical scenario for anger — it describes the pattern that is expected. One can be angry without following the script exactly: I can be angry with myself, or I can be angry but not try to get even. The word but suggests that we have expectations that are being crossed, that the case does not fit the prototypical scenario.

Prototypes, either as objects or scenarios, are not entirely specific. A chair is prototypical furniture, but we do not have to picture the exact style or the kind of wood or the color. The question is then how specific the prototype is to be. Rosch and her colleagues argued that a prototype’s level of specificity is chosen to maximize its operating efficiency in use. It is the best trade-off between two goals: having a manageable number of prototypes which are not too laden with details, and being able to draw many logical consequences from a mental representation. The specificity of our image of a robin allows us to deduce things
about birds. Not all our deductions will be correct—penguins do not appear in
the spring, or eat worms—but they are generally accurate. The preferred level
for prototypes is called the basic level. Concepts below that level, like the idea of
a certain subspecies of robin, are subordinate; concepts lying above it are super-
ordinate. Clinton's symbolic gesture had the concept of interpersonal friendship
as superordinate and the various ways of being friends—inviting someone to
one's house, engaging in leisure activities—as basic and prototypical.

Prototypes and prototypical scenarios are cultural entities. Individuals can
be confident that others know them. As an ideal, one can assume that proto-
types and prototypical scenarios are common knowledge for a group, meaning
that everyone knows them, everyone knows that everyone knows them, ad in-
finitum.5 To the degree that the world knows that Clinton knows that friends
invite friends to dinner, and Clinton knows this, and so on—all can be confi-
dent that the message received was the one sent. Also, for the purpose of ex-
plaining symbols, the different rules about prototypes and prototypical scenar-
ios preclude us from postulating them in an ad hoc way. The prototype must be
prominent through the culture, or there will not be common knowledge of it,
and it will not be understood.

Metonymies

The second element of message symbols is metonymy, the use of a part to rep-
resent the whole. To say “my blood was boiling” can mean that I am angry. The
phrase chooses an element of the prototypical scenario for anger, an internal
sensation of a physiological response. In visiting Sarajevo, Mitterand took an el-
ement of the scenario of helping a friend in need—paying a visit—to represent
friendship. Other examples are removing a sentry post at the Berlin Wall to cel-
brate the end of communist rule or the United States ordering a review of aid
to Yemen as a message of disapproval for its stand in the Gulf War. Metonymies
were traditionally literary devices, but evidence has grown that they influence
our patterns of thought. Like prototypes and metaphors, they make their refer-
ents easier to manipulate (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, chap. 8; Lakoff 1987).

5. The idea of common knowledge is a technical one here. It means something different from
the usual sense, that the idea is widely known. It is usually attributed to Lewis (1969), although
Friedell seems to have formalized it earlier (1967, 1969). They wrote independently, but both were
influenced by Schelling. Friedell was also inspired by Abelson and Rosenberg’s symbolic psycho-
logic (1958). Binmore (1992) gives an introduction to the idea, and Geanakoplos (1994) reviews re-
cent findings. To be practical, the concept should be understood as allowing less than full certainty
and the possibility that the belief is mistaken, so here the phrase common belief will often be used.
Conceptual Metaphors

In its literary usage, a metaphor is a specific expression, a figure of speech, like “the shadow of your smile,” or “my wild Irish rose.” A conceptual metaphor, as defined by Reddy (1979), is a way of thinking, an extended mapping that takes one conceptual domain into another. People think and speak in the source domain, the easier one to manipulate, and the mapping allows them to draw inferences about the target domain, the one of real interest. Like prototypes, metaphors are cultural entities, often used in language, and people know that they are commonly understood.

The standard naming rule for a conceptual metaphor follows the pattern THE-TARGET-AS-A-SOURCE. The naming rule reminds us that the metaphor involves a general mapping, a constellation of ways of talking and thinking, not a specific expression in the language. Reddy did a thorough study of INFORMATION-AS-A-CONDUIT, in which communicating information is mapped into sending an object or material to someone. In 1990, George Bush wanted to “get the message through” to Saddam that he must leave Kuwait. People talk of the need to “package” the message right and to make sure it does not get “distorted.”

Conceptual metaphors help us understand a complicated target domain, but the mapping is usually imperfect and leads to systematic errors. In the case of Bush’s attempt to “get the message through,” it is possible that Saddam understood what Bush was saying, that he was ready to go to war but did not find the statement fully credible. A message’s meaning and its credibility are different. The first may get through, but the second might not arrive with it. The metaphor’s source domain of sending objects or material through a conduit cannot express this distinction, and the metaphor induces the user to overlook that there are really two tasks to accomplish.

Prototypes operate at the basic level of thought, but metaphors operate at a superordinate level (Lakoff 1987). The metaphor LOVE-AS-A-VEHICLE leads to expressions like “traveling down the road of life together”—here the vehicle is a car—or love “ending up on the rocks”—now it is a boat. For A-GROUP-AS-A-SPECIFIC-PERSON, the group may be a state, as when Clinton represents the United States, or it may be a group within a state, as in Mandela’s symbolic act.

As well as the metaphors that arose in chapter 2, some others are common in international relations writings. Goertz (1994) describes THE-CONTEXT-FOR-A-POLICY-DECISION-AS-A-BARRIER, as when one talks of obstacles to its success, and WAR-AS-A-DISEASE. Milliken (1996) discusses the use of the latter metaphor during the Vietnam War. The idea of the spread of proliferation of nuclear
weapons also draws on a biological metaphor. Another example is \textit{a-policy-as-a-path} (Chilton 1989), as when two nations are “on the road to war,” and \textit{war-as-a-game} (Lakoff 1991; Cohn 1994; Milliken 1996), as when one missile “takes out” another. The latter is a good (or bad) example of how a metaphor can lead to false thinking. It would be hard to choose a winner in the Iran-Iraq war. Calling it a tie is the only way to satisfy the metaphor, but the two countries were devastated by this tie. The metaphor makes wars seem less horrific.

Having elaborated on these components, we can now analyze Mitterand’s trip to Sarajevo and Mandela’s invitation to his jailer.

\textbf{Mitterand’s Visit to Sarajevo Airport}

Mitterand’s visit drew on a particular subscenario of the friendship prototype, how one responds to friends in need. If one were asked for ways to do this, the ways might be to write a letter or telephone them, visit them, listen to them, give them advice, comfort them, or try to supply their needs. As the metonymic aspect of his symbol, Mitterand chose the visit.

Clinton’s gesture to Major meant that their countries were friends, but Mitterand was saying that in general European countries should help Bosnia in its crisis. It was an imperative communicative act, rather than an assertive one. The difference cannot be deciphered from the action alone — the audience must know some context — and Mitterand’s verbal explanation helped as well. He emphasized how his short flight from Paris showed that Bosnia was part of Europe. It is as close as Warsaw, he stated, recalling an event where evil was tolerated to the world’s regret. He not only stated the symbol’s meaning but explained its various symbolic elements to enhance its impact.

\textbf{Mandela’s Inauguration}

Mandela’s symbolic gesture exploited two prototypes. One is the scenario of reconciliation. It is a simple pattern involving a wrong, a restoration of justice, a gesture offering reconciliation, and an acceptance. The other involves how reconciliation is offered, the gesture-of-reconciliation prototype. In Mandela’s case, he invited Gregory to a ceremony marking an important event in his life, as one would invite a friend to one’s marriage.

Mandela’s metaphor is \textit{a-country-as-a-specific-person}. The black majority in South Africa is Mandela, the white citizenry is James Gregory, and one’s domination over another is mapped into someone holding someone in jail. The
metaphor’s role is more complicated here, because the mapping is to be applied not just to the message itself, Mandela’s invitation, but to elements in the context in which it was sent, the history of the races in South Africa (fig. 2).

Mandela’s invitation, though a recognized kind of reconciliatory gesture, is ambiguous. Taken alone, it might be a flaunting of his victory or an act of personal friendship. The receiver will have more confidence in an interpretation that fits more aspects of the action. Reconciliation is the typical first act of a new leader like Mandela. Gregory’s role as the jailer is a salient feature that must be interpreted in any explanation of Mandela’s symbolism. The fact that the invitation involved a public ceremony also alerted the audience to expect a symbolic message. A dinner invitation or a gift would have fit the prototype, but a gesture around Mandela’s inauguration underlines the connection with his ascension to leadership. It makes it clear that he is signaling as a national leader, sending a symbolic message about the two races, not just about two individuals. It is not

Fig. 2. Deciphering Mandela’s symbolic invitation. The operations involving the prototype, prototypical scenario, and metaphor are applied both to the symbol and the context.
a perfect isomorphism since not every element of the reconciliation scenario can be mapped—there was no previous time at which the two men, or races, were friends—but enough fits to make the meaning clear.

The Symbol/Convention Continuum

In symbolic communication, then, a common knowledge of metonymies, prototypes, and metaphors leads the receiver to understand the message. When a symbol is used often enough, the steps drop out, and the receiver comes to recognize the meaning directly. The symbol becomes conventionalized. Why do people choose to say something symbolically, rather than just say it? Looking at conventionalization helps us answer this, since a symbol that has turned into a convention “just says it.” Do conventions sometimes move back to become symbols? The yellow ribbons displayed in the United States during the Gulf War had different positions on the symbolic/conventional continuum over their history, and this section looks at the causes and consequences of their shifts.

Definition of Meaning by Convention

“Convention” cannot be taken in a literal sense. Most conventions did not start with a gathering of people who agreed to follow the practice. The use of a red flare on a road or the order of the alphabet sprang up somehow, and users continued to follow them because of precedent. Whatever conventions are, they are different from symbols. The red flare on the road means caution but does not symbolize it. According to the following definition, the essential feature is how people understand the meaning.

Definition: A communicative act has meaning by convention, if the group understands the meaning by recognizing it as based on an agreement or a stipulation or a precedent. Such an act is called a conventional communication.

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6. As far as the users are concerned, a conventional communication appears more arbitrary than a symbol, so this concept of convention is like Peirce’s concept of symbol. Arbitrariness was a major element in David Lewis’s definition of convention (1969), but the present definition is more influenced by Schiffer’s (1972). Lewis’s approach does well for many coordination problems but has been criticized when applied to language, where it is not clear that a speaker’s goal is always to coordinate at least in any reasonable sense. Lewis required that a convention be a regularity, constantly used in the group, and the focus of the present definition is that this regularity must have come about in a certain way. It has a narrower range than Lewis’s, because it refers only to communications, not practices in general.
Evolution of the Gulf War Yellow Ribbons

The history of the ribbons suggests that two forces were moving the practice back and forth between a symbol and a convention. People understood the meaning of wearing the ribbons through some prototypical scenario or story that they called to mind. Over time the story faded, and people came to understand the meaning by precedent. That is, the practice moved toward a convention.

Intermittently, the convention was inserted into a plot—it was used in a folkstory, a song or a movie. Traditional and popular plots tend to be dramatic and emotional and to exploit cultural stereotypes and prototypical scenarios. The convention's use in a story line refreshed the symbolic aspects of the colored ribbon motif, and the popular mind again saw it as a metonymy drawn from the prototypes in the story. It moved back to a symbol.

Also important for the symbolic practice's survival was the fact that its use in a plot increased its connection with strong emotions and so its power as a value symbol. Moreover, if the movie or story or song became widely known, people had the confidence to use the element as a metonymy. These dynamics can be examined in detail for the yellow ribbons since they entered the historical record, the older uses set down as songs and stories and the newer ones described by the media.7

The Gulf War ribbons descended from a similar practice during the Iran hostage crisis, and this, in turn, came from two strands of tradition (fig. 3). One involved traditional and popular songs telling of wearing various colors to express love for an absent partner. The other included songs and stories in which a husband passed by his home on a train or bus and his wife sent momentous news to him, coding her message into a colored signal.

The first theme, wearing colored ribbons for an absent loved one, goes at least as far back as Shakespeare's time. In Othello, Desdemona refers to an old lyric song about a forsaken lover who wears a green laurel branch. Different embodiments of the idea have been used in traditional songs over the centuries. Through the present century, college students sang a mildly risqué version,

7. When Americans began displaying yellow ribbons around the Iranian hostage crisis in 1979, news reporters and the curious public contacted the Library of Congress for information, and were directed to the Library's Archive of Folksong, which became a hub for collecting and relaying the information. When the Gulf crisis broke out, the Archive had that role again. The account here is taken in part from the articles of the late Gerald Parsons, music archivist at the Library (1981, 1991), as well as Santino (1992), Tuleja (1994), Larsen (1994), Heilbronn (1994), Dunn (1991), Soens (1992), and Adams (1994).
pre-1600s - present, English traditional and stage songs: "All around my hat I will wear a green willow..." Colors worn for love or remembrance.

1900s American college and popular song: “Around her knee she wore a purple garter.”

1949 movie song: "'Round her neck she wore a yellow ribbon... she wore for her truelove who was far, far away."

American railroad convention: colored lanterns to signal track conditions.

1896 American parlor song: “Just a Light.” Husband is train engineer; wife sets green lamp in window to signal that sick daughter will live.

1940s folk-story: Husband rides home from prison on train; wife ties white apple tree to signal and welcome.

1975 Watergate: Gail Magruder ties yellow ribbon on porch for welcome when husband returns from prison.

1979 Iran hostage crisis: Penne Laingen ties yellow ribbon around tree while husband is hostage in Iran.

1979-80 Iran hostage crisis: Americans put yellow ribbons on trees, wear buttons to support hostages.

1990-91 Gulf crisis: yellow ribbons on trees, cars, buttons, Christmas wreaths, etc., while U.S. soldiers are in the Gulf.

Fig. 3. Evolution of the Gulf War yellow ribbons
“Around her leg she wore a purple garter, . . . She wore it for her Williams man so far, far away,” or a crimson garter for Harvard, or other colors for other colleges. Tin Pan Alley versions were sent to the copyright office, the earliest submitted in 1917. The song was also used by soldiers as a marching cadence (Soens 1992). It was the theme of a 1949 John Wayne movie, She Wore a Yellow Ribbon, about wives and sweethearts whose true loves were soldiers who went off to battle Indians. The song became a popular hit that year, recorded by the Andrews Sisters and others and again in 1961 by Mitch Miller. In 1975, a version closer to the one used by Shakespeare rose on the British hit parade. It is clear that wearing ribbons for a soldier away at war has been a recurrent and widely known theme, so someone using it symbolically in the right context could expect the message to get through.

The other ancestral branch of the yellow ribbons had a wife signaling to a husband riding by on a train or bus. This also seems to have involved a song that descended from a practice. “Just Set a Light” was a sentimental parlor piece from 1896, which my mother sang to me as she learned it from her mother. A train engineer must make a night run, although his young daughter lies sick near death. His wife is to put a lantern in the window: if my darling is dead show the red, he tells her, if she is alive show the green. The climax is the sight of the green lantern. Gussie Davis, one of the song’s composers, had worked as a railroad porter and it seems likely that he was inspired by the practice of using colored lights to show safety or danger on the tracks ahead (Cohen 1981). Cohen cites another symbolic rendering of the custom, in a nineteenth-century poem, “Will the Lights Be White?” by Cy Warman (1911). Warman went through a series of railroad color codes representing the troubles of life, and finally asked if he would see white lamps, meaning “go ahead,” to welcome him into heaven. Again one finds an association of the practice with certain stories and emotions.

The song of the green lantern probably influenced a progenitor of the Gulf War yellow ribbons. This was a folk story, circulated at least as far back as the 1940s, about two men who strike up a conversation on a train. One has just been released from prison and says he is worried that his wife will not take him back. He has written her a letter telling her to tie a white ribbon around the apple tree in their front yard if she has forgiven him. If the tree is bare, he will ride on to start a new life somewhere else. He is too anxious to look, so his fellow passenger tells him the scene: the apple tree is covered with ribbons. The story was retold in newspaper columns and in sermons and made into a television play in 1972 starring James Earl Jones as the ex-con.8

8. There is no direct evidence that the song “Just Set a Light” was the ancestor of the folk story, but the two share the unusual theme of a wife sending a crucial message encoded into colors to her
These two strands, the 1940s story of the men on the train and the cycle of songs related to “She Wore a Yellow Ribbon,” were brought together in 1973. Professional songwriters Irwin Levine and Larry Brown wrote “Tie a Yellow Ribbon Round the Ole Oak Tree.” Brown had heard the story in Vietnam but he put the convict on a bus instead of a train and had his conversation with the driver instead of a fellow passenger. The signal around the tree, which was a “white kerchief” in the story as it had reached Brown, became a yellow ribbon. The songwriters changed the color to yellow because of popular consciousness of the 1949 song, because it seemed more romantic than white, and because it fit the meter. Their song became a radio hit and continues to be popular with orchestras playing for dances, so again it had a wider social base, broader than the typical popular or rock song.

The idea in the song had descended from practices: wearing colored ribbons or setting out warning lanterns. In January 1975, the plot element of ribbon tying was turned into a practice. When Watergate figure Jeb Magruder was released from prison, his wife, Gail, tied yellow ribbons on their front porch to welcome him home. This was a close parallel to the song. In April 1979 during the Iranian hostage crisis, Penne Laingen put a yellow ribbon on a tree in her yard, meant to stay there until her husband, Bruce, came home from captivity and untied it. Her inspiration was a television report about Gail Magruder’s welcome for her husband. Her uncertain memory of the 1973 song lyrics was that they told of a prisoner, and she felt this fit the plight of her husband. Her idea of him coming back to untie the ribbon was not in the song but faintly suggested “She Wore a Yellow Ribbon.” On December 10, 1979, in a Washington Post article “Coping with IRage,” Barbara Parker suggested that Americans who were frustrated over the standoff could follow Penne Laingen’s example. An association of support for the hostages’ families ordered lapel pins depicting yellow ribbons and distributed them across the country to grassroots organizations like Boy Scout troops and to visible local celebrities like television weathercasters.

The hostage crisis ended in January 1981, but eleven years later the ribbons were revived. In 1990 as U.S. troops left for Saudi Arabia, ribbons appeared on trees, utility poles and the radio aerials of cars. The practice took on new forms, with newspapers drawing yellow ribbon banners across their mastheads and supermarkets putting pictures of ribbons on shopping bags and loading yellow tapes in their cash registers. When the bombing of Iraq started, the yellow storm
intensified. A Buffalo television channel wrapped its news desk in a large yellow bow (Hallin and Gitlin 1993). The largest ribbon manufacturer reported a one-year sales increase from five million to fifty million yards (roughly the circumference of the earth) (Larsen 1994), and when the supply of ribbon ran out, other materials, like paper, nylon, or plastic “Do Not Cross” tape, were conscripted. The ribbon decorations continued after the war to welcome the troops home. On July 4, Ross Perot bankrolled a project to wrap the Texas state capitol building in yellow.

Colored ribbons have been adapted to other meanings since, during the Somalian intervention and in November 1994 when a U.S. helicopter pilot was held in North Korea. Yellow ribbons have been displayed during searches for missing children or for friends lost at sea, and at murder trials they have been worn by family members of the victim.

**Symbols versus Conventions: Why Say It Symbolically?**

The Gulf War ribbons’ ancestors moved back and forth between conventions and symbols. When the conventional practice was put into popular songs and stories, it became associated with metaphors and prototypes. Embedding it in a plot enriched its associations, which encouraged its symbolic use, where the latter evoked those associations. In the railroad song and poem, the colored warning lights become linked to the metaphor of a journey. “Life is like a mountain railroad,” says another old song, in which the signals mean life or death on the tracks ahead. The folk story and song of the husband’s return connected the ribbons to prototypes about ways to welcome someone home. Generally one can meet the person at the station, invite the person’s friends over for a party, or decorate the house for a celebration. The last was the metonymy for the ribbons’ appearance in the plot, and so the story and song connected them with the welcome home prototype. When yellow ribbons were used during the Iranian hostage crisis, they were very much a message symbol. Americans recognized the intended prototype and knew that others would see this too, because of the song’s wide circulation.

To a large extent the process is cyclical — if the practice has associations that are too clear at the time, it will not be flexible enough for the details of the current context. As time passes, and knowledge of the song or story fades, the practice becomes a convention and more flexible in its meaning. Then it can be used in a new way. Sometimes this is explained by stipulation. The railroad engineer on the night run and the husband on the bus told their wives what the color code meant, and they were also telling the listeners this repeatedly in the chorus.
The association of the ribbons with forgiving a prisoner had to wane before they could be used for soldiers in the Gulf. By 1990, people were somewhat less conscious of the song and could base their interpretation of the ribboning more on the 1979 Iranian crisis. The 1979 use of ribbons was then a precedent, another basis of a convention. Those conventional communications that are based on precedents are understood because of the similarities of contexts between the precedent and the current situation. This is a different mechanism than the symbolic one of prototypes, metaphors, and metonymies. Wearsers in 1990 could expect that their ribbons would be understood since the Gulf situation was similar to the 1979 Iranian crisis. They saw their country confronting another Middle Eastern tyrant and their loved ones being taken away from home for an indefinite time, and these similarities invoked the precedent. Other military actions had been conducted in Grenada, Lebanon, and Panama, but the ribbons had not appeared because the contexts were less similar.

A first generalization about conventions versus symbols is this: A practice that appears in a conventional communication rather than in a message symbol is more flexible in acquiring new meanings. The structure of prototypes and metaphors for symbols constrains the meaning more tightly than the mechanism of precedents for conventions. During the ribbons' evolution, their meaning shifted from unrequited love to forgiveness to support for soldiers to welcome home, and in recent uses back to lamenting the loss of a relative. The meaning fit what the context required, as long as it was not too great a step from the previous meaning. Gail Magruder, under the influence of the 1973 song, was showing acceptance of a husband in prison for a crime, but the song's connection to Penne Laingen's situation was looser—her husband was a captive, but he did not need forgiveness. The shift in meaning was possible to the degree that the audience used the precedent of Magruder rather than the plot of the song. Compared to the ribbons used in the Iranian hostage crisis, the Gulf War ribbons were one step further from the song—the soldiers were away from home but not captives. For a convention, each new usage forms a precedent for the next.

Other offshoots showed the meanings became more adaptable when the memory of the song had waned. From the fall of 1991, red ribbons were used for the fight against AIDS (Fleury 1992), white ribbons for opposition to violence against women, red ribbons around car aerials for opposition to drunk driving, green for environmentalism, and blue for survivors of child abuse. These meanings trace back to the song but have nothing to do with decorating a house or welcoming someone home.

A second generalization is that a practice that appears in a conventional com-
munication rather than in a message symbol is more flexible in changing its form. Under the influence of the 1973 song, Gail Magruder and Penne Laingen each tied a ribbon on a tree in her front yard, but later the ribbons were tied to radio aerials or Christmas decorations or became simply yellow supermarket tape. Their form moved away from the one in the song but remained understandable through a chain of precedents.

This flexibility increased the potential users. Boose (1993) believed that tying the ribbons in a bow had a suggestion of the feminine, of women who must stay at home waiting for the men at war. The college songs bring out the feminine connection, with ribbons in crucial places to be untied when the lover returns and the early users, Magruder and Laingen, were wives waiting at home. If the ribbons had kept that association, their use would have been limited. Picturing the ribbons on lapel buttons and bumper stickers helped to defeminize them.

A third generalization is that message symbols can convey their meaning with more emotion and convey the emotion more accurately. The lump-in-the-throat plot of the popular song put feeling into ribbon tying. Associating the message with the song's plot also conveyed the welcome-home emotion better than just asserting it.9

Americans seemed to want their symbol to have a value component and to see it as an old custom. Many people who called the Library of Congress for information already knew what they wanted to hear and were looking for an authority to back them up (Parsons 1991). They insisted that the yellow ribbons had been around since American soldiers marched off in the Civil War, perhaps as far back as the War of 1812. The claim of an historical tradition was made in newspaper columns and even in academic articles, but it is almost surely false. Library of Congress researchers found no evidence in nineteenth-century letters, diaries, photographs, or fiction. The military connection comes from this century, with the soldier's marching song and the John Wayne movie, and one suspects that belief in an old tradition is a fuzzy confusion of the movie with history, just as the popular mind moved President Kennedy's speech to the Berlin Wall. Some of those who put up ribbon assemblages misremembered the 1973 song as referring to a returning Vietnam veteran, not a convict, and claimed the song recorded a real incident in Brunswick, Georgia (Heilbronn 1994).10

A final generalization is that a symbolic message can be more ambiguous than

10. In spite of this, yellow ribbons have not yet passed the "definite article" test for a value symbol: one can speak of "the flag" and "the dove of peace" but not "the yellow ribbon."
a conventional communication. This is often an advantage. The ribbons expressed any or all of these stances: opposition to Saddam, support for Bush's policies, personal support for the troops, a hope that they would return safely, and solidarity with the rest of America. Some people interviewed by Heilbronn saw the ribbons as making up for the shabby treatment of the soldiers who returned from Vietnam. The ribbons were promises that things would be different, and many who had doubts about the Gulf War itself put them up anyway. The symbol's ambiguity had the advantage that America could feel united emotionally without really being united politically.

Overall, yellow ribbons were more attractive as symbols than conventions because of the imprecision of their message and the strong values conveyed by their association with prototypical stories. The same traits apply to many examples of the last chapter and are typical reasons for choosing symbolism over direct language for a message.