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American Indian silence in *House made of dawn*

Abstract

An ethnography-of-communication perspective is suggested regarding selected occurrences of non-verbal behavior in N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*. Similar to conventions in American Indian languages described by sociolinguists, several of the novel's speech events involve silence as a discursive prescription for negotiating ambiguity in interactants' role expectations. In addition, the novel seems to imply that silence as a response to Anglo-American hegemony represents a strategy of empowerment which allows indigenous communities to resist by simply outwaiting.

Key words: Silence in *House Made of Dawn*

Introduction

A stylolinguistic approach, according to Fowler, attempts to apply to a literary text the methodologies modern linguistics makes available, including such subfields as sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology, which focus on the intersection of language and culture. What has rarely been suggested, however, is that part of such a perspective should include a consideration of the significance of non-verbal behavior such as gestures, eye gaze patterns, and even silence in the exploration of cultural issues and psychological processes. Hymes' (1974) ethnography of communication provides an effective framework for the interpretation of social interaction practices, which are not only strategic in form and usage but which also carve out ecological niches. The latter notion is implied in the concept of communicative economy, which recognizes

that combinations of participants, channels, codes, topics, and other variables are constrained by cultural preferences and prescriptions. Thus, as culturally constructed signs, non-verbal phenomena such as silence not only have meaning but also clear rules regarding combinations with speech and other signs as well as contextual conditions for appropriate use.

Critics of N. Scott Momaday's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *House Made of Dawn*, such as Scarberry-Garcia, have frequently identified the discursive silence exhibited by the protagonist, Abel, a Native of Jemez Pueblo, a Towa-speaking community in northern New Mexico, as indicative of his estrangement from self and home (86). Presumably, his alienation stems from the psychological shocks experienced in combat during World War II and his incarceration following the slaying of a suspected sorcerer. While the textual evidence for Abel's "inarticulateness" as symptomatic of what currently is called post-traumatic stress syndrome is certainly quite valid, an ethnography-of-communication assessment of selected occurrences of his non-verbal behavior and that of other Native characters in the novel invites an additional interpretation based on the role of silence as a strategy of caution, resistance and outwaiting.

The Ethnography of Silence

Educators of American Indian children have frequently pointed out the challenge of encountering their seeming refusal to participate in classroom discourse. In this regard, Wieder and Pratt have described traditional American Indian students as finding it awkward to put themselves forward verbally in response to a teacher's questions. Doing so, Wieder and Pratt suggest, would set oneself uncomfortably apart or inappropriately above one's peers and even make one appear to be rude. Instead, respect and attentiveness are typically demonstrated by avoiding eye contact and by being silent. Thus, in these cases, refraining from speaking clearly functions as a form of

deference and politeness. Not surprisingly, interactants unfamiliar with these non-verbal conventions may misinterpret them as disengagement or, possibly, as a passive-aggressive posture. In his seminal paper on the role of silence in Western Apache culture, Basso even cites “the Indians’ lack of personal warmth” as one of the erroneous characterizations in popular literature of perceived Native taciturnity (67).

Indeed, Basso’s taxonomy has become a virtual template for a number of observations on non-verbal behavior in the classroom by education researchers addressing pedagogical concerns of teachers on Indian reservations. Relying primarily on Hymes’s (1962, 1964) ethnography of communication framework, Basso also refers for his interpretation of the function of silence in Western Apache to sociolinguists such as Brown and Gilman (1960), Conklin (1959), Ervin-Tripp (1964, 1967), Frake (1964), Friedrich (1966), Goffman (1961, 1963, 1964), and Gumperz (1961, 1964, 1967), who largely focus on the ways the social environment of speech events shapes the decision-making process or strategy in the selection of message forms.

What Basso concluded was that silence between Western Apache interactants is the prescribed behavior when meeting strangers, in the initial stages of courting, for welcoming children returning from government boarding schools, to respond to a verbal attack, when in the presence of a grieving person, as well as toward a patient undergoing a curing ritual. These types of social situations, Basso argues, have common underlying determinants of non-verbal responses based on relationships of an ambiguous or unpredictable nature.

Specifically, according to Basso, the ambiguity stems from the mutual unfamiliarity of the interactants or a change in the status of an established social relationship. Thus, persons who approach each other as strangers have the choice of moving the ambiguous relationship toward a friendly or a hostile stance. Similarly ambiguous is the situation for a young couple initiating a

courting relationship. In both communicative situations, Basso points out, the interactants' expectations of their social identities have not yet been sufficiently developed in order to predict the types of responses the interlocutor would offer.

In the case of children returning from government boarding schools after several months have elapsed, parents and relatives are likely to apply caution to a relationship interrupted by a prolonged absence from home. Past experiences with boarding-school returnees have taught Native communities to expect changes in the children's attitudes toward their former social environment, and thus a certain degree of unfamiliarity and, perhaps, doubt between interactants is anticipated.

Another change in psychological makeup involves a display of out-of-control anger. Since restraint in social interactions is a highly desired quality among Western Apaches, an interactant who engages in verbal attacks, especially while intoxicated, is considered to be in an altered state. Regarded as a form of temporary insanity, the behavior of an enraged individual is regarded as difficult to anticipate and thus implies status ambiguity. Similarly, a grieving person must be approached cautiously, for his or her presumed temporary loss of emotional equilibrium may produce an altered state as well.

Finally, Basso explains that patients undergoing curing rituals are believed to come in contact with powerful forces which are potentially harmful to anyone. The songs and prayers with which the shaman propitiates the deities can also unleash devastation for the entire community, especially if procedural errors occur, regardless of how unintended they may be. Thus, one's verbal interaction with the patient must be postponed until his condition is less threatening not only to him but also to others.

The absence of verbal communication associated with social situations in which the status of

focal participants is ambiguous has also been described by Mowrer (1970) about Navajo speakers in the Tuba City region. Herself a native Navajo speaker, Mowrer agrees that her community uses silence in much the same manner as Western Apache speakers in conditions in which role expectations lose their predictability.

Similar non-verbal behavior patterns can be observed among other Southwestern, if not most, North American indigenous communities. In fact, the significance of silence in greeting exchanges was noted by early English colonists among Algonquian speakers in the Chesapeake Bay. The following comments by a clergyman of the 1680s, possibly the Reverend John Clayton, seem to capture a Native sense of polite caution in the preference for taciturnity over speech.

When a stranger comes to their house, the chiefe man in it desires the stranger to sit down; within a little while, he rises and toucheth the stranger with his hand, saying You are come; after him, all the rest of the house doe the same. None speaketh to him, or asketh him any questions, till he think fit to speak first. (Pargellis 1959: 241)

Unless familiar with such a communicative convention, the non-Native visitor would likely have misinterpreted such non-verbal behavior as a lack of hospitality. In fact, the colonial record reveals a certain degree of bewilderment and, perhaps, even irritation with the non-verbal responses of Virginia Indians in interactions with English speakers (Beverley).

Even differences in the length of pauses, as reported by Scollon and Scollon, can lead to misinterpretations of turn-taking signals in simple conversations between Canadian Athabaskan speakers and English speakers. For Athabaskan speakers a pause of up to one and a half seconds does not imply a signal of relinquishing the floor to the interlocutor. For an English speaker, in contrast, a pause of more than one second signals the end of a turn and the expectation to claim

the floor. Thus, when the English speaker feels free to claim the floor, the Athabaskan speaker may regard that action as an unwelcome interruption instead of an anticipated turn-taking. The negative stereotypes which emerge from these failed interactions involve perceptions of rudeness and pushiness on the one hand and uncooperativeness and sullenness on the other. The Scollons also found that English-speaking teachers and Athabaskan-speaking students unwittingly carry these stereotypes into the classroom.

The Discourse of Silence

The protagonist, Abel, in *House Made of Dawn* also finds himself in several social situations in which the status of the focal participants is ambiguous. In the speech event excerpted in the attached appendix, Angela St. John, a wealthy Anglo woman from Los Angeles who is sexually attracted to Abel, attempts to approach him with small talk, the expected discursive convention for an English speaker in dealing with strangers. For Abel, the ambiguity in this speech event stems from his unfamiliarity with the interlocutor, Angela, who is not only of a different ethnicity but also appears to be approaching him in a somewhat hostile manner. With regard to meeting an Anglo stranger, Basso's Apache informants "usually assumed that he 'wants to teach us something' (i.e., give orders or instructions) or that he 'wants to make friends in a hurry'" (73). In addition, the encounter is complicated by Angela's subtle sexual overtures when "[s]he sucked at her cheeks and let the initiative lie, to see what he would do." Thus, Abel is forced to deal with two overlapping communicative situations—meeting a stranger and considering a possible sexual encounter--in the same speech event, in which his expectations of the focal participants' social identities have not been sufficiently developed in order to predict the types of responses. Hence, Abel's Native upbringing leads him to extreme caution by looking "at her without the trace of a smile," and giving "her no clear way to be contemptuous of him."

The decidedly defensive and thus confrontational nature of Angela's stance is revealed in her perception of having to "hold her ground and wait," a metaphorical construction which, according to Lakoff and Johnson, is derived from the discourse of warfare. The resulting "silence between them" becomes uncomfortable for her as an English speaker and prompts her, probably too soon, to claim the floor to engage in small talk by stating that "[y]ou have done a day's work." Following that remark, about which she is "wondering why she had said it," Abel's refusal to take a conversational turn irritates her to the point of making "her seethe." This somewhat extreme reaction to the fact that he just "stood there" and that "[t]here was no reply, nothing," may be generated more by her seemingly failed sexual advances than by the mere awkwardness of conversational silence or lengthy pauses as perceived by an English speaker.

Even Angela's tactic of almost bullying him into a verbal response by serving up the quasi-ultimatum, "[y]ou will have to make up your mind, you see, or else I may not be here when you come" only intensifies Abel's retreat into the Native communicative convention of standing aside and "hanging on" in silence, which seems so "easy" and "natural" for him. By not allowing "himself to be provoked," Abel gains control of the interaction and watches "from far away something that was happening within her." Ironically enough, Angela misinterprets his reserve, which "was too much for her," as a curious powerlessness on his part, as she misconstrues his standing "dumb and docile at her pleasure, not knowing, she supposed, how even to take his leave." However, Abel is only following the discursive prescriptions of his culture, for which "silence was the older and better part of custom still" (Momaday 58). As the novel later reveals, Abel is fully aware of Angela's implicit sexual advances, even though at the time she is misled by "the way he had looked at her—like a wooden Indian—his face cold and expressionless" (36).

During their second encounter, Angela begins to understand the strategic nature of Abel's silence.

He followed her silently into the house and through the dark rooms. She turned on the light in the kitchen, and the sudden burst of it made her shrink ever so little. She gave him coffee and he sat listening to her, not waiting, gently taking hold of her distress, passing it off. She was grateful—and chagrined. She had not foreseen this turn of tables and events, had not imagined that he could turn her scheme around. (62)

Although Angela may not yet fully understand the function of non-verbal communication as a subtle form of what the narrative voice refers to as “resistance and overcoming,” she does begin to submit to it (58). Admitting, in her defeat, that “[s]he had no will to shrug him off,” Angela now even regards Abel's silence as attentive and sympathetic “listening” which seems to be “gently taking hold of her distress.” However, what she apparently does not realize at this point is that, while he does not appear to be “waiting,” Abel is, nevertheless, applying a strategy of “outwaiting,” into which the members of his speech community have long been socialized (58).

During Abel's murder trial, his strategy of silent outwaiting as a form of subtle resistance and overcoming also remains unrecognized by the officers of the court.

When he had told his story once, simply, Abel refused to speak. He sat like a rock in his chair, and after a while no one expected or even wanted him to speak. That was good, for he should not have known what more to say. (102)

Killing a sorcerer who had threatened him was for Abel a “simple” and “the most natural thing in the world” (102). However, the futility of explaining the imperative of lethally confronting one's enemies to men who lack such a cultural context in their language moves Abel to simply outwait them in silence.

Word by word by word these men were disposing of him in language, their language, and they were making a bad job of it. They were strangely uneasy, full of hesitation, reluctance. He wanted to help them. (102)

His “natural” strategy to stand aside and outwait the actors actually empowers Abel to detach himself from the court proceedings and watch “from far away” as they clumsily attempt to explain to themselves the Native “psychology of witchcraft” (34, 102).

The interactant who fully understands the strategy of silent “outwaiting” is Benally, a Navajo whom Abel befriends at a job site after having been relocated to Los Angeles by a parole program.

He was looking right down at his work all the time, like I wasn't even there. I knew how he felt, so I didn't try to talk to him, and every time it slowed up we just stood there looking up the line for the next piece, like we were really busy thinking about it, you know, and it was part of the job.

Work settings are, in fact, as Basso noted, frequent opportunities for Native individuals to meet members of different tribes. The following episode is recalled by one of his informants from Cibecue, located on the White Mountain Apache Reservation.

One time, I was with A, B, and X down at Gleason Flat, working cattle. That man, X, was from East Fork [a community nearly 40 miles from Cibecue] where B's wife was from. But he didn't know A, never knew him before, I guess. First day, I worked with X. At night, when we camped, we talked with B, but X and A didn't say anything to each other. Same way, second day. Same way, third. Then, at night on fourth day, we were sitting by the fire. Still, X and A didn't talk. Then A said, "Well, I know there is a stranger to me here, but I've been watching him and I know he is all right." After that, X

and A talked a lot...Those two men didn't know each other, so they took it easy at first.

(72)

None of the participants in this speech event, Basso points out, feels the obligation to introduce the persons who are unknown to each other. Instead, it is left to the strangers to decide when to begin to speak. In this case, four days of silent communication have taken place before verbal interaction is attempted. To hasten this process is considered presumptuous and viewed with suspicion because the motivation may be based on an imposition, such as a request for money or labor. Furthermore, Basso claims, talkative strangers are often assumed to be drunk.

Similarly, for Abel, who finds himself relocated to Los Angeles, a foreign and potentially hostile environment, “[i]t was a long time before he would talk to anyone,” Benally recalls; however, “after a while we talked a whole lot, him and me, but it was about things that happened around here” (153). That “it was a long time before he would talk about himself—and then he never said much” is fully understood by Benally, who clearly identifies with that discursive preference when he adds, “I guess it’s that way with most of us” (153). Benally accepts Abel’s verbal caution as proper behavior and finds comfort in it as he acknowledges that “[w]e were kind of alike, though, him and me.” (153). In addition, there is the coincidence of Benally’s turning out to be Abel’s distant kinsman through the Coyote Pass (Jemez Pueblo) Clan, whose origin can be traced to Jemez Pueblo refugees’ fleeing the turmoil of the Pueblo Revolt of 1680 and finding sanctuary among the Navajo.

After a while he told me where he was from, and right away I knew we were going to be friends. We’re related somehow, I think. The Navajos have a clan they call by the name of that place. I was there once, too...It’s a pretty good place; there are mountains and canyons around there, and there’s a lot of red in the rocks...it’s like the land south of

Wide Ruin, where I come from, full of gullies and brush and red rocks. (153)

The Native discourse strategy of initial verbal reticence helps Benally and Abel connect in a way which Basso insightfully characterizes as “directly related to the conviction that the establishment of social relations is a serious matter that calls for caution, careful judgment and plenty of time” (73). Therefore, following this proper initial phase of carefully assessing the potential of their friendship, Benally and Abel can now proceed to a deeper level that involves their understood mutual investment in the sacred Southwestern landscape upon which lie the aesthetic and mythic locations vital to their tribal and personal identities.

A further speech event in which not only Abel but also members of his extended family are expected to approach each other with caution occurs after his homecoming from military service during World War II. His grandfather, Francisco, “could feel the beat of his heart” as he anxiously waits for the bus to arrive (9).

The door swung open and Abel stepped heavily to the ground and reeled. He was drunk, and he fell against his grandfather and did not know him. His wet lips hung loose and his eyes were half closed and rolling. Francisco’s crippled leg nearly gave way. His good straw hat fell off and he braced himself against the weight of his grandson. Tears came to his eyes, and knew only that he must laugh and turn away from the faces in the windows of the bus. (9)

Francisco finds himself facing two overlapping and extremely delicate communicative situations within the same speech event—meeting a returning relative and managing someone in an altered state. The expected changes in boarding-school returnees’ attitudes toward their former social environment mentioned by Basso are generalized by Mowrer to apply to any relative who has been absent for more than six months. Typically, after a light handshake little is said, sometimes

for several days. In rare cases, a greeter may cry and embrace the returnee, who, in turn, remains dry-eyed and silent. After having been away for a year, Benally also recalls that his grandfather “cried because...you had gone away and you were coming home” (Momaday 169).

In addition, the degree of unfamiliarity and doubt between Francisco and Abel is heightened significantly by Francisco’s belief that inebriation has rendered his grandson as someone temporarily not himself. In fact, as Mowrer explains, drunkenness and the expression of out-of-control anger seem to belong to a similar semantic field, in that both phenomena are believed to be symptomatic of affliction by witchcraft. In either case, affected individuals are considered temporarily insane and not responsible for the changes in their behavior. Understandably enough, even the next day, Francisco and Abel feel compelled to avoid each other, as the narrative voice informs that “[n]othing had yet passed between them, no word, no sign of recognition” (30).

Other Native characters in the novel also engage in behavior which reveals the discourse strategy of silence. For example, as Angela enters the bathhouse to take a mineral bath at the hot springs near Jemez Pueblo, “[t]he attendant said nothing, but laid out the towels in one of the stalls and drew the tub full of smoking mineral water” (61). In the scene before Tosamah, Pastor and Priest of the Sun of the Holiness Pan-Indian Rescue Mission, begins his sermon “The Gospel According to John,” his disciple, Cruz, facing a Native congregation “stepped forward on the platform and raised his hands as if to ask for the quiet that already was” (90). Perhaps, the most poignant reference to silence not only as a Native discursive prescription but also as a symbol of dignity occurs in Tosamah’s sermon entitled “The Way to Rainy Mountain,” in which he pays homage to the aged Kiowa visitors at his grandmother’s house whom he remembers as “men of immense character, full of wisdom and disdain” and who “dealt in a kind of infallible quiet and

gave but one face away; it was enough” (134).

Conclusion

In this stylolinguistic approach to *House Made of Dawn*, an attempt has been made to appeal to an ethnography-of-communication perspective regarding the significance of such non-verbal behavior as silence in the exploration of cultural issues and psychological processes. Although the novel’s numerous critics’ conclusion of Abel’s taciturnity as symptomatic of post-traumatic stress syndrome is not disputed, an additional interpretation based on the role of silence in traditional American Indian communicative strategies is suggested. Several of the novel’s speech events in which silence emerges as a discursive pattern can be analogized to situations captured by the sociolinguistic taxonomies descriptive of reticence among Western Apaches and Navajos. The relevant settings include the meeting of strangers, approaching a romantic relationship, returning home after a prolonged absence, exposure to someone in an altered state and responding to external authority. These conditions seem to have in common the loss of predictability in the interactants’ role expectations. Thus, the Native culture demands a cautious stance which surfaces as a prescription for silent “turn-taking.” In addition to endorsing sociolinguistic insights, the novel seems to offer the uplifting view that such a discursive strategy empowers Native individuals in confronting Anglo-American hegemony. By choosing to stand aside silently, members of indigenous communities can exercise caution through non-verbal responses which enable them to detach themselves and to outwait imminent strife.

Appendix

He placed the ax deep in the block and came to her. She sucked at her cheeks and let the initiative lie, to see what he would do.

“There is gum in it,” he said at last. “It will burn for a long time.”

He looked at her without the trace of a smile, but his voice was soft and genial, steady.

He would give her no clear way to be contemptuous of him. She considered.

“Shall I pay you now?” she asked.

He thought about it, but it was clear that he did not care one way or another.

“I’ll cut the rest of it Friday or Saturday. You can pay me then.”

It offended her that he would not buy and sell. Still, she knew how to learn at her own expense, and eventually she would make good the last investment of her pride. It was just now, for the time being, that she must hold her ground and wait. There was silence between them. He continued to stand off in the failing light, his still, black eyes just wide of her own. He did not move a muscle.

“You have done a day’s work,” she said, wondering why she had said it, and he stood there. There was no reply, nothing.

“Well, then,” she said, “you will come on Friday? Or did you say Saturday?”

But he made no answer. She was full of irritation. She knew only how to persist, but she had already begun to sense that it was of no use; and that made her seethe.

“You will have to make up your mind, you see, or else I may not be here when you come.”

His face darkened, but he hung on, dumb and immutable. He would not allow himself to be provoked. It was easy, natural for him to stand aside, hang on. He seemed to be

watching from far away something that was happening within her, private, commonplace, nothing in itself. His reserve was too much for her. She would have liked to throw him off balance, to startle and appall him, to make an obscene gesture, perhaps, or to say, “How would [**you?**] like a white woman? My white belly and my breasts, my painted fingers and my feet?” But it would have been of no use. She was certain that he would not even have been ashamed for her — or in the least surprised.

And yet in some curious way, he was powerless, too. She could see that now. There he stood, dumb and docile at her pleasure, not knowing, she supposed, how even to take his leave. (Momaday 33-34)

Note

I wish to thank Prof. Mario Garcia for his invaluable comments on an earlier draft. Remaining errors are, of course, my sole responsibility.

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