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On The Ethnohistorical Reconstruction of Communicative Behavior

Abstract. The potential of ethnohistorical sources in the reconstruction of past communicative behavior in extinct speech communities for possible contributions to the evaluation of culture change has yet to be fully explored. In this discussion two sets of extra-linguistic behavior surrounding the presumed speech acts of blessing and welcoming among the Kitanemuk and Vanyume of southern California described in Father Francisco Garcés' 1776 journal are selected and commented on within the framework of an ethnohistory of communication.

Introduction

Over two decades ago, Emanuel Drechsel (1983) proposed the feasibility of an ethnohistory of speaking approach, the diachronic counterpart of an ethnography of speaking, by examining selected sociolinguistic descriptions of Mobilian Jargon contained in such historical sources as Le Page du Pratz's (1758) reports on Louisiana. Focusing on formal protocols for greetings, of which Le Page du Pratz sketched in relatively detailed fashion two scenes of speaking, Drechsel pointed out the value of such information about etiquette as symbolic action in piecing together the structure and function through time of such moribund languages as Mobilian Jargon. Nevertheless, since the publication of Drechsel's seminal paper, ethnographers of communication have, with some notable exceptions (Hanks, 1987; Choque, 1989; Paulson, 1990), largely continued to ignore historical documentation in favor of the time-honored tradition of fieldwork.

Thus, the systematic study of communicative behavior through time is still waiting to make its potential contribution. The aim of this paper is to provide a further example regarding the consideration of ethnohistorical sources in the reconstruction of past communicative behavior, specifically the speech acts of extinct speech communities, for which fieldwork is thus no longer possible.

Time Depth in the Ethnography of Communication

A case in point is the study of California Indian languages, whose future is characterized in the "updated" *Handbook of North American Indians* in rather pessimistic terms:

> . . . the anthropological study of California Indian cultures is still a field with some activity with reference to native languages and prehistory. The old-style ethnographic work has ended because the aboriginal cultures are extinct. Many languages are no longer spoken, and the number of surviving tongues is steadily decreasing as the last speakers die (Heizer, 1978:14).

However, other contributors to the *Handbook*, such as King and Blackburn (1978:537), point out that filling many gaps of extinct groups could be accomplished by utilizing more effectively ethnohistorical documentation, which for some cultures, such as the Tataviam of the upper Santa Clara River, is apparently still virtually untapped:

> The San Fernando Mission registers remain one of the most important sources of data yet to be investigated in regard to village size, distribution, and intermarriage patterns. The early observations of Garcés and the members of the Portolá expedition provide further important information on the Tataviam. Other data are probably present in archival materials.

Similar statements can be found throughout the *Handbook*, especially regarding small groups with no surviving speakers.

In reference to communicative behavior, historical records certainly have their limitations and probably for that reason have been suspect. The tacit assumption has been that European travelers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were too ethnocentric to consider the detailed recording of Native communicative behavior worthwhile (Galloway, 2006). However, instead of simply dismissing the seemingly incomprehensive Europeans as not meeting modern research standards, sociolinguists should approach such recordings as equivalent to depositions by hostile witnesses. The “cross-examinations” of their statements make available bits and pieces of descriptions of communicative behavior which seemed to have been "impressive" to the narrator (Drechsel, 2003). These reinterpretations provide crucial data for the restoration of extra-linguistic phenomena which could contribute to a better understanding of cultures for which currently only brief word lists exist.

Furthermore, as Drechsel (1983:166) has argued, a greater time depth in the ethnography of speaking needs to be incorporated. Even in areas where fieldwork conditions are more accessible than in California, communicative forms which no longer occur today in a given speech community are nevertheless relevant to the understanding of culture change. One clear example Drechsel cites refers to the classic forms of pidgins and creoles during European colonial expansion.

The Limitations of Ethnological Data

The focus of the following illustration is on two Takic- (Uto-Aztecan-) speaking groups, the Kitanemuk and Vanyume of the western Mojave Desert, for whom only the scantiest of ethnological outlines are available based on data obtained during the early part of this century. Chief among them are the field notes of J. P. Harrington (1917), who interviewed Kitanemuk survivors at Tejon Ranch, a brief summary of Kitanemuk culture by Kroeber (1953:611-613) in his *Handbook*, and scattered Kitanemuk linguistic data assembled by Meriam (1955). For the

Vanyume even less information is available. From a surviving brief word list, it cannot even be determined whether they spoke a separate Takic language or a dialect of neighboring Serrano, for whom more extensive ethnographic descriptions fortunately do exist (Kroeber 1907: 139-140; Bright 1975; Strong 1929). Yet, Kroeber (1953:614) postulated that "[d]ialectically they [the Vanyume] stand nearer to the Kitanemuk than to the Serrano of the San Bernardino Mountains." Because the Vanyume enjoyed friendly relations with the Mohave and Chemehuevi, who were enemies of the Serrano, Kroeber (1925:614) concludes that they must have been autonomous.

Since the ethnography of speaking approach was not developed until the 1960s, communicative behavior is scarcely mentioned in the early ethnological literature on Takic speakers. Ironically, Kroeber (1953:615, 613) himself seems to have relied on the same historical source discussed below in a couple of single-sentence-length remarks concerning the speech act behavior of blessing and welcoming among the Kitanemuk and Vanyume:

> Seeds, possibly crushed meal, were scattered in the fire and over sacred objects.
>
> . . . and where the chief lived, welcome was extended by sprinkling acorn flour and small shells or beads.

Though the style of his *Handbook* allowed him to paraphrase material without direct references to sources, it is obvious that this particular information on communicative behavior was obtained from the journal of Father Francisco Garcés, a Spanish Franciscan friar who traveled through the Mojave Desert in 1776.

The Nature of Ethnohistoric Communicative Data

Kroeber (1953:946) relied on Coues' (1900) English translation of Garcés' journal, of which he makes the following bibliographic comment:

A well translated and splendidly annotated version of the diary of an intrepid explorer and priest, rich in data of the greatest value.

Revisiting this already greatly appreciated historical source in California history and ethnology can yield additional information for the so far largely neglected sociolinguistic perspectives.

In reference to the communicative act of blessing among the Kitanemuk mentioned by Kroeber, the text of Coues' translation of Garcés' journal states:

> A little while after the service began the wife of the chief arose, took a basket *(corita)* of seed *(chico)* and scattered it over the Santo Cristo I wore on my breast; the same did other women, and they even threw some of this seed *(semilla)* on the fire, in order that there should be bright light.

In an accompanying footnote to this passage, Coues (1900: 276) offers an ethnological commentary supplied by F. W. Hodge of the Bureau of American Ethnology:

> Garcés misinterprets their design, which was not to make the fire blaze up. The casting of seed into the fire was doubtless a form of sacrifice. The present Pueblos, before eating, frequently throw a small quantity of food into the fire. -- F.W.H.

Incidentally, Kroeber (1953:613) also follows up his brief mention of the use of seeds for the purpose of blessing among the Kitanemuk with a similar remark, most likely appropriated from Coues' footnote: "The Pueblo sprinkling of corn meal is inevitably suggested."

Regarding the communicative act of welcoming mentioned by Kroeber for the Vanyume, Coues' (1900:244) translation of Garcés' journal reveals the following passage:

> *Mar. 19.* I went one league southsoutheast *(sic)* and arrived at the house of the captain of these rancherias. He presented me with a string of about two varas of white sea-shells; and his wife sprinkled me with acorns and tossed the basket, which is a sign among these

people of great obeisance. In a little while after that she brought sea-shells in a small gourd, and sprinkled me with them in the way which is done when flowers are thrown. Likewise when the second woman came she expressed her affection by the same ceremonies. I reciprocated these attentions as well as I could *(del modo que pude)*, and marveled to see that among these people so rustic are found demonstrations proper to the most cultivated, and a particular prodigality *(magnificencia)* in scattering their greatest treasures, which are the shells.

Kroeber's (1953:615) only additional comment on this fragment of the text refers to the stringing of shells in "natural fathom lengths," no doubt his interpretation of the Spanish concept of "varas" cited by Coues.

The Ethnohistory of Pragmatics

Though the very likely accompanying, probably formulaic, utterances to the two selected sets of speech act behavior were not recorded by Garcés, his descriptions of the extra-linguistic aspects are anything but trivial, since they represent significant information necessary for the piecing together of a particular ethnohistory of communication. From what is now known about illocutionary acts in general, some basic meanings, whether actually uttered or not, might nevertheless be inferred.

In blessing, for example, the speaker regards his utterance and/or action as endowed with some power which will be of benefit to the target person or object. Wierzbicka (1987:225) proposes the following formula for human blessings:

I say: I want good things to happen to you (/person X)

I say this because I want to cause it to happen

I know that one can cause good things to happen to someone by saying this (and doing certain other things) if God wants it

I know that I am someone who can say this

Though with specific reference to the English speech act verb "bless," the formula nevertheless implies a universal as well as unitary application--that is, the speaker's feeling of something good toward the target person. Situations in which objects rather than persons are blessed are included in this basic meaning because "an object blessed seems to be seen as an intermediary in the chain of graces coming from God to a person" (Wierzbicka 1987:226).

In welcoming, the speaker is not merely greeting the addressee on neutral ground but he is making available his place to someone who has come from a considerable distance. Wierzbicka (1987:226) suggests the following formula for the basic meaning of "welcome":

I assume that you and I both know that we will now be for some time in the same place, because you have come to be in my place, from a different place (I assume that we both know that you haven't been away for a short time)

I assume that you and I both know that we will now be able to say things to one another in a way we couldn't when we were not in the same place

I say: I feel something good because of your coming here;

I want you to feel something good when you are here

I say this because I want to cause you to think that I feel something good towards you and to feel something good because of that

In addition, Wierzbicka points out that the acts of greeting and welcoming are differentiated on the basis of short term versus long term communication.

Both of the communicative situations involving blessing and welcoming described in Garcés' journal contained the extra-linguistic behavior of the sprinkling of seeds, or perhaps acorn meal as Kroeber suggested, on the target person and such objects as a crucifix and a campfire. The use of meal or pollen for blessing individuals and objects is well documented for

Puebloans as well as Athapascans in the neighboring Southwest, the area thought to have been the primary source of cultural diffusion to the southeastern California desert groups.

Among the Western Apache, for example, the shaman sprinkles cattail pollen over the head and shoulders of a girl during her puberty ceremony. In addition, he picks up a small basket filled with such items as corn kernels, candy and even coins and pours the contents over her head. Basso (1970:67) quotes the following informant's statement regarding the meaning of this action:

> After he pours it over her head, everything in all the baskets gets holy. Not just the stuff from the basket he pours over her. All the baskets, even the big ones near the buckskin. Because it is holy, all those things, everybody wants it. If you get a piece of candy, you will have plenty of food all the time. If you take one of those corns home and plant it, you have plenty of corn to bring in later on. You get some money, that means you get rich and never be poor. The girl's power makes all those things holy and good to have.

This power acquired through the blessing is shared with the community, according to Basso, by male relatives of the pubescent girl by distributing some of the items among the crowd of spectators.

Among neighboring Puebloans, the sprinkling of corn meal and pollen is associated with the required reciprocity in maintaining the delicate equilibrium between man and the universe. Dozier (1966:82) explains:

> Not only must man use sparingly of the food and material resources of the universe but he is required to reciprocate by appropriate propitiatory rites. These range all the way from offering corn meal, corn pollen, prayer feathers, and prayer sticks to elaborate ceremonial dances made as "beautiful as possible" and participated in by the whole village.

Refusal or neglect in the engagement of this extra-linguistic behavior, which usually forms part of the recitation of formulaic utterances such as prayers or blessing texts, could invite such misfortunes as illness, crop failure, drought conditions, or witchcraft, which affect not only the individual at fault but ultimately the entire "innocent" community.

To engage in reciprocity in terms of speech act theory could be regarded as part of the general illocutionary act of thanking. Also, since in the act of welcoming, the speaker sees the visitor's arrival as a favor and an honor, Norrik (1978: 289) has concluded that welcoming is actually just a special case of thanking. Therefore, it can be argued that both the acts of blessing as well as welcoming belong to the macro speech act of thanking, for which Wierzbicka (1987:214) proposes the following formula:

I know that you have done something that is good for me

I say: I feel something good towards you because of that

I say this because I want to cause you to know what I feel towards you

I assume that you would want to hear me say this to you

Thus, whether addressing persons or the supernatural, the key component in thanking seems to be reciprocity.

Returning to the two communicative situations selected from Garcés' journal, it can perhaps be conjectured that reciprocity was a major motivational force in those contexts. For example, the cited blessing of Father Garcés' crucifix with seeds or acorn meal by the Kitanemuk headman's wife seems to have occurred in response to a preceding act of blessing of his own, of which Coues' (1900:275) translation reveals the following passage:

Thereupon I arose and recited the rosary *(corona)* of Maria Santisima, singing the hymn *(alabado)* with the Indian Sevastian and the Jamajabs who accompanied me from the

beginning, and who already knew the Ave Maria. This I have practiced in all the *rancherias*, and it has served to the great astonishment of all the nations.

Since welcoming can also be regarded as a subcomponent of thanking, reciprocity is strongly indicated as well. This claim is further strengthened by the described Vanyume custom of sprinkling on the addressee not only acorn meal but also sea shells, a highly prized trade item often used as currency in native California.

Conclusion

The systematic study of communicative behavior through time is still a largely neglected kind of inquiry. This paper has attempted a modest demonstration of the great potential of ethnohistorical sources in the reconstruction of past communicative behavior such as illocutionary acts in extinct speech communities, which would certainly contribute to the understanding of culture change. Two sets of extra-linguistic behavior surrounding the presumed communicative acts of blessing and welcoming among the Kitanemuk and Vanyume of southern California described in Father Garcés' journal were selected and commented on along the lines of an ethnohistory of communication. Based on some general theories of illocutionary acts and ethnographic comparisons, some basic meanings were inferred. It was suggested that the acts of blessing and welcoming are subcomponents of the macro speech act of thanking, and it was conjectured that in those contexts reciprocity was a major motivational force. In closing, it should be pointed out that throughout Garcés' journal admiration for native communicative behavior is expressed, yielding a considerable amount of sociolinguistic descriptions, of which the two examples discussed herein are representative samples.

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