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Documenting language, visualizing culture: shooting digital video in two endangered language communities

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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper is part of an ongoing ethnographic documentary study on how present-day speakers of Nez Perce and Sahaptin utilize the linguistic practices of their speech communities at a time when their ancestral languages are severly constrained by language endangerment and language shift. It adopts the contemporary concerns of documentary linguistics to understand how utterances are utilized as linguistic resources in public ritual oratory. As a macro-analytic study, it accounts for (1) the range of multilingualism in public settings, (2) how communicative codes are organized in interaction, and (3) the nature and extent to which oratory becomes meaningful in the life of indigenous peoples.

To establish the basis for such accounts, I employ a filmic-based approach, herein termed 'situated visual analysis', whereby I record and document oratorical speech forms using digital video. My unit of analysis is the "ritual oratory" performance given by Nez Perce and Sahaptin traditionalists in strictly localized contexts. Because of their high visibility as discursive phenomena, ritual oratory performances are informative precisely in the way they operate across multilingual and intercultural social domains. Further, ritual oratory events are often multimodal in character and as such they are ideally suited for observational study using digital video technologies.

2. AUDIO-VISUAL REPRESENTATIONS AS LANGUAGE DATA

The use of film or digital video in language documentation is not as new as it seems. Linguists have steadily adopted this medium as a way to capture and understand the complexities of spoken or gesture-based language samples. Thus, filmic-based methods and analyses can be described in at least two instances.

2.1. Instrumental visual analysis

Instrumental linguistic techniques and methods are typically designed as experimental observations. Time-aligned audio-visual representations derived from film or digital video tend to be treated in much the same way as audio recordings and photos. That is, such representations have measurability as data and are unambiguous in the sense that linguists can make descriptive claims about the range of possible human languages (Ladefoged 2003). In many cases, instrumental visual analyses attempt to visually record the articulatory behavior of the human vocal apparatus. In general, however, audio-visual representations exhibit measurability limitations in this mode of analysis and it is for these reasons that linguists often choose to rely almost exclusively on recorded audio

samples for their data. In the present study no instrumental visual analyses were conducted.

2.2. Situated visual analysis

Situated visual analyses promote linguistic inquiry into the locally situated contexts of real-world language use. The primary element of concern is the skills speakers bring into a communicative situation. In terms of basic data analysis, it strives to account for the 'communicative act' or those observable forms of talk that are 'generally coterminous with a single interactional function' (Saville-Troike 2003: 24). Thus, the goals of situated visual analyses are simply to visually capture the complexity and range of communicative acts.

Three important criteria are proposed in this analysis. First, recording activities must be 'observational' to the extent that they record direct representations of naturalistic language use. In other words, there is an emperical concern as to how talk becomes differentiated across varying domains of interaction. Second, recording activities are non-interventionist in orientation. The use of the camera seeks to preserve the 'distinctive spatial and temporal configurations' (MacDougall 1994: 31) which emerge over the course of a communicative situation. Third, film-makers must be able to self-monitor their recording activities based on an ethical recognition of the unfolding nature of real-world language use. That is, respect for the diginity and aspirations of community participants is observed at all times during the film-making process. The motivations for these criteria are to inform our use of filmic-based methods within the framework of contemporary ethnographic/linguistic documentation as well as to dispel some of the uncertainty surrounding the use of film as a representational medium.

3. FILMING IN THE NEZ PERCE AND SAHAPTIN COMMUNITIES

Permission to film was granted in four speech communities (Nez Perce Reservation, Umatilla Indian Reservation, Celilo Village, and Yakama Nation). While a number of participants/consultants were filmed in varying contexts and situations, a limited number of recording events exhibited reoccuring subject matter containing naturalistic language use. This reoccurent subject matter tended to depict ceremonial events and activities in locations referred to as 'the longhouse,' a public ceremonial center common to most Nez Perce and Sahaptin communities. It was here that the organizing features of ritual oratory first became apparent. However, much of this analysis would not have been possible without having been granted privileged access to locations on the basis of my being recognized a s a member of the societies under study. Nowhere was this more apparent than when I was obligated to surrender my participant-observer role for that of a ritual orator, a moment of fidelity that was captured on film by my own camera!

4. THE STATUS OF NEZ PERCE AND SAHAPTIN LANGUAGE ENDANGERMENT

The Sahaptian speech community is composed of two genetically related languages, Nez Perce (Nu·mí·pu·) and Sahaptin ('Ičiškí·n), both of which are located in the southern Columbia Plateau of western North America. Each of these languages and their associated dialects are spoken in five distinct American Indian reservation communities in Oregon, Washington, and Idaho. Nez Perce is composed of two dialects (Upper River and Lower River dialects); the majority speak the Upper River Nez Perce dialect. Sahaptin is composed of 15 dialects and is organized by three geographic divisions in the Columbia River region.

Currently, Nez Perce and Sahaptin and their associated dialects are severely endangered. A preliminary estimate on the number of fluent speakers shows 30 speakers (less than 1% of the population.) for Nez Perce and 250 speakers (1.5% of the population.) for Sahaptin. Thus, only 1-1.5% of the total Nez Perce and Sahaptin population are fluent in their first language; the majority of speakers are above 60 yrs of age.

In spite of severly limited resources, present-day tribal language maintainance and revitalization programs are actively promoting ways to increase the number of heritage speakers, speaker fluency, and heritage language awareness. Language immersion is currently the most common form of language teaching in these communities but it has yet to become a sustainable pedagogical practice across all age groups.

5. MULTILINGUALISM IN THE SOUTHERN COLUMBIA PLATEAU

Multilingual societies are typified by the coexistence of two or more languages or dialects. The documentary problem to be addressed here is found in Mühlhaüser (1996: 323), 'Knowledge has to be obtained as to what sustained traditional multilingualism and how much of the traditional support system is still in place.'

Thus, from ancient times into the historical period, Nez Perce and Sahaptin speech communities exhibited a stable traditional multilingualism with a strong homogeous sociocultural underlayer. As reported in the literature for this region, prestige is ascribed to multilingual individuals who exhibit communicative competence in more than one language variety (Spicer quoted in Thomason 2001: 28). Based on consultant interviews, multilingual individuals are also remembered as communicating in a closed situational repertoire among intimates or kinsman and communicating in another repretoire in other settings. However, in ritual settings (evident from early recordings), multilingual abilities were often put on disp lay to multilingual audiences. We can thus claim the following knowledge regarding the existence of multilingualism in Nez Perce and Sahaptin speech communities based upon at least two factors, these are (1) prestige in possessing pluralinguistic competence in multiple languages, and (2) maintainance of intergroup solidarity.

Today, the traditional multilingualism of the past has been more or less replaced by a modern destablized form, one that is punctated by an incipient shift to English and a gradual weakened state of language use. Notably, however, elements of traditional multilingualism continue to persist as a form of praxis in ritual oratory.

Consider the opening lines of a ritual oratory given to a mostly Sahaptin multilingual audience at the longhouse of Celilo Village, Oregon.

> Cayuse Chief Jesse Jones, March 2006. Speaking in the Lower River Nez Perce dialect:

> 1   (inaudible)...hé·nek̓e qeʔciyéẃyeẁ himyú·me lá·wtiwanim. káʔo táʔc šo·yá·po·timtki hičí·qin káʔa kí· mé·ywipe. ka· mí·ẁecpe tító·qan ʔecú·kwece *Cayuse*-pu· nu·mí·pu·nim.

> '...again I am glad (to be here) my relatives and friends. All will be spoken well with English just on this morning. And momentarily some people who know of Cayuse/Nez Perce (language)'.

(Speaker now shifts to English)

Figure 1
Scene of Cayuse Chief Jesse Jones giving ritual oratory.

It is clearly evident from the above passage that facets of social identity have their partial origin in an older traditional multilingual society. Attendance to the parameters of linguistic variation demonstrate a deliberate orientation to interactional opportunities. The unintended consequence of this orientation to variation is that English is now accomodated as an alternative interlingual code despite its non-indigenous status. Nevertheless, we can begin to see how utterances are mobilized as interactional resources and that their employment, in

this instance, can have real world effects on modes of social organization (Agha 2007).

6. RITUAL ORATORY IN THE LONGHOUSE TRADITION

Ritual oratory comprises aesthetically marked episodes of communication that are meaningfully oriented to an audience. Among Nez Perce and Sahaptin speaking peoples, ritual oratorical performances are commonly public occurences though often restricted to localized contexts and place. They are generally recognized as a participant-linked speech event which can be distinguished from ordinary discourse by its stereotypic performative force. The most highly regarded ritual oratory is that spoken in the longhouse, a community ceremonial center.

Oratory is set apart from ordinary discourse by a set of contextualization cues. These cues take the form of auditory signals given by a "bell ringer," a ritual specialist who organizes the order of events over the course of a ceremony. These signals serve to mark the boundaries of social action such as the opening and closing of a particular segment of discourse or performance (see Figure 2).

Figure 2
Structure of Ritual Oratory
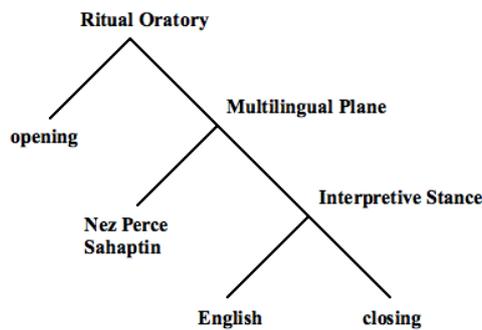
In addition to the opening and closing of an oratory sequence, it includes (1) a multilingual plane where a speaker chooses a indigenous code to speak in and (2) an interpretive stance where a speaker has the option of interpreting his or her speech or to make a commentary using English. Based upon our sample, the structure of ritual oratory is revealing in that it makes transparent an 'order of indexicality' whereby the use of linguistic resources is stratified according to cultural preferences and abilities (Blommaert 2005: 73).

ORDER OF INDEXICALITY
(1) Indigenous Code > (2) Indigenous Code & Interpretive Stance > (3) Non-Indigenous Code as Interpretive Stance

Authentic ritual oratory performances are those that are expressed wholly in the indigenous code or composed of an indigenous code accompanied by an interpretive stance in English. On one occasion, I was seated next to a respected elder during the meal break of a ceremony. As the meal progressed, various members of the longhouse got up to speak. Some spoke in the indigenous language but many spoke only in English. Upon hearing a person speaking in English the elder—who clearly identified herself as a reciever of the oratory performance—remarked to no one in particular, 'They should be talking in our language!' In other community longhouses, I witnessed similar ritual oratory given only in English.

It is evident that English-based ritual oratory is not as highly valued when compared to that spoken in the indigenous language(s). Valuing traditional oratorical forms may be partly a response to the notion that human experiences, especially deep spiritual experiences, are directly linked to the ways in which they have been habitually conceptualized and encoded through language. As many fluent speakers can attest, older ways of thinking are often embedded in older ways of speaking. It is precisely these 'ways of speaking' that make ethnographic/language documentation so vital to understanding how the content of culture is transmitted in the minds of each new generation.

7. CONCLUSION

In this study, we have documented contemporary forms of public ritual oratory. It utilizes an empirically informed 'situated visual analysis' to draw attention to the convergence of filmic-based documentary methods and sites of research. These considerations have been largely inclusive of the current impacts of language shift and how such a process can critically inform community and disciplinary concerns over language endangerment. Thus, when we begin to account for the materiality of language and its larger role in human communicative behavior (McConvell 2003, Hill 2006, Woodbury 2003), we are essentially claiming that the myriad 'ways of speaking' are also sites of struggle in the distribution of semiotic resources.

The documentary evidence is undeniable in this regard. At the outset of this project, the contribution of ritual oratory to language documentation is one that points to an enriched and deepening understanding of language as 'organizations of diversity' (Hill 2006) in which I as linguist and tribal member can count my own membership.

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