



“THE GRIZZLY BEAR IS LIKE OUR BROTHER,” IDENTITY IN INTERTRIBAL DISCOURSE

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Abstract:

Identity work through traditional metaphorizing in the discourse genre of sermonizing in the context of Amerindian intertribal gatherings is interpreted as to strategies of inclusiveness and reaffirmation of social structures.

Keywords: Amerindian, powwow, rhetoric, identity work, sermonizing, metaphorizing

1. Introduction

Despite traditional Amerindian oratory having been lauded greatly by literary scholars, little work concerning contemporary rhetorical processes is evident in sociolinguistics (Ruoff 1990; Stromberg 2006). Yet rhetorical structures as universal phenomena appear wherever individuals feel the need to persuade others of taking or refraining from certain actions or beliefs. This paper attempts interpretive assessments of the substratal constraints on identity work in the general rhetorical genre of sermonizing in the context of Amerindian intertribal and bicultural pressures. In an impressively exhaustive survey of the role of rhetoric in shaping traditional Amerindian political organization, Meyer (2005) found the mention of discursive strategies such as sermonizing ubiquitous throughout the early Americanist ethnographic literature. In tribal cultures with decentralized political authorities, ethnographers have identified rhetorical articulateness combined with a charismatic presence as one of the main markers of political authority.

2. Ethnolinguistic Context

American Indians who are drawn to intertribal dance celebrations, called powwows, bring with them a range of functional competencies in English. Many are very capable bilinguals but most, especially in the American Northwest, where native languages are endangered, tend toward nonstandard English monolingualism. Nevertheless, noticeable substrate influences continue to make themselves felt, not only in phonology and syntax but also in discourse. By necessity,

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English serves as the lingua franca in reaffirming a general native identity at intertribal powwows.

These one or two-day celebrations provide the frame for the reconstruction of an ever-evolving schema of "Indianness." Although at times in competition with narrower local tribal identities of a particular cultural area such as the Northwest, the intertribal powwow contains a subtext of inclusiveness, regardless of tribal affiliation. Held in a public park, athletic field, or a school gymnasium, these gatherings are dominated by the iconic traditions of the Great Plains. Choruses of men huddled around large raw hide drums sing in piercing falsetto while dancers in spectacular regalia of cloth, fur, buckskin and feathers delight spectators with a feast of rhythmic colors. Sometimes referred to as war dances, ethnographers have traced them to the Grass, Scalp, Calumet, and Stomp dances of the Plains (Howard 1955, 16; Young 1981, 103). These dances, in modified form, have spread to virtually all parts of North America and have become an important vehicle for reaffirming a native identity, even among tribes which did not share these practices in traditional times.

2.1 Identity Work in the Rhetoric of Sermonizing

In addition to intertribal dances, competing local traditions are reaffirmed during special presentations, for which the general powwow dancing is temporarily suspended and which are often followed by remarks which take on a sermonizing function, in the general sense of an opinionated talk with moral overtones but not necessarily sectarian. During one such special presentation at the 2015 intertribal powwow on the Umatilla Reservation in Oregon, a middle-aged woman donning a bear skin complete with taxidermied skull performed a highly stylized dance imitating the bruin's scratching movements on the ground as if foraging for food. Since such dances of a traditional religious significance are generally the domain of men, it is unusual for a woman to perform such a time-honored ritual. Given that such ritual knowledge is typically the possession of certain families who pass it down the male line, it is possible that in this particular dancer's line of inheritance no male kinsman may have been available or willing to carry on the ritual, inasmuch as bear power is considered extremely dangerous. Believed to be a potent force for curing illness in much of native North America, bear power is harnessed by shamans dressed in the skins of bears and armed with bear claws imitating the animal's movements in order to fight off the evil that has stricken the patient (Rockwell 2003, 2). Thus, for this dancer to have taken on the responsibility of learning the bear ritual assures her a position of authority in the powwow circle. In her post-performance remarks, she chose, in Bourdieuan (1991) terms, a discourse genre designated by her relational position in this particular social space, which gives her the right to be listened to:

(1) My friends and relatives ... (2) brothers and sisters ... (3) honorable elders ... (4) generation of today ... (5) our seventh generation of our ancestral relations and those that are not yet born ... (6) I thank you for welcoming me ... (7) to be part of the circle ... (8) I wanna share a little bit of who I am and who we are as Suquamish people ... (9) the grizzly bear is like our brother ... 10) our mother ... (11) our grandmother ... (12) our grandfather ... (13) through our creation stories we learn about our history our origin of who we are ... (14) as Suquamish people ... (15) as that is what we are ... (16) we are all people of that land ... (17) the grizzly bear ... (18) was the one ... (19) that told the

creator ... (20) that he would teach the women how to give birth to the young ... (21) that he would teach the people how live in harmony and balance with the land ... (22) what fruits and roots and medicines ... (23) would be used to nourish our bodies and strengthen our spirits ... (24) so that we may be able to live a good life ... (25) with balance ... (26) but today we're faced with many many faces of challenges ... (27) obstacles ... (28) in the environment and the land ... (29) even our own cultural identity ... (30) within our traditional teachings ... (31) if we don't look out for the grizzly bear habitat ... (32) then we are contributing to the decline of our own culture ... (33) the grizzly bear requires a large landmass ... (34) to survive ... (35) the land is the place where our place of learning took place ... (36) that was the first teaching place for our children ... (37) when they're going through their ... (38) passage of rites ... (39) as they're growing up ... 40) they learned about the landscape ... (41) they learned about responsibility ... (42) they learned about how much fruits and roots and medicines to take ... (43) and what to leave to sustain for future generations ... (44) it was the land trust ... (45) the land is our trust ... (46) and if we look out for the grizzly bear ... (47) then we're lookin' out for the sustainability of our culture ... (48) and I know and I believe ... (49) no matter where we go and what we do ... (50) each and every one of us have our own creation stories ... (51) about our lifetime and where we come from ... (52) and also our own responsibility to ensure the cultural continuicy (sic) ... (53) it was not long ago in the past couple of days we celebrated ... (54) well I didn't celebrate ... (55) Canada Day ... (56) a day of colonization and assimilation ... (57) a day that should be recognized and commemorate the loss ... (58) of indigenous people's culture language and oppression that has taken place ... (59) because we've all been colonized and assimilated in this new way of life ... (60) while we struggle to maintain our balance and our cultural ... (62) identity ... (62) so I say keep up with your songs and keep up with your dances ... (63) let us not discriminate one another ... (64) let us support and encourage and honor one another ... (65) it doesn't matter what race or ethnic origins we come from ... (66) there's only one race and that's the human race ... (67) we're all people of the land ... (68) and we all have a responsibility to ensure that these young ones here ... (69) will be able to grow up and understand who they are and where they come from ... (70) without a status number or a registry number that tells them that they're from a tribe or a band ... (71) they need us to be honorable ... (72) they need us to walk that good life and good role ... (73) and we need to demonstrate that ... (74) and walk that and live that ... (75) and practice that ... (76) so they can see us ... (77) observe and learn from it ... (78) because they are our future generation ... (79) and in order for us to survive as a people ... (80) as indigenous people ... (81) as people rooted from the land ... (82) we need to walk and live that as well ... (83) aho (... marks pauses and hesitations of noticeable length).

The speaker addresses her audience in very specific terms and in a deliberate order. In intertribal powwow contexts, the first term in (1) is usually employed for non-Indian ethnicities, mostly Anglo-American spectators, who quite often comprise the majority in sheer numbers. They are acknowledged, welcomed, and encouraged to patronize the numerous vendors hawking native crafts, whose station fees help finance the event. But otherwise, this ever-present large segment is rarely addressed and is thus suppressed to the interactional margin. Nevertheless, the speaker stresses inclusiveness by preposing the first person singular possessive pronoun, which is then extended to other tribesmen in the form of the English equivalent of Lakota "Mitakuye Oyasin" (my relations), a phrase often utilized in opening prayers and other

formal discourses in these intertribal gatherings. In (2), the speaker addresses her fellow Suquamish kinsmen of her own generation (her parents' generation would be addressed as uncles and aunts), while in (3) she reserves a special mention for those of her grandparents' generation and in (4) for those of her children's age group. The number seven in (5), derived from the four cardinal directions plus the sky, nadir and center, is considered sacred in many contexts, including in the reckoning of generations past and future. In (6) - (8), the speaker rounds out her introduction by expressing gratitude for having been allowed to perform the bear dance, by defining the social space as symbolic of the life cycle, and by announcing the intention of her remarks to be a projection of an image of herself and her tribe. Thus, the structure of her introduction, in terms of the expected acknowledgments and their order, marks her as a native and is already the beginning of what has generally been called identity work (Strauss 1959).

In (9) - (12), the speaker continues her identity work with the Northwest Coastal tradition of allegorical alignment of kinship with a mythic animal. Resembling humans in countenance and upright posture, the bear is the most anthropomorphized and mythologized animal in native North America (Rockwell 2003, 2). That symbolic kinship is then connected in (13) - (16) to her tribal origin myth and to the landmarks where mythic events are believed to have taken place and which now serve as mnemonic devices to recall those tales as reaffirmations of the tribe's true ownership of that sacred ground (Basso 1996). In analogy of an animal with a human-like long duration of infancy and a protracted juvenile period, the speaker in (17) - (20) tethers her own identity as a mother to her tribe's mythic teacher of motherhood (Rockwell 2003, 5). Sharing with native peoples many of the same vegetal resources in traditional times, the bear is also metaphorized in (22) and (23) as a teacher of idealized nutrition and therapeutics. Worth noting in (23) is the advocacy of a wholistic approach to comestibles. Suggestive of a subtext of opposition to modern food consumption with its negative health impacts, such harkening back to former subsistence practices is a frequent theme in powwow discourses and should be regarded as a form of identity work in resistance to acculturative pressures. Similarly, in (21), (24) and (25), the implied responsibility of land stewardship carries an undertone of criticism regarding modern land exploitation and thus sets up the subsequent frame of sermonizing.

In the initial expansion of her metaphorized identity work, the speaker, in attempting to turn to broader issues regarding resistance to acculturation, experiences a processing breakdown in (26), which she repairs in (27). The synonyms in (28) provide her with an island of reliability for the additional time needed in planning her next utterances. In addition, they capture overlapping but slightly diverging semantic fields which help her frame her next talking points. Also, by repeating these synonyms, the speaker not only establishes coherence but also oils the waters of social interaction with signifiers of modern ecological as well as traditional native meanings (Brown 1999, 224). Moreover, the binomial pair elevates her register for positioning it into the legitimization of her place in the existing social hierarchy (Bourdieu 1991). In a quasi-restricted code in (29) and (30), she reiterates the role of landmarks, to which are attached mythic tales recited to children, in reaffirming tribal identity.

The conditional statement in (31) and (32) frames the crux of the speaker's sermonizing in the same quasi-restricted code which is really only understood by those with the local knowledge regarding the role of landmarks in preserving the mythic texts of the tribal heritage. Though seemingly rambling, the speaker actually engages in reiteration of the bear metaphor in (33) -

(40) as it relates to the landmarks as a repository for youth socialization. The stark reality of the possible loss of this cultural geographic knowledge emerges in (35) in the switch from the present to the past tense. This temporal shift is remarkable considering that the use of the past tense with its implication of the "vanishing Red Man" propagated by mass media is greatly resented (Leavitt et al 2015). Yet, the mainstream stereotype of natives as ecology-conscious stewards of the land surfaces in (41) - (46) by imitating the discourse of bionomics in conjunction with the bear metaphor in the conditional statement in (46) and (47). In (37) another processing breakdown occurs, most likely a failed English lexical search for a Lushootseed equivalent, yielding in (38) the unidiomatic noun collocation. Furthermore, the redundancies and pauses in (35) - (40) and the self-repair in (44) and (45) suggest performance stress effecting utterance planning difficulties, all indicative of a significant emotional involvement.

Becoming more embracing in (48) - (52), the speaker encourages members of other tribes to follow their own oral traditions by addressing them with the inclusive first-person plural pronoun. But a failed lexical search causes her to stumble in (52) and launch into a seeming digression, resembling a background construction in (53 - (62). Characterized by a divergent mode of presentation, a background construction impacts on the main narrative by interspersing a segment characterized by a different communication scheme (Schutze 2014, 252). In this case, the speaker suddenly draws from the discourse of post-colonialism and ethnocide. Though she may be indirectly relating personal experiential disorders stemming from traumatic interactions in the context of palpable racial prejudices, the speaker remains with her argumentative commentaries at a global level in characterizing her community as deprived of a positive cultural reputation as well as lacking in political and economic power. In (54) there is even a further interjection within the background construction which serves as a self-evaluative device. Even as a digression, this general airing of her grievances regarding mainstream acculturative pressures becomes part of her extended identity work, which is in part oppositional in nature. In her rallying cry in (62), the speaker, in choosing the second person plural pronoun, seems to be encouraging her children's generation. And in her plea for unity, she soon shifts to the more inclusive first-person plural pronoun in (63) and (64). Then, widening her orbit to a seemingly trite level in (65) and (67), she quickly follows up with a uniquely native perspective of peoplehood in (67). In her apparent all-embracing pronouncements, she is actually tackling in (68) and (69) the very specific issue of ever-increasing miscegenation, especially in her children's generation. Since phenotypes determine folk taxonomies of race, a significant number of mixed blood children do not fit the expected "Indian" complexion. Furthermore, the Byzantine criteria for tribal membership can be so onerous as to exclude those of less than one half of Indian blood. Therefore, the speaker encourages in (70) a distancing from such artificial determinants, often perceived as unfair, which are adopted by the tribes and bands themselves and then approved by the federal governments of the United States and Canada. The mention of digits in analogy with regimented institutions such as the military and prisons heightens the rejection of governmental definitions of who should be considered an Indian.

In her concluding remarks, the speaker employs redundancies to summarize and re-emphasize her previous talking points. The somewhat murky referent in (72) becomes clear in (81) as the next generation being guided by the mythic tales that emanate from the landmarks of

the sacred geography. She closes with the Kiowa lexeme for gratitude, a conventionalized marker for opening as well as closing discourses in intertribal contexts.

3. Conclusion

This paper has attempted an interpretive assessment of the constraints on identity work in the particular rhetorical genre of sermonizing in the context of Amerindian intertribal and bicultural pressures. Notwithstanding her command of nonstandard English, the speaker yields to discursive preferences that exhibit substratal influences. These substratal expectations surface especially in this emotionally driven discourse with which she wishes to project an image acceptable to herself and to her community. In speaking to her native audience, she first establishes her identity by very specific terms of address in a deliberate order and by defining her tribal membership. However, the core of her identity work revolves around an allegorical kinship with a mythic bear whose mythic texts emanate from landmarks where mythic events took place and which now serve as mnemonic devices to recall those tales as reaffirmations of the tribe's true ownership of that sacred ground. The metaphorization of the bear and of the sacred geography sustains further identity work in areas such as motherhood, nutrition, and in the projection of inclusiveness to mixed-blood children. Additionally, a significant part of her extended identity consists of an oppositional stance toward mainstream acculturative pressures. Lastly, it appears that nonstandard English is serving as a vehicle for the preservation of substratal discursive practices.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interests.

About the Author

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