



DIALOGIC INCONGRUITY IN MOMADAY'S *THE INDOLENT BOYS*

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Abstract:

From the perspective of interpretive sociolinguistics, this paper offers a stylistic assessment of dialogic incongruity in Scott Momaday's play *The Indolent Boys*. The mismatches between utterances and the discursive context reflect the protagonist's psychosocial fragmentation attributable to the consequences of forced assimilation. Employing an expanded ethnography-of-speaking approach which incorporates sociocultural as well as psychological meanings of the text, the analysis of selected conversational exchanges reveals the continued significant role mythic texts play in recovering and strengthening Native identities.

Keywords: American Indian theater, cultural memory, forced acculturation, conflicted identity

1. Introduction

The renowned American Indian novelist and poet N. Scott Momaday, who was awarded the 1969 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for *House Made of Dawn*, has also been noted for penning acclaimed stage and screen plays (Momaday 1968; 2007). Honoring indigenous cultural memory, Momaday's dramatic pieces strive to make visible historic as well as mythic events and personages that have been ignored by mainstream theater and film. In *The Indolent Boys*, which had its first public performance and its subsequent world premiere in such prestigious venues as the Agassiz Theater at Harvard University and the Syracuse Stage in Syracuse, New York, Momaday reawakens a tragedy "deeply and ever more dimly embedded in Kiowa oral tradition" (Momaday 2007, 5, 7). During one of the fiercest Oklahoma blizzards of 1891, three runaway boys from a U.S. Indian Service boarding school froze to death trying to return to the camps of their families on the Kiowa reservation some thirty miles away. Much more than a mere backdrop for the play, the boarding school as a topos of forced assimilation contextualizes the conflicted psychological state and ambiguous social position of many Indian students at such

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institutions, particularly embodied by the main character, John Pai. Drawing on the methods of interpretive sociolinguistics, this paper presents a stylistic analysis of the protagonist's psychosocial predicament by applying an expanded ethnography of speaking which allows for the consideration of not only sociocultural but also psychological meanings of a text.

2. The Indian Boarding School

Though Christian denominations had sponsored similar institutions since colonial times, the concept of government-run boarding schools for American Indians was the brainchild of Richard Henry Pratt, a veteran of the Indian Wars, who had been assigned to guard Indian prisoners of war at Fort Marion, Florida. With the help of volunteer teachers, he experimented with the instruction of basic English, art, and craftsmanship to his charges and convinced federal authorities in 1879 to establish the Carlisle Indian Industrial School at Carlisle, Pennsylvania, the first government institution dedicated solely to the education of children from Indian reservations. By removing Native youths from their tribal environment, the U.S. Indian Service intended to create acculturated generations that might serve as social models upon returning to their communities. In addition to a common elementary education, the curriculum emphasized vocational skills and combined with its residential component developed into an effective device for assimilation. With the goal of total "Americanization" under a strict code of quasi-military discipline, the pedagogues resorted to such draconian measures as punishing students for speaking their Native languages and prohibiting all signs of Indian identity, such as religious practices, tribal dress, and long hair on boys. Since it was impractical and expensive to send many children to such distant locations as Pennsylvania or Virginia, where another program had been added to the historically Black Hampton Institute, a network of regional Indian boarding schools soon sprang up, in which Pratt's motto, "[k]ill the Indian, save the man," was energetically implemented (Pratt 2004).

Though passionately anti-racist and regarded at the time as humanitarian, Pratt has now been vilified by revisionist history as an advocate of cultural extinction. In retrospect, it is indisputable that Indian communities were traumatized as their children were, at times forcibly, taken away for as long as eight years without being allowed to see their families. Many never returned, a bitter truth attested to by the ever-present cemeteries adjacent to the campuses (Adams 1995). Horror stories about the boarding school experience abound and still make up a substantial portion of tribal oral traditions. Memories of alleged physical and psychological abuse have given rise on the one hand to life-long resentment and on the other hand to proud narratives of overcoming adversity. Thus, the boarding school symbolizes not only victimization and cultural loss but also, paradoxically, agency and cultural survival. And since this type of forced assimilationist experience was so common, these dreaded institutions and, in some cases, their alien locations have become the source of integral narratives for the construction of American Indian identities and have even been credited with "*fueling the drive for political and cultural self-determination in the late 20th century*" (Davis 2001, 22).

3. John Pai

The setting of *The Indolent Boys* is the Kiowa Boarding School at Anadarko, Oklahoma, where the students and staff anxiously await news of the whereabouts of the three missing boys, who have fled after one of them had been whipped by the institution's disciplinarian. Among the agonizing souls are Miss Carrie, a sensual and sympathetic teacher in her mid-twenties, and John Pai, a Kiowa student of "*benign and inscrutable expression*," who is the first to graduate from the school and to be accepted to a seminary in faraway New York (Momaday 2007, 54). Although held up by the entire school staff as a paragon of their assimilationist goals and held especially dear by Miss Carrie for confirming her in "*purpose*," "*person*," and "*vocation*," John is nevertheless conflicted about his bicultural existence to the point of palpable psychological instability (Momaday 2007, 29). In his contemplating monologues, he indicts the school as

“. . . a camp where memory is killed. We must forget our past. Our existence begins with the cutting of our hair and taking of a Christian name. Here at the Kiowa Boarding School at Anadarko, Oklahoma, on the banks of the Washita River, I am taught not to remember but to dismember myself.” (Momaday 2007, 24)

Worn by both sexes long enough to be braided, hair signifies power, virility and physical strength and ties the individual to Mother Earth's long grasses that once nourished the sacred Buffalo. Thus, when one's hair is cut, vitality is purportedly sapped, and a crucial facet of one's unique relationship with oneself is lost. But surely most damaging to one's mental health is the weakening of the spiritual connection to the revered landscape, where the spirits of the ancestors dwell, whose mythic tales provide wisdom and guidance for centering one's life (Basso 1996; Chamberlin 2003). Moreover, being compelled to take on a Christian name amounts to being forced to reject one's childhood and family. The three runaways' Kiowa patronymics, "*Seta*," "*Koi-khan-hodle*," and "*Mosatse*," have been transmuted by school officials into "*Sailor*," an approximate homophone but otherwise a completely arbitrary appellation, "*Dragonfly*," a direct translation from Kiowa, and "*Muchacho*," a rephonologization of a Kiowa borrowing back to its Spanish etymon—the latter boy's father is a Mexican captive who has remained with the tribe. Lastly, the banks of the Washita River are iconic in Kiowa oral tradition as the place where in 1890 the tribe sought for the last time to gather for the Sundance, a summer solstice ritual, but was prevented by the government agent, who called for military troops from nearby Fort Sill (Taylor 2021). It is also the location where in the winter of 1868 several Kiowa families who were camped with their Cheyenne allies were slaughtered by a cavalry regiment commanded by none other than the now infamous Colonel George Armstrong Custer, a ruthless butcher, whose demise at the hands of Lakota warriors eight years later has been celebrated as poetic justice by virtually all American Indians (Nye, 1937, 63; Utley and Washburn, 2002). Thus, the Kiowa Boarding School, now located by the same stream, remains for John and his fellow students a signifier of genocide and continued cultural extermination.

John's conflicted psychological state emerges saliently in Act One, Scene Two, during his dialogue with Miss Carrie, as he interjects implications of the school's culture of orality and as he alludes to mythic texts which appear to be irrelevant to the topic of the conversation. The resulting incongruity is defamiliarizing since the speech of a fictional character in the world of a text is necessarily based on its commonality with the modes of conversational conduct and social organization of ordinary contexts. Though not homologous modes of communication, dramatic and natural discourses are nonetheless parallel, and expectations of wellformedness in everyday conversation provide the criteria against which aberrant speech is perceived. A speaker's communicative competence equips him with an awareness of context and the forms of communication that are appropriate. Hence, a mismatch between context and utterance results in discursive incongruity, a phenomenon which sociologists have called "*communication out of character*" (Goffman 1956).

When hierarchical social roles, such as pupil and teacher, are clearly defined, especially within the context of an educational institution, an exchange such as the following may be discerned as contravening expectations concerning the relationship of utterance to context.

CARRIE

... It's dreadful, the cold. (She studies him for a moment, smiles.)

At ease, John. Relax. If they were back, you would know, wouldn't you, John?

JOHN PAI

Yes, ma'am. We would all know, I think.

CARRIE

All? How? Why do you say we would all know?

JOHN PAI

The KBS is a compact community, close-knit and efficient. Our grapevine is both complex and compact.

CARRIE

Don't be impertinent." (Momaday 2007, 26)

To affirm the social boundary between Miss Carrie and the indigenous student community of the school, John relies on the exclusive sense of the first-person-plural pronoun, and he reinforces their asymmetrical power relationship with a distancing form of address. In addition, he conveys his inferior social status with hedging to mitigate the impact of his implied claim of access to restricted local knowledge (Lakoff 1973; Geertz 2000). Unaware of his discursive intention and becoming rather flustered, Miss Carrie perceives him as simply violating the Gricean maxim of relation (Jeffries and McIntyre 2010, 106). According to her discursive expectations, his seemingly irrelevant, and at times even verbose, responses effect an incongruity between strategy and context, threatening a disintegration of the discourse at the structural level. However, the possible breakdown is averted with a repair strategy which Miss Carrie initiates in the form of a dismissive negated imperative.

Having assertively re-established the discursive frame, Miss Carrie initially offers a pragmatic olive leaf with a quasi-performative verb, but she remains skeptical of John's confidence in the potential of local knowledge.

"CARRIE

. . . Yes, I believe what you say. The children know that three of their number are missing . . . But not one of them has said a word. Not one of them has said a word or even mentioned the names of the missing ones, not one.

JOHN PAI

Without words or names, they would know.

CARRIE

You speak in riddles, John Pai . . ." (Momaday 2007, 26)

The derailment of her repair prompts Miss Carrie to reproach John for his apparent noncompliance of cooperating with the culturally expected turn-taking routines of English conversations. In her apprehension, the consequence of John's refusal to observe the familiar exchange patterns results in what to her amounts to incomprehensible and irrelevant wordplay. Concurrently, John is frustrated by the failure of his deliberate launch into discursive idiosyncrasy as a strategy to communicate his conviction of the efficacy and extent of indigenous oral networks.

A more efficient repair is achieved as Miss Carrie simply digresses to a different topic, that of praising John for his acceptance to a seminary in New York.

"CARRIE

Goodness knows, I'm proud, I can tell you that. I think in these last few weeks I was as anxious to hear as you were.

JOHN PAI

You deserve the credit ma'am. It was because of you. . .

CARRIE

By no means! Your application was very strong, they say, your application. They speak of your originality, your command of the language, your eloquence.

JOHN PAI

Yours. I set your words down on the paper. I couldn't . . .

CARRIE

Don't be impertinent. I was merely your, your intermediary." (Momaday 2007, 27)

Though her divergence deflects a breakdown of structure, Miss Carrie still apperceives a mismatch between communicative strategy and discourse context. Taking John's seeming display of modesty at face value, she remains impervious to his need for her to acknowledge his conflicted state of mind respecting his bilingual and bicultural reality.

The communicative competence of a speaker in matching an utterance with an appropriate context of use involves knowing when to be familiar and when to be formal,

knowing when to be direct and when to be indirect, or simply knowing when to talk and when to keep quiet. As John realizes that his communicative objectives are foundering, he begins to distance himself further by violating these expectations more aggressively.

JOHN PAI

Imagine. I am eloquent, and it isn't even my native language.

CARRIE

But you have taken possession of it, appropriated it, made it your own, as if you were born to it.

JOHN PAI

I was born to words, truly, ma'am—very old words, from the time when dogs could talk.

CARRIE

You will make a fine preacher, John. You will spread the gospel, as they say. You will glorify the word of God.

JOHN PAI

The word of dog, the voice of the turtle.

CARRIE

(exasperated) If we can get you past your impertinence! Your riddling is . . .
." (Momaday 2007, 28)

At this point the mismatches between utterances and context approach Ionesconian proportions of unstable dialogue. Indeed, the seeming absurdity precipitated by the reverse anagram “dog” for “God,” threatens the communication of any message at all. Yet, John’s rhetorical strategy of ostensible aberration and meaninglessness, which implicitly enacts the very futility of his conflicted existence, also reveals a desperate struggle to create order in his life by reaching out to the mythic texts of his tribe. As disclosed in Act Two, Scene Three, one of the Kiowa discursive markers for the introduction of a mythic tale translates as “*when dogs could talk*” (Momaday 2007, 60). Also of mythic significance, the sacred turtle, along with other fabled animals, donated parts of its body to the Kiowa creation of the horse, a most revered animal whose powerful spirit is embodied by the fierce tornados of the Great Plains (Kansas Historical Society 2021; Momaday 1969, 48).

Paradoxically, it is Miss Carrie’s drawing of attention to the absence of congruity that in itself becomes the message of John’s conflicted existence. In the following exchange, she underscores her concern about the supposed impropriety of such discursive digressions into Kiowa ethnosemantics within the walls of an Indian boarding school, whose general mission is to emphatically suppress all forms indigeneity.

“CARRIE . . . Remember yourself; you are almost no longer a schoolboy; you are almost a man of the cloth.

JOHN PAI

I do remember myself: I was a camp child, a child of the cloth, trade cloth. I preached to the dogs in the name of Sailor, the Dragonfly, and the Muchacho. Amen.

CARRIE

Oh, stop it, John! Just stop it! You're going to pop off with something like that in front of George [the school superintendent] or Agent Adams [the Indian Service official] one of these times, and you're going to be in a sad lot of trouble." (Momaday 2007, 28)

Though mindful of other representatives of institutional authority, John is confident enough in his bond with Miss Carrie to express to her his need to anchor himself in recondite allusions to his Native identity. Thus, trade cloth, such as colorful serapes from Mexico and Pendleton blankets from Oregon, specifically woven with beautiful geometric designs for the Indian market, persists as a conspicuous signifier of indigeneity. After the extermination of the buffalo, the wool blanket replaced the fur robe and has remained, according to Luther Standing Bear, author, activist, and himself one of the early survivors of the Carlisle boarding school, "*a true American garment . . . worn with the significance of language . . . many an Indian has accompanied his own personal salvation by going 'back to the blanket'"* (Standing Bear 2021). The latter phrase endures in contemporary reservation-speak with the same meaning of coming back to the fold. Next, instead of memorializing the three runaway boys by their Kiowa patronymics, John draws attention to their suffering by invoking their imposed alienating exonyms. Lastly, as mythic creatures, dogs belong to the realm of the sacred, prompting him to finish his dialogic turn with a burst of irony and defiance by mocking the discourse marker for closing Christian prayers. And though she does not entirely ignore the indices of their disparate social statuses, Miss Carrie appears somewhat sympathetic to what she considers his penchant for whimsical chatter. "*I love to play at words with you,"* she tells him, "*[b]ut sometimes I think I've been wrong to encourage you"* (Momaday 2007, 29). Hence, her indulgence only reaches as far as that of a caring teacher's condescension, without allowing her to recognize John's psychological urgency to create an ordered reality to relieve his state of disorientation.

In the midst of a severe identity crisis, John yearns desperately to fit into a social order, an enculturation process which he should have accomplished during adolescence. However, his transition from childhood to adulthood was severely disturbed by the boarding school trauma. During a period when he could have been searching for a sense of self through an in-depth examination and acquisition of tribal values, John was indoctrinated to renounce his kin's worldview as primitive and, instead, has been impelled to envisage a dubious future as a preacher, an intensely public vocation, in an alien society whose racial ideology is anything but welcoming. In his monologic deliberations, he analogizes his confused psychosocial state to a split personality, and he seeks solace in the mythic texts he heard as a child recounted by the elders of his tribe.

" . . . I am beside myself . . . I like the notion of being beside myself. We Gaigwu, we Kiowas, have a story, an old, holy story about hero twins. One boy threw up a gaming wheel. It came down and split him in two. He was two boys then, twins. He stood beside himself . . ." (Momaday 2007, 24)

Essentially, John realizes that he has become two different persons at odds with each other. The precarious existence between two cultures in which John finds himself was assigned in the early sociological literature the label “*marginal man*” (Stonequist 1937). Such individuals experience awkwardness and stress in the everyday situations of a strange social environment in which they estimate themselves as less than fully competent to understand the seemingly complex tasks of interacting in situationally adequate ways. Intensifying this fragile state of mind is the host culture’s tendency to stigmatize such outsiders as socioculturally incompetent and thus undistinguished, which is especially the case when they originate from minority communities of color, such as Indian reservations, considered politically and economically powerless, and therefore deprived of cultural prestige.

However, the dispiriting powerlessness of social marginality may motivate some intercultural travelers to attain an advanced level of acculturation enabling them to command a less-than-perfect but nonetheless adequate competency for functioning in the unsympathetic target culture. To alleviate the invisibility consequential of their underprivileged status, they must exert themselves to gamble on felicitous interactions with members of a race-conscious society. Furthermore, they must endeavor to undergo an arduous biographical conversion involving a re-imagining of themselves and their past (Berger and Luckmann 1966, 143). Later, they may regret, perhaps even deplore, their fixation on the identification with the rejective mainstream culture since the denial of their roots may have led to self-loathing and debilitating suffering. Yet, some reconciliation is achievable for those who ultimately envision their bicultural, and especially their bilingual, capabilities as viable social capital and who thence reconstitute themselves as possessing unique and invaluable experiences derived from crossing cultural borders and living in an ambivalent world. Along those lines of optimistic expectations, John Pai muses,

“ . . . if I could just get back to the camps, with all my schooling, of course, and reacquaint myself with the old people and with the daughter of Tsentainte or with that tall girl from Saddle Mountain, I think I could be a fine, fine preacher. Aiee!” (Momaday 2007, 25)

At least, that was John’s intention. But the narrative voice of the tribal elder Mother Goodeye apprises us that after he had boarded the train, his first time stepping onto the iron monster, for the long journey to the seminary in New York, he quickly jumped off and ran back to the Kiowa camps. Perhaps, he was reminded of one of his uncles, “*in chains . . . sick and afraid,*” who had been transported by the same means to the military prison at Fort Marion, Florida, after the Kiowa’s final defeat during the Red River War (Momaday 2007, 70, 55). Or, perhaps, it was “*Seta,*” “*Koi-khan-hodle,*” and “*Mosatse,*” who beckoned him “*back to the blanket.*”

4. Conclusion

Incongruous dialogue creates characters who reflect psychosocial fragmentation, in John Pai's case, in response to the convergence of worldviews radically at odds with each other, giving rise to severely conflicting ordering structures. The communicative competence that organizes canonical conversations in English necessarily acts as a comparative frame for the interpretation of the displayed dissonant interactions. It is the mismatch between John's speech and the discourse context in which it is embedded within the text that produces the oddity of his seemingly incongruous discourse. John's psychological urgency to create an ordered reality to relieve his state of disorientation is exacerbated by the ostensibly elusive syncretism of the colliding sets of radically contrasting cultural schemata. Moreover, John's disturbed sense of identity stands emblematic of American Indian communities' painful struggles with acculturation and of their collective suffering. Ultimately, however, John and his kin will survive by confidently reaffirming their Native identity and reorganizing their lives with the meanings passed on by their traditional texts, into which the three runaway boys have already passed. In the words of Luther Standing Bear, "*it is the unquenchable spirit that saved him -- his clinging to Indian ways, Indian thought, and tradition that has kept him and is keeping him today*" (Standing Bear, 2021).

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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Guillermo Bartelt is a sociolinguist with a focus on the English varieties of American Indians at the spoken as well as written levels.

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