



## HEDGED ASSERTIONS IN MOMADAY'S *THE MAN MADE OF WORDS*

**Guillermo Bartelt<sup>i</sup>**

California State University,  
Northridge, USA

### **Abstract:**

In essays elucidating his beliefs in the sacredness of the Southwestern landscape, the relevance of American Indian oral tradition, and the power of language in shaping Native worldviews, Scott Momaday frequently qualifies declarative sentences focusing on these themes with evidential hedges formed with epistemic modals and adverbials as well as with attitudinal hedges consisting of pronoun-verb constructions. Since an assertion implies knowledge of the proposition, hedges are therefore indicative of a distancing from convictions of its truth, or at least of a weakened commitment to its assertoric force.

**Keywords:** American Indian non-fiction, stylistics, evidential and attitudinal hedges

### **1. Introduction**

Hailed as the dean of American Indian literature, the Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist, poet, and playwright Scott Momaday has also been a prolific essayist. Covering a span of over thirty years and strewn about in diverse newspapers and magazines, many of his articles have been made more readily available in a collection entitled *The Man Made of Words* (1997). Divided into three parts, *The Man Made of Words*, *Essays in Place*, and *The Storyteller and his Art*, these pieces celebrate American Indian oral tradition, the Southwestern American landscape, and poetic language. The latter motif, which he characterizes as “*the miracle of symbols and sounds that . . . defines [us] as human beings,*” Momaday offers as the unifying theme of his essays, which might otherwise “*seem as random observations, recollections, and evocations of place and procession*” (Momaday 1997, 1). It is especially the creative part of language, which makes possible the textual (re)creation of oneself, that Momaday promulgates as the highest potential of the imagination. Yet, he cautions that imagination must be employed responsibly, especially when advancing perspectives on the human condition, since “*stories have moral implications and are established squarely upon belief*” (Momaday 1997, 3). Hence, salient in his essays is a pronounced hesitancy in the assertions of his beliefs regarding the

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<sup>i</sup> Correspondence: email [gbartelt@prodigy.net](mailto:gbartelt@prodigy.net), [guillermo.bartelt@csun.edu](mailto:guillermo.bartelt@csun.edu)

sacredness of the landscape, the continued relevance of oral tradition, and the power of language in shaping the worldview of a culture. To this end, Momaday frequently qualifies declarative sentences dealing with these themes with evidential hedges expressed by epistemic modals and adverbials as well as with attitudinal hedges consisting of pronoun-verb constructions. Since an assertion implies knowledge of its proposition, the application of a hedge can therefore be indicative of a cautious surmising of its truth, or at least of a weakened commitment to its assertoric force (Turri 2016; Benton and Elswyk 2020, 4).

## 2. The Sacred Landscape

In the American Southwest and the Southern Plains, the two Native cultural provinces with which Momaday is intimately familiar, traditionalists adhere to an animistic belief system which imagines the physical world as inhabited by spiritual beings. As such, landforms, and even atmospheric phenomena, are conceived as containing inner forms which are human-like and whose powers not only influence but ultimately determine human destiny (Wyman 1957). Additionally, the landscape serves a mnemonic function by associating paramount mythic tales, most often those dispensing moral advice, with specific topographic features (Basso 1996). These revered geographic points epitomize a fusion of time and space, facilitating a visibility for the contemplation of tribal values and ideologies (Bakhtin 1981).

Though Momaday avoids endorsing animistic beliefs explicitly, he underscores their continuing significance in shaping American Indian values and ideologies. In his essay entitled *A First American Views his Land*, Momaday apprises his readership that,

(1) *"I tell my students that the American Indian has a unique investment in the American landscape."*

(2) *"It is an investment that represents perhaps thirty thousand years of habitation."* (Momaday 1997, 33)

The propositions in (1) and (2) are, firstly, framed by a folk model which beholds professorial discourse not only as truthful but also as authoritative. Additionally, in overlapping with the values and ideologies of American culture, the instructor's lecture is surmised as "unbiased" as well as "logical." To further lend credence to his assertions, Momaday selects a nominal metaphorical construction from the discourse of finance, providing him with a seemingly confident anchoring of the propositions within the respected ideology of capitalism, in which analogies to the world of accounting and banking abound. Also, to enhance the credibility of his assertion, Momaday is compelled by discursive expectations to add as much concrete detail as memory, or cursory references, permit. However, whenever specifics, such as approximate numbers, are cited, Momaday consistently distances himself somewhat from the source or from his own memory, either of which he might suspect as unreliable, by inserting an evidential

hedge such as the epistemic modal *perhaps* in (2). Nevertheless, evidential hedges generally still accommodate a vigorous commitment to the proposition, with only restrained weakening of the assertoric force.

For a more robust form of qualification, Momaday relies on attitudinal hedges, most often consisting of a construction of the first-person-singular subjective pronoun and a verb such as *believe*, *suspect*, or *think*, which he inserts in either medial or final sentential position.

(3) "*The process of investment and appropriation is, I believe, preeminently a function of the imagination.*" (Momaday 1997, 39)

(4) "*In our society as a whole we conceive the land in terms of ownership and use.*"

(5) "*It is a lifeless medium of exchange; it has for most of us, I suspect, no more spirituality than has an automobile, say, or a refrigerator.*" (Momaday 1997, 40)

In medial position, especially within the verb phrase, as in (3), the attitudinal hedge effectively interrupts and thus significantly tempers a disputable assertion in reference to highly subjective cognitive processes. In (4) - (5) the presumption of supposedly common European and North American absolutist beliefs in inanimacy is curbed in (5) by an attitudinal hedge separating indirect and direct objects.

In final position, as in the following excerpt from Momaday's essay entitled *An American Land Ethic*, the qualification seems less vigorous, since the hedge does not break up the sentence.

(6) "*Once in his life a man ought to concentrate his mind upon the remembered earth, I believe.*" (Momaday 1997, 45)

Yet, the force of this sentence-finally positioned attitudinal hedge, which modifies an exceedingly personal prescription, also extends into the assertion that follows.

(7) "*He ought to give himself up to a particular landscape in his experience, to look at it from as many angles as he can, to wonder about it, to dwell upon it.*" (Momaday 1997, 45)

The modal construction in (7) is one of the most compelling with regard to the meanings of duty, correctness, or the criticizing of someone's actions. Similar to imperatives, it can be perceived as overly paternalistic and is thus used sparingly by English speakers of equal social rank. Moreover, the discontinuous phrasal verb separated by a reflexive pronoun represents a metaphorical construction derived from the discourse of warfare, in this case, surrender (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). However, the mitigating carry-over of the attitudinal hedge from (6) allays the possible infringement

upon conventions of politeness between social equals, among whom directives, imperatives as well as rebarbative analogies are expected to be cushioned.

The choice of modality in (7) is implicitly suggestive of a quasi-animistic spirituality which contemplates man's submission to nature, with the implication of the physical world as not only alive but also as transacting as a supernatural agent. Momaday informs his readers that,

(8) *"[v]ery old in the Native American worldview is the conviction that the earth is vital, that there is a spiritual dimension to it, a dimension to which man rightly exists."*

(9) *"It follows logically that there are ethical imperatives in this matter, I think."* (Momaday 1997, 39)

The religious overtones inherent in the assertion in (8) are ostensibly buttressed by references to animistic beliefs of great but undetermined antiquity lexified adjectivally and heightened with an intensifier. In addition, a significant degree of confidence is tacit in the adjectival, adverbial, and nominal constructions. However, the follow-up proposition in (9) contains a moralistic sentiment which is rationalized with an exceedingly idiosyncratic form of deduction. It is this eminently subjective domain which solicits to be moderated by a sentence-final attitudinal hedge to impart an acknowledgement of this contestable stance.

In numerous interviews, Momaday has denied harboring any ambition with respect to a role as an activist of political or social causes. Representative are his responses to Louis Owens and Bettye Givens.

*"That's not my disposition somehow. I'm not a political person."* (Balassi et al 1990, 52)

*"But I don't care about changing attitudes. That's not the sort of writing I do. I don't make any sort of social comment."* (Givens 1982, 83)

Yet, in a number of essays, Momaday does, in fact, express concern about the timely sociopolitical issue concerning the degradation of the environment by advocating an emulation of the Indian spiritual approach to the land as a practice of ecological responsibility. In his essay *An American Land Ethic*, he professes that his people, the Kiowa, have always had a *"deep, ethical regard for the land,"* and he admonishes his readership that,

(10) *"[w]e had better learn from it."*

(11) *"Surely the ethic is merely latent in ourselves."*

(12) *"It must now be activated, I believe."*

(13) *"We Americans must come again to a moral comprehension of the earth and air."*

(14) *"We must live according to the principle of a land ethic."*

(15) *"The alternative is that we shall not live at all."* (Momaday 1997, 49)

Though moralizing tends to exist in the eye of the beholder, it is, if perceived as such, always at peril of being interpreted as sanctimonious finger-wagging. Grudgingly accepted from preachers and rarely tolerated from politicians, it is otherwise profoundly resented in mainstream American culture, which professes to be politically democratic and socially egalitarian. To avoid running the risk of possibly alienating his readership, Momaday selects three strategies to mitigate the impact of his exhortation. In (10) - (15), the inclusive sense of the first person-plural pronoun allows for his own placement among the addressees whose orientation he wishes to change, and thus the modal of firm obligation in (12) - (14) is blunted. A further abatement in (11) is accomplished with a sentence-initial evidential hedge in the form of an adverbial. However, the more effective moderation emerges as a sentence-final attitudinal hedge in (12), whose impact extends to (13) - (15).

Notwithstanding its propensity for extreme self-confidence in its aims, moralizing can never be so certain of its ends as to silence disagreement entirely. Thus, it is incumbent upon the assiduous moralist to at least hint at his capacity for empathy.

(16) *"One effect of the technological revolution has been to uproot us from the soil."*

(17) *"We have become disoriented, I believe;"*

(18) *"...we have suffered a kind of psychic dislocation of ourselves in time and space."*  
(Momaday 1997, 47)

The dilemma with moralism is not only that sanctimony is repellent but also that its seemingly arrogant certitude engenders an impulse to demonize. Therefore, the scrupulous moralist, in attempting to transform *Anschaungen* without overreaching, must infuse some measure of prudence and humility. The sentence-final attitudinal hedge in (17) accomplishes that disposition by abating the boldness expressed in (16) - (18). Since believing assertions is not as strong as knowing them, a weakened position allows Momaday to exhibit empathy with a lessened commitment to the alleged truth of these propositions.

Ultimately, Momaday advocates a secular kind of geopiety in which the normal adjustment to, and subsequent appreciation of, a particular type of physical environment is extended to a compelling commitment of stewardship.

(19) *"There is no alternative, I believe, if we are to realize and maintain our humanity, for our humanity must consist in part in the ethical as well as in the practical ideal of preservation."* (Momaday 1997, 47)

The mid-sentential attitudinal hedge in (19) tempers not only the negated predicate nominative of the existential dummy-subject construction but also the subjunctivized assertion that follows. A further subduing of the self-appointed moral posture is again facilitated with the inclusive sense of the first-person-plural subjective and possessive pronouns.

### 3. Oral Tradition

Though it dwarfs the privileged medium of literature in sheer volume, variety, and purpose, oral tradition, notwithstanding the esoteric inquiries of folklorists, is largely dismissed as a viable vehicle for the preservation of the texts of significance to a culture. Yet, despite impressive increases in literacy, orality remains the predominant but unacknowledged mode of transmitting values and ideologies. Undisputed, however, is its place of honor as a precursor to literary genres. Hence, as a champion of American Indian oral traditions, Momaday seizes upon that canonization in his essay entitled *The Native Voice in American Literature*.

(20) *"soldiers  
you fled  
even the eagle dies."* (Momaday 1997, 20)

(21) *"In this song we have one of the most concentrated and beautiful examples of American Indian oral tradition that I know. . . (22) This Sioux formula embodies in seven words the essence of literature, I believe."* (Momaday 1997, 20)

Appraising the short, transcribed and translated oral text in (20) as a *"nearly perfect formula,"* Momaday claims to discern,

(23) *"a profound equation in which elements of life and death and fear are defined in terms of freedom and courage and nobility."* (Momaday 1997, 19)

That thought-provoking insight in (23) requires, nevertheless, quite a leap in order to advocate for such a textual minimus as in (20) to embody the kernel of the belles-lettres. Thus, the assertions in (21) and (22) demand hedges not only to qualify Momaday's self-declared familiarity, extensive though it may be, with the diverse body of recorded as well as unrecorded tribal texts but also to moderate his risky postulation regarding the speculated nucleus, and by extension the theorized origin, of literature.

Furthermore, in his essay *To Save A Great Vision*, Momaday proposes the possibility of the preservation of American Indian oral tradition through careful

recording and translation, if carried out by a sympathetic litterateur such as the poet John Neihardt. With the aid of a translator, Neihardt interviewed the sixty-seven-year-old Lakota shaman Black Elk in 1931 and with the publication of *Black Elk Speaks* made available to the American public a euphonious portrayal of the last days of aboriginal Plains Indian life. Momaday wholeheartedly endorses Neihardt's edited version of the translation as poetic.

(24) *"The lyrical names, the precise ordering of detail, the evocation of the warrior ideal, these constitute a kind of common denominator, a bridge between the poem and the song, between literature and legend, between the written tradition and the oral."*

(25) *"The transformation of speech into writing—this speech into this writing—is a matter of great importance, I believe."* (Momaday 1997, 28)

The ostensibly defensive sentence-final hedging of the assertion in (25) as a follow-up to the proposition in (24) is motivated undoubtedly in response to the critical debates surrounding the accuracy of this particular collaborative memoir. Some of those concerns, voiced in annotations and reviews, have even been appended to the latest editions of Neihardt's work (2014). Particularly ethnographers contend that Lakota traditionalists have rejected Neihardt's rendition as representative of Lakota beliefs. It is argued that by relying solely on the translation of an intermediary, a Lakota-English bilingual, Neihardt did not fully understand the Native context of Black Elk's narrative (Neihardt 2014). Other critics allege that Neihardt may have exaggerated or even altered some parts of Black Elk's account in order to make it more accessible or marketable to the intended White audience of the 1930s (Silvio 1999).

Emphatically dismissing the relevance of the controversies surrounding the true authorship or the quality of the translation of *Black Elk Speaks*, Momaday simply credits Neihardt the poet as possessing the sensibility which rendered him particularly receptive to oral discourse.

(26) *"Even though he could not understand the language that Black Elk spoke, we cannot doubt, I think, that he discerned quite readily the rhythms, the inflections and alliterations of the holy man's speech."* (Momaday 1997, 28)

Alliterations also abound in Neihardt's edited translation, which Momaday seems to elevate as somehow having been inspired by Neihardt's exposure to the original Lakota elocution he could not understand. The conjecture of that somewhat implausible transmission demands to be bolstered by the inclusive sense of the first-person-plural pronoun to involve the reader as a claimant of the assertion in (26). Nevertheless, the muscular modal of ability negating a verb with a lack-of-conviction meaning triggers a sententially medial attitudinal hedge in order to abate his conviction of a discursive bridge between oral tradition and literature.

Contemplating *Black Elk Speaks* as an “*extraordinary human document*,” Momaday exalts its eminence as a symbolic chronicle of the spiritual journey of the Lakota people.

(27) “*That the pilgrimage was in a sense ended at Wounded Knee in 1890, that Black Elk’s words at last take a tragic turn—‘There is no center any longer, and the sacred tree is dead’—is of little consequence in the long run, I believe.*”

(28) “*For in that sudden and absolute investment in the tragic, in the whole assumption of a tragic sense, there is immeasurable vindication, the achievement of a profound and permanent dignity.*” (Momaday 1997, 22)

Wounded Knee, the location in South Dakota of the last massacre perpetrated by the US military upon the Lakota people, lives on in their tribal memory as well as in revisionist history as the final infamy in the complicated record of Indian-White relations. With absolute defeat and domination came the prohibition of the core of Plains-Indian religion, the Sundance, a summer solstice ritual during which a carefully selected cottonwood tree represented the axis mundi. To seemingly brush aside the calamitous collapse of the entire traditional social order and the psychologically debilitating deprivations delineated in (27) and thus to rationalize the affirmations in (28), Momaday must mitigate his assertions with a sententially final attitudinal hedge whose force extends into the following discourse.

Comparable with his esteem of Neihardt, Momaday asseverates in his essay entitled *A Divine Blindness: The Place of Words in a State of Grace*, his admiration of the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges, who by the age of fifty-five had become completely blind. Ironically enough, that progressive disability may have empowered him to enhance his imagination for the creation of innovative literary symbols.

(29) “*What Borges most esteemed in writing, in those great books he knew but could not read, I suspect, were precisely the things that distinguish the oral tradition—awe, astonishment, imagination, belief, holy dread.*” (Momaday 1997, 85)

The typhlosis in his mature years led Borges to focus his creative effort on short stories and poetry, the latter notably revered by Momaday as the crown of literature and conjectured to represent the closest link to oral tradition. Nevertheless, Momaday cautions himself in (29) with a mid-sentential attitudinal hedge in attributing to Borges the same emotions and sentiments he ascribes to tribal orators and their participatory audiences, upon whom the tales and songs were targeted to impress the values and ideologies of their kindred and clan.

#### 4. Language and Worldview

Since his parents were fortunate enough to secure employment during the Great Depression as teachers with the Indian Service, Momaday was given the rare opportunity



of spending his formative years on several Indian reservations in Arizona and New Mexico, at a time when Native life was still traditional and was just beginning to be transformed by mainstream societal pressures. That exposure allowed Momaday to experience not only his father's Kiowa traditions of Oklahoma but also those of Southwestern tribes such as the Apache, Navajo, and especially Jemez Pueblo, where the family moved when he was twelve years old and where he lived until he had to attend off-reservation high schools.

Notwithstanding that unique background, Momaday is careful in his essay entitled *On Indian-White Relations: A Point of View* to avoid possibly misleading his readership into an assumed integrality of his understanding of the Indian worldview as an insider.

(30) *"In case of my own writing, where it centers upon Indian life, and especially upon an Indian way of looking at the world, I can say with some validity, I think, that I have written of "the thing experienced" as well as of "the thing observed.""* (Momaday 1997, 51)

Yet, as a Kiowa from Oklahoma and a monolingual English speaker, young Momaday was by his own admission regarded as an outsider, which limited his access to the "deeper" meanings of the Southwestern Indian worldview, ultimately accessible only through fluency in one of the tribal tongues (Momaday 1976). Thus, the sententially medial attitudinal hedge in (30) reflects an honest moderation of his assessment of any self-declared insights into the Indian cosmos.

Though lacking fluency in a tribal tongue, including the Kiowa speech of his father's people, Momaday's exposure to the rhythms and sounds of indigenous languages enabled him nevertheless to identify many words and phrases, which are, in turn, embedded in indigenous cultural practices and religious beliefs. Thus, he is persuaded by the linguistic dimension as pivotal in comprehending the collisions of cultural schemata.

(31) *"The dichotomy that most closely informs the history of Indian-white relations is realized in language, I believe."* (Momaday 1997, 52)

As an intercultural traveler and especially as a poet, Momaday is keenly aware of the role of language, particularly the Indian words and phrases familiar to him, in organizing and giving meaning to experiences and thus defining the way an ethnicity understands itself, the world, and its place in it. Though intuitively appealing, it might be perceived as overly reductive to ascribe the entire nature of cultural conflict to linguistic misunderstandings. Hence, the sentence-final attitudinal hedge in (31) serves as a vehicle for such a seemingly simplistic assertion to be more readily accepted.

The American Southwest continues to be inhabited by Native peoples whose cultural constructs have been among the most anachronistic in North America. Referring especially to the Pueblo Indian communities of New Mexico in his essay entitled *The Morality of Indian Hating* as "islands of refuge in time and space, committed absolutely to the

*principle of independence and isolation,*" Momaday does, nevertheless, predict a gradual breakdown of traditionalism (Momaday 1997, 75).

(32) *"The sense of temporality which has pervaded the old costumbres [traditions] is, one thinks, an illusion produced by the sad certainty that, beyond sanctuaries, cultural extinction is imminent."* (Momaday 1997, 75)

Interestingly enough, the switch from the usual first-person-singular pronoun to an indefinite form for the mid-sentential hedge in (32) seems to offer a relatively softer moderation than the more robust mitigation which a definite counterpart might have effected. This pronominal indefiniteness allows the reader to entertain the hope that Momaday's seemingly foregone conclusion of impending cultural doom might be too hasty and that enclaves of indigenism might endure after all.

## 5. Conclusion

Refraining from certain unqualified propositions for which he might anticipate refutations, Momaday incurs less responsibility with hedged assertions which intrinsically qualify his otherwise apparent confidence in his pronouncements. His choice to hedge allows him to appear careful enough to evade flat-out assertions of contestable notions, while nevertheless phrasing his postulations as declarative sentences. Since as a Native American he inherently occupies a position of authority, Momaday can confidentially associate himself with a significant degree of understanding regarding indigenous cultural issues. Nevertheless, expectations of discursive politeness motivate him to engage in frequent hedging, occasionally abetted by switches to first-person-plural pronominals, as a semiotic of constraint and propriety. Thus, his application of epistemic modals and adverbials for evidential hedges, while still conveying a vigorous commitment to the proposition, does achieve a token weakening of the assertoric force. For a more robust form of qualification, Momaday relies on attitudinal hedges, consisting of constructions of a first-person-singular subjective pronoun, or an indefinite counterpart, and a verb in either medial or final sentential position. In medial position, especially within the verb phrase, an attitudinal hedge interrupts a disputable assertion which needs to be tempered. In final position, its mitigating force extends to portions of the following discourse. Noticeably, the more frequent hedges in his essays are doxastic; that is, they offer his belief as the only justification for his assertions without attempting to take into account any external confirmation. Since believing potentially controvertible assertions, especially those involving moralistic pronouncements or idiosyncratic forms of rationalization, is not as strong as knowing them, a hedged position allows Momaday to exhibit discursive courtesy through a weakened commitment to the alleged truth of such propositions.

## Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

### About the Author

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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