Spokes in a Wheel: A Linguistic and Rhetorical Analysis of Native American Public Discourse
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SPOKES IN A WHEEL: A LINGUISTIC AND RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF NATIVE AMERICAN PUBLIC DISCOURSE[1]

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Public speeches by Native Americans are often stereotyped by Whites as "unorganized" or "rambling". Careful listening, however reveals considerable similarity between speeches. Further, Native Americans are easily able to separate bad speeches from good ones and to rate speakers according to their speaking skills. These last observations lead to the suspicion that it is not that these speeches lack structure, but that they follow different structural principles than do speeches by Whites. It is the lack of understanding of these different principles which is the problem. Cooley and Babich (1979) examined Native American speeches in an attempt to determine the principles by which they are organized and were immediately faced with the problem of what system to use to analyze them.

In that paper we aimed to furnish teachers with sufficient knowledge about the structures of these speeches that they could begin to attack the stereotype. For that purpose, complex linguistic analyses of discourse structure which require considerable theoretical background, such as the one that Longacre (1976) proposes, are inappropriate. Traditional rhetorical analyses are also inappropriate. Philipsen (1972) has shown that Navajo speech behavior operates within a different rhetorical framework than White speech behavior. One should not use traditional rhetorical constructs, which are based on Western cultural norms (Young, et al, pp. 1-9) since applying those constructs would then show Native American speakers as deviant.

It seems, however, inappropriate to totally discard either linguistic or rhetorical approaches. Instead, what is needed is a system which unilizes something of each: the cultural perspective on organization which rhetorical theory supplies and rigorous analytic methods from linguistics. Thus a system that appears to be revealing is an analysis of the linguistic structure which is tied to an analysis of the rhetorical structure. This paper describes a set of data using that analytic system. It first examines the organization and progression of topic, paying particular attention to the relation of topics to each other and to the subject of the discourse. Secondly, it examines the organization within each topic and the structure of the transitions between topics. Finally it examines the cohesive devices (Halliday and Hasan, 1973), in particular the device of reference, which these speakers use. This analysis reveals both the rhetorican structures and the ways those structures are realized.

The corpus is a series of speeches, 12 in all, by Native Americans from various tribes. Eight of these speeches were delivered by students in Principles of Communication, an introductory course at the University of Oklahoma. These speeches varied in length from three minutes, forty-five seconds to nearly 17 minutes.

All student speeches were simultaneously video- and audio-recorded with the permission of the entire class. The remaining four speeches were delivered by three older prestigious Native Americans. Only one was videotaped, but all were audiotaped with the full knowledge of the speaker. These speeches are of two types: two of them were delivered before an audience, the other two were recorded in an "as if" situation, in which the speaker had been asked to prepare a speech in advance and deliver it "as if" he speaking to an audience fron his tribe on some ceremonial occasion. These speakers were Kiowa, Creek, and Cherokee.

Data Analysis: Before proceeding, it is necessary to define the constructs which I have used. There are four: topic, topic change point, organization, and cohesive devices. Topic is defined as the speaker's talk about one and only one content area. Typically a speech will consist of several topics, all related to the subject of the speech in some way. Those places in the speech where the speaker moves from one topic to another are noted as topic change points. These points themselves are not of interest, instead I am interested in the manner in which transition from topic to topic across those points is achieved by the speaker. The perceived relationships which hold between topics, the way those relationships are made evident at topic change points, and the relations between units within topics are defined as the organization of the speech.

Cohesive devices, discussed at length in Halliday and Hasan, 1973, mark coreferential relationships and tie parts of the speech together, making it a text. Cohesive devices are not structural units, but markers of semantic relations which hold in a text. Halliday and Hasan discuss four different kinds of cohesive device: reference, substitution, ellipsis, and conjunction. Cohesion using reference, the device investigated here, is achieved by the use of pronouns or other words which stand in the place of the original referent noun. These words can either refer backward to a coreferent which has already occurred, or forward to one which has not.

There is a great deal of variation in the details of organization of these speeches, as one would expect. Nevertheless, strong similarities exist in the general patterns of organization. The typical speech consists of three to five topics which are related to the subject of the speech in that they are parts of it. For example, a speech on the "Moonie Cult" has three topics: Rev. Moon, Recruiting Techniques, and Brainwashing. (See Example 1 for the first portion of this speech) These three topics are offered by the speaker in a sequence which does not demonstrate any relation between topics, except through their relation to the subject of the speech. In other words, there is no organizational pattern which holds between the topics, but they all can be seen to relate to the subject.

1 This will be on the Moonie Cult, which is a cult started
2 by a gentleman who created every Moonie, which is, I guess,
3 a religious being that has no denomination, supposed to be
4 a unified - any denomination that you want. And he was
5 from Korea. He excaped Korea when the U.S. overcame this
6 POW camp where he was in jail at the time, and he went to
7 New York where he started his religious cult. He started
8 out as a Presbyterian, and he went to the Unification Church
9 which he started and designed himself. I was supposed to
10 talk over brainwashing techniques that the cults used. What
11 they do is they - the Moonies like people who are educated
12 or getting educated, that are young. They usually have
13 their own college canvassers recruiting, looking for people
14 that are depressed waiting for classes that had a test,
15 people who are worried about something, like low morale
16 people. And they invite them over to the group, which con-
17 sists of a lot of smiling faces and a lot of young people,
18 and try to impress them in that sort of state. The object
19 of their recruiting is to get the person to stay over a while
20 and visit and live with them for a little while. And what was
21 told to me was the best time to get a recruit was late in
22 the week, and if it was possible to keep him over and have
23 him miss class the beginning of the next week, chances were
24 that they had them in the cult. And brainwashing is a big
25 controversy right now. . .

EXAMPLE 1

At line 9, the speaker concludes his first topic, Rev. Moon, and begins the next, which is announced as "brainwashing techniques" but which turns out to be "recruiting techniques". At line 24, he concludes that topic and returns to "brainwashing". There are no overt markers of the relation between Rev. Moon and recruiting, or between recruiting and brainwashing. In speeches where the speaker begins with an overtly marked introduction there is often a brief outline of the planned speech which takes the form "first I will. . . next I will. . . and finally I will. . ." (See Example 2).

1 OK, my part of the symposium is dealing with some of the
2 reasons or couses that lead to suicide. And I attempted to
3 cover three specific areas: and I started with Indian
4 reservations, and went on down to the urban society, and I
5 also covered the area of boarding schools. And I found
6 that on a reservation that the living conditions were. . .

EXAMPLE 2

Speakers who use these phrases in their introduction often introduce each topic with a similar phrase. In example 2, line 5, the speaker introduces his first topic with "and I found that on a reservation". This speaker introduces his second topic with "I

went on to research some more in the urban areas", and his third with "and the last topic I attempt to do some research on was boarding schools". These phrases serve to announce a topic change and to tie each topic back to the introduction, but they do not demonstrate any direct relationship between topics. As transitions, then, they operate very abruptly. Often they are simply not there and the topic is merely changed without announcement. (See the last line of Example 1)

In only one of the twelve speeches was there any explicit marking of the relationship between a topic and its immediately adjacent topic. This speech, by one of the students, is immediately recognizable as being different from the others. It is this feature that makes it so. In all the other speeches the only relationship between topics is, as I have noted, implicit, through their relation to the subject of the speech.

. . .and the last topic I attempt to do some research on was boarding schools. And I have a statement here that was made by Laslow and ? on psychosocial adjustment of Indian youth, and this is from the American Journal of Psychiatry. It states that there is a high incidence of suicide among the American Indians on reservations and in Indian schools. Part of the boarding school problems were that there were behavior problems in the children before they even attended the schools. Like a lot of them didn't -- this was the only place they had to go. There were no parents and they had been in a lot of foster homes and stuff and finally they get old enough to go to boarding school they ship them off. They come there with a problem, you know. And its the boarding school, how its set up, a lot of times there isn't enough staff there to suit every child, you know, to help everybody like it should be. There was also some tribal conflict within the many tribes that integrated into the boarding school. I guess attempting suicide was putting oneself into a situation where he might be beat up to the point of death. And also alcohol and drugs, like I say.

EXAMPLE 3

Organization of information within the topic is very much like the organization between topics. In example 3, which illustrates a single topic, there are four information points: prior problems of students, staffing problems, intertribal conflict, and alcoholism. Even though the topic is a unified text, there are no overt marks of the relationship between these four points, excepting their occurence in the topic.

Within topics the text is strongly cohesive and most of the cohesion is realized by pronouns which are coreferential with nouns and other pronouns elsewhere in that topic. Of the four cohesive types which Halliday and Hasan discuss this type, reference, is used an overwhelming percentage of the time. See Example 4.

The first instance of Indian militancy was I guess, well not really the first but when the papers and everything started writing about it and started coming into public view, was the occupation of Alcatraz, and that was in San Fransisco bay. These indians, which weren't really California Indians, they were Indians from all over the United States and there really wasn't that many California Indians in the group that occupied the island. But the reason they took it over was because of an old treaty that said the government when its not using any land it should revert back to the original owners which was the Native Americans. They had a lot of plans for this place you know. They wanted to turn it into a cultural school, also a spiritual center, a museum. It was in San Fransisco Bay but in San Francisco the Native American Center there had burned down, and so they didn't really have any place to go. They lasted out for about two winters, but all the time they was holding out you know there was always confrontations with the federal marshals, which blockaded medical supplies, food, and sanitation facilities. Finally, in the spring of 1970, they cut off their electricity and water, but it wasn't until June of 1971 that they finally, you know, gave up. It was called the war of attrition but, you know, they really didn't accomplish that much but what they did accomplish they knew that they had to carry on and do something else. . .

EXAMPLE 4

In this example there are 30 markers of coreferentiality and 24 of these are third person pronouns, either "they" or "it". The cohesive string which begins with "these Indians", in line 5 , is 16 markers long, ending on line 25. All but two of these markers, "the group" (line 8) and "Native Americans" (line 11-12), are occurences of "they". The use of this device makes cohesion within topics very strong, if somewhat repetitious. However, cohesive devices are not used across topic change points, even in the one speech which is recognizably untypical.

These data demonstrate that these speeches can be described using the system discussed in the early parts of this paper. Each speech, with minor variation, consists of a series of topics whose contents are related to the subject of the speech. There is, however, no demonstrated relationship between topics. Transition devices, when they occur, serve mainly to announce a topic change, but often do not occur at all. Within the topic, points of information are organized in the same way; they are presented serially with little or no demonstrated relationship between them. Within each topic there is a strong cohesive effect which is achieved mainly by using pronominal reference. However, cohesive devices are not used to tie topics together.

The Rhetorical Organization of Native American Speeches: How can the organization of these speeches be related to the culture of the speakers? Ms. Diana Labadie-Wondergem, an Osage Indian, has suggested a useful rhetorical model: a wagon wheel with the subject of the speech located on the hub, and the speaker on the rim. The speaker moves along the rim to offer his audience a series of different perspectives on the subject. These topics, the spokes of the wheel, appear as though they were being presented serially. They all relate to the subject of the speech, but are separate from each other although the extent of the separation will depend on the knowledge and intentions of the speaker. If this analog characterizes the structure, it then becomes very difficult to discern any intertopic relationship, because none should exist. Spokes do not branch from each other.

In Native American culture it is the role of a public speaker to share with his audience as much of his knowledge as he can about a subject, but it is the role of the listener to put that information together and to arrive at a conclusion about its worth or about how it applies to the subject at hand. Any overt marking of the relationship between topics, whether by the use of transition devices, or of cohesive devices, could be construed as an attempt to lead the audience towards a decision, and that would be improper. As a rhetorical model, the spokes-in-a-wheel model adequately characterizes the structure of these speeches, allowing that structure to be related to the roles which Native American culture assigns to the speaker and the audience. To paraphrase one of the speakers in this data set, the speaker supplies the pieces in the puzzle, it is up to the audience to make a picture out of them.

NOTE

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