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**ABSTRACT**

English essayist literacy shares many features with the discourse patterns of English speakers. Where these patterns are different from those of another ethnic group, literacy will be experienced as interethnic communication. Athabaskan discourse differs from that of English in (1) presentation of self (an Athabaskan is silent with new acquaintances); (2) dominance and display (in Athabaskan culture silence is submissive, talk dominant); (3) protection of self-image (Athabaskan courtesy prohibits speaking well of one's self); and (4) closing formulas (Athabaskan has none). These differences result in mutual ethnic stereotyping. To an Athabaskan, to acquire English essayist literacy is to become snug, boastful, talkative, and arrogant. It is suggested that non-Western forms of literacy may be useful in approaching the problem of Athabaskan literacy. For instance, the Kutchin Athabaskans once developed a native literacy on the model of some African peoples, by reading and memorizing scripture (an authoritatively presented text) and spontaneously adopting therefrom forms of writing for practical use. (JB)

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LITERACY AS INTERETHNIC COMMUNICATION:  
(AN ATHABASKAN CASE

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LITERACY AS INTERETHNIC COMMUNICATION:  
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Discourse and Literacy

Two themes currently underlie much interest and activity in interdisciplinary work involving education and linguistics. A strong interest has been developing in the study of discourse especially in interethnic communication. The work of Gumperz (Gumperz and Roberts 1978, Gumperz 1977a, 1977b) has focused on communication between ethnic groups as the most productive arena in which to gain insights into the signaling mechanisms by which speakers communicate information about messages in discourse. Racial and ethnic stereotyping have been shown to develop in interethnic communication by inferences which relate directly to the discourse structure.

A second theme has developed around the issue of literacy. Various researchers (Scribner and Cole 1978a, Goody 1977, Olson 1977, in press) have begun pointing out the centrality of a particular view of reading and writing to education in America. Others (Grace, in press) have shown that this view also permeates work in linguistics. We have begun to see that we have taken a particular model of prose style as the central, organizing model of our view of language. From this view has evolved a complex of theoretical and educational positions that we are now seeking to unravel.

In this paper we will suggest first that the essayist prose style which we have taken as our model of literacy is to a large extent defined by discourse properties. We will then take a special case of interethnic discourse, Athabaskan-English interethnic communication, and show how differences in discourse patterns result in different conversational inferences and in ethnic group stereotyping. Then we will suggest that because the discourse patterns

of the essayist style of writing are basically the same as those of the English speaker in Athabaskan-English communication, the Athabaskan experiences literacy as an instance of Athabaskan-English interethnic communication. From this we suggest that because learning to read and write in the essayist manner is in fact learning new patterns of discourse, literacy for an Athabaskan is experienced as a change in ethnicity. We close then by explaining a known case of Athabaskan literacy as being very different structurally from essayist literacy.

### Varieties of literacy

As we work into our understanding of literacy three areas of insight are developing: the historical, the comparative, and the developmental. In European history we now see essayist literacy as a relative dateable phenomenon. It shares with many other developments a common orientation and a common past. At the same time when we compare European literacy with Asian literacy we see that the existence of two major orientations to the written word are not necessarily mutually exclusive within one society nor sequentially related as historical developments. Finally as we look at the development of literacy in formerly oral societies we see that there may be differential distribution of literacy styles. In order to understand literacy as a problem of interethnic communication we first need to understand some of the relevant structural differences among types of literacy.

### The Enlightenment discontinuity

Much of what we take for granted in our contemporary world came into existence around 200 years ago as part of a general reorganization of European knowledge structures. In a series of books Foucault (1973, 1976, 1977a, 1977b) has tied together the beginning of what he calls an 'episteme.' He

sees as related the development of the modern Sing Sing style prison after the model of Jeremy Bentham, the workhouse, the modern public school and examination system, the military review, the zoological garden and botanical garden, historical-comparative linguistics and the modern concept of literature and essayist prose. Although his argument is complex and not without internal problems, it is important to see in these developments a similar orientation to knowledge. The idea of the modern prison is the same as that of the workhouse or factory. A single observer may watch, and through watching control, the activity of a large group of people. People are arranged as entities displayed in separate cells or working positions which by their arrangement display the ordering of the penal or productive system.

A zoo, a garden or a military review is much the same in its orderly display to the view of the ruling mind which orders and arranges the system. The visual domain is the organizing domain. Other relationships are subordinated. The logic of relationships between species and genera on the basis of morphology is paralleled in natural history, comparative linguistics, and penal discipline. A rose is related to other plants, not to the soil in which it grows. A horse is related to mammals, not to the grasses it eats. In writing what becomes significant are the grammatical relationships internal to the text. The relationship of the text to the world of action is subordinated to its internal arrangements.

Goody (1977) has argued that literacy leads to organization by classification through the access to display of order that the visual mode provides. The reorganization that was experienced in Europe some 200 years ago could then be seen as a historical outcome of literacy, or to be more exact, widespread literacy. Ong (1958, 1967, 1977) has argued that this new orientation to language and thought was a result of printing which facilitated both

visual display and highly accurate replication. With printing that visual display became accessible to a much larger audience.

Another important factor in the European reorganization of knowledge was the methodism of Peter Ramus. Ong (1958) discusses the great influence that Ramus and his followers had in organizing schooling and pedagogy in Europe around orderly 'methodized' visual displays. The emphasis in schooling on organizing knowledge paralleled the view of language as part of this world of knowledge. Language came to be viewed as primarily visual, that is as writing, as highly organized or grammatical and as a transparent representation of the natural order of the universe.

Olson (1977, in press) has associated this reorientation of language toward the text with the somewhat earlier Protestant reform movements in Europe, and especially with the work of Luther. For Luther the text was supreme. Salvation was to be achieved through a deeper reading of the text, not by reference to knowledge found outside the text. He goes on to compare this orientation to the explicit statements of the Royal Society of London that all text which was not clear and sufficient in its own right was to be rejected from their proceedings.

Although the reasons are not all clear, it seems now that by 200 years ago, European knowledge had been reorganized in such a way that nature was taken as lawful, orderly, and independent of human activities. Language as a part of nature was taken to share these properties. At the same time language was seen as the clear reflection of the orderliness of the natural world. All instances of language that showed these properties of clarity and transparency were judged as natural. Language that was unclear, contextual, symbolic, or not strictly grammatical was judged unnatural and by the wisdom of the Enlightenment an offense of God's natural law. It was in

this intellectual atmosphere that the English essayist prose style became enshrined as the natural means for the expression of truth and knowledge. It became both the medium and the ultimate goal of schooling. Access to knowledge has been seen as isomorphic with fluency in the essayist style for 200 years now in Europe and it is because of this that the recent decline in essayist literacy has been viewed as the decline of knowledge itself.

### Chinese literacy

It is striking how little Asian literacy is mentioned in general discussions of literacy. What we wish to add here is just the suggestion that this in itself is an indication of the nearly complete identification of literacy with the European essayist style.

There have been at least two strong and ancient literacy traditions in China, the Confucianist and the Buddhist. O'Harrow (1978) has argued that because of important differences in these traditions, Buddhist literacy was disseminated throughout Asia and became the source of popular literacy movements, while Confucianist literacy remained the literacy of a powerful bureaucratic elite. According to O'Harrow, Confucianist literacy was much like essayist literacy in Europe. It emphasized the text as absolute and inviolable. No copies were allowed to be made that were not made exactly and elegantly. Calligraphy was emphasized so that even the aesthetic appearance of the text would be reproduced. This kept literacy effectively restricted to an elite group of court trained scholars who were the instruments of the distribution of court power. Literacy was transmitted through obedience, training and normative standards.

Buddhist literacy, on the other hand, was characterized by a looseness in regards to the text. Oral interpretation and elaboration were necessary for understanding. Not only copying for dissemination, but also translation, were

fostered. It was in this tolerance of deviation from the original text that the way was opened for popular literacy movements. Anyone could write who chose to and ultimately scripts developed which were only distantly related to the originals.

It is probably dangerous to seek too many parallels in the West or to develop these differences further here. What seems significant to us is that both of these traditions were developed throughout Asia and as far as we know were never strictly in competition. There was probably something more like a functional specialization of these types of literacy, than the enshrinement of one type as the only access to knowledge. We suggest that in our search for understanding of the dominance of essayist literacy in European society it will be important to look further into traditions outside of Europe.

#### The role of scripts

We have suggested, following O'Harrow, that the development of popular literacy and scripts in Asia evolved out of the Buddhist literacy tradition and its open attitude toward change and innovation. Chao (1968) has argued that the use of Chinese writing while it may greatly increase learning time gives a facility in reading that more than compensates for the effort spent in learning. Havelock (1963) has attributed the development of Greek thought in the early period to the development of alphabetic writing and although Goody and Watt (1963) continued this argument, Goody (1968, 1977) more recently has played down the importance of the actual script.

Because some cases of native American literacy have involved non-alphabetic scripts it seems important to keep this arena open for investigation. The syllabic script developed by the Wesleyan missionary Evans has been used widely in Canada by the Crees, for whom it was invented, but also Chipewyans and Inuit. In the Kutchin area McDonald (1911) developed an alphabetic

system but insisted that his experience had led him to feel that only a syllabary was effective in teaching literacy. The longstanding strength of Kutchin literacy in the system developed by McDonald attests to factors that we must seek to understand.

### Vai Literacy

In an attempt to begin to sort out the range of factors relating literacy, schooling, and cognition, Scribner and Cole (1978a, 1978b) have been involved in a study of literacy in Africa. There they have described a situation in which three types of literacy exist together. The Vai script is phonetic and has been used for over a century for personal and village public needs. It is learned in informal contexts without schooling. Arabic literacy is associated with the learning of the Qur'an and is learned through a long process of schooling which consists to an important extent of the memorization of the Qur'an. English literacy is associated with schooling outside the village. Students go away to school and learn English as part of a full 12-year curriculum in European education.

Scribner and Cole have described important functional differences in these literacies. They are used differently and learned differently. They further argue that there are important cognitive consequences of these literacies. They have shown the best experimental evidence to date that there are language and cognitive skills that are directly related to reading and writing. In this paper our interest is not in the cognitive consequences of literacy but rather in the social consequences. We are concerned with seeing how a particular form of literacy is related to personal and social identity. From Scribner and Cole's work it is clear that there is some social distribution

of the three literacies of the Vai and it is our goal to suggest that the factors that associate English schooling with essayist literacy are factors relating to discourse.

### Essayist literacy as discourse patterns

Both from the history of literacy in the western world (Goody, 1977) and from Scribner and Cole's work in Africa it is clear that as a new phenomenon, literacy is radically dissociated from language as text. The first uses of writing have historically been the preparation of various kinds of lists. Language as label has been the entrance of writing into relation with speech. After a period of time the earliest uses of writing to represent longer stretches of speech have been in such things as recipes or letters. For the Vai it is the newest form of literacy, the Vai script, that is used in this function. We would suggest that at the beginning writing is highly decontextualized in its separation from speech. The objects listed occur in their juxtaposition only on the list, not in nature. The kings listed in succession do not and could not ever stand in a representative line. As writing is used for letters, speaking and writing become more closely aligned. It is speaking that dictates the form of the written text. The final development that follows, at least in Europe, has been the transformation of discourse into the decontextualization of writing.

### Decontextualization of discourse

We have discussed above some of the changes in writing in the shift to essayist-literacy. The ideal text is closed to alternative interpretation. It is nonindexical. Nothing outside the text is needed for interpretation. These factors have important implications for the discourse structure. The important relationships to be signaled are those between sentence and

sentence, not those between speakers nor those between sentence and speaker. As reader this requires a constant monitoring of grammatical and lexical information. In spoken discourse the listener can get a good bit of the meaning from the context. In reading essayist prose the clues to interpretation are in the text itself.

In essayist prose new and given information are signaled syntactically and lexically, not prosodically as in English speech. This requires a higher attention to syntax and especially to sequential relations among sentences. At the same time there is a higher percentage of new information in essayist prose. As Cook-Gumperz and Gumperz (1978) point out it takes much longer to say something than to read an equivalent written statement. This difference in redundancy requires a much higher degree of attention to essayist prose than to speech.

With the heightened emphasis on truth value rather than social or rhetorical conditions comes a necessity to be explicit about logical implications. In essayist prose the logical relations of sentences must be explicitly marked which again requires a heightened attention as well as the monitoring of longer sequences of text.

A significant aspect of the essayist prose style is the fictionalization of both the audience (Ong 1977) and the author (Foucault 1977b). We have said that within the essayist text it is the text itself that provides the contexts for the interpretation of the text. Rather than saying it is decontextualized we might say it is reflexively contextualized. This same relationship also holds true between texts. Ong (1977) has argued that writing only speaks to other writing. The process of reflexive contextualization continues outside the text into the universe of writing. The reader of an essayist text is not an ordinary human being. It is an idealization, a

rational mind formed by the rational body of knowledge of which the essay is a part. The reader is not allowed lapses of attention or idiosyncracies. By the same token the author is a fiction. The author as person by a process of writing and editing seeks to achieve a state of self-effacement. The author seeks to write as a clear communication from rational mind to rational mind. It is assumed in this fictionalization of author and audience that any obstruction in the pure view of truth is the result of faults in the text, in its being less than a perfect representation of knowledge. In this process of refinement each text speaks to each previously created text and the author and reader stand to the discourses of text as human facilitators.

#### Preparation for literacy

Cook-Gumperz (1978) has suggested that typical interactive styles in schooling serve as preparation for literacy. She argues that features such as teachers calling for close attention before giving verbal instructions highlight the child's focus upon the purely linguistic aspects of the message. This prepares the way for literacy which as we have suggested above requires heightened attention to several aspects of the linguistic code. As Cook-Gumperz argues, this increased dependence on the linguistic code actually is unproductive for children at first and places the teacher in a double bind situation. The teacher must insist on a type of decontextualization that in the ongoing school is less useful than the highly contextualized peer-style interaction.

One detail which Cook-Gumperz notes that is of interest by comparison with Foucault's work is the teacher's insistence that good posture is an essential aspect of paying attention. Foucault (1977b) has argued that the military review is intimately related to the general reorganization of

knowledge that produced the essayist prose style. In the same way that the author as person is fully effaced in the essay, the soldier as person is fully effaced in the military review as is the child as person in the school exam. What is presented to the ruling gaze is a pure representation of internalized rational knowledge.

We would like to take Cook-Gumperz's idea a little further and suggest several ways in which patterns of linguistic socialization in the child's life before school are continuous with the school preparation for literacy in many segments of western society. In earlier work Scollon (1976) proposed the term 'vertical construction' for the interactions of one year olds involving single words that are the structural forerunners of the multiple word constructions of later syntactic development. Bloom (1973) also saw the importance of these but did not feel that they were in themselves syntactic developments. Several other recent studies have put this discussion into relief against a broader question, that of different strategies of language learning. Peters (1977, 1978) has described a child who took a more holistic approach to structural development than had been represented in the literature. Generally he was not analytical. His longer, melodic strings were contrasted with those of most of the children in previous descriptions. This led Peters to suggest that language learning was approachable by children through a variety of routes, all equally successful.

About the same time Nelson (1975) began to write that in her work she had observed that children fell into two groups which she called referential and expressive. The former favored nominals while the latter favored forms that expressed social and personal attitudes. While these distinctions were not absolute, that is, all referential children had expressive terms and vice

versa, there was an important association with the expectations of parents or caregivers. What was crucial was a matching of the caregivers' expectations and the child's strategy.

While Peters and Nelson were suggesting a much greater variability among language learning patterns, in our own work at Fort Chipewyan, Alberta (Scollon and Scollon 1979a) we found that interactions between source and the learner were much less critical than we had assumed in natural learning situations.

If we look back at the concept of the vertical construction it can now be suggested that its function is not in fact syntactical preparation as such but preparation for literacy. In the earliest vertical constructions a child begins by speaking. This is usually a single word and corresponds to a noun in the adult system. The adult's response calls for a comment. It is a 'so-what?' question. The child responds with an answer. These topic-comment sequences are at first jointly produced but with time the child is able to say both the topic and the comment within a single prosodic group. At that stage the adult calls for sequences of longer constructions.

In terms of the discussion of essayist prose as discourse we can see this vertical construction as calling for new information. The vertical construction is an effective mechanism for upgrading the information load expressible by the child. At first the adult bridges between the given and new information. Then the child accomplishes this bridging. At first the bridging is tentative. The words are uttered with pauses, each word in a separate intonation group. Then as the child succeeds in grouping given and new information intonationally, the adult keeps pulling for higher and higher percentages of new information until ultimately the prose of adult essayist style is reached. We see first vertical constructions on a continuum of adult-guided preparation for highly decontextualized adult literacy.

In other ways this same preparation for literacy is emphasized. Parents' diaries are intensely literate not only in modeling literacy for children, but by their focus on the first intelligible words of the child. The child sees the high value placed, not on communication in general. This has gone on for some time before the first clear instances of adult-like words (Halliday 1975). What the child notices is the emphasis on words. What is recorded is the clear, the explicit, the non-contextual.

More obvious training is found in reading for children. The prosodic structures of stories read out loud provide an intermediate prosody between spoken discourse and written discourse. As the prosodic contextualization cues are leveled in this form of reading, the child becomes more and more dependent on the grammar to provide meaning, especially meaning about the information structure of the text.

As we look at the literature on language acquisition over the past decade or so we can see that the shift from studies of grammatical structure to studies of discourse and the context of communication are paralleling the present interest in understanding the dominance of the essayist prose style in European schooling. We would suggest as we have elsewhere (Scollon and Scollon 1979b) that much of the discussion of the acquisition of language could be nicely rephrased as the preparation for literacy. The stages and strategies of language development that at first appeared universal and then appeared almost irrelevant may now turn out to be necessary preparation for a particular type of literacy. We suggest that in western literate society, at least until recently, the child has gotten guidance from the earliest period in life in the discourse structures of literacy which enable a reasonably continuous transition from speaking and hearing to writing and reading in school.

## Discourse in interethnic communication, Athabaskan-English

One implication of what we have said about preparation for literacy is that where this preparation is absent, literacy will develop only with difficulty. This is because the discourse structures upon which literacy is based are learned very early as part of the child's socialization to a cultural world and as part of the child's identity as a person. Learning new discourse patterns is tantamount to learning a new identity and, as we know, this is not done easily. In fact we believe it takes an equally deep involvement in the new identity over a comparable period of time for a new identity to develop.

We intend to argue that the discourse patterns of essayist literacy share many features with the discourse patterns of English speakers and that where these patterns are sufficiently different from those of another ethnic group, literacy will be experienced as interethnic communication. Gumperz and Roberts (1978) have argued that much ethnic stereotyping can be tied to inferences made by one group about the other because of misreading of contextualization cues in cross-group discourse. In our work (Scollon and Scollon 1979c) we have found interethnic communication to be very productive of insights into the discourse structures of both groups and to involve several dimensions other than the central dimension of information structuring.

### Athabaskan-English discourse

The terms we are using here are problematical and we need to clarify them first. We need terms to designate the two ethnic groups under consideration. We do not want to identify either group by language criteria alone. In the Athabaskan case the patterns we are discussing are generally present whether or not the individual in question actually speaks an Athabaskan language. At the same time these patterns may ultimately be traceable to the Athabaskan

language. What we wish to identify with the term 'Athabaskan' is any individual whose discourse patterns are the result of socialization to a group which would identify itself ethnically as Athabaskan. By English speaker we mean anyone who is socialized to the discourse patterns that are characteristic of at least, but not only, white middle-class educated Americans. As a way of avoiding such a complex and still misleading designation on the one hand and the too simple but very misleading gloss 'American' on the other we have chosen 'English speaker.' What is central in this discussion is that the ethnic stereotypes 'Indian' and 'Whiteman' relate quite specifically to discourse patterns used by these groups in speaking to each other. We are seeking to describe these patterns. Throughout this discussion, then, 'Athabaskan' will refer to one set of discourse patterns and the ethnic group with which they are associated and 'English speaker' will refer to the other set of patterns and the associated ethnic group.

The first critical dimension is the presentation of self. For Athabaskans, as Basso (1970) pointed out for the Apaches some time ago, speech is avoided in situations where there is doubt about how one is to present the self. Speech only becomes acceptable where social relations are known and established. That is, social knowledge is used as a preparation for speech. English speakers on the other hand rely heavily on speech to develop social knowledge. One talks to stranger to get to know them. Athabaskans get to know someone in order to be able to speak.

The result of this first difference is that English speakers end up speaking much more than Athabaskans in interethnic communications which are predominantly among people not well known to each other. The stereotyping that results is the view of Athabaskans that English speakers talk all the time and the view of English speakers that Athabaskans are taciturn and withdrawn.

Another factor contributing to this stereotyping of the English speaker as talkative and the Athabaskan as taciturn has to do with a different relationship between dominance and display for the two groups. Bateson (1972) and Mead (1977) have suggested the usefulness of looking at how different societies relate dominance and subordination to exhibitionism and spectatorship. As they point out, Americans relate spectatorship to the dominant role in contrast to the British. The parent observes the child's displays or the teacher observes the student. For Athabaskans, the relationship is between dominance and display. That is, the Athabaskan teacher displays, the child watches, the parent exhibits, and the child observes.

If we view speaking as the presentation of self as Goffman (1974) has suggested and relate this presentation of self to exhibitionism, then we can see that for Athabaskans speaking is consistent with the dominant role and refraining from speaking is consistent with the subordinate role. For English speakers it is the dominant person who listens, the subordinate who displays through talk.

The frequent situation then is for the English speaker to begin speaking as a means of negotiating social position. The Athabaskan refrains from speaking. To the English speaker this communicates an attitude of superiority on the part of the Athabaskan while to the Athabaskan the speech of the English speaker also communicates an attitude of superiority. The stereotyping of each group as always taking a superior attitude to the other is a direct structural result of the difference in the dominance-display relationship.

One other area in which the presentation of self is problematical is that for the English speaker there is an ideal of 'putting your best foot forward' in speech with persons not well known. For Athabaskans, on the other hand, there is a strong prohibition of speaking well of one's own accomplishments,

abilities or belongings. This leads in conversation to considerable self-deprecation and inexplicitness. This is all too easily taken by the English speaker at face value, especially when accompanied by a general stereotyping of a general stereotyping of a superior attitude and taciturnity. This latter is then easily reinterpreted as surliness.

To the Athabaskan the English speaker's explicit expression of his own activities, abilities, and accomplishments in the best light is not simply in bad taste, it expresses a complete disregard of the dangers of tempting fate. It courts very bad luck. The English speaker is seen as boastful which coupled with the air of superiority expressed by his general volubility gives a stereotype of intolerable smugness.

A second area in which difficulty develops is in the distribution of talk. As we have said, the English speaker virtually always speaks first. The structural result of this, as Schegloff (1972) has pointed out, is that the English speaker controls the topic of the conversation. This gives a nearly complete topic dominance of the conversation to the English speaker which only compounds the stereotyped view of the English speaker as smug and self-contained. Another structural feature is that the pause in Athabaskan discourse is longer than in English. This means that turns are rarely exchanged on an even basis. The English speaker usually quickly regains the floor and continues while the Athabaskan speaker is waiting a bit longer, trying to get a word in edgewise.

The sum of these features of the distribution of talk in Athabaskan-English interethnic communication is that the English speaker begins first, controls the topic and continually regains the floor. The result is usually a monologue broken only by the English speaker's own awareness that something is wrong. Unfortunately, the usual interpretation returns to the stereotyping above of the Athabaskan as silent, withdrawn, or, if he or she speaks, as irrelevant. For

the Athabaskan, interethnic communication with English speakers is often an opportunity to hear long monologues, which from his or her point of view are highly decontextualized.

A final feature of the distribution of talk is the absence of departure or closing formulas for Athabaskans. This absence is related, we believe, to the prohibition on speaking of the future. Departure formulas may be seen as ways of establishing the state of the relationship between the speakers for the purposes of resumption at the next encounter in terms of the future. For the Athabaskans, this is felt as a further decontextualization in terms of the present situation and a last and perhaps dangerous assertion of dominance.

The third area of interethnic communication of importance is the signaling of information structure. It is in this one area that Athabaskan patterns are if anything more like essayist style than English speech. Whereas English generally marks information structure prosodically in speech, Athabaskan marks it lexically to a larger extent. This carries over into Athabaskan discourse in English where on the whole the varieties of pitch contour and volume are much less marked than normal in English. This of course leads to confusion in discourse of the sort detailed by Gumperz (1977b). What is heard as stressed by one speaker may be heard as emotional by the other.

### Ethnic stereotyping

As we have seen, sources of ethnic stereotyping are abundant in Athabaskan-English interethnic communication. These sources are both structural features of discourse and expectations about the nature and functions of language. Where the communication between groups fails there is frequent recourse to stereotyping of the other group. What is equally important to note is that ethnic stereotyping of the self also occurs in these cross-group communications. Members of the group come to view these communicative patterns as distinctive factors.

in their own identity both as members of a social group and as persons. It is for this latter reason that change becomes problematical. If it were simply a matter of talking a bit more or less, later or sooner, learning to say good-bye or not to, changes in these patterns would not be so strongly avoided. When it is seen as a matter of identity, however, it is easier to understand why an Athabaskan who for some reason becomes voluble feels like a whiteman in doing so, or an English speaker who for some reason cannot get a word in edgewise in a conversation feels like an Athabaskan. We suggest that these patterns of discourse are at the heart of ethnic identity.

#### Essayist literacy as English discourse patterns

The ideal essayist text is an explicit, decontextualized presentation of a view of the world that fictionalizes both author and audience. There is a high level of new information and its internal structure is cohesive and clearly bounded. To the Athabaskan, the English speaker presents as well a fictionalized self and speaks in long, bounded, topic-controlled monologues. As we compare the features of English discourse in Athabaskan-English interethnic communication with the essayist prose style we see a high degree of similarity. To the Athabaskan the English speaker does "talk like a book."

We should note that the bookishness of the English monologue is a result of the specifically interethnic nature of the communication. In strictly English-English conversation the factors that lead to monologic presentations are controlled by a more even exchange of turns and a general agreement on the nature and goals of conversation. In this case, however, interethnic communication produces speech in which language dominates the situation, language creates its own contexts of interpretation, and language speaks to the future and other situations. These features all shared in common with the essayist prose style give to English discourse a figure much like that of writing.

As we have suggested above, the Athabaskan response to these features is ethnic stereotyping of the English speaker as smug, boastful and too talkative. Now we would like to extend this to suggest that for the Athabaskan, essayist text appears much the same. We suggest that the Athabaskan cannot engage in reading or writing essayist prose without developing some of the same stereotypes of arrogance and irrelevance. As reader this may not be so critical, but let us consider the problem of writing.

#### Writing as a crisis in ethnic identity

For an Athabaskan to produce an essay would require him or her to produce a major display. This display would be appropriate only if the person was in a position of dominance in relation to the audience. But as we have said the audience, and the author, are fictionalized in essayist prose. The text itself becomes decontextualized. This means then that the clear relationship of dominance is obscured. Where the relationship of the communicants is unknown we have said that the Athabaskan prefers silence. The paradox of prose for the Athabaskan then is that to the extent that it is a communication between known author and audience it is contextualized and therefore not good essayist prose. To the extent it becomes decontextualized it becomes more uncharacteristic of Athabaskans to seek to communicate.

The Athabaskan set of discourse patterns are mutually exclusive with the discourse patterns of essayist prose to a large extent. In order to write the Athabaskan must adopt discourse patterns that are identified with a particular ethnic group, identified in Alaska as English speakers.

Where writing is in native languages for distinctly native purposes this dilemma becomes critical. We would argue that an Athabaskan cannot as Athabaskan write about Athabaskan things. It is only to the extent that he or she is modernized, has come to identify as an English speaker, that he or she can

operate within the essayist ideal of literacy. Where the interethnic communication patterns produce social conflict between speakers these same patterns produce internal conflict for an Athabaskan writer. We suggest it is this internal conflict that explains much of the problem of native literacy programs as well as problems with English literacy in the public school system in Alaska.

### Kutchin literacy

There is an obvious difficulty with the statements we have just made. For many years Kutchin Athabaskans have enjoyed an important native literacy. We would now like to consider this apparent exception. Albert Tritt at Arctic Village kept an extensive and detailed journal (Tritt nd) for many years. Early in this century he saw literacy in Kutchin and the Episcopal faith as the only ways his people would survive the crushing pressures of modernization. His work was part of a more general Anglican/Episcopal religious movement spurred by Archdeacon McDonald in the Canadian Kutchin area. People now remember sitting around campfires while old people recited the syllabary prepared by McDonald in his alphabetic writing of Kutchin.

While we do not have yet an adequate history of this early Kutchin literacy we do know enough to suggest why it should have been as successful as it was. If we recall the three types of literacy described by Scribner and Cole (1978a) we can see that what we have called essayist literacy corresponds to English literacy for the Vai. Kutchin literacy, on the other hand, is much like Qur'anic literacy.

For the Kutchin, literacy was reading the Bible. It was on the whole unilateral. That is, one read but one did not write liturgical materials. The goal was the uncritical adoption of the truth of the word. To the extent writing was used, it was used to practice for copying out of the Bible. The work of Albert Tritt may be explained by his own conviction that he was an important

leader of his people. He could risk the assumption of the authorship role on behalf of his people.

As a secondary development writing became used by the Kutchin for many of the pragmatic uses that Vai literacy performs. Students learned to read by listening to a teacher read from the Bible, hymn book or prayer book. On the side, however, they began to practice by writing notes and letters to each other. The students invented a pragmatic Vai-type literacy spontaneously out of the Qur'anic Kutchin religious literacy and this pragmatic literacy is still functioning to a limited extent.

We can see now that both Qur'anic and Vai-type literacies avoid the problems of ethnic identity that befall essayist literacy. In the first case, the word as handed down from a divine source fits into the Athabaskan pattern of dominance being associated with display. It is appropriate for God to deliver messages to man, not vice versa. At the same time, the noncritical attitude is appropriate in relation to God's Word and fits the Athabaskan pattern of the subordinate or learner as spectator.

Vai-type pragmatic literacy, on the other hand, occurs between people well known to each other. It is highly contextualized and depends absolutely on each participant reading between the lines. Another factor that might be mentioned is that there is no normative standard. Because it is contextualized, spellings may be idiosyncratic and still interpreted correctly. Vai-type literacy is well suited to the underground, unofficial or informal mode of learning and transmission. Students invented this form of letter writing as a nonserious use of the Qur'anic style literacy and could be much freer in their spelling and grammar.

In summary then we can see that Kutchin literacy has been successful to the extent it has because it has not been essayist literacy. Vai-type literacy

and Qur'anic type literacy appear to be compatible with Athabaskan discourse patterns. Learning literacy in these patterns does not threaten to produce changes in ethnic identity the way essay literacy does. Essayist literacy in any language may in fact be a powerful instrument of cultural and ethnic change.

### Conclusion

We have advanced in this paper a number of suggestions relating inter-ethnic communication and three types of literacy. We now would like to emphasize that we have used the word 'suggest' intentionally. In Alaska while programs for the development of literacy have been rapidly proliferating, the study of literacy has not been well established. The suggestions that we have advanced are based on the research that has been done as well as on our own interpretations of that research, and the history as it is now known of various literacies. Rather than 'findings' we would like to regard our suggestions here as hypotheses that could be studied in ongoing research.

It is clear that we need a much fuller understanding of Kutchin literacy both past and present. We need to research carefully both interethnic communication and literacy training to test for the accuracy of the parallels we have drawn here. We need longitudinal as well as comparative studies of early language socialization patterns to test our hypothesis that interactive patterns such as the vertical construction are productive of essayist literacy.

Finally, we should emphasize that here we have spoken only of Athabaskan-English interethnic communication and literacy. There is a critical need to understand interethnic communication among other groups in Alaska and a further need to seek to relate these patterns to literacy. If literacy related as closely to discourse patterns as we believe it does, then other native groups which have quite obviously different discourse patterns can be expected to relate in different ways to literacy.

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## LITERACY AS INTERETHNIC COMMUNICATION:

### RELEVANCE STATEMENT

The teaching of literacy is commonly considered the most important task of schooling in our society. The task is attended with special difficulty in situations like the one discussed in this paper by Ron and Suzanne Scollon, involving students from a nonliterate culture, speakers of a language other than the dominant language of the educational system to which they are subjected. Much energy has been expended on the development of programs to teach literacy to native peoples, but many such programs have been doomed to failure because they approach the problem of teaching literacy to speakers of other languages as essentially a linguistic one. The Scollons argue that systems of literacy are fundamentally bound up with culture-specific systems of spoken discourse, and that insofar as spoken discourse encodes social meaning, related to personal and social identity, the teaching of literacy across such linguistic/cultural boundaries has a crucial sociolinguistic dimension that cannot be ignored in education. By showing how the patterns of discourse employed by Athabaskan and English speakers are mutually out of phase, the authors suggest ways of accounting in specific terms for the trouble spots in teaching Athabaskan speakers European-style literacy in any language. While their perspective and argument have special relevance in contexts where students come from nonliterate backgrounds, they are generalizable to all educational situations involving sociolinguistic heterogeneity.