

Culture



Taciturnity in Native American Etiquette: A Cree Case

Regna Darnell

Volume 1, Number 2, 1981

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1077829ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1077829ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA),
formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne
d'Ethnologie

ISSN

0229-009X (print)

2563-710X (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Darnell, R. (1981). Taciturnity in Native American Etiquette: A Cree Case.
Culture, 1(2), 55–60. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1077829ar>

Article abstract

Ethnographers of speaking have distorted the realities of communicative events in native American societies by focusing exclusively on speech. The Cree of northern Alberta, along with many other native peoples, place far greater emphasis on the use of silence and on pause between turns at talk. Listening, rather than speaking, is the highly valued communicative skill. Lack of understanding of different communicative Systems is responsible for considerable inter-ethnic conflict.

Taciturnity in Native American Etiquette: A Cree Case

Regna Darnell
University of Alberta

Ethnographers of speaking have distorted the realities of communicative events in native American societies by focusing exclusively on speech. The Cree of northern Alberta, along with many other native peoples, place far greater emphasis on the use of silence and on pause between turns at talk. Listening, rather than speaking, is the highly valued communicative skill. Lack of understanding of different communicative systems is responsible for considerable inter-ethnic conflict.

Les linguistes-ethnographes ont déformé la réalité des événements communicatifs dans les sociétés amérindiennes en s'intéressant seulement au discours. Les Cree du nord de l'Alberta, comme beaucoup d'autres Amérindiens, insistent davantage sur l'emploi du silence et des pauses qui ponctuent le discours. Écouter, plutôt que parler, est d'une haute valeur communicative. Le manque de compréhension de systèmes de communication différents est responsable d'une grande partie du conflit inter-ethnique.

For some years now, ethnographers of speaking have sought dimensions of cross-cultural typology with regard to the use of language. I myself have from time to time succumbed to this temptation, largely in an effort to characterize gross contrasts in the interactional etiquette of native American and middle class white societies with regard to amount of talk and amount of talk about talk. The stereotypic American Indian is taciturn — strong and silent. Even outside of the proverbial cigar store, anyone who has done American Indian fieldwork recognizes that native people do not fill conversational pauses with talk — a source of embarrassment to many well-meaning anthropologists.

The taciturnity/volubility continuum raises a number of difficulties when it is applied cross-culturally. Firstly, the terms are used with their English connotations and are therefore culture-bound. "We" assume that TALK is what is going on in interaction and that the speaker is the center of a model of communication. The native American, in contrast, assumes that talk is egocentric boasting unless its message is subordinated to the listener's effort to extract meaning which will be useful in his/her own personal experience. Further, what "fills up" social interaction in a time continuum is not talk but co-presence. The appropriate model of communication, then, cannot isolate speech from the rest of communi-

cative behavior without distorting social reality.

Moreover, though it is "essential to isolate the dimensions and features underlying taxonomic categories" (Hymes, 1972), there is no accepted cross-cultural definition of such categories as taciturnity and volubility. Hymes' own effort to typologize quantity of speech makes clear both the oversimplification and the fuzziness of the analytic categories. Taking taciturnity as an example, Honigmann reports that the Kaska recognize a man as "taciturn" when he does not speak at all for two or three days. The term is only superficially a judgment of speech; it is interpreted as a danger signal that violence is about to erupt. The Kaska do not talk about speech *per se*, but about its social consequences. Yet the Kaska, like most native Americans, are a taciturn people from the point of view of middle class whites. Their own judgment of taciturnity and volubility is not made on a cross-cultural basis. (See Darnell, 1970, for a reanalysis of Honigmann's material from the point of view of speaking).

I am not suggesting that all societies are alike with regard to taciturnity and volubility, simply that the meanings of these terms must be ethnographically explicated in particular cases. There will clearly be variation on individual, cultural and situational levels. I would, in fact, prefer to argue that all people, at both the individual and societal levels, are both taciturn and voluble. Predictability comes not at the level of gross typology, but in the specifications of contexts in which talk is appropriate (and, of course, what kind of talk). These specifications will not, at least in the case of most North American Indians, be facts about speech but facts about social interaction. Speech is, after all, a resource which is used, not for its own sake but to communicate — in other words, to express social purpose. The generalization which emerges will necessarily be normative, not describing every interaction by every individual.

The isolation of speech as an analytic category is, then, necessarily arbitrary in terms of the explanation of social behavior. Although ethnographers of speaking have always given lip service to "other" modalities of communication, speech has remained artificially in the foreground. Only by focusing on the ways in which communication as a whole proceeds, i.e., the allocation of communicative purposes among modalities, can the role of speech itself be understood.

Quantity of speech is simply not equivalent to quantity of interaction, and certainly not to quality of interaction. I have become increasingly dissatisfied with the facile generalization that American Indians are taciturn, although I have myself attempted to deal with the communicative use of silence among the Cree of northern Alberta whom I know best. I am convinced that there is a communicative pattern which char-

acterizes most American Indian groups but that it is not one of taciturnity. Rather, I would claim that public and private (intimate) behavior are sharply distinguished, with considerable (social) reticence being appropriate to the former. Talk in public is something to be monitored with great care.

I would like to adopt a very broad definition of interactional etiquette. Succinctly, it is "the way people treat one another" within some socially bounded system. Etiquette involves two or more potential interactors. For Cree, this means any animate being, defined by the presence of (spiritual) power as conceived by the culture. Thus, animals, objects used in ceremonies, natural phenomena, etc., as well as human persons, have the interactional capacity. The distinction is made grammatically in Cree (Darnell and Vanek, 1977).

Potential interactors must have a mutually shared understanding of the meaning of the actions of others, whether or not those actions are verbal. They must have the ability to extract information from person and situation. It is impossible for people to be together without communicating information about themselves and their relationships. For native Americans, it is co-presence rather than talk which is the organizing principle of interactional etiquette.

Etiquette is ultimately an output of the individual and cultural definitions of the nature of potential social relationships. Cree persons define these quite differently than do whites (see below). For this reason, a breach of etiquette is a breach of personal autonomy and is a very serious matter.

Because etiquette systems vary both individually and culturally, misunderstandings abound. The postulation of an Indian system which is different from the white system is an abstraction, as Cree recognize when they distinguish Moniyaw and Nehiyaw on behavioral grounds. Although the primary referent is to ethnic origin, Moniyaw (white man) is glossed as loud-mouthed. In everyday usage, it is more often a judgment of behavior, a succinct commentary on interactional style. The Moniyaw does not know how to listen or to think before he replies; it is not loudness of voice which is characterized but a communicative style which is more aggressive than that of the Indian person, Nehiyaw. The behavioral judgment is frequently used, because not all Cree always behave in an Indian manner. Even those individuals who habitually behave like white men understand and interpret this distinction, indicating that they believe it to be real.

Many individuals, both within and between cultures, adjust to the presence in their social environment of different systems of etiquette. Our family's grandmother has learned to tease my husband and to accept his teasing in a style which would

be inappropriate in her own culture but which to both of them signifies respect and affection. An Indian friend at the University has learned an idio-syncratic set of non-verbal cues to hold attention for the ultra-long pauses he uses in conversation with whites. These examples illustrate the human capacity for flexible interaction. Any interaction, after all, involves surmounting the barriers which surround and threaten to engulf individuals. The cross-cultural interaction is simply a more drastic case.

For the Cree, co-presence or "being together" is a more ambiguous state of affairs than talking together. Indians consider social interaction to be potentially dangerous, a face-threatening imposition on personal autonomy (Scollen and Scollen, 1979). Basso (1970) has described Western Apache use of silence to mitigate potential ambiguity, as when a schoolchild returns to his/her home community and silence reigns until the child signals where his/her loyalties now lie. The child has the right to choose both the direction of loyalty and the means to communicate it. Personal autonomy is the crucial factor. The silence serves to protect the autonomy of each family member from overstepping the bounds of co-presence (which are psychological, not physical). Similarly, one does not speak for another person. A Cree friend of mine was asked by a student if his son liked moosemeat. He replied that he liked moosemeat. That is, he answered the question that should have been asked so as not to embarrass the student. At the same time, he did not speak for his son.

Ambiguity is desirable in interaction because it mitigates the potential danger of autonomous beings opening themselves to one another without reasonable certainty of non-threatening response. A number of spatial metaphors have been posed to me by Cree people to illustrate this process:

I. The Indian way is like two circles which touch but do not overlap. It is a good thing if two people come close enough for their essential beings to touch. This is the essence of social life. Whites, in contrast, try to make their circles overlap, to "pretend" that they become one. But persons are always different in their perspective, knowledge and social needs. Native communication is built on recognizing that difference and placing a high value upon it.

II. Another reported image is that of stars which pass each other in the night sky. They never touch but their forces influence each other. There is a pattern in the movement of the stars. Analogically, it is proper that old and young, male and female, etc. should interact thus. One cannot come too close without destroying the person-ness that interaction is based on. To protect his precious autonomy it is often necessary not to talk. When one does talk, it is often necessary to talk indirectly. One must make no blatant claims on another being. It is inappropriate, for example, to pose a question so that an immediate and explicit answer is demanded.

III. Perhaps the most common Cree metaphor for depicting relationships is that of a tree and its branches. When applied to social interaction, the strong roots are provided by the cultural tradition and the branches represent categories of social persons who are bound by their relationships, not by their talk.

These metaphors are characteristic of Cree styles of explanation. It is a distortion of reality to describe directly what something is. The strategy is to say that it is like something else, permitting the hearer to interpret the analogy according to his/her own experience. Not all Cree individuals, of course, would provide such metaphors of social interaction. Traditionally, it is the elders, particularly the old men, who present the native tradition to young people and to outsiders who wish to learn. These individuals express themselves metaphorically, partly so that their talk will not impose a view of the world on those who listen.

I have recently suggested (Darnell, 1979) the need for the concept of a Discontinuous Interaction. Speech as analyzed by linguists is usually taken as being consciously coded and correctly decoded at the moment of interaction. Native Americans know that this is not so. Because they place more emphasis on listening, they stress that the message, if it is important, may take years of life experience (having little or nothing to do with speech) to be understood. The old person who is the teacher conveys his knowledge to a young person and hopes that it will fall on fertile ground. The teacher directs the interaction and controls its content. He holds the interactional floor, as it were. But he cannot control the outcome, the receipt of the full meaning of his utterance. His only control is in the choice of addressee, and this is a very serious matter. The old person will probably not even be alive by the time the interaction has been completed. Yet there is always an expectation that completion will occur at some future date. Only then has the teaching been successful. Perhaps appropriately, Cree do not call this "teaching" but "telling." Teaching requires completion — only the telling (putting the message on the interactional floor) can be controlled and reported as accomplished. The rest must be resolved in the future.

Again it is necessary to move from speech to interaction more generally. Cree conceive interactions as basically asymmetrical. The one who speaks must have something to say which is not known to the addressee. Almost always one person is in control and the other, even when speaking, defers to that one. The elder speaking to a young person is the case par excellence, but it also applies in socially symmetrical interactions based on situational factors such as topic. If there is no asymmetry of knowledge, there is no need for verbal communication.

Intimacy, then, is not a matter of lack of status differential. Rather, it is a matter of recognizing and accepting reciprocal social asymmetries. One individual completes another, in the sense of social identity. There is a complementarity which does not jeopardize autonomy. It is for this reason that silence among intimates is highly valued (if there is nothing to say). Silence, then, has at least two social meanings: First, it signals ambiguity, distance or potential threat. Secondly, it expresses intimate co-presence. The quality of these two kinds of silence is quite different and unmistakable to any member of the society. The first involves tentation, waiting and incompleteness. The second is like a full circle, complete, sufficient and in no need of speech.

This dualism of form or output is the basis for much cross-cultural misunderstanding. Roger Brown's suggested universal dimensions of status and solidarity (1965) indicate a potential generality. The same form is often appropriate among equals or from lower status to higher status individuals. Someone who is not conversant with the etiquette of a society may well misinterpret this. Taciturnity in its meaning of reticence characterizes one, but surely not the other, from which voluble speech may erupt at any time.

I would now like to turn to the question of voluble speech. It should be no surprise that gossip is a salient category of Cree social life. In small communities, even if they be urban neighborhoods, people necessarily know a great deal about one another. A community, defined by social networks which have closure, is understood by Cree as a unit within which people's lives touch each other (but do not overlap). Within the limits set by personal autonomy, this gives certain rights. I would like to specify some of the conditions for gossip (the Cree would call it something like frivolous talk or just talking). First, there must be intimacy and mutual acceptance. Second, there must be new information permitting reassessment or confirmation of the essential nature of some person (s). Third, there must be sufficient indirection to protect the privacy of both gossipers and target. Such phrases as "I wonder if..." or "maybe he should..." are common. Motives are virtually never attributed without qualification. Courses of action desirable for others are equally left in midair. There is no intention to offer advice (which in any case would be done by presenting a parable or analogy which might cause the other to reevaluate his course of action in a discontinuous interaction). Nor do people say "If I were him, I would do...". People are themselves and each has a different essential nature. This "as if" has no social meaning; it is uninterpretable. Gossip is for the satisfaction of the parties to it, not for the edification of the target, even should he become aware of it.

It is commonplace that native communities possess extremely effective grapevines, which may be understood as lines of communication. An unusual occurrence produces considerable talk and speculation which is rapidly transmitted as individuals piece together bits of a story. For example, during my first field trip, I and two other people had to walk thirteen miles in the middle of the night because a truck broke down. An hour after arriving home, a native cabin, I went to buy oversize shoes for a sprained ankle and found that the white storekeeper (an inveterate eavesdropper) seven miles away knew the details of this expedition (including rare bear steak for breakfast at the ranger station). All this is a long story, but everyone I met that day had more details than any one participant or observer could have provided.

The sources of information were multiple. First, the white man who shot the bear had returned home before dark. He reported to various people that he had given my sixty year-old sister the bear to tan, with the meat as payment. Second, I, my research assistant, and a young forest ranger were observed walking down the road at 4 a.m., although no one emerged to acknowledge our presence. My limp and unaccustomed walking stick were noted. Third, the forest ranger publically reprimanded his assistant for "borrowing" a truck with a winch at 5 a.m. He simultaneously gave the young man a lecture on the dangers of trichonosis from our breakfast before returning for the truck. Fourth, it was daybreak by the time both trucks returned along with my hosts and the bear carcass. The only person we spoke to was a five year-old going to school, though others observed our progress. The child returned home to pass on the news and was late to school. Her family decided to do some visiting that day. Importantly, no one came to visit us. The methods of inquiry were oblique. Fifth, a number of people walked down the road in front of our house. My older sister was outdoors skinning the bear. I had been put to bed and was not visible. This enabled observers to conclude that I was seriously injured (but not too seriously or the nurse would have been consulted). A child was eventually sent to see if my older sister and I would like to visit the healer that afternoon; she was a lonely old woman and would be pleased to have our company for tea. In this way, without invasion of privacy, provision was made for nursing services should they be necessary.

In this case, more was accomplished by observing than by talking — at least in the obtaining of information. This information — all of it reasonably accurate — was passed on verbally in public meeting places such as the store. As long as I was her guest, my hostess did not participate in these discussions, although she is normally the first to speculate about any unusual event. My autonomy was carefully

protected, both by her and by others. The gossip was confined to appropriate contexts.

Formal speaking operates in almost total contrast to this kind of casual gossip. Oratory is important but is considered a major imposition on the speaker. Elders who have wisdom do not often speak in public meetings. Young men are the political leaders on the surface. The Okimaw, leader, is likely to be an old man. The official leader or chief is called Okimahgan or fake leader. His leadership persists only if he follows the advice of the elders. But the elders themselves are not made vulnerable by being forced to speak, especially in front of white men. Their words are laconic, privately offered to individuals, and usually metaphorical. Any necessary application to the affairs of the real world will be made by younger men. No one will predict the future or the actions of others. Philips (1976) has suggested that "speaking" at Warm Springs, Oregon, serve to get information on the floor without requiring immediate or direct response, and that a political system based on consensus functions to avoid direct confrontation (imposition on autonomy). Control is not asserted over others but each has the right to his opinion. In public behavior, confrontation is potentially dangerous because of its potential divisiveness. Therefore, speech is used with extreme care. People believe that it is difficult if not impossible to withdraw from hasty words.

It should be clear by now that there are good reasons to avoid speech under certain conditions. But friendly social interaction is not precluded by silence. Approach, openness to increased intimacy, is signalled by nonverbal cues: spatial positioning (usually in a circle), relaxedness of posture, body alignment, synchrony of body motion, gestures which include a potential interactor, etc. "Good" social relationships are highly valued and explicitly reinforced by an elaborated system of nonverbal communicative behavior.

Verbal input is deliberately kept minimal. Other cues are used precisely because they are deniable, i.e., there is little risk. Cree communicative style is quite voluble in the sense that Cree persons are usually extremely willing to open themselves to those who respond appropriately to cues of comfortable co-presence. Taciturnity, from a cultural point of view, is withdrawal from communication when these conditions are not met. Speech is a hoarded resource but communicative openness is not.

Speech, moreover, has little to do with the speaker. The listener or interpreter is much more important, because his understanding of the message is necessary to effectiveness of communication. Pauses are long between utterances because important messages require assimilation and thought before an

equally serious response is possible. Indeed, the speaker is frequently not the focus of attention. Interactional control tends to operate fairly independently of turns at talk. Speakers, like all social beings at all times, are incomplete in themselves — a speaker can exist only in relation to a listener.

Amount of talk is, then, a relatively minor feature of the Cree communicative economy. To characterize Cree ways of speaking without characterizing the whole communicative system of which they are a part is to grossly distort the nature of social interaction. To list other communicative modalities in parallel to speech uses is also inadequate. The significant task is to characterize Cree concepts of the social person and to show how social persons realize their essential nature through communicative interaction in a range of modalities. Only when the social purposes of interaction are made clear will it be possible to understand the meaning of the communicative forms which realize them.

Most of this paper has been concerned with Cree examples. However, comparable material from other native American groups has been cited without apology. The patterns being described seem to be widespread in North America. The precise extent of their application will emerge only as an empirical ethnographic corpus becomes available. The question of the taciturnity or volubility of American Indians should be posed in relation to North America as a culture area, not merely with reference to the Cree or any other single group.

Although this paper has dealt with ethnographic data, the theoretical perspective which permeates it is one which has been developed with reference to a broader set of concerns focused around the need for linguistics to become a science of human communication (Vanek, 1978, 1979; Darnell, 1978; Vanek and Darnell, In preparation). The approach to modalities of communication, among which the verbal is only one, has been useful cross-culturally precisely because it allows analysis of the communicative means to achieve particular social purposes. In the simple contrast between two cases — Cree and middle class white — the valence given to verbal and non-verbal modalities is considerably different. Therefore, speech has a different meaning vis-à-vis communication as a whole. The broad perspective of human communication is necessary to portray the reality of Cree speaking in its communicative context.

REFERENCES

- BASSO, Keith
1970 To Give Up on Words: Silence in Western Apache Culture, *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 26: 213-230.
- BROWN, Roger
1965 *Social Psychology*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press.
- DARNELL, Regna
1970 The Kaska Aesthetic of Speech Use, *Western Canadian Journal of Anthropology*.
1978 On the Aim and Scope of Linguistics, *Papers in Linguistics* 11 (3-4).
1979 Speech Act versus Communicative Interaction, *Proceedings of the 9th Annual Meeting of the Western Conference in Linguistics*, In Press.
- DARNELL, Regna and Anthony L. VANEK
1977 The Semantic Basis of the Animate/Inanimate Distinction in Cree, In R. Darnell (ed.), *Language Use in Canada*, Edmonton-Champaign, Linguistic Research, Inc.
- HYMES, Dell
1972 Models of the Interaction of Language and Social Life. In J. Gumperz and D. Hymes (eds.), *Directions in Sociolinguistics*, New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston: 35-71.
- PHILIPS, Susan
1976 Some Sources of Cultural Variability in the Regulation of Talk, *Language in Society* 5: 81-96.
- SCOLLON, Ron and Suzanne SCOLLON
1979 Face in Inter-ethnic Communication. In J. Richards and R. Schmidt (eds.), *Communicative Competence*, New York, Longman. To Appear.
- VANEK, Anthony L.
1978 The Grammatical Category of Person in Czech.: Toward a Holistic Theory of Human Communication. In B. Comrie (ed.), *Classification of Grammatical Categories*, Linguistic Research, Inc., Edmonton-Carbondale. Also appeared in *International Review of Slavic Linguistics* 3 (1-2).
1979 A Note on Context-Sensitive Grammar, *Papers in Linguistics* 12 (3-4).
- VANEK, Anthony L. and Regna DARNELL
In Preparation. *Semantic Structures: Toward a Holistic Theory of Human Communication*.