Construal of person in Arapaho complaints

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Previous studies in person reference demonstrate that the number of possible references to persons is limitless, yet, the form is determined by the conversational organization and cultural cues (see Enfield & Stivers, 2007). According to the fundamental research by Sacks and Schegloff (1979), speakers tend to produce the most minimal but at the same time the most recognizable forms of reference. However, as it has been shown in research on Finnish (Hakulinen, 1987), Yeli Dene (Levinson, 2007), Tzotzil (Haviland, 2007), and other languages, these principles of minimization and recognition can be disregarded to fit the politeness related. Similarly, the Native North American language, Arapaho (Algonquian), provides tools for referring to people while also complying with cultural norms: because complaints and gossip about third persons are considered disrespectful, speakers have found ways of producing clearly ambiguous references.

In my paper, I investigate the reference and identification of person in Arapaho complaints. Analyzing five hours of face-to-face conversations between fluent native speakers of the language, my research describes the forms of reference and their function in the complaint. I claim that using definite descriptors allows speakers to preserve the anonymity of the referent while also claiming an epistemic stance and exercising collective Arapaho agency:

(1) Relative clause reference in complaint.

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Vera: Hiikoot  hi'in  beh'eihehi',   niicebkoohuutiit,   hoo'eino',
      moreover  that   old man        he manages sth   he gathers up
      "What's more, that old man, the one who ran [the Sun Dance], he gathered up [the information
      and took it with him]."
(2.0)
Vera: .hhh  Tohcooh'entoot.            Wo'ei3  hoowucebenowuunee
              since he is no longer located at   or        he does not pass it on to him
he'iiteihini3i  hi'in   (.)  .hh  niinii3iyoo
someone          that                thing possessed
      "Because he's no longer here. Or he didn't pass on to anyone what he possessed."
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Using a relative clause in the example above, the speaker identifies and refers to a known person, but its descriptive form also distances the speaker and the Arapaho community from the referent. In removing self from any association with that person, the speaker also removes herself and the community for being responsible for that person's actions. On the other hand, reference by impersonal verbal inflection extends the responsibility for complained actions onto the whole community without specifying the speaker's belonging to it:

(2) Impersonal verb form in the complaint (the conversation is about scolding youth):

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Don:  Henei- henei- heeneih'eyoo3etiitooni'.
                  people are bothered by each other - 0S
      "People get all bothered by each other."
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My study demonstrates that most of the reference terms in complaints tend to be membership categorizing devices that besides simply referring to particular people provide description and social commentary on the whole category of such people outlining the expectations of their agency. Ultimately, the limited number of possible forms of reference constructs a highly organized action often aimed at enhancing cohesion of the Arapaho community. In using vague and seemingly ambiguous forms of reference, Arapaho speakers, nonetheless, are able to fully identify the objects of complaints (mainly because of the familiarity of the community with all of its members) and to perform the socially acceptable identity of polite and respectful speakers.

References

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