Plains Cree *pêyâhtikowêwin*: The Ethic of Talking Softly

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Abstract. Cree speakers often characterize their language as "soft." What this means is explored in the context of various philosophical concepts developed by the Cree themselves for the analysis and understanding of speech, with the aid of parts of the Hymes model for the ethnography of speaking, and is related to a paradigm of grammatical contrasts produced by a Cree elder.

1. Introduction. During linguistic fieldwork on Plains Cree (Algonquian, Western Canada), targeted questions about several well-known features of Algonquian languages (obviation, direct and inverse morphology, animacy, clause-typing) brought to the mind of an elder from one of the four reserves in Hobbema, Alberta, a paradigm he had been taught by one of his own mentors. The paradigm is reproduced here as (1a)–(1c).

(1a) *êkos îtwêw ana pawâkan.*
êkosi itwê-w ana pawâkan
thus say-3 that.AN.SG spirit
'That's what the spirit said.'
Context: The *pawâkan* has come to you, the speaker, and you are conveying what it said to others.

(1b) *êkos ê-itwêt ana pawâkan.*
êkosi ê-itwê-t ana pawâkan
thus C1-say-3 that.AN.SG spirit
'That's what the spirit said.'
Context: The *pawâkan* has come to someone else, who told you about it, and you are conveying what it said to others.

(1c) *êkos ê-itwêyit anihi pawâkana.*
êkosi ê-itwê-yi-t anihi pawâkan-a
thus C1-say-DS-3 that.AN.SG spirit-OBV
'That's what the spirit said.'
Context: The *pawâkan* has come to someone else, who told someone about it, who told you, and you are conveying what it said to others.

While the English translations of the three Cree sentences in (1a)–(1c) are identical, the contexts of the sentences differ in ways relating to their grammatical differences, which manipulate obviation (nonobviative *pawâkan* vs. obviative *pawâkana*, and nonobviative *ê-itwêt* vs. obviative *ê-itwêyit*) and clause-typing (the independent-order form *itwêw* vs. the conjunct-order form *ê-itwêt*)

(Wolfart 1973). From a linguistic point of view, the sentences (1a)–(1c) amount to a miniature grammar of key points of Cree morphosyntax that are relevant to constructing chains of information (Cook and Muehlbauer 2008; Muehlbauer 2008, 2015). Thus, this paradigm of sentences is exceptionally valuable for linguists seeking to study how Cree language forms correlate to the discourse contexts in which they are used—a perfect marriage of form and context.

However, this is not exactly what the Cree elder himself was concerned with. Rather, his way of summarizing this paradigm was to say *kâ-yôskâtâk ôma nêhiyawêwin* 'the Cree language is soft', and he used it as a starting point to discuss proper ways of speaking in Cree, using the Cree language.[1] That is, within the speech community the issues raised by this paradigm pertain more to what Western scholars would classify as cultural aspects of language; the elder was thinking not in linguistic-analytic terms per se, but rather within a cultural model of modes of speech and the values of speech.

Any part of language can be considered from many points of view simultaneously. We could discuss sentences (1a)–(1c) in terms of their forms (Cook and Muehlbauer 2008). We could discuss them in terms of intensional and extensional meaning, in the perspective of formal semantics (Muehlbauer 2008). We could integrate concepts from the fields of anthropology and ethnology and inquire about the pragmatic and contextual issues that this paradigm of sentences brings up (Muehlbauer 2015), considering what they tell us about verbal performance in Cree culture. All of these are useful perspectives, and contribute to our understanding of what is obviously a crucial piece of Cree language data.

However, these are all essentially outsider points of view. While such perspectives are also useful to speakers of the language in helping them develop and defend productive linguistic ideologies about Cree (Kroskrity and Field 2009; Muehlbauer 2013), another point of view that is sometimes neglected in our consideration of language forms (i.e., "formal" linguistics) is what the community themselves think about these forms. What sorts of analysis do Cree speakers themselves imply with these sentences? What is their perspective? What was the impetus for creating this paradigm and what does it contribute to cultural understanding for Cree speakers? This is a valid perspective in its own right, and one that casts light on other perspectives.

When considering how these perspectives interact, it is important to remember that there is no way to derive everything from a single starting point. There is no primum mobile either for language as a whole or for a particular linguistic form in the sense that we have often sought it. Language is simultaneously many things at once and there are many valid, simultaneous perspectives on it. That the information gained from a cultural perspective does not straightforwardly derive from formal analyses, or vice versa, does not invalidate either perspective. While the search for a single starting point may often produce important and enlightening results, this should not cause us to ignore aspects of language that cross-cut this drive.

This article presents a series of concepts, expressed in Cree, that can act as points of departure for understanding a fundamentally Cree perspective on the purposes and needs of communication. A useful way to understand these concepts is Hymes's "norms of interpretation" (1974:60–61). This is not to say that Hymes's model is the only, or even the best, way to look at these questions. Borrowing a metaphor from McLuhan (1951), Hymes's model provides interesting handholds from which to climb over and survey this terrain. This discussion, then, is a survey of what I have come to understand in the decade I have worked with these speakers using the tools I have acquired. It is not definitive, neither as a representation of a Cree perspective nor as an ethnographic model.

2. Norms of interpretation. In order for an oral performance to be interpreted by its audience, the audience must have some kind of abstract structure in mind in much the same way that a speaker possesses an abstract knowledge of the language's system—the rules by which the forms can be constructed—which is then performed in a particular place and time. We call this abstract knowledge "grammar" or "competence" in linguistics (Chomsky 1965), and the correlate for full discourses is often called norms of interpretation (Hymes 1974; Baumann 1977). As Baumann (1977) and Chomsky (1965) point out, in neither case does the abstraction necessarily match any given instance of performance; other factors may intervene in both the small-scale linguistic production and the large-scale discourse production.

Nevertheless, it is clear in both cases that linguistically and culturally competent speakers possess an abstract system of knowledge allowing them to interpret a given performative act. Without this system of knowledge, the performance is uninterpretable gibberish, just as listening to a language without knowledge of the grammar is. A Canadian farmer in Saskatchewan who comes across a tree with brightly colored cloth tied to it—a crucial part of traditional Cree ceremony—will not be able to interpret it any more easily than he would the linguistic structures of the people who tied it there.

Norms of interpretation, then, are ideals that define ways of interpreting speech events. For Hymes (1974), these norms are highly culturally specific, intersecting with the belief system embedded in the culture. When approaching Plains Cree, then, we ought to ask what the Cree-specific norms are and how they interact with the construction of meaning via language. Combining work mostly done by anthropologists who attempt to interpret Cree culture and discussions with Cree speakers, I have been able to piece together a basic set of norms that are referenced in Plains Cree discourses. In many ways, the Cree system (which presumably has endured for a few millenia in some form) resembles a more durable version of the one described for early Quaker speech communities by Bauman (1974), and a detailed comparison of the two systems of communication would be useful.

When one works with Plains Cree speakers, many of their initial statements about language relate to norms of interpretation rather than to the formal properties of specific linguistic forms. In describing their language, three different thinkers from three different age groups in three different areas of Cree territory have all referenced a concept of "softness,"[2] as in (2), which they say encapsulates the purposes of the language and the ideals for how the language ought to be used.

(2) *kâ-yôskâtâk ôma nêhiyawêwin.*
kâ-yôsk=ât=â-k ôma nêhiyawêwin
C2-soft=PF=II-0 this.IN.SG Cree.language
'The Cree language is soft.' (author's field notes)

The root *yôsk-* is not easily translatable into English, in part because roots in Cree, somewhat like those of Semitic languages (Déchaine 2003), have extremely abstract meanings, but also because the concept that *yôsk-* expresses is not closely analogous to anything in most English-speaking communities. In some contexts, *yôsk-* means 'soft' with respect to touch. For example, when Emma Minde describes the process of working with hides in constructing clothes, as in (3), the goal is to have them *ê-yôskâki* 'soft'.

(3) *kâ-misipocikêt, kâ-misipotât aya pahkêkin, ka-yôskâyik*
'when she scraped the hide over a blade so that it would be soft' (Minde 1997:22).

However, when *yôsk-* is used of the Cree language, the root has a more abstract, philosophical meaning that is not translatable into English at all (the abstract property of softness in English being something that a Hollywood tough-talking actor like John Wayne would insult his opponents with). For example, Sarah Whitecalf, in a discourse yet to be published, describes medicine that helps the mind as *yôsk-* (Wolfart p.c. 2008). After many discussions with Plains Cree community members, it seems the term is a summary of a set of Plains Cree norms of interpretation. These are best described by Lightning (1992), and I outline these in sections 3–6, borrowing heavily from his description.

3. *wâhkêpinêwin* 'vulnerability'. One of the recurrent themes in Lightning's discussion of Plains Cree oral performance is vulnerability.[3] "The speaker makes themselves open and vulnerable to the hearer" (Lightning 1992: 62–63). This vulnerability can be psychological, as is seen below, but it can also be explicitly physical in nature, as Sarah Whitecalf explains.

> *mistahi kitotêwak oskinîkiwa, okosisiwâwa ôki nâpêwak—mistihkomân kî-cimatâwak êsa ômatowihk, êkwa ê-wî-kakêskimâwasocik; mistihkomân êsa kî-cimatâwak, "hâm, kisîmitâni, ôma kâ-wî-wîhtamâtân, ôma kâ-wî-isi-wâh-wîhtamâtân; kîspin kisîmitâni, ôma ohci tâh-tahkamîhkan!"*

> They lectured the young men a great deal, the men lecturing their sons—they used to plant a hunting-knife [in the ground between them] like this [gesture] when they were going to counsel their children; they used to plant a hunting-knife [in between]: "Now then, if I anger you by what I am going to tell you, by the manner in which I am going to tell you about these things; if I anger you, then you shall stab me and stab me with this knife!" [Whitecalf 1993:76]

According to *kâ-pimwêwêhahk*'s summary of this counseling practice, vulnerability was the primary reason elders were listened to: *êwak ôhci k-ôh-kî-nitohtâht kêhtê-aya kîkway ê-wîhtahk* 'That is why the old people used to be listened to when they told something' (Kâ-Nîpitêhtêw 1998:94).[4] This is vulnerability in the most visceral sense, but there are correlated psychological aspects to vulnerability as well. These are more subtle, and require an understanding of other Cree concepts.

The concept of vulnerability here is tightly intertwined with the Plains Cree notion of truth, which I discuss in section 6 as part of the concept of 'making truth happen'. In attempting to speak about his or her beliefs, the speaker is liable to be misinterpreted. Since accurate representation is a crucial Cree ethic (Cook and Wolfart 2009), this risk is considered substantial. Since the misinterpretation began with the speaker, speakers often take the responsibility for proper interpretation on themselves, which means that they must make strenuous efforts to get hearers to interpret the communicated beliefs properly. The best way to do so, within the Cree ethic, is to open oneself totally, to surrender oneself completely and unashamedly to inspection. This is dangerous, obviously, because it lets the audience know things about the speaker that could be used against him or her and that could themselves be misinterpreted. Hence, speakers choose to make themselves psychologically vulnerable in order to give their understanding of truth the best chance of being properly interpreted by hearers.

This ethic of vulnerability is part of the underlying reason for a number of Cree speech practices, including most notably the traditional practice of counting coup (Mandelbaum 1940). In this type of speech, a Cree man will rise at a gathering and recite deeds he has done, all of which are most likely known to those present. While this is generally interpreted as bragging by Europeans, it is actually quite the opposite when understood in terms of Cree ethics. By reciting their significant deeds, speakers open their lives to inspection and make themselves vulnerable to their hearers. If their words are not an accurate representation of their deeds, the speakers' subsequent speech will not be listened to. Counting coup, then, is a kind of "putting your money where your mouth is," so to speak: "I am a person who has done these things. I here recite them so that you know I speak accurately about myself. If this recitation turns out to be wrong, I am aware that you will not believe me in anything I subsequently say."

As an example of this mismatch between European and Cree discourse styles, consider Emma Minde's account of her life. She begins with an emphatic statement about her own good deeds and her central importance to religious leaders in the community.

mâk âya, namôy âyi nitayiwêpin, k-âyiwêpicik mân âya kêhtê-ayak, môy –môy âya êwako nipimitisahên, êyâpic aya niwîcihtâson mâna ê-isko-kaskihtâyân pikw îta; ita kâ-mamisîtotâkawiyân. mâcik âya, ê-kî-mamisîtotawit ayamihêwiyiniw ka-wîcihak ôta, ayamihâwin ohci. nik- aya, nikiyokawâwak mân âya otâhkosiwak, ninitawi-wîc-âyamihâmâwak. êkwa kihc-âyamihêwiyiniw mîn ê-kî-sawêyimit aya, ayamihêwi-saskamon ka-miyakik otâhkosiwak, êwako atoskêwin nitôtên; êkwa kâ-nîpêpihk, êkota mîna mân âyamihêwiyiniw êkw âyamihêwiskwêw niwîcêwâwak, ê-nitaw-âyamihêstamawâyâhkik, ayisiyiniwak kâ-nakatask- ayi, kâ-nakataskêcik.

But I am not retired the way old people retire, I do not follow that way of life, I still help everywhere as much as I can; where people rely on me. The priest, for instance, has relied upon me to help him with the church work here. I usually visit the sick, I go and pray with them. And now the Bishop has blessed me so that I give Holy Communion to the sick, that is the work I do now; and at wakes, at that time, too, I usually go along with the priest and the sister, when we go to pray for the people who have departed this world. [Minde 1997:2]

Within Cree discourse, this is interpretable as a counting coup and a statement of her own vulnerability: "I am going to talk about religious belief and living a good life and these are my credentials for talking about it. I hereby open my life to your inspection in order that you take my message in its proper context." However, these are statements that could easily be misinterpreted as self-serving piety in an English linguistic and cultural context. Such a misinterpretation highlights the dangers of translating one culture into the language and value system of another; a discourse that demonstrates ideal vulnerability in Cree terms can be twisted into ugly self-aggrandizement in another system of values. As a thought exercise, the reader should consider what it would feel like to be asked to speak in front of every family member and every close friend you have ever known and then be asked to summarize the important things about your life. The feeling of intense scrutiny, fear of misrepresentation, and sense of being inspected that accompanies this activity is what Lightning is referring to as the experience that must be accepted in order to live up to the ethic of *wâhkêpinwêwin* 'vulnerability.'

A number of other Cree cultural patterns are also crucially entangled with the ethic of vulnerability, including the *pakitinâsowin* 'giveaway' (from the root *pakitin-* 'release', plus derivational morphology that results in a meaning of 'making oneself free/released/discharged'), *kîhikosimowin* 'fasting rituals', and the prayer type called *mawimoscikêwin*. In each of these events, the actor surrenders control, either through loss of bodily power (fasting), loss of all possessions (giveaway), or surrender of mental volition (*mawimoscikêwin*). These acts of *wâhkêpinêwin* 'vulnerability' can be taken to the extreme, including fasting until death, giving away all one's possessions to the point of nakedness, and complete, public loss of emotional control (*mawimoscikêwin*).[5] While these acts of surrendering could be interpreted as placing the life of the person in danger, Cree elders explicitly identify these same things as necessary for life. For

example, *kâ-pimwêwêhahk* summarizes *pakitinâsowin* 'the giveaway' as equivalent to life itself: *êkota ohci pakitinâsowin ê-miyiht; pimâtisiwin anima kâ-miyiht* 'from that, he is given the giveaway ceremony; it is life that he is given' (Kâ-Nîpitêhtêw 1998:126).

In general, Cree culture places a high emphasis on interdependence and supplication, an ethic constructed within the context of a relentlessly demanding natural world. *kâ-pimwêwêhahk* summarizes this outlook elegantly when he says,

> *êwak ôhci, "êkâya wîhkât 'nitipêyimison' itwê!" k-ôh-itihcik osk-âyak; wiy âna kâ-tipêyihtahk kipimâtisiwininaw. namôy wîhkâc âkaw-âyihk ka-kî-kîkway-tôtênânaw, tâpiskôc ôm âyimôhtowin.*
>
> That is why young people are told, "Never say 'I am my own master!'" For it is he [the Creator] who rules our lives. We would never be able to do anything hidden, for example this gossiping. [Kâ-Nîpitêhtêw 1998:54]

As a human being, you are always vulnerable, always in a role of dependency. The only way to have life is to acknowledge this dependency, this vulnerability, and to act as a vulnerable creature.[6]

Returning to the triadic paradigm in (1a)–(1c), *wâhkêpinwêwin* 'vulnerability' is apparent insofar as the paradigm itself is an explicit opening to inspection. The learner is being instructed on how to make their means of acquiring this kind of spiritual knowledge explicit. Talk in an extremely careful, explicit way about the words of spirits, the learner is here instructed, so that the hearer will know exactly what you know and how you know it; make yourself vulnerable; open yourself to inspection. The grammatical contrasts among the sentences of (1a)–(1c) partly have to do with grammatical means of implying whether someone other than the current speaker is responsible for the accuracy of what's reported.

4. *kitimâkêyihtowin* 'compassion'. Hand in hand with vulnerability is a norm of interpretation[7] that Lightning (1992) identifies as "compassion." One ought to have a "compassionate mind," he says (Lightning 1992:16). Louis Sunchild, the elder he works with, repeatedly confirms this; looking on the hearer with compassion is a crucial ethic for Cree discourse and speakers will typically make a strong effort to establish this relation to their hearers.

This concept labeled "compassion" or "having a compassionate mind" is an English translation of the root *kitimâk-* with the final *-êyim/-êyiht* 'do with the mind'. The root *kitimâk-* occurs frequently in Plains Cree with a variety of verb-building morphemes and it has complex connotations that are not directly transferrable to English. The term is variously translated as 'pity' and 'compassion', but the particular attitude picked out by the root is more specifically Cree than the English implies. If we consider the contexts that the form is used in, and how Cree elders talk about the concept, a better picture of its meaning is accessible.

The concept expressed by *kitimâk-* describes the right attitude for the powerful to have towards those less powerful. For example, according to *kâ-pimwêwêhahk,* the Creator often looks upon humans with *kitimâkêyimowin* 'compassion' or 'pity', as in (4).

(4) *kîspin itêyimikoyahko,* ***kitimâkêyimikoyahko,*** *ka-wîmâskâkonaw ana kâ-pimohtêt iyôtin.*

'If it is His will for us, **if he thinks of us with pity**, this tornado which is going through will pass us by.' (Kâ-Nîpitêhtêw 1998:58)

Elders, in turn, ought to have this attitude towards young people. In the *atâyôhkêwin* 'myths' or 'sacred stories' recorded among the Sweetgrass Cree (Bloomfield 1930), elderly people are classically identified as having this attitude towards their children and grandchildren. As well, leaders are supposed to have it for the people in their care; (5) is an example.

(5) *êkwa tânis âya, ê-isi-miyopayik, kik-êsi-kanawâpamât aya, otiyinîma okimâhkân, "ka-****kitimâkêyima****cik kitayisiyinîmak; ka-nâtamawacik kitayisiyinîmak, ita ayahk, kâ-nayêhtâwipayicik."*

'[. . . he counseled him about] how things might go well, how a chief should look after his people, "For you to **care for** your people; for you to take up for your people where they run into trouble."' (Minde 1997:68)

Likewise, all parents ought to have this attitude towards their children. In fact, *kâ-pimwêwêhahk* asserts in (6) that this is the purpose of children coming into the world.

(6) *tâpiskôc îh, pêpîsis kimiyikawin,* ***ka-kitimâkêyimat an êwako, ka-kitimâkêyimat.***

For example, behold, you have been given a baby **so that you might think of that one with compassion, you are to think of it with compassion.** (Kâ-Nîpitêhtêw 1998:62]

Yet further, humans ought to have this attitude towards animals, especially birds, but everything down to insects, as seen in (7). It appears to be the progenitive power of these creatures that is the underlying reason for this compassionate attitude. In general, this progenitive aspect seems to be intimately connected to the "power" that *kitimâk-* is tracking.

(7) *"ka-wâpamâw êkot[a] ê-pimâhtawît manicôs, ê-askôs-, êwakw ân ê-askîwiskahk askiy, êwak ôhci* ***kitimâkêyimihk****! wâwîs awa – piyêsîsa, êkon ê-kihcêyimât kôhtâwînaw, ê-ocawâsimisit ê-wâpamâyêk, êkâya wîhkâc pisiskêyimihk ana!" kî-itwêwak mâna kisêyiniwak, êwak ôhci k-ôh-manâcihtâhk kîkway. wiy âna* ***ê-kitimâkêyimât*** *êkoni.*

'"There you will see an insect crawling along, populating the earth, therefore **think of it with compassion**! Especially the birds, Our Father thinks highly of them, and

when you see a bird with its own young, never bother it!" the old men used to say, that is why one should treat things with respect. **He thinks of them with pity**.' (Kâ-Nîpitêhtêw 1998:62)

Hence, *kitimâk-* is something that flows from the powerful to the less powerful, and is innately connected to life. This power could be an innate relation (e.g., the innate powerfulness of a human with respect to an insect), or it could be a circumstantial relation. For example, people who are suffering in some way, or elderly people who have become weak, are both canonical targets for experiencing *kitimâk-*. They are simultaneously identified as being in a state of it (*kitimâkisi-*) and as having it directed towards them (*kitimâkêyimiht*).

(8) *kiyâm pikoyikohk* ***ê-kitimâkisit*** *kisêyiniw, nôtikwêsiw* ***ê-kitimâkisit,*** ***ka-kitimâkêyimiht;*** . . .

'No matter how **poor** an old man may be, how **poor** an old woman may be, **one must look upon them with compassion**; . . .' (Kâ-Nîpitêhtêw 1998:64)

Tragedies and tragic events, such as the flu epidemic of 1918, referred to in (9), are often times that call for a near-universal *kitimâk-* attitude.

(9) *mitoni kî-****kitimâkan*** *anim êkospî, kayâs anima.*

'It was really **pitiful** at that time, it was long ago.' (Ahenakew 2000:40)

It seems, then, that there is a fundamental issue of power involved, that this power is connected to progenitivity, and that *kitimâk-* is something in the weaker that calls to the stronger. To direct one's mind in a *kitimâk-* way is to recognize one's own power and to find a responding aspect in the creature considered.

As Lightning (1992) and the elder he learns from both affirm, this mental attitude is absolutely crucial to speech of any kind. As a norm of interpretation, it dictates the performance of language in a particular set of ways. As part of one's compassionate mind, one must speak *pêyâhtik* 'quietly, slowly, kindly, softly, understandably' to others, as in (10). This *pêyâhtik* speaking is the linguistic aspect of compassion, including a demand for careful choice of words, a controlled voice, and careful representation of the hearer's perspective. *Pêyâhtik* speech, which is essentially spoken compassion, is seen as crucial to developing understanding, because it opens the hearer's mind to the message (Lightning 1992) and thus builds towards "mutual thinking," which I discuss in section 5 below.

(10) *môy nânitaw itâpatan ka-kisîwêhkahtawat kîkway ê-kitahamawat; môy ka-kî-âpacihik,* ***pêyâhtik*** *kitos!* ***pêyâhtik*** *kitos! nisitohtamôh ôma!*

'It is pointless for you to raise your voice and scold them when you are warning them about something; it cannot benefit them, speak to them **quietly**! Speak to them **quietly**!' (Kâ-Nîpitêhtêw 1998:62–63)

Since *pêyâhtik* speaking is the hallmark of *kitimâkêyihtowin* 'compassion' and a core support strategy for developing understanding, it is shocking and distressing when it fails. This is the crux of the bad news that *kâ-pimwêwêhahk* brings to the group of elders he addresses in (11): *pêyâhtik* speaking is not working.

(11) *namôy kinisitohtâkonaw kîkway, kitawâsimisinaw kôsisiminaw* ***pêyâhtik*** *âta kîkway ka-wîhtamawâyahk, môy kinisitohtâkonaw.*

'They do not listen to us, our children and grandchildren, although we tell them in a ***pêyâhtik*** way, they do not listen.' (Kâ-Nîpitêhtêw 1998:46)

While the cultural message is not conveyed by an English translation, the Cree here is unequivocal: the core method of counseling young people is failing the elders. Thus, the transmission of *nêhiyaw-isîhcikêwina* 'Cree things, Cree ways' to the next generation is strongly endangered. In framing his speech this way, *kâ-pimwêwêhahk* is casting himself as a straggling survivor, returning to the camp to confirm what everybody already knows—things are very bad and there is not much of hope of them getting better. What remains for *kâ-pimwêwêhahk* to do is exhort the audience to perseverance (*ahkamêyimo!* 'persevere!') and to maintain their beliefs in what the Creator has given them (*kâ-miyikowisiyâhk kâ-nêhiyawiyâhk* 'what we who are Cree have been given by the powers').

Turning again to the paradigm of sentences in (1a)–(1c), *kitimâkêyihtowin* 'compassion' is the chain that binds the three agents together. As is shown by the Cree focus on supplication and the idea of divinity discussed above, compassion is what motivates a *pawâkan* 'spirit' to bring powers and messages to a human. For example, Sarah Whitecalf tells of an owl *pawâkan* that sends messages and also warns of danger (Whitecalf 1993:36–45). This is a benefit to the receiving humans, while the *pawâkan* is acting out of pity for those who are weaker than itself. Ideally, this is also the motivation that links together the various humans who share this message, because sharing this knowledge results in the betterment of lives. For example, the woman who was visited by a porcupine *pawâkan* in Sarah Whitecalf's account (Whitecalf 1993:34–35) and given the gift of sewing then goes and teaches other women how to do the same. The Cree concept of *kitimâkêyihtowin* 'compassion', then, is an underlying reason for the very existence of this paradigm.

5. ***nisitohtamowin, mâmâw-itêyihtamowin*** **'mutual thinking'.** Cultures differ strongly as to the conceptual role of cooperation in speech. For example, Aristotle's model of rhetorical technique emphasized a fundamentally assertive and adversarial relation between speaker and hearer; the job of the speaker was to wrestle for the hearer's attention (possibly in the context of shouting on a street corner) and convince him that a point he did not agree with is, in fact, better (Cook, Déchaine, and Muehlbauer 2005). For this model, Aristotle developed a set of techniques for the persuasion of hostile audiences, including controlling for types of evidence (e.g., witnesses, documents, etc.), organization of

the speech (what he calls "syntax"), the argumentation of the speech itself, and the presentation of the speaker's ethics. This lays out a particularly adversarial approach to speaking, but it has had enormous influence on Western institutions from law to education to science, due, at least partly, to the vigorous use that Augustine made of it during his numerous polemics against his doctrinal opponents (e.g., the Pelagians). In addition, it has had a dominant influence on the study of language meaning (semantics), where the fundamental speech act is a brutal assertion of how the world is, an assertion that the hearer has to agree to or deny (Searle 1965; Stalnaker 1999; Déchaine 2007; Stephenson 2007). This model of Aristotle's is by no means the only model of speaking in Western societies (others might include, e.g., Quaker speech), but it has had a strong influence within significant institutions.

Plains Cree rhetorical ideals do not follow this Aristotelean model of speaking at all. Walter Lightning explains the Cree view in terms of a concept he calls "mutual thinking" (1992:62), which tends to be expressed in Cree as *nisitohtamowin*, often glossed as 'understanding'. When someone speaks, they assume, as in (12), that the hearer is going to listen to them carefully (*nanahitamowin* 'careful, respectful listening') and try to think along with them.

(12) *mistahi kî-nanahitam oskinîkiskwêw.*

'A young woman used to listen to it (what her elders said) respectfully.' (Kâ-Nîpitêhtêw 1998:46)

In other words, cooperation is assumed as a precondition of the performance. Still, while it is expected, it is not taken for granted. The speaker will typically work to establish mutual thinking, calling on an arsenal of rhetorical tools to establish the proper relation between speaker and hearer. For example, the speaker will make clear statements of beliefs they have in common, including their adherence to traditional religious practice. Kâ-Nîpitêhtêw does this in (13) by establishing that he works with other elders and observes the important Cree rituals of morning prayer and smoking the pipe.

(13) *êkosi ninanâskomon, wâpahki iskwêyâc ka-wî-, ôta ka-wîci-pîhtwâmakik, ka-kâkîsimoyahk kîkisêpâ.*

'So I give thanks, each morning when I smoke with them here, when we chant our prayers in the morning.' (Kâ-Nîpitêhtêw 1998:48)

The speaker will also rely heavily on shared presences to bring the hearer into the proper attitude towards the speech performance. For example, the speaker may appeal to his or her connections with family and mentors of the hearer, as in (14).

(14) *êwakw âwa kâ-wîhtamawak anohc awa, ôta kâ-wîtapimak awa, misawâc êtokwê kinisitawêyimâwâw, 'Freda' isiyîhkâsow; êkota ôma wîst ê-atoskêt ôta, tâpiskôc ôm îtê mâna kâ-pê-wîtapimakik ôki.*

'This is what I told this person here today, when I sat together here with this person. In any case, I guess you all know her. Freda is her name; she also works here, for example when I come to sit here with these elders.' (Kâ-Nîpitêhtêw 1998:46)

In addition, *pêyâhtik* 'compassionate' speaking plays an important role because it conveys the speaker's *kitimâkêyihtowin* 'compassion' towards the audience and those connected to the audience—for example, as in (15), by expressing the concerns and needs of others, including how the speaker will exert himself or herself to provide assistance with these concerns and needs.

(15) *kîkwây ôma mistahi kâ-mâmitonêyihtamihikot awa wîsta otawâsimisa, pêyak âsônê . . . mâk ê-isi-kaskihtâyân, iyikohk ninitotamâkêstamawâw âta, tahtwâw k-ôhpâskonak ospwâkan.*

'What worries this person greatly is his children, one in particular . . . but as far as I am able, that is how much I will do for [this young person], every time I raise up the pipe.' (Kâ-Nîpitêhtêw 1998:48)

In a sense, these tools and the work the speaker does with them are the parallel to Aristotle's tools of persuasion (Cook, Déchaine, and Muehlbauer 2003). The speaker is trying to persuade the hearer to think with him or her. This is not the same thing as agreement; the speaker has no proposition to convince the hearer of, as seen in the discussion of "making truth happen" in section 6 below.

Given these values, it should be no surprise that verbal conflict is strongly avoided. There is a near-universal preference for exit from a conversation should there be a risk of an argument, as is expressed in (16).

(16) *nânitaw ê-wî-itwêt ayisiyiniw, ahpô niya tipiyaw, nânitaw ê-isit ayisiyiniw, niyîkatêhtân, namôy ninôhtê-nitohtawâw, môy nânitaw itâpatan ayisk ka-nitohtawak, konita ka-naskwêwasimak; nawac anima, êkâ ka-nitohtawak, êkos ê-kî-isi-wîhtamâkawiyân niya; êwak ôhci kik-âpacihikonâwâw ê-isi-owîcisânihtoyêk, ê-isi-otawâsimisiyêk kôsisimak, ka-kitimâkêyimiskik, mêkwâc ê-wîcêwacik, êwakw ânima piko kê-pimohtahikocik.*

'When a person is going to say something negative, even to me personally, when a person says something negative to me, I simply walk away, I do not want to listen to him, for it is pointless for me to listen to him, and it is in vain for me to respond to him; it is better that I should not even listen to him, that is what I myself was told, and that will benefit you as well, being siblings to each other, and being parents and grandparents, so that they might love you while you are here (on earth) with them, that is the only thing that will guide them through life.' (Kâ-Nîpitêhtêw 1998:64)

Negative speech is considered spiritually dangerous and can make the hearer as unclean as the speaker. Anyone who has worked with Plains Cree people for any length of time can easily provide anecdotes that affirm this value system, but a particular experience stands out from my own fieldwork. This occurred when an anthropologist (unreflectively) made belittling remarks about some elders he

was working with during a forum on aboriginal languages. He had been talking about the troubles of working on a particular kind of project, and how the elders were being (in his view) obstructive by making unreasonable demands. As he explained this, he chuckled and rolled his eyes, as Westerners sometimes do when talking about a difficult grandparent. An elder aboriginal person abruptly stood up and interrupted the talk to say that he was sorry but he had to leave to perform a sweat. Nothing was commented on by those present, but the situation stuck out in my mind enough that I brought it up to a Cree person I was working with. He interpreted the elder's reaction in this way:[8] "That old man had heard bad things there, at that talk, eh? He had to go clean himself, go to do a sweat to get himself clean. That bad talk had made him dirty" (author's field notes). In a Cree interpretation, then, the removal from the context was a sign of its exceptional offensiveness, and, obviously, the elder had to go clean himself after hearing it.

One way to understand this association between negative speech and uncleanliness for the hearer is to think of the hearer's role in the performance. A Cree person will seek to always "think along" with the speaker towards achieving a cooperative understanding. Given this mirroring of the speaker, if the speaker says something awful or cruel, in a very literal sense the hearer has now thought something awful or cruel. It is the verbal equivalent of dumping dirty water over the hearer's head.

The nonassertional, noncombative mutual thinking of idealized Cree communication can be seen in the paradigm in (1a)–(1c). Of the three forms offered, only that in (1a), employing the independent order verb *itwêw* 'she/he says thus', has anything like assertional properties in the classic sense (Cook and Muehlbauer 2008; Cook 2008; Muehlbauer 2015), insofar as it makes a statement about what the speaker takes to be true. That is, the form indicates that the speaker believes this proposition to be subjectively true, rooted in their own person experience. The forms in (1b) and (1c), which employ the conjunct order form *ê-itwêt* 'she/he says thus', are nonassertional in that they do not directly indicate the speaker's belief about the truth of the proposition (Cook 2014). That is, (1a) expresses the speaker's personal belief and experience and the other two sentences express that the speaker only knows of this from someone else. There is no attempt on the part of the speaker to convince the hearer of this truth—the speaker is behaving as merely one link in a series of cooperative speech acts. It is up to the cooperative hearer to sort out the various truth issues associated with this *pawâkan*'s message.

6. *ê-tâpwêmakahk* 'making truth happen'. One of the ways in which a performance can be evaluated is in terms of meeting its goals. Did the speaker achieve the ends towards which he or she was aiming? We have already seen some of these ends; the proper expression of the speaker's *wâhkêpinêwin* to prepare the hearer's mind, the expression of *kitimâkêyihtowin* via proper

pêyâhtik speech, and the achievement of *nisitohtamowin* via this speech. However, there is a more superordinate goal that these others are essentially preparatory for, what Lightning calls "making truth happen" (1992:63). The entire purpose of Cree speech, he says, is to bring together the proper contexts so that truth will "happen" for the hearer. This careful choice of the English word "happen" is meant to convey the nonagentivity of the event; the speaker is seeking to be an intermediary, via proper speech, to an event that is really not of their making.

This concept, expressed in English as "making truth happen," is typically expressed in Plains Cree via the word *tâpwê* 'true' and its verbal derivatives, such as *tâpwêmakan* 'it comes true, it is fulfilled.' For example, *kâ-pimwêwêhahk* uses this word in (17), describing the process that Western missionaries go through, whereby they steadily gain understanding of *nêhiyaw-isîhcikêwina* 'Cree things, Cree ways', eventually reaching a realization of their truth.

(17) *piyisk an êkotê kik-êspayihow; ka-wâpahtam wîsta, ê-tâpwêmakahk ita kôhtâwînaw ê-kî-miyikoyahk, kîkwây ka-mawimostamahk.*

'ultimately he [the priest], too, will move in this direction [towards the Indian way of worship]; he, too, will see that it is fulfilled, the way in which Our Father has given it to us, what we should worship.' (Kâ-Nîpitêhtêw 1998:126)

This truth event is not agentive; the verb has the suffix *-makan*, which means the event has no animate agent (Wolfart 1973; Muehlbauer 2008). Humans cannot directly make this truth happen; all they can do is set up the proper circumstances in hopes that it will. In the context of the Cree relation to divinity, the proper thing to do is to rely on (*nâtamostam*) rituals for help of either a physical or spiritual nature. If proper contexts are created, then a Cree person can hope that the truth happens, that their faith is fulfilled as a truth (*ê-tâpwêmakahk*), as in (18).

(18) *êwak ôma niyanân ê-mamisîyâhk, tahto-nîso-kîsikâw ê-matotisiyâhk, wêpinâsona ê-pakitinamâhk; tânitahtwâw êkwa ê-pimohtêt, niwîmâskâkonân. ê-tâpwêmakahk, kîkway, okisêwâtisiwin ita ê-nitotamâht kôhtâwînaw.*

'As for us, we rely on this, we hold a sweat-lodge every day, we present cloth offerings; and although it [the Tornado] has gone through now several times, it has passed around us. It is fulfilled, that in which Our Father's grace is requested.' (Kâ-Nîpitêhtêw 1998:58)

Humans are powerless to change events and are powerless to force a truth into existence, as is expressed in (19).

(19) *môy nânitaw itâpatan ka-mawimoyahk ôta; môy nânitaw, môy kiyânaw kitipêyihtênânaw wiya; . . . pikoyikohk, pikw îtê itâmoyahko, pikw îtê mawimoyani, môy nânitaw ka-kî-nâtamâkon, . . .*

'It is pointless for us to cry out here; for we ourselves have no control over it, none at all; . . . no matter where we might flee, no matter where you might cry out, it cannot rescue you, . . .' (Kâ-Nîpitêhtêw 1998:58)

When there is fulfillment, when truth happens—for example, when a sun dance is properly conducted with belief, as in (20)—the event becomes 'powerful'; that is how speakers translate *ê-tâpwêmakahk* in this context.

(20) ***ê-tâpwêmakahk*** *ôma nipâkwêsimowin.*
'This sun-dance **is powerful**.' (Kâ-Nîpitêhtêw 1998:126) (from an explication of proper ceremonies in a sun dance and the spirits that are present at it)

When truth happens for a person, this powerful fulfillment of the truth is a realization for the perceiver about the thing perceived, in much the same participational relation that exists between the *kitimâk-* of a person in need and the *kitimâk-* attitude of one who has power (as detailed in section 4 above). This perception of truth is expressed in Cree by the verb *tâpwêwakêyihtam*, which is literally 'perceive the truth in it' (*tâpwê-* 'true' and *-êyiht-* 'perceive it with the mind').[9] For example, a person can *tâpwêwakêyihtam* that a ritual is *ê-tâpwêmakahk*, as in (21), and this perception will both confirm the power of the ritual and give them new access to its powers.

(21) *mâcikôtitan ômis ôma wî-ispayiw wî-mêtawâkâniwiw êwak ôma, ê-mosci-kiskinowâpicik, kiskinowâpiwin k-âpatan; mâk ân âyisiyiniw* ***kê-tâpwêwakêyihtahk*** *kîsowâtamohk okâkîsimowin! ê-ohpâskonât ospwâkana, mâh-mînwâskonamaw anima, oskicîwâhtik!*
'Lo, this is going to happen [when someone makes a mistake in their prayers] and people are going to play around with this, learning merely by imitation, learning by imitation will be used; but for a person who believes in it, you all complete his chanting prayer! As he raises the pipe, help him to point it the right way, the pipestem.' (Kâ-Nîpitêhtêw 1998:122)

For Lightning (1992) there is no difference between the cooperative "truth happenings" in ritual contexts like this and the way speech proceeds. He is simply describing the interpersonal parallel of the process laid out for the ritual relation between human understanding and the natural world. Humans make truth happen in the natural world via their perception of the power of ritual supplications, and they make truth happen for each other with their speech.

This is truth seen as a revelatory process, rather than an assertional one (Déchaine 2008; Muehlbauer 2008). In this sense, it is strongly divergent not only from Aristotelean rhetoric, but from standard models of semantics. Within formal semantics, language is typically conceived of as organized around assertions—claims about the "objective" state of things in the "real world." However, a number of linguists now agree that Plains Cree has a grammar organized around the subjective relation between speakers' beliefs and those of others (Cook 2008; Déchaine 2008; Muehlbauer 2008). Summarizing, the evidence

seems to indicate that Plains Cree discourses are not persuasive and that the semantics are not, strictly speaking, truth conditional. Rather, the language forms appear to be used to convey beliefs of various people in a subjective sense. There is what I believe, and what you believe, and what others believe; there is no ultimate fact that any one of us can be in possession of, such that it can be used as a tool (or a weapon) against the others.

This overall approach to truth and its relation to Cree grammar are well-illustrated by the triadic paradigm in (1a)–(1c). The form in (1a), *êkos îtwêw ana pawâkan,* offers the speaker's perspective and, truth-conditionally, nothing more—the speaker experienced this and they are telling you about it. You, the addressee, are free to believe or disbelieve, agree or disagree; you may even not believe in *pawâkanak* at all. The forms in (1b) and (1c), *êkos ê-itwêt ana pawâkan* and *êkos ês ê-itwêyit anihi pawâkana,* indicate belief at some remove—the speaker has acquired some knowledge of this event, and is passing it on to you. In (1c), the events are set at a greater distance through the use of the obviative (Cook and Muehlbauer 2008; Muehlbauer 2008, 2015). In all three cases, however, truth must happen for the hearer. It is up to you, in the context of your own knowledge and in the shared context of *kitimâkêyihtowin, wâhkêpinêwin,* and *nisitohtamowin,* to put the pieces together and perceive the truth of these events.

7. Conclusion. The Plains Cree construction of the triadic paradigm in (1a)–(1c) provides a crucial insight into what Plains Cree speakers value and what their beliefs are about their language, their "linguistic ideology" (Kroskrity and Field 2009). As given to me, the paradigm crucially demonstrates grammatical ways to convey how someone knows something about messages from a helper spirit, through firsthand experience, through secondhand experience, or at a greater remove. We should conclude, then, that the structuring and conveying of the personal relation to information is of primary importance to this speech community.

The value placed on this relationship to information extends beyond spiritual issues. I have checked this paradigm with a variety of Plains Cree speakers, using a variety of other potential sources (e.g., a friend, a relative, a stranger, a human, an animal), and in all cases, much the same concerns hold. The spirit's message is identified as the most important, amounting to the equivalent of a legal context, which is why it is used for this paradigm. When one talks about a *pawâkan*'s message, it seems that the stakes are at their highest and hence communicative values are thrown into strong relief. However, the concepts encapsulated here carry through, it appears, to interactions in daily life as well.

Embedded in a Cree worldview, this paradigm can be interpreted as conveying a number of Cree norms of communication. Through it, the elder teaches the student to allow himself or herself to be inspected regarding their knowledge—the Cree ideal of *wâhkêpinêwin.* By invoking the context of a *pawâkan,*

the elder reminds the student that the compassion shown to this weak, dependent human hearer should be extended, in the same manner, to other humans so that they may also benefit—the Cree ideal of *kitimâkêyihtowin*. By constructing a paradigm that avoids direct assertion, the elder encourages the student to engage the hearer's own experience, reminding the student of the need for careful listening and the development of shared thinking—the Cree ideal of *nisitohtamowin*. The grammatical contrasts among the three sentences throw light on the nonassertional, personal nature of truth, teaching the student to be careful to supply the proper context for the pieces of knowledge that are made available to the hearer in the proper context so that truth can happen for them—the Cree concept of *tâpwêmakan*.

Notes

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Abbreviations. The following abbreviations are used: C1 = conjunct type 1; AN = animate; DS = different subject; IN = inanimate; SG = singular; OBV = obviative.

1. The discussion was a fairly "typical" exchange—at least from a Cree point of view. The typical way someone talks about this topic in Cree is in a very "displaced" way. The first time it is brought up, nothing might be said. The second it is brought up may be by the elder themselves, in a way that seems abrupt (e.g., in this case, he called me at 6:00 A.M. a week later). The third time it is brought up, it may be in a more serious context (e.g., in a sweat or during some other activity).

2. It is notable that one of the thinkers who referenced this concept was a Woods Cree from Northern Saskatchewan, rather than a Plains Cree. This suggests that the concept crosses significant cultural and linguistic boundaries.

3. As far as I can tell, this is a translation of the Plains Cree word *wâhkêpinêw(in)*. In this case, the English and Cree concepts evidently share much in common.

4. "*kâ-pimwêwêhahk*" is a name he uses in Cree and hence follows Cree capitalization patterns (there are no capital letters in Cree. "Kâ-Nîpitêhtêw" is his legal Canadian surname. It follows English capitalization rules (*ka-* is treated as a compound name, like "Ste." in Ste. Exupéry). This is the standard for Cree names, used by everyone.

5. It is important to note that these values appear to cross the traditionalist-Christian divide in Cree communities. For example, it is not at all uncommon to hear classic *mawimoscikêwin* prayers offered by elders on the Sunday Christian radio broadcasts in Manitoba.

6. It is interesting to note that one of the Cree terms for the Métis is *ayîsiyiniwak kâ-tipêyimisocik* 'the people who rule themselves' (Norman Fleury p.c. 2013). Implicit in that phrase is reference to a perceived gap between the Cree way and the mode of life that the Métis pursued, either through necessity or choice.

7. I understand a "norm of interpretation" as being related to how participants should think (as opposed to act) because it affects how someone's speech is interpreted. By expecting a speaker to have a compassionate mind, the hearer interprets what they are saying as well-meant, coming from their best attempt at a solution to problems, etc. Much like how your mother expects you to interpret her scolding as "compassionate"

because she "has your best interests at heart." It is a set of background knowledge needed to fully understand a communicative event.

8. Throughout this discussion, I leave unidentified the persons whose interpretation I am reporting because they asked not to be identified. The reasons for this have to do with significant community-internal conflict in the modern Cree context. That would be a topic for another article, although one I am hardly qualified to write.

9. This word has several morphophonological variants, most notably *tâpwakêyihtam* and *tâpwêyihtam*, that reduce or eliminate the premedial *-wak-* that appears in its Standard Roman Orthography transcription.

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