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STRUCTURES OF DISCOURSE: SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS OF ABORIGINAL CHILDREN

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The English language differs from others both in the patterns and the sociolinguistic conventions of its discourse. This paper uses forms of greeting as a specific reference as to how cross cultural communication can break down when Aboriginal people and English speakers interact.

Since children often rely on the spoken word as a basis for writing, and Aboriginal children rarely learn to write successfully in English, referring to the structure of Aboriginal languages offers a possible explanation of one contributive factor to this inability.

Each and every individual language is different, not only in its vocabulary, but also in the way its discourse is patterned and the conventions which govern its social interaction.

In this paper some of the notable differences between English and Aboriginal languages are compared. This comparison is offered as a possible explanation of how communication can break down between people from different cultures, especially in the classroom. Beginning with differences in the sociolinguistic conventions of interpersonal speech, possible cross-cultural miscommunication is discussed with reference to forms of greeting.

A comparison of spoken and written language is then introduced. This brings into discussion the ways in which Aboriginal people, if they use their own language as a basis, may fail to learn to write successfully in English. The common practice of repetition used when Aboriginal people write in English is cited as a specific example, and a possible explanation is tendered.

COMMUNICATION STOPS AT "HELLO"

Although it may appear to the English speaking teacher that their Aboriginal students speak and understand English well, in reality this may be far from the truth. Often, students have considerable difficulty comprehending just what their teacher wants of them. Sometimes this communication breakdown may have its roots in the sociolinguistic differences in the rules and conventions which structure the discourse patterns in their respective languages, and may begin on the first day of school.

When a student enters a class it is an accepted practice in English speaking classrooms to ask his name and introduce him to the rest of the class. A teacher of Aboriginal students will have little success with this strategy, as he may be violating some of the Aboriginal rules of interpersonal communication (Harris, 1980). Firstly, personal names are not used as freely among Aboriginal people as they are among non-Aborigines; secondly, in many instances avoidance relationships may prohibit the speaking of a name in the presence of certain people. Whilst it may go against traditional English language conventions, it is far more acceptable to seek such information from a third party when communicating with Aboriginal people.

Another contributing factor to potential breakdown of communication has its basis in the lexis of Aboriginal languages. The English

language has many greeting words and responses from which individuals may choose to greet their friends or acquaintances when they meet, depending upon the closeness of the relationship and whether or not the participants wish to engage in further conversation. A reciprocal "Hello" or "G'day" merely acknowledged the existence of the other party, whilst a "Hi! How are you?", or "Haven't seen you for a while," invites further interaction. The more formal "Good morning ... How are you today?" is somewhat open-ended. The speaker may not really be concerned with the answer to this question, rather he is establishing a relationship and a possible opening for further conversation.

Regardless of which alternative is selected, it is more or less obligatory amongst English speaking people to acknowledge each other when they meet with some form of greeting. Most Aboriginal languages on the other hand have neither the obligation nor the lexical choice to do this. Theirs is a much less formalised greeting system, and often no words exist equivalent to "Hello". However, an Aboriginal meeting a non-Aboriginal may be aware that some form of recognition is expected of him, and ask "Where are you going?". For him this is equivalent to the English "How are you?" and he doesn't really expect an answer. But the non-Aboriginal may interpret this simple question as overt curiosity and become quite antagonistic, especially if he does not wish if to be known where he is going. Conventions of English discourse require that a question such as this be answered. An understanding of such cross-cultural differences in discoursal patterning is necessary in order that exchanges be correctly interpreted. The signals, or words used may not necessarily be interpreted by the hearer/reader in the way intended by the speaker/writer. The interpretation of what is said may be affected by both social and cultural bias, as in the afore mentioned examples. These affects become manifest in terms of discourse context since general principles of conversational structure are not universal, and in linguistic realisations as there are many ways of saying the same thing and many ways each may be interpreted (Candlin 1981, in Smith, Ed.). It is necessary for both teachers and students to be aware of such differences in order that they have optimal opportunity to interpret meanings correctly.

MEANINGS ON PAPER: DOES SPEECH AFFECT WRITING?

Thus far, this discussion has dealt with spoken interchanges. However, other differences become manifest when language is written down. Whilst it is acknowledged that written and spoken language are different, writing is initially dependent upon spoken language. The young writer often begins with remembering his experiences and writing them down. This is what is referred to by Martin (1985) as 'recount genre'. The child later learns to write in the genres of reports, procedures, explanations and finally expositions, as he develops his abilities in factual writing.

Factual writing, according to Martin, is designed to explore the world around us, focusing on how things get done and what things are like. It is different in this from the narrative genre, the main function of which in our culture and the English language, is to entertain. In Aboriginal culture, however, myths and legends serve as much to explain as to entertain. Traditional stories in the narrative form are often explanation of natural phenomena.

It is possible that this may act as a constraint on the children's ability to learn to write in the genres of factual writing in English. Other constraints also exist. Firstly the children may be asked by the teacher to 'write a story'. The word 'story' in English usually refers to a narrative. The teacher, however, does not necessarily expect this when asking the Aboriginal students to write. Often what the teacher expects is words on paper. The children usually respond by writing

of their experiences and produce a text in the form of a simple recount. If they were led to expand their abilities to include other forms of writing they would be at the beginning of a developmental progression. In reality, however, they will probably continue to write recounts throughout their school life. Furthermore, the possibility exists that if they were to attempt a more highly developed factual text they might produce something closer to a narrative in structure, as within their culture these perform the functions of factual texts.

Thus, the differences in Aboriginal and European world views become apparent, as preconceived notions about what constitute a fact, identity concept, or relationship are derived from culture, of which language is the core (Regent, citing Palmer, Riley Ed. 1985). Halliday (1976, in Kress Ed.) maintains:

> If a language has evolved in the service of certain functions that may in the broadest sense be called social functions ...Has this left its mark in determining the nature of the language?...Social functioning of language determines the pattern of language varieties... or registers ...The register range or verbal repertoire, of a community or individual derives from the range of social uses of language in the context of a particular culture.

Language in Aboriginal cultures largely fulfills such a social function, thus English too is seen to serve this purpose. For Aboriginal people the forming and maintaining of relationships is paramount; hence English is used in this context between themselves and non-Aborigines. When it comes to writing, this aspect also serves as a constraint. Factual written English is depersonalised; however, an impersonal debate form does not exist in Aboriginal languages. People draw on their experience when using language, thus, when using a second language the first may be used as background knowledge. Aborigines may relate their choice of words in English to the way in which they would express themselves in their own language. This is true of both spoken and written language. Since Aboriginal culture is based upon oral traditions, it must be assumed that the spoken word is the basis of both oral and written discourse. Manifestations of this become apparent when regarding children's writing in Aboriginal communities. Often 'stories' are very repetitive, which makes them appear uninteresting and poorly structured by English standards.

McKay (1984) cites some data from his research in the Ndjebbana language, which may provide some explanation for this phenomenon. He maintains that repetition may function as a marker of duration or iteration, as in the example below:

> Nirrikebba niyarra budborl,
> Njirriyankana, 'I'.
> Njarrakkoya, njarrakkoya, njarrakkoya,
> njarrakoya,yalawa njarrawolobena kul...
>
> Do you two want to go to the football?
> We said 'Yes'.
> We slept, we slept, we slept, we slept
> (that is, four days later)
> we came to school.

Bearing this in mind regarding a text produced by an Aboriginal student from the same area it is possible that she has used the repetition in a similar way, to indicate to the reader that all the participants of the event were doing the same thing.

> On last night me and Josephine we went to beach.
> We were laughing and playing and laughing and
> playing and then Rebecca came and we were
> playing and laughing then we went back home and we were playing and laughing at home. We had good fun and then we went toback home. (Post primary student)

Observation of this student at work indicated she put considerable thought into her 'stories' all of which were similar. She may very well have been ensuring that she had an action for each individual named.

Examples of direct translations of Aboriginal language indicate that repetition is, in fact, inherent in the language. The way in which the verb is structured denotes not only the action taking place, but who and how many are acting, whilst in English this is accomplished with the use of pronouns and mostly inferred without continual repetitions of the pronoun. The number of actors does not have the same importance in English as it appears to have in Aboriginal languages.

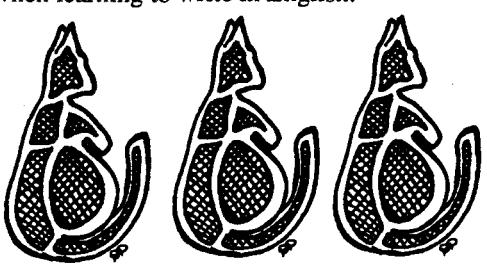
> Galug nagudji rey rogurmereni dja birironareni (Then one (man) went spear-dodging and they-see-good-at-dodging-spears)
>
> galug bindimey bininj bo:gen nawu benero:magni then they-them-took men two these two-good-speardodging.
>
> gabeneneyo giggig dja warlarg.they-two-names giggig and warlarg.They-sent-them those
>
> Benebo:gen nawu benero:magni namegbe those-two they two-good-dodging they beneguinyagan they-two-after-him.
>
> ... they tested out each man's skill at dodging the spear. Then they selected two men so skilled called 'giggig' and 'warlarg' and sent them forth.

In the English version of the story it is established that two men are the actors of the story: "they selected two men". It is not necessary to repeat this information as it is implied by the pronoun "them" later on, and in ellipsis..."so skilled called ..." It would appear that Aboriginal languages do not have the use of either pronouns or ellipsis in their structure, hence the repetition. This example is from the Gunwinggu language (Oates, 1964). However, linguistic analyses of other Aboriginal languages indicate that they share similar traits (SIL-AAB work papers).

If students are to become more proficient at writing in the English language, teachers need some understanding of the structure and discoursal patterning of both English and the vernacular and need to generate in their students an awareness of the differences.

The use of pronouns, conjunctions, ellipsis and inference need to be taught explicitly, as it seems they have no existence in Aboriginal languages. The factual writing skills necessary for further education include not only these, but the ability to depersonalise the language-taking the relationships away from the communication. This is something alien to Aboriginal culture which needs careful explanation and much practice.

English is not just a social language. Students need to be made aware of this and presented with a variety of text examples and models for comparison if they are to succeed in their education and function effectively in the English speaking community. The differences between spoken and written English must be made apparent as well as the variety of generic forms to be found in written English. Aboriginal students need to have their attention drawn to the fact that theirs is an oral traditional culture and as such the structure of the language may make it inappropriate as a background to draw upon when learning to write in English.



SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

- Often there is communication breakdown in classrooms with Aboriginal students and English speaking teachers.
- Discourse conventions and patterns vary between different languages, and these may be inadvertently broken when Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people interact in English.
- Both teachers and students need an awareness of such differences in order that meanings be correctly interpreted.
- Written and spoken language differ, especially in English. Initially, however, spoken language forms the basis for writing.
- Two broad categories of writing exist in English - factual and narrative. Whilst they serve different functions in English speaking cultures this may not be true of other culture.
- Aboriginal students are disadvantaged in schools because of their apparent inability to progress beyond recount genre when writing in English. Differences in world view and the functions and structure of the languages contribute to this.
- Repetition, occurring when Aboriginal children write in English, may be attributed to the structure of their own language upon which they rely for background knowledge.
- Features such as pronouns, ellipsis and inference do not appear to exist in Aboriginal languages, thus they must be taught to students.
- Ideally, teachers should have a knowledge and understanding of the language of their students in order that they may make explicit the differences in the languages and help their students become more proficient at both speaking and writing in English.

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