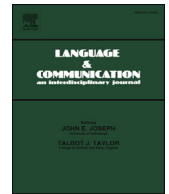




Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Language & Communication

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/langcom

Shifting: Amerindian perspectivism in Kaska narrative performances

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online xxx

Keywords:
Ontology
Code switching
Subarctic
Dene
Athabaskan
Narrative

ABSTRACT

This article proposes a perspectival shift in views of Kaska storytellers' code-switching to appreciate its verbal artistry, its role indexing features of the colonial encounter, and its connections to Kaska ontology. Despite the major social and economic changes experienced by Kaskas, the basic features of their lived reality remain unchanged, and they remain open to understanding the *k'éh* "ways" of other *dene* "people", including those of animals and other animate beings. While English speakers may devalue the language shifts of Kaska storytellers, such shifts enhance their authority as prominent men who were among the first to assume paid positions, as creative storytellers well informed about oral traditions, and as eye-witnesses to dramatic events.

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1. Introduction

This paper argues for the ongoing significance of Kaska ontology as foundational for their cultural practices, including language, what Kaskas refer to as *Dene k'éh* 'Kaska way(s)/Kaska language'. Kaskas are a Dene (Athabaskan) group whose traditional unceded territories are in the Yukon and northern British Columbia as identified on the map below (see Fig. 1).

In this article I use the term "ontology" in a similar sense to that used by Eduardo Kohn in his 2015 Annual Review of Anthropology article, as meaning "the study of reality." However, since for many Kaskas "studying" sounds like an academic exercise for non-Kaskas, the sense used here is closer to "being" or "lived realities". Despite dramatic social and economic changes in the last two centuries (Moore, 2001), the deeper realities remain largely unchanged for Kaskas and for the diverse *dene* 'people' who share the world with them.

One route to understanding reality and modes of being for both Kaskas and non-Kaskas is through stories, and it was through a story told to me and Kaska language teacher Ann Mercier by Kaska Elder John Dickson at his home in *Dene Keyeh* (Kaska Territory), Upper Liard, Yukon in 1987 that I began to appreciate Kaska ontology. His story about the girl who lived with salmon demonstrated two apparently contradictory features: an adherence to Kaska understandings of the identities of humans and animals and their relations, coupled with extensive use of English. The version below was transcribed¹ and translated with the assistance of Kaska language workers Ann Mercier, Grady Sterriah and Leda Jules.² It is rendered in ethnopoetic format with the text of the original performance on the left and the translation on the right.

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¹ The Kaska text is in the orthography used by the Yukon Native Language Centre except that <i> is used to represent [I]. The text is in an ethnopoetic format with line breaks for pauses and breaks in the intonational contour. The major parts of the story are indicated with Roman numerals.

² The English translation uses plain text for portions of the original story that were in Kaska and italics for portions that were in English. Kaska words are used for some repeated terms to parallel the use of English echo translations in the Kaska text.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langcom.2018.02.001>

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Please cite this article in press as: Moore, P., Shifting: Amerindian perspectivism in Kaska narrative performances, *Language & Communication* (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langcom.2018.02.001>

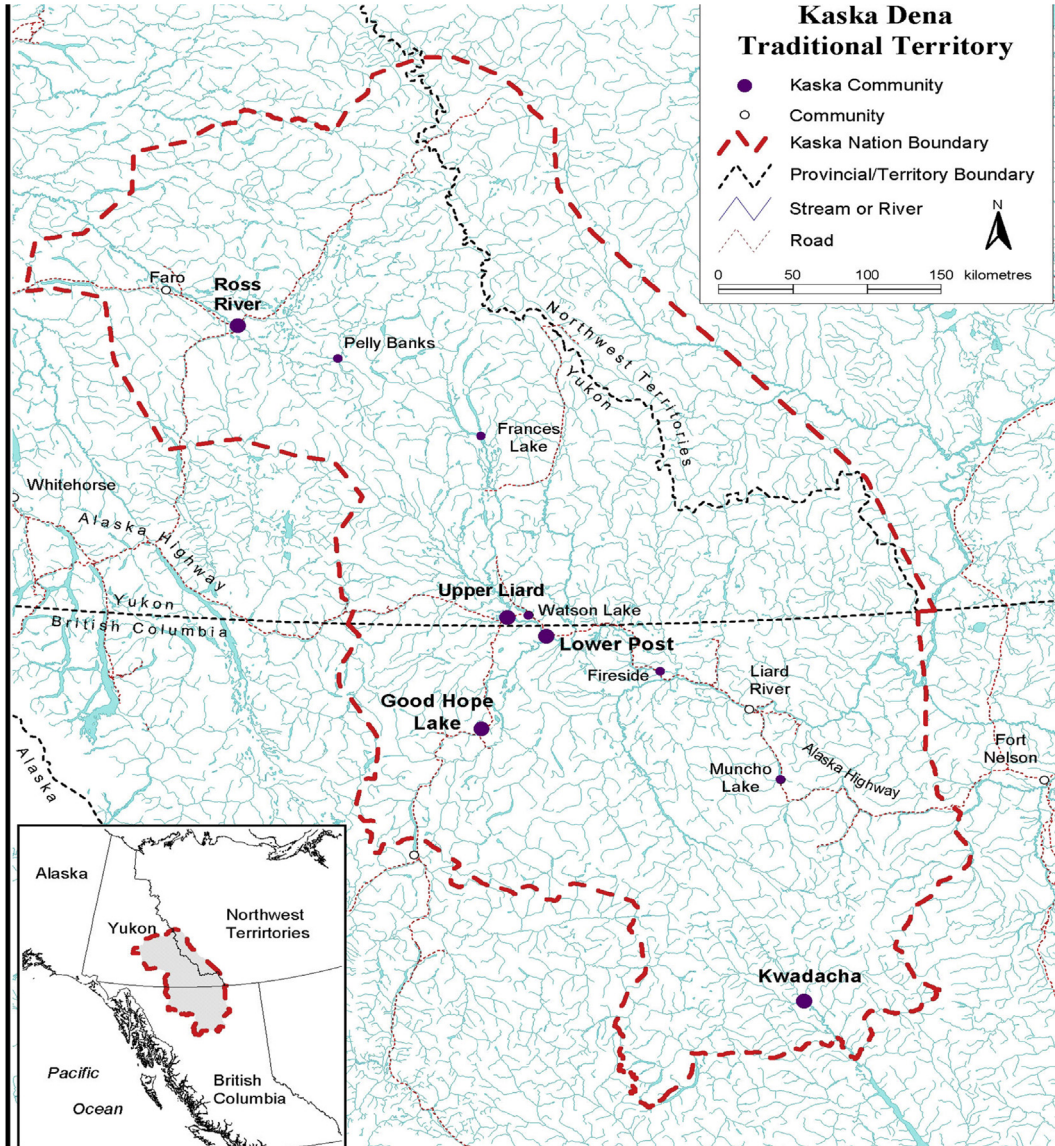


Fig. 1. Map of Kaska territory.



Fig. 2. Kaska Elder John Dickson at Frances Lake, Yukon, 1992.

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