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Speaking through animals: Kawaiwete shamanism and metalingual play

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ABSTRACT

Working from transcripts of Kawaiwete shamanic cures and myths, this paper looks at moments of referential play, situations in which animal terms are used to refer to humans and their physical states as well as moments when referential language is replaced by non-referential communication. As the Kawaiwete are a Tupian-speaking Brazilian indigenous people, their shamanic and myth performances offer a means of considering how a lowland people's language ideologies relate to the construction of ontology. Given that Amazonian or "Amerindian ontology" has been represented as the inverse of "the Western ontology," and that a focus on reference is associated with "Western" language ideology, this emphasis on referential play and the creative manipulation of the metalingual function of language, is counterintuitive. This paper argues that these techniques are key ways the "perspectival" aspects of lowland cosmologies come to be summoned and experienced.

Tanya Luhrmann, among others, has asked how, in evangelical Christianity, God becomes real to congregants, given that this being "cannot be seen, heard, or touched" (Luhrmann, 2004:519). For practitioners of lowland shamanic traditions, such as those Amazonian indigenous people, called Kawaiwete, who I will discuss here, the parallel question might well be, how do people know that when shamans are speaking, that they are conveying the voices of spirits? How do those involved come to believe the voices heard in some ritual events are not, in fact, those of an uncle or grandfather speaking in falsetto or guttural tones, but are truly the voices of beings from other spaces and times? I argue that one of the key ways Kawaiwete shamanism works to create a sense of the spaces of the cosmos and the beings who populate them is through the manipulation of the metalingual function of language, specifically by referring to humans and their physical states in terms usually used to refer to animals. This sort of metalingual play only occurs when spirits occupy the same space-time as humans in certain ritual events and when they are speaking directly to humans. The language used to call spirits into this shared space is, in contrast, largely non-referential as communication across different cosmological domains occurs in other ways. While the focus on reference is associated with the Western intellectual tradition, the manipulation of the referential function of language, may nevertheless also be a key way distinctive "perspectival" aspects of lowland cosmologies come to be summoned and experienced.

"Perspectivism" as formulated by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2012, 2014) describes the ontology of Amazonian or Amerindian peoples and has at times been extended to a describe that of all non-Western peoples. Also called "multinaturalism," this type of thought, most readily apparent in myth texts and shamanic ceremonies, appreciates animals and humans equally as types of persons, as both having the capacity for culture, but understands them to have different perspectives because they possess different types of bodies, which give them access to different "natures." "Multiculturalism," a

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term characterizing the ontology of "the West" or of "moderns," in contrast, is based on an understanding that all living things have a shared biological nature, but are divided according to the categories of nature and culture, and within the human domain, between different cultures. Amerindians thus have an understanding that all entities share culture, but not nature, while Westerners, that all share nature, but have differential capacities for culture or, if human, also perceive the world through the lens of different cultures. While Viveiros de Castro (2012:46) states that this formulation opposing the ontology of Amazonian indigenous peoples to that of Western moderns is "too symmetrical to be more than speculative fiction," this opposition has been widely used to characterize indigenous South American thought and cosmology and has been enthusiastically employed far beyond Amazonia (see Costa and Fausto, 2010). The use of terms from the "Western" side of this equation, such as "culture" or "history" to describe aspects of "indigenous" ontology, is revalued as ethnocentric or not relativistic enough, as obfuscating indigenous reality, and as in fact a type of colonization of thought (Viveiros de Castro, 2014; see also de la Cadena, 2015).

If this characterization of indigenous ontologies, and that of Amazonians in particular, is extended to the topic of language ideology, one would expect that similar sorts of symmetrical inversions might be found. Following Paul Kroskrity, language ideologies are understood as "beliefs, or feelings, about language as used in their social worlds" (2004:498). If we know that an orientation towards reference is linked to language standardization, found in nation-states (Silverstein, 1981, 2000), then, within the myth texts and shamanic performances of Amazonians, one might expect to find language ideologies that are very much "other." Amazonian language ideologies could likely be focused on something very different than reference, perhaps as Michelle Rosaldo (1982) observed for Illongots, something such as action. Other research on ritualized language in the lowlands, however, particularly that of Laura Graham (1986) comparing Xavante men's wailing, singing and oratory with respect to the extent these genres have semantico-referential meanings, or her discussion (1995) of vocatives in Xavante dreamed songs, suggests that attention to variance in the referential function may be a key means of situating humans relative to other beings and domains in the cosmos. Even research following a perspectivist approach, that emphasizes Amazonian difference, which has touched on aspects of Amazonian peoples' ideas about language, suggests that reference is, in fact, an area of significant elaboration. One of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's key articles on perspectivism, for example, explores the important differences in the way reference works with respect to the "self" in Amazonia showing "self-references" are "personal pronouns registering the point of view of the subject talking, not proper names" (1998:476). In the context of contrasting missionary and Wari' conceptualizations of translation, Aparacida Vilaça (2016), observes that for Wari' translation, especially that done in shamanism involves, not finding terms of equivalence in two languages. Rather it is focused on a translation of perspectives. The same term if used by different kinds of subjectivities (including human and non-human) is understood by Wari' to have different referents. What a Jaguar calls 'beer' is the same referent a human would call 'blood.' Or, what is a 'papaya' for humans, is a 'paca' for the jaguar (2016:63). Here, through an exploration of Kawaiwete shamanism and myth, I would like to extend these insights, while also downplaying the split a perspectivist approach can imply, between "moderns" and "non-moderns" or multinaturalists and multiculturalists (see Bond and Bessire, 2014 for more on this critique).[1] I argue that an increased attention to the referential function of language in Kawaiwete religious practices can shed light on their distinctive language ideologies (see Keane, 2004) as well as point to how these distinctive ideologies are also working with some of the same aspects of language (namely, the referential function) that those understood to be quintessentially "modern" also tend to elaborate.

1. The Kawaiwete and their shamanism

The Kawaiwete are a Tupi-speaking people, who live in the north and central sections of Brazil's Xingu Indigenous Park in the central state of Mato Grosso. Formerly they were known as the Kayabi, a name those who continue to live outside the park still use. The majority of families relocated to the Xingu between 1952 and 1966 from frontier areas further to the west. Within the park, shamanism has both expanded and come under increasing attack at different points in time. The Xingu Park, established over the course of the 1950s and finally legally recognized in 1961, was an institution that emphasized cultural preservation rather than acculturation (Garfield, 2004: Menezes, 1999). As Kawaiwete/Kayabi families moved to the park from frontier areas, shamanism became more public (Travassos, 1984). Several Kawaiwete individuals who had become interested in Catholicism in the 1950s before moving to the park, for example, either used shamans and/or practiced shamanism by the time of my first fieldwork in 1992. This was the case even for a man who had become a catechist for a Jesuit priest, Father João Dornstauder, accompanying him on his traveling mission to a variety of indigenous peoples living near Utiariti mission in Mato Grosso state at midcentury. In the past decade, however, this trend has reversed as many Kawaiwete have converted to the Christianity practiced and spread by the Summer Institute of Linguistics. These converts are highly critical of shamanism. Despite this trend, shamanism is still practiced in the park and shamanic cures are still sought out by Kawaiwete patients and others.

Even before the recent interest in conversion to Christianity, however, each particular shamanic cure was open to some extent to contestation. In 1992 for example, not all Kawaiwete were firm believers in the practices of each and every shaman.

[1] *'Toria'* is used by other Tupian speakers such as the Parakanã to refer to whites, both within the space of the shamanic tocaia (called tokaja) the as well as outside of it (Fausto, 2012:143, 261).

[2] This man was also Prepori's son, someone who was in 1992 training in the arts of shamanism with his father.

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