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*Topic Initiation, Addition and Control: A Multi-modal Perspective from Arapaho*

Abstract

Topic Control and related issues are a major part of the tradition of Conversation Analysis. However, very little CA work has been done using Native American languages. This talk presents an initial study of topic control in Arapaho, using a video database of naturally-occurring conversation.

The presentation shows that Arapaho speakers in small groups normally prefer to arrange themselves physically adjacent to each other, so that they can all focus their gaze on a triangulated point roughly equidistant from all speakers, rather than sit directly facing each other and look at each other. From this unmarked bodily and gaze position, speakers have the option of taking on more marked stances, including physically turning either the head or the entire upper body to look directly at another speaker, typically for only a short period of time. The person being looked at virtually never fully reciprocates this movement. Instead, they acknowledge the marked gaze and posture being displayed to them via slight head movements and peripheral shifts in vision towards the other interlocutor.

This baseline contrast between unmarked and marked attentiveness can of course be accompanied by numerous scalar variations, as well as additional gesture, laughter etc. But most importantly, the two postures interact intricately with the grammar of the spoken language. In particular, Arapaho has a number of ways of introducing new topics, adding to topics, and challenging topics. These include discourse particles such as *howoo* and *hiikoot* meaning roughly “also, in addition,” and syntactic structures such as sentence-initial nouns introduced as new referents. The focus of this presentation will be on the interactions of spoken grammar and attentiveness in the process of topic control. The presentation examines two conversations, one between an uncle and two nephews, the other between two unrelated women from opposite sides of the reservation who have not seen each other for several years. In choosing these two conversations, an effort has been made to maximize contrasts of gender, inter-generational attitudes, and familiarity. This is done not in order to present an anthropological study of how these factors influence conversation – though they certainly do -- but rather to show the degree of continuity in gaze, posture, gesture and spoken language grammar across both conversations, in order to establish a baseline for better analyzing Arapaho and Algonquian-language conversational practices generally.