Reported Speech, Experience, and Knowledge in an Amazonian Society: The Nanti of Southeastern Peru

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This paper describes and analyzes the use of reported speech by speakers of Nanti, an Arawakan language of southeastern Peru. It seeks to understand the importance of reported speech in the Nanti communicative repertoire, and its relationship to broader communicative, ideational, and political patterns. Based on ethnographic data, I argue that Nanti speech reporting practices realize a linguistic/ideational complex that links communicative practice to conceptualizations of experience, knowledge, and the relationship between experience and knowledge. On the basis of comparative analyses with other societies, I also advance hypotheses about the cross-cultural properties of reported speech as a social practice.

1. Introduction

This paper addresses the use of reported speech in Montetoni and Maranxejari, two indigenous communities in lowland southeastern Peru. These two communities have a combined population of about 250 individuals and are located at the headwaters of the Camisea river. The residents of Montetoni and Maranxejari speak Nanti, an Arawakan language, and, except for a few young men who have

learned to speak Machiguenga, the language of the neighboring indigenous group, they are entirely monolingual.

In particular, I focus on how Nanti individuals use reported speech to relate to others information that they have obtained through communicative interaction, and how this use of reported speech interfaces with Nanti ideologies concerning knowledge and the relationship of knowledge to speech. My immediate goal in doing so is to show that Nanti speech reporting is inextricably intermeshed with culturally-specific ideologies of the relationship between experience, knowledge, and language (i.e Nanti epistemology). More specifically, I aim to show that Nanti epistemology plays a crucial organizing role in the patterning of Nanti speech reporting practices.

As John Lucy has remarked, reflexive speech—that is, talk about talk—is a pervasive and characteristic feature of human communication (Lucy, 1993). Of the numerous reflexive speech practices we find in human societies, one of the most ubiquitous is the use of reported speech.

From a formal perspective, reported speech has already received substantial attention. Many linguists have examined the shifts in deixis, aspect, mood, and tense associated with reported speech (Janssen and Van der Wurff, 1996; Coulmas, 1986), and reported speech has also received attention in formalistic studies of discourse (Longacre, 1976). From an ethnographic perspective, however, reported speech is less well understood. Despite pioneering work by linguistic anthropologists (Basso, 1995; Besnier, 1993; Lee, 1997; Sherzer, 1983), much remains to be learned about the cross-cultural variation of speech reporting practices and the patterning of these practices with respect to local social practices and ideologies.

My goal here is to present preliminary results and analyses that I hope will further advance our ethnographic understanding of reported speech. This work aims to contribute to the documentation of the cross-cultural variation of speech reporting practices and also to contribute to our understanding of how the use of reported speech depends, in a particular society, on ideologies of knowledge and language.

2. Nanti Speech Reporting

This work is part of an early phase of my research that seeks to answer some broad questions: First, what are the communicative functions of reported speech in Nanti society? Second, how does Nanti speech reporting interface with other aspects of linguistic and social practice to generate a cohesive system of communicative practice?"

In my work to this point, I have identified two major communicative functions to which reported speech is put by Nanti speakers. First, Nanti speakers employ reported speech to describe and refer to the actions of individuals as social agents. Thus, in Nanti discourse, the decisions, orders, requests, and evaluative judgments that individuals produce are discussed by directly reporting the speech by which speakers realize these illocutionary and evaluative forces in discourse. For example, when relating narratives, decisions to act are typically recounted by quoting an utterance announcing the plan to carry out the act:

(1) Bixotoro 1
   B: ironpa   noxanti   atsi   nonxamosote   ige
          suddenly I.say   alright!   I.will.visit   my.brother
   B: Suddenly I said, "Alright! I will visit my brother."

It is the second major communicative function of speech reporting, however, that I want to focus on here: the use of reported speech to relate information that is obtained through communicative interaction with others.

When Nanti speakers obtain knowledge solely by talking with another individual, they normally relate this knowledge to another person by directly quoting the words of the person who was the source of that knowledge. Consider the following interchange. Joja, the leader of Maranxejari, asked Chris Beier, my partner, if she had any children back at home. She said that she did not, and she provided an explanation for her childless state, which is highly anomalous from a Nanti perspective. Chris left the hut shortly thereafter, leaving Joja to talk to me. At that point another Nanti man arrived, and Joja immediately told him what he had just learned:

(2) Joja 1
   J: noxa   pijoxanajaxeri   pitomi?   oxanti
          I.say   you.leave.behind.him   your.son   she.says

nomantsigataxe,	ari	oxanti.	tobajeti	natsiperejaxa, asi
I.was.sick	indeed	she.say	much	I.suffered so

oxamosotero	noxotoro.	oxanti jara	pijanenexi,
she.visited.	her doctor	she.say will.	not your.child

pimantsigataxe.	oxanti	tera	nojanenexi ontime.
you.were.sick	she.says	no	my.child exist

J: I said, "Did you leave a child behind?" [in your land]. She said, "I was sick." Indeed she said [that]. "I suffered a great deal." So she went to the doctor. She [the doctor] said, "You will not have children; you were sick." She [Chris] said, "I have no children."

This use of reported speech even extends to knowledge gained decades ago. In the following example, the leader of Montetoni, Migero, discusses with me his knowledge regarding Yonatan, an elderly Nanti man he met some twenty years ago.

(3) Migero 1

M:	pairani	nonejaxi,	nonejaxiri.	ixanti	noponijaxa	tsinkateni.
	long.ago	I.saw	I.saw.him	he.said	I.come.from	place.name

	ixantajigaxena	inosixapitsajigaxi	nosinto.
	he.said.to.us	they.took.away	my.daughter

M: Long ago I saw, I saw him. He said, "I come from Tsinxateni." He said to us, "They took away my daughters."

Migero has never visited the settlement of Tsinxateni, so his sole source of knowledge regarding Yonatan's residence there is Yonatan's words. In the third sentence, Migero quotes Yonatan talking about the kidnapping of his daughters by missionaries, an event that Migero similarly knows about only through the utterances of residents of Tsinxateni.

The extent to which Nanti individuals quote the speech of others in this way can be quite striking. For example, in tracing migration histories and constructing genealogies, I often asked about people's

birthplaces. Typically, people responded using reported speech, as in the following example.

(4) Joja 2

J:	oxanti	pimechoti	Syegorija.
	she.say	you.born	place.name

J: She said, "You were born in Syegorija."

Since people typically do not remember their own births, and hence no longer have direct experience of their places of birth, they must ultimately rely on others to inform them of where they were born. For Nanti speakers, this means that they typically report their mothers' speech when they inform others of where they were born.

3. Epistemological Concerns in Nanti Discourse

In order to see how the preceding uses of reported speech fit into broader cultural ideologies of knowledge—that is to say, local epistemological systems—we now need to look at the epistemic conditions under which Nanti individuals make knowledge claims of particular kinds.

The first general feature to note in this regard is that Nanti individuals tend to be very prudent and careful in making knowledge claims. Knowledge that has been obtained by being present to witness the topic of discussion can be talked about unproblematically. But when inference and probability judgments come into play in making knowledge claims, Nanti individuals become circumspect.

This circumspection takes two forms in discourse, which appear to correlate to gradations in the epistemic reliability of a potential knowledge claim. The first form is the use of a second position clitic, /-xa/, which serves to indicate indefiniteness or uncertainty. The kinds of claims that merit the use of the indefiniteness clitic are typically ones that involve inferences about behavior and action based on substantial but incomplete knowledge of the circumstances.

Consider the following example, in which Migero talks about an elderly man who died of a respiratory infection only a few days before we arrived in Montetoni in July of 2000:

(5) Migero 2

M: jame   ixami   ainyome<u>xa</u>.   pantya pinejapaji.
   had.not he.die would.exist.(indefinite)   almost you.see.arrive

M: Had he not died he would (presumably) be here now. You almost
   saw him when you arrived

The inference that the elderly man would be alive and present in Montetoni but for the respiratory infection is highly probable, but not certain, since, for example, he could have survived the repiratory illness only to have been bitten by a snake. Or alternatively, he could have lived, only to suddenly move to another Nanti community.

Now consider another example, in which I ask Jorija, who had recently gone hunting at the headwaters of the Tsironpija River, if the mouth of that river was far away.

(6) Jorija 1

L: agatija   tsironpija   onaxe   samani?
   mouth.of.river river.name   is   far

L: Is the mouth of Tsironpija river far?

J: samani<u>xa</u>
   far.(presumably)

J: Far (presumably).

As subsequent discussion made clear, Jorija had traveled far down the river on his hunting trip but had not arrived at the mouth of the river. As a result, he could infer, but could not be sure, that the river mouth was far away. For example, the river could double back so that the mouth of the river is in fact not very far, as the crow flies.

As you can see, the inferences involved in cases of the use of /-xa/ are very likely to hold. They are what I call *near inferences*. As inferences become increasingly distant, Nanti speakers tend to become increasingly diffident in making knowledge claims, even with the use

of the indefinite clitic. Beyond a critical point Nanti speakers make no knowledge claims. What is perhaps most striking about this point is its extremely conservative nature.

Consider the following example: In late July of 2000, while I was staying in Montetoni, several Nanti from Maranxejari came for a visit. Maranxeja is less than two hour's walk from Montetoni, and in the late afternoon, at around 3, the visitors left to return to Maranxejari. As dusk was falling I asked Migero, who had hosted the visitors, "Ipigajigajira?" or "Have they gotten back yet?" Migero repsonded, "Te nogote," or "I don't know." The inference involved in answering the question either positively or negatively was too great to even countenance a qualified, speculative response.

Thus, we see a relationship between the experiential relationship that a Nanti speaker has with a given topic and the discursive practices employed in talking about that topic. At the extremes of what one might call the Nanti epistemological spectrum, one finds direct experience linked to epistemologically unqualified discussion of the topic at hand, and at the other extreme, complete absence of direct experience with respect to a given topic associated with unwillingness to make knowledge claims about that topic. An intermediate part of the spectrum is constituted by knowledge claims based on near inferences that rely on partial direct knowledge of the topic at hand, which are discussed with the concomitant use of the indefinite clitic /-xa/, which in this discursive setting serves to index the epistemic stance of the speaker.

4. Reported Speech and Epistemology

Now, in the context of this epistemological spectrum, consider the place of reported speech. If we consider the above examples of use of reported speech by Nanti speakers, we can observe that the topics discussed by recourse to reported speech are precisely ones of which the speaker has no direct experience. Reported speech thus serves as the means by which a Nanti speaker can introduce into talk information acquired without direct experience.

We can therefore see the use of reported speech by Nanti individuals as filling what would otherwise be a significant gap in the discursive sphere left by the fairly stringent epistemological requirements for the experiential basis of knowledge claims in discourse. In the
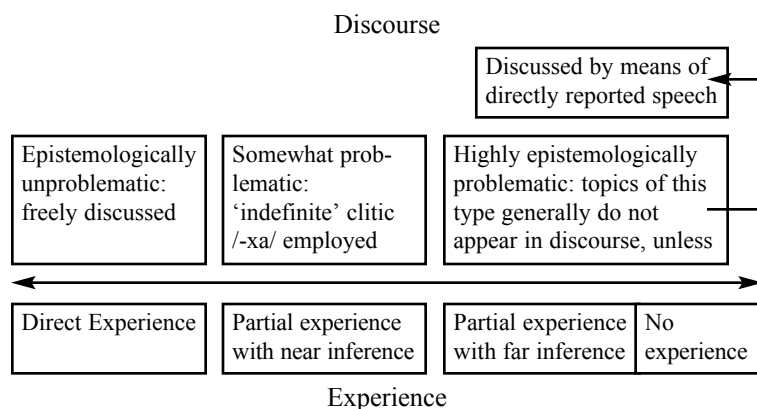
communicative ecology of Nanti speaking practices, then, speech reporting and direct knowledge claims combine to cover the wide range of knowledge sources that arise in everyday life (see 7 below).

It is important to note, however, that in a very real sense the use of reported speech does not violate the principle that knowledge claims should be founded in direct experience. This is because the speaker does, of course, have direct experience of the speech that he or she is reporting.

The knowledge claim that a speaker makes in reporting speech is not that the claims made in the reported speech hold, but simply that a particular utterance was produced by the quoted party. Thus, Nanti speech reporting practices extend the possible sources of knowledge that a speaker may draw on in discourse, while at the same time respecting the basic epistemic principles of Nanti communicative life—that knowledge claims should be founded in direct experience.

It is interesting to note, from this perspective, that Nanti speakers only engage in direct speech reporting—that is, Nanti speakers never engage in indirect speech reporting. DSR preserves all the deictic features of the reported speech, thereby unambiguously distinguishing the reporting event from the reported event. In particular, DSR reduces to a minimum what Bakhtin calls the "penetration of the authorial voice," which thereby marks the speech as originating from another speaker (Voloshinov, 1986 [1929]).

(7) Relationships between Experience and Discourse

Discourse

		Discussed by means of directly reported speech
Epistemologically unproblematic: freely discussed	Somewhat problematic: 'indefinite' clitic /-xa/ employed	Highly epistemologically problematic: topics of this type generally do not appear in discourse, unless

Direct Experience	Partial experience with near inference	Partial experience with far inference	No experience

Experience

5. Common Knowledge

Before concluding, I want to refine the picture I have presented a little further. In particular I want to point out that Nanti speakers do at times make knowledge claims in ways that contradict the picture sketched so far. They do so, however, in a systematic manner, which points to a need to further develop the model of the relationship between experience, knowledge, and speech developed so far.

There are, for example, occasions when Nanti speakers do not employ reported speech to relate knowledge gained through speech. This is the case when verbally-based knowledge has become very widely diffused throughout the discursive sphere—for example, the fact that I came from a distant land by airplane. There are also occasions when Nanti speakers freely make inferences about matters of which they have not had direct experience. Such claims are related to temporally stable features of the world, such as animal populations, and the places in which people live; or to highly routinized activity, such as regular hunting, farming, and gathering.

The ubiquity, regularity, and diffusion of knowledge appears to transform these forms of knowledge into epistemologically unproblematic "common knowledge" (see 8 above). The epistemological principles governing discourse that I have described above therefore apply to knowledge claims that lie outside of the realm of the "commonly known" (which can be understood in both senses of the word "common"—frequent and shared).

6. Conclusion

I have attempted in this paper to make both an empirical point and a theoretical one. Empirically, I have shown that the use of reported speech in a particular society—that of the Nanti of southeastern Peru—is conditioned by the experiential relationship that speakers have to the events being discussed. More generally, I have shown that there is a correlation between the discursive strategies that Nanti individuals employ in talking about a given topic and the experiential relationship of those individuals to the topic of discussion, and that reported speech occupies a particular position in this pattern of interrelation between discourse and experience.

Theoretically, I have argued that aspects of the patterning of speech reporting practices in Nanti discourse need to be understood as

deriving from the intersection of speaking practices and local ideologies of what constitutes reliable knowledge. The evidence I have presented suggests that it is not possible to account for the circumstances under which reported speech is used, or the topics for which it is used, except in terms of locally-defined criteria of what constitutes reliable and unreliable knowledge.

This observation points to the possibility that not only are Nanti speech reporting practices and Nanti epistemology profoundly intermeshed with one another, but that Nanti epistemology constitutes an important organizing principle for the use of reported speech by Nanti speakers. Such an explanation of the patterning of Nanti speech reporting practices would constitute an explicit analysis along the lines originally proposed by Voloshinov (Voloshinov, 1929 [1986]), by which speech reporting practices are understood to be structured by ideologies of language prevalent in a given society.

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