

# POWER OVER DISCOURSE: LINGUISTIC CHOICES IN ABORIGINAL MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS

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## **Abstract / Résumé**

In recent years, it has become obvious that First Nations in Canada are growing stronger in their assertiveness as 'nations within,' as distinct peoples with a right to self-determination, land and resources, and treaty concessions. This evolving status of First Nations is mediated through a powerful discourse that challenges the existing paradigm. The Native discourse can be analyzed on the media level (newspaper) using various linguistic concepts and models. This article examines how First Nations in Canada represent themselves and their issues in their own media and how they counteract and resist the dominant discourse of Euro-Canada by (re-)constructing and affirming positive Native identities.

Au cours des dernières années, il est devenu évident que les Premières nations du Canada s'affirment de plus en plus comme des « nations intérieures », soit des peuples distinctifs qui bénéficient d'un droit à l'autodétermination, de terres et de ressources, et de concessions accordées en vertu de traités. Le statut en évolution des Premières nations est médiatisé par un discours bien argumenté qui s'attaque au paradigme existant. Le discours des Autochtones peut être analysé sur le plan des médias (journaux) en ayant recours à divers concepts et modèles linguistiques. Le présent article examine comment les Premières nations du Canada se représentent elles-mêmes et présentent leurs questions dans leurs propres médias et comment elles contrebalancent le discours dominant des Canadiens européens et y résistent en (re)construisant et en affirmant des identités autochtones positives.

## Introduction

First Nations<sup>1</sup> people across Canada now control a substantial number of media outlets. To have access to, and control over, for example, newspapers and printing presses means to have power over discourse. Television, novels, plays or newspapers, the radio or internet are used extensively by Aboriginal people to provide a forum to inspire and empower themselves, to re-affirm positive Native identities by building a national pride and creating solidarity.

In the mass media of the dominant Euro-Canadian discourse Native people and their issues are either omitted altogether, or presented mostly in a negative light in stereotypical roles. When covering Aboriginal issues, non-Native newspapers often reduce the complexity of Aboriginal histories to 'problems': the 'Indian land problem,' the 'unemployed Indian problem' or the 'Indian self-government problem' (e.g. Valentine 1996, Lawrence and Simon 1996, McGormick 2000). These presentations have little or no reference at all to the Aboriginal perspective on the issue. In controlling their own media, Native people combat stereotypes and ensure that their histories and contemporary issues are told from their own perspective. In their media images, for example, many Native writers convey both modernity and tradition. Their messages are often clearly political and target the Canadian Government for ignoring First Nations rights and not respecting agreements, such as land treaties. Taking control of the media means taking control of a very important institution in today's society. Jäger and Link (1993) call the media *Die Vierte Gewalt* (The Fourth Power) because they have an immense influence upon (predominant) discourses and therefore shape the attitudes and actions of people. Taking control then means Native people act as subjects. Acting as subjects rather than being acted upon also means empowerment and confidence that they can effect change.

Discourse not only reflects, but constructs and transforms culture. This insight has been affirmed in many disciplines, such as Critical Linguistics, Critical Discourse Analysis (e.g. Fowler et al. 1979, Fowler 1991; Fairclough 1992, 1995a and b, van Dijk 1991, Jäger 1993, 1996; Wodak and Ludwig 1999), and discourse-oriented approaches in, for example, social theory, political science, literary criticism or critical social psychology (e.g. Thompson 1984, Wilson 1990, Billig 1991, Wetherell and Potter 1992, Simpson 1993). Through an analysis of how Native newspapers represent Native issues in a particular way and in doing so play a significant role in creating and (re-)affirming Native cultures and worldviews. This study aims at explicating and specifying the linguistic devices and strategies used to create an intricate web of cultural identities, empowerment and the connection of tradition and innovation. Na-

tive newspapers, and the media in general, are a forming link, a mediator that shapes Native discourse and at the same time is shaped by it. The media are not a passive mirror, but play a profoundly active role in constituting attitudes, identities and belief sets, in short, the culture of which they are a part.

The term 'Native discourse' refers to a distinct discursive practice, i.e. a distinct way of speaking and writing and thus thinking employed and circulated by First Nations people in Canada.<sup>2</sup> I am aware of the danger of talking about 'one' Native discourse. There is no such thing as a monolithic Native culture but many different Aboriginal nations with distinct cultures, languages, traditions etc. However, their common history of internal colonialism and discrimination including destruction or even loss of identity and language, loss of land and intense suffering becomes part of a collective memory which is reflected in the discursive practice of Aboriginal people today. Furthermore, in their struggle for self-determination and their efforts to revitalize, for example, traditions and Aboriginal languages First Nations in Canada pursue a variety of common goals and thus employ similar strategies to talk about the world and to create membership categories.

## Data and Analysis

The data for this analysis is taken from two Native newspapers, the *First Nations Messenger* (formerly *Assembly of First Nations Bulletin*) and the *Anishinabek News*. The former is a bi-monthly publication of the Assembly of First Nations (AFN), the political organization that represents Status First Nations in Canada on the federal level but which has increasingly been lobbying not only on behalf of Status First Nations but on behalf of Aboriginal people in general. The first edition of the *First Nations Messenger* was published in December 1998. The *First Nations Messenger* is the first national newspaper and is published in two separate editions, English and French. The *Anishinabek News* has been published monthly since 1988 by the Union of Ontario Indians (UOI)-Anishinabek Nation. It is published in English.

I examined in detail texts that appeared in these two newspapers in the time from December 1998 to June 2001. The analysis of these news texts followed a 'top-down' approach, that is, I started with the overall structuring principle or macro-text analysis and worked my way down to the micro-level of the texts. Due to space limitations, however, I can only present some of my findings. What follows is a selective overview of some of the properties of the Native discourse including discourse strategies such as repetition and parallelism, reference to 'time-honoured values and models' and lexical choices such as the cultural key

word 'Turtle Island.' Lexico-grammatical choices such as process types and pronouns will also be considered as well as a prevalent semantic feature of Native discursive practices, namely humour and irony.

## Repetition

Repetition and parallelism (see below) are particularly important in an oral culture. Consequently, it is not surprising to find numerous instances of these traditional discourse strategies in today's Native newspaper discourse. As Valentine (1995:202) points out, repetitions are a typical discourse feature of Native text and talk. In her analysis of orally transmitted teachings and legends in Algonquian languages, one of her findings is that in many narrative texts repetitions of phrases or lines occur. Repetitions are used throughout as a means of adding force to particular parts of the story as well as a local structuring device. Spielman (1998:200) points out with regard to repetition in Native storytelling: "They appear to be most noticeable at crucial points in the story and thus may be considered to be instrumental in the structuring of the narrative." Generally, the function of such repetition moves is quite clear: to enhance and make more prominent the repeated proposition in order to be communicatively more effective.

Some of the frequently repeated structures in Native news discourse are those circling around the concept of family and community as, for example, in (1) to (3):

(1) [...] my generations' ability to communicate in our mother tongue has not been passed on to our children and grandchildren.

[...] For those of us who can already speak our language, it begins with speaking it at every opportunity we can, especially to our children and grandchildren in the home. What is learned and spoken in the family home is the basis upon which our children and grandchildren begin their lives and their understanding of the world.

The phrase "our children and grandchildren" is directly repeated three times. The author does not use a referring expression such as 'they' substituting "our children and grandchildren" where it would be stylistically appropriate to do so. The decision to repeat the phrase rather than using a referring expression is not only a linguistic one but also one that reflects specific values and beliefs. Native languages will die if no actions will be taken. This highly important message must be presented as such. It has to be made clear, in a direct unambiguous way, that it is the task of the children and grandchildren to carry on traditions and languages.

In addition to the repetition of the same words and phrases, a choice of words from the same semantic field also exercises cohesive force within texts. The semantic field of 'family' is a centrepiece and recurring theme in Native discursive practices. Besides the phrase "children and grandchildren" the sample text in (1) above draws repeatedly from a range of words that relate to the concept of family: "my parents, grandparents and extended family members," "my family and community," "Elders," "family home," "in the home," "our communities," and "individuals, families, communities and nations."

What becomes quite clear here is that the notion of family is very broad and does not just encompass the nuclear family but expands to the community up to the level of individual nations. Traditionally, family was composed of those who worked together and who were bound not only by ties of kinship but also by friendship and responsibility. This extended family was both the largest unit of economic cooperation and the primary system for the socialization of children. Therefore, by repeatedly using certain words and phrases related to the semantic field of family in the (extended) Native sense of the term, Native writers not only establish lexical cohesion but also a collective identity among various First Nations people which, in turn, produces a sense of social unity. Collaborative group processes, which include family, extended family and community members, emphasize traditional Native values of community that are very much needed in today's individualistic world.

Another prominent Native discourse strategy is the reference to and repetition of what I have called 'time-honoured sources of authority,' i.e. the appeal to authority and truth by referring to Elders. The reference to Elders and what they have said is not only significant in terms of textual properties. More important is what is contextual or extra-linguistic, that is, the communicative function and thus social dimension of such a discourse structure. The legacy of Elders, their role and responsibility as teachers and transmitters of culture, which was discouraged and interrupted by imposed Euro-Canadian systems such as the residential schools, is being honoured and retrieved again. The Elders' contributions are very much needed in a time of change and resistance. Their knowledge, advice and teachings still (or again) play a significant role and are part of the Native discourse in modern-day Canada as the following examples show:

(2) Our Elders have always told us that our treaties will survive as long as the sun shines, the grass grows and the rivers flow. The treaties are sacred documents that are an expression of our nationhood. The Elders have also said the treaties are living, breathing documents and I have always

believed this to be so.

(3) The Elders have told us that without our language we might survive, but we will not be whole and we will be cut off from our knowledge, spirituality and our true identity forever. Some Elders have said that if effective action is not taken soon, we, as people, will also become extinct.

First to be noted here is the stylistic preference to capitalize the word "Elder." This language choice indicates respect towards Elders, their knowledge, wisdom and achievements. In all Native cultures, Elders are honoured and their life experiences carry great value.

Furthermore, the Elders are quoted indirectly and the term 'Elders' is used generically, that is, no specific Elders are mentioned. This is generally the case when this discourse strategy is used. However, in news reporting the credentials of the person stating something are important. An authoritative source, such as, for example, the prime minister, the head of a particular department or ministry, an official etc. must provide the information for it to gain news value or importance. Title and name of the source providing the information are important attributions for the accountability of what is reported (Bell 1991).

In Native news texts, on the other hand, one rarely finds this phenomenon of the unnamed source, as in "Some Elders have said," or "Our Elders tell us." According to Native values, Elders are one of the most important sources of authority and knowledge. They do not have to be named explicitly since the traditions and the traditional knowledge they pass on have been proven and time-honoured. Reporting what the Elders have said thus carries a historic dimension and adds to the force of a collective memory by expressing a proposition that is in line with what 'they' have said before. Spielman (1998:179) has identified the appeal to personal experience and the defusing of contrary opinions with an appeal to authority as an important discourse device within oral Ojibway discourse. He describes the function of this discourse strategy as implying something like this: "This isn't just me that believes this and I didn't just make it up. I'm passing down something that has been taught among our people for generations." Thus, to state the views of Elders in newspaper discourse adds credence and commitment to what the writer intends to communicate.

### **Parallelism**

Parallel constructions in texts signify more than their propositions literally state. They carry additional social or extra (linguistic) meanings. As noted above, repetition functions to focus upon the important theme of a story, highlighting information to which the author wants the read-

ers to pay particular attention. This function of bringing back the attention of the readers and directing their focus to specific key words, images, themes or ideas is also realized by employing rhetorical devices such as parallelism. Although repetition and parallelism have overlapping features and the latter is said to be a subtype of the former, it is useful to point out the difference between them. Repetition describes an exact correspondence between two or more elements (words, phrases, sentences), such as the above example “our children and grandchildren.” Parallelism, on the other hand, requires an element of identity and an element of contrast. Or to put it differently, parallelism is used to describe a correspondence between elements in a text in which there is some degree of repetition and some degree of difference as the following example illustrates:

(4) The 1760 treaty between the British Crown and the Mi'kmaq is “ancient” and should not be binding, they say, but still cling to the sanctity of the 1763 Treaty of Paris by which France ceded to Britain most of the eastern mainland of North America after the Seven Years War.

Legal contracts are binding, they say, but government bean-counters estimate Canada faces \$200 billion in contingent liabilities because of its unwillingness to settle its outstanding legal obligations to Aboriginal People.

They denounce Indian oral tradition and history as ludicrous fiction, but base their values, ethics, and system of justice on the legends of Christianity that are supported by very little in the way of documented historical evidence.

The topic of the article in example (4) is treaties and their implementation. In using a linguistic representation, which foregrounds the validity of the treaties and the inconsistency of argumentation on the Euro-Canadian side, the First Nations writer positively affirms his peoples' view of history and demonstrate credibility. The author's reasoning is based on the argumentative topos of justice (see, for example, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1983), which is linguistically realized through parallelism. The underlying rule of justice demands that one must treat alike the things, persons or situation that one considers to belong to the same category. By comparing the 1760 Treaty between the Mi'kmaq and the Crown with the 1763 Treaty of Paris, the author implies an equivalence between the two. He also implies and thus indirectly demands an equivalent acknowledgment of the First Nation / Crown treaty. The same holds true for the next propositions. Traditional oral history is seen as belonging to the same category as the biblical legends and therefore the same respect and implementations that Christianity experiences is demanded

for Native oral history. Or, to put it the other way around, if the 1760 Treaty is “ancient,” then the 1763 Treaty is ancient too and should not be legally binding. And if Native oral tradition is nothing but “ludicrous fiction” so are the legends of Christianity.

The quoted examples above display a form of grammatical or syntactic parallelism in that they all repeat the following pattern with two equivalent units being linked by the coordinating conjunction ‘but’:

<b>clause</b>	<b>coordinating conjunction</b>	<b>clause</b>
The 1760 treaty between the British Crown [...] they say	but	they) still cling to the sanctity of the [...].
Legal contracts are binding, they say	but	Government bean counters estimate Canada
They denounce Indian oral tradition as [...],	but	(they) base their values, ethics and systems of [...].

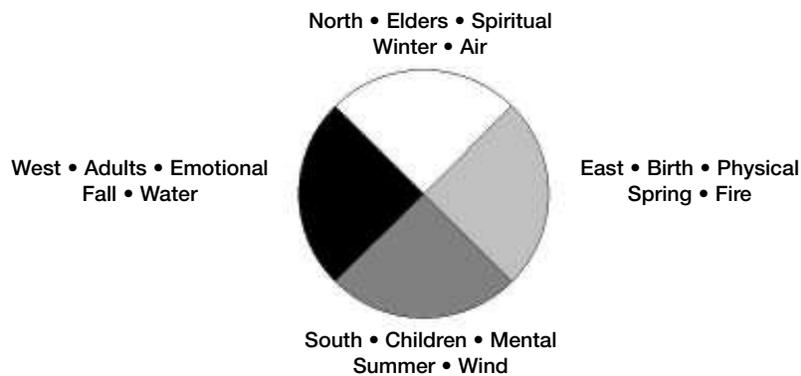
The formal arrangement of example (4) expresses not only the syntactic but especially the semantic equivalence of the clauses. The formal parallelism that the author uses underlines his standpoint that non-Native people are inconsistent and contradictory in their argumentation by providing factual evidence.

### **The Medicine Wheel**

Another repeatedly used discursive strategy that I have termed ‘reference to time-honoured values and models’ makes use of a concept and symbol that is shared in one form or the other by almost all Aboriginal people of North and South America (Bopp et al. 1985). This concept is known, for example, as the ‘Medicine Wheel’ or the ‘Sacred Hoop’ or the ‘Sacred Circle.’ The Medicine Wheel is a teaching tool and a representation of traditional spirituality, philosophy and psychology, and is mostly presented in the form of a circle. It stands for the togetherness of people and nations, for unity and power, for spirit as well as for the cyclical nature of everything. It is the visual presentation of “All my relations” symbolizing the belief that human beings are only one part of the

universe and that all things are interrelated. Central to the teachings of the Medicine Wheel is the goal to live a good life, which means people should try to balance in themselves the facets of all four quadrants of the wheel and respect them equally (Whiskeyjack 2000). The Medicine Wheel can be expressed and interpreted in many ways: the four seasons, the four winds, the four elements, the four cardinal directions, the four colours symbolically representing the four different types of people in the world, the four aspects to human nature and many other relationships that can be expressed in sets of four. There are different but related versions of the Medicine Wheel for different First Nations (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1**  
**Medicine Wheel**



Although not explicitly labelled as such, the news examples (5) and (6) below refer to the notion or idea of the Medicine Wheel:

(5) It has taken me 36 years of writing to learn something about journalism, but one Anishinabek teaching taught me a lot more about truth [...]

The teaching deals with the four original gifts of the Four Directions we believe the Creator gave to the Anishinabe.

(6) Our Elders tell us that we must deal with the whole circle: the mental, physical, emotional and spiritual dimensions of health; the child, the adolescent, the adult and the Elder; the individual, the family, the community and nation. All are connected. We must keep the circle strong.

The concept of the Medicine Wheel and the symbol of the circle

respectively are properties of a more traditional discourses. Yet, their inherent teachings and practical applications still inform the writings of Native people today. Example (6) directly asserts three dimensions of the Medicine Wheel, namely the four aspects of human nature, that is, the mental, the physical, the emotional and the spiritual; the four stages of life, childhood, adolescence, adulthood and Elders. With the third dimension—individual, family, community and nation—the writer alludes to the concept of self-in-relation and to the notion of extended family. The author’s mentioning of the circle and of the relationships expressed in sets of four as well as his reference to the interconnectedness of it all is conventionally associated with the symbol of the Medicine Wheel in many Native nations. It does not explicitly have to be labelled as such. The elements mentioned are sufficient clues for the culturally initiated to deduce that somebody is talking about the Medicine Wheel.

The circle metaphorically stands for a way of life and reflects culture-specific attitudes, values, beliefs etc. For First Nations people the circle referred to is not any circle but the expression of a particular world-view. It continues to play a central role in Native culture and Native writing of all sorts, specifically in Native literature. The Okanogan writer Jeannette Armstrong, for example, emphasizes that the parallels between the structure of contemporary Native novels and the image of the circle are of an intentional nature. Talking about her own writing, Armstrong remembers being asked: “Is this accidental that there are four parts [in your novel] and it’s like the four Directions, and there are the prologue and the epilogue being the direction above us and below us?” And I said, “No, it wasn’t actually” (quoted in Lutz 1991:20).

### **Turtle Island**

One key word from the lexical set of Native people is ‘Turtle Island.’ It has a very specific meaning potential mainly for First Nations from Eastern Canada like the Anishinabek and the Haudenosaunee. In the creation stories of these nations the earth was formed on the back of a giant turtle from a handful of soil scooped from the bottom of the sea by a small, brave animal. The metaphor and related concept ‘Turtle Island’ does not exist, for example, on the Northwest coast and on the plateau and is therefore rarely used in the discursive practice of these Native Nations. However, in Native discourse ‘Turtle Island’ has become a pan-Indian term, which helps to establish a national identity, i.e. a form of imaginative identification with Native symbols and values in contrast to the symbols and discourses of the dominant society as the following examples suggest:

(7) When Columbus landed on the shores of what is now the

Dominican Republic, there were more than 300 Native American languages. Today 175 of these survive, 53 of them still spoken in Turtle Island North (Canada).

(8) At one time, traditional teachings were the only accepted education curriculum not only for the Anishinabek, but for all First Nations on Turtle Island.

In example (7) one nation and identity is constructed through reference to a national territory: "Turtle Island North (Canada)." Wodak and associates (1999:158) have pointed out that the discursive construction of "a national body" includes references to a land base, national resources and landscapes as well as to local and geographic borders. Using the term "Turtle Island North" implies that there exists a 'Turtle Island South.' The question then is whether the latter term is used for South America and/or for the territory of the United States. In fact, various examples can be found in Native (news) discourse in which 'Turtle Island' refers to North- and South America. More often, however, the symbolic community of 'Turtle Island' is constructed in discourse to refer to North America including Canada, the United States, Mexico and Central America because it is shaped like a turtle.<sup>1</sup>

In example (8) the Anishinabek writer discursively creates a common history and culture as well as a national territory for the entire Aboriginal population. By means of language referring to the traditional discourse of teachings, by using the indefinite quantifier "all" and finally by using the generic label "First Nations" the diverse Native nations are unified and thus a national Turtle Island is constructed. National and political similarity is also constructed in the following examples:

(9) With the Indian Act as a tool, the First Nations' of Turtle Island became "wards of the state" [...] The First Nations' of Turtle Island would also begin to use the "I" word in order to describe themselves. [...] The First Nations' of Turtle Island need to abandon the labels placed upon them by the "Other."

(10) In spite of suppression of successive colonial governments and churches, our uniqueness as original citizens of Turtle Island has withstood assimilation and colonialism.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the term 'First Nations' became popular as a reference term to all people of Aboriginal ancestry in Canada. In opposition to the dominant attitude and cultural and linguistic debates concerning the 'two founding nations of Canada,' Aboriginal people insisted that their social structures and governments, which existed before European contact, took precedence (Burnaby 1999). In the context of modern-day Canada and the place Aboriginal people have in it, the unifying expression "First Nations of Turtle Island" in (9) helps to construct a

collective and national pan-Indian identity. The same applies to example (10). Despite the fact that there are distinct Native nations and cultures, or that there are federally recognized ‘Status or Treaty Indians’ and ‘non-Status Indians,’ they are all citizens. This category is used to create sameness and uniqueness. Moreover, the common element in the construction of ‘the nation of Turtle Island’ is not so much a common culture or language but a shared history of internal colonialism: “In spite of suppression of successive colonial governments and churches, our uniqueness as original citizens of Turtle Island has withstood assimilation and colonialism.” Regardless of considerable diversity in actual historical experience and tradition on the part of individuals and groups, the notion of a shared past and intense suffering becomes part of a collective memory that defines important elements in a pan-Indian identity (Jarvenpa 1992, Halbwachs 1985). And as Mercredi (1993:106) puts it: “We see ourselves as distinct peoples with inherent rights which exist because of our history on this land, this place we collectively refer to as Turtle Island.”

The national ‘Turtle Island’ is separated from the state (of Canada). It reflects the status of Aboriginal people as ‘nations within’ and, most importantly, it is an explicit reference to creation reflecting different ways of looking at the world. Using the term ‘Turtle Island’ rather than ‘Canada’ in Native (news) discourse is thus a choice of signification and an act of resistance as it opposes descriptions and interpretations of the cultural outsider perspective, i.e. the Euro-Canadian account of history that tells of only ‘two founding nations.’

### **Process Types and Native Perspectives**

The ideology of a newspaper influences the way it represents ‘reality.’ It also illustrates the fact that there are always representational choices available at each level in the production of a text, not only lexical choices as discussed above but also, for example, syntactic choices. The syntactic style of a text is less obvious and somewhat more subtle than the words and rhetoric being used in discourse. Pronouns, active/passive structures, nominalizations, various process types and other constructions can nevertheless convey underlying meaning in sentence structures and thus attitudes, opinions and distinct world-views (Fowler 1991).

The following section deals with lexico-grammatical choices in discourse. The system of transitivity is used to explain how people represent or encode experiences of events and activities—‘reality’—in grammatical configurations of the clause (Halliday, e.g. 1973, 1985; Halliday and Hasan 1985, Givón 1993, Eggins 1994). According to systemic func-

tional linguists realities are constructed in terms of what happens ('process') or is the case ('state' or 'event') and by or to whom ('participants,' e.g. an agent). As examples (11) and (12) below show, First Nations explicitly refer to themselves as agents who deliberately initiate actions and control these. They are no longer passive victims who are acted upon but construct a reality and identity for themselves, which is linguistically realized through the frequent use of action process types. In an action an 'agent' actively initiates or /and causes an action. In Givón's terminology, 'agent' is the participant who is occupying the subject position in a clause, and who is typically human acting deliberately upon something or somebody. Such a representation foregrounds the involvement of the agent in a particular event and thus his or her responsibility:

(11) [...] During the campaign for national chief, I crisscrossed the country. I visited your assemblies and communities, participated in your debates, responded to your inquiries and you shared your dreams and visions for your people.[...]

I have stayed in your homes. I have listened to your wise counsel. I learned through these visits, meetings, individual discussions and debates that we need each other more than ever. I based my election platform on what I heard during the campaign [...].

(12) Today, we teach university programs, publish books, elect our own political leadership, argue in courts and struggle to close the gaps that divide us from our neighbours.

All clauses in examples (11) and (12) are in the active voice with the speaker ("I" and "we") almost always occupying the first syntactic position. First Nations are actively involved in the processes identified above in concrete ways, i.e. they do not just happen but are deliberately performed/intentional acts. This kind of representation has a potential ideological function in the sense that it shows how Aboriginal people see themselves in contemporary society, namely, as active and responsible participants. As Burton puts it: "...once it is clear to people that there are alternative ways of expressing 'reality,' then people can make decisions about how to express 'reality'; both for others and themselves. By this means, we can both deconstruct and reconstruct our realities to an enabling degree" (1991: 200).

Moreover, Native people construct a reality not only in terms of action processes but also in terms of 'states' and 'events.' These process types encode meanings about states of being, becoming or having (possession), i.e. persons or things are assigned attributes or identities as example (13) illustrates:

(13) I believe our people are ready. Our nations have the tools

to move forward, our people are becoming better educated, our businesses and economic abilities are growing.

[...]

We have so many people to be proud of, from the kindergarten teacher to the university professor, from the carpenter to the medical specialist. These are our people.

This representation of experience constructs a positive and motivating reality by assigning positive values and characteristics to Native people and their achievements. Consequently, this leads to a reinforcement of the bonds and solidarity within the in-group.

Positive attributes and a positive description of themselves lead to positive self-presentation and self-awareness which is very much needed in a time when negative stereotyping and bias continue to misrepresent Aboriginal people in the mainstream media.

### **Pronominal Choices – ‘We,’ ‘Our’ and ‘Us’**

Looking at the pronominal choices that producers of Native news texts make can reveal the way they represent themselves in relation to other participants of the discourse and to the topic discussed. Simultaneously, pronominal choice contributes to the emergence of the writer’s (or speaker’s) as well as the addressee’s identity in discourse.

Particularly pronoun forms of ‘we’ including its object variant ‘us’ and the possessive adjective ‘our(s)’ are revealing since they induce the readership to conceptualize group identity, solidarity, a national collective and the like as members of an in-group. In fact, as a frequency count shows, the first person plural pronoun ‘we’ is the most extensively used pronoun in Native news discourse (see Table 1 below). Yet, often “the actual discourse referents for *we* are seemingly limitless; its precise interpretation is dependent on the particular context of use and the inferences to be drawn on the basis of mutual knowledge of speaker and interpreter” (Wales 1996: 63), as example (14) shows:

(14) In the Ojibway language, we use the term “Kweok” to refer to women, a term which is used to demonstrate respect and honour. As First Peoples, we must respect our cultural traditions and celebrate the women who are at the heart of our nations.

We have been working very hard to ensure that the AFN is representative of all of our peoples [...]. This edition of the First Nations Messenger not only celebrates First Nations women, but it also serves to inform you about the issues we are working on.

The first ‘we’ refers to the Ojibway people, a group in which the

**Table 1**  
**Distribution of Pronouns**

	total number of words/ pronouns	<b>total number and % of we, our, us</b>	total number and % of I, my, me	total number and % of you, your	total number and % of they, their, them
“Restoration of our languages is everyone’s responsibility,” Phil Fontaine FNM Feb/March 2000	608 / 63	<b>40 63,5%</b>	14 <sup>1</sup> 22%	6 9,5%	3 4,8%
“Our nations must ensure treaty rights are recognized, protected and implemented,” Phil Fontaine FNM Dec. 1999	673 / 51	<b>39 76,5%</b>	7 13,7%	1 1,9%	4 <sup>2</sup> 7,8%
“New leader promises to listen to the voices of the people,” Matthew Coon Come FNM Aug./Sep. 2000	754 / 66	<b>36 54,6%</b>	13 19,7%	10 15%	7 10,6%
“I am Canadian. I am Anishinabe” Dominic Beaudry, AN July 2000	1680 / 108	<b>67<sup>3</sup> 62%</b>	4 3,7%	1 <sup>4</sup> 0,9%	36 33%
“Open letter to chiefs, councils and Community members,” Vernon Roote, AN Dec. 2000	619 / 42	<b>30 71,4%</b>	8 19%	3 7%	1 2,4%

<sup>1</sup> includes one use of ‘myself’

<sup>2</sup> includes one use of ‘themselves’

<sup>3</sup> includes five uses of ‘ourselves’

<sup>4</sup> indefinite reference (i.e. ‘one’)

author includes himself since he is Ojibway and speaks his Native language, i.e. Ojibway. This first use of 'we' then is an instance of speaker-inclusive 'we' and addressee-inclusive 'we' in that it refers to the speaker himself and to some others. It is, however, only partly addressee-inclusive since only Ojibway or, possibly, people speaking and understanding the Ojibway language, are addressed. In the next sentence the author makes use of another inclusive 'we' (and 'our' respectively) which refers, this time, not only to one specific Native nation but to "First Peoples" in general and thus includes all Aboriginal people in Canada and maybe, in an even wider context, all Indigenous nations worldwide. The last two occurrences of 'we' ("We have been working..." and "...issues we are working on") are speaker-inclusive but addressee-exclusive. Here the writer makes some claims about the work and objectives of the *Assembly of the First Nations* (AFN), which he is a member of. Therefore, this 'we' refers only to the AFN. This interpretation is once more confirmed through the explicit distinction between 'you' and 'we' in the last sentence. The Native readers, the target audience, are directly addressed as the beneficiary of information about the issues the AFN ('we') is working on.

In most cases, however, 'we,' 'our' and 'us' are employed in Native discourse to refer to Aboriginal people as a whole and encode the meaning speaker + addressee and are thus speaker and addressee inclusive. Pronouns used in this way can convey empathy, commitment and solidarity. They unite various Aboriginal nations into one unique group, namely 'we as a people', as example (15) illustrates:

(15) Our Elders tell us that we have entered the time period in our traditional teachings that is referred to as the Seventh Generation. [...] The Seventh Generation is predicted to be a time when our youth will become our leaders. A time when we are to look to our young people for guidance, strength and direction. [...] everywhere we look on Turtle Island our young people are teaching us to look at who we are as adults. As we enter the new millenium we are seeing our young people stepping forward [...] taking us on journeys of discovery as to how far we as a people have come and what we can achieve.

The extensive use of 'we' forms in Native discourse also reflects a traditional value, namely a strong cultural preference of seeing oneself as related to and interconnected with others. It creates a sense of social unity and collective responsibility, which are basic principles in many Native cultures. Consequently, the dominant use of the pronouns 'we,' 'our' and 'us' can be seen as the linguistic manifestation of this world

view and as a counter strategy to Western representations of identity as portrayed in (16):

(16) Another concern is for the younger people who are studying and working towards careers as individuals, much like European society. As Anishinabek, we are a collective society and must do all we can to promote and make our children proud of who we are and what we are working for.

It has been emphasized not to only take into account the presence or absence of different pronominal forms in the analysis of expressions of identities and communicative goals. The frequencies of respective pronouns are also of utmost importance (e.g. Wilson 1990: 46, De Fina 1995:387-388). The pronominal distribution with regard to person deixis in the five news texts chosen for illustration and shown in Table 3 below clearly indicates that first person plural forms dominate the Native discourse. The National Chiefs, Phil Fontaine and Matthew Coon Come, for example, make extensive use of 'we' forms which are said to be a general characteristic of political address. However, in non-political Native texts first person plural forms are employed very frequently, too, as the news text "I am Canadian. I am Anishinabe" shows.

The predominance of 'we' and its corresponding pronouns 'us' and 'our' gives the Native discourse a feature of collective action, solidarity and group effort. By choosing 'we' rather than the self-centred 'I', Native writers represent a reality in which the actions of the group are more valued than the actions of the individual. First person plural pronouns are significant as they promote and affirm not only textual cohesion but also, ideologically speaking, unity among otherwise diverse groups and nations and thus construct a new collectivity in the form of a national pan-Indian identity. The various Native nations and interest groups may not share the same traditions, language, values or beliefs, but they all share a similar relationship to the out-group, i.e. the Western world. They all share a history of internal colonialism, of broken promises and intense suffering and although the importance of the heterogeneity of the many Native nations is always stressed by Native people, inclusive 'we' and its related forms are the most frequent pronouns of the Native discourse.

## **Humour: Irony and Teasing**

### **Irony**

Laughter and humour are essential in many, if not all, Aboriginal cultures. Of course, each Native nation has a unique world-view, cultural framework or humour tradition. Yet the types, functions and effects of humour in Aboriginal cultures seem to have much in common as Bruchac

(1987:26-27) points out:

One of the things which binds Indian people together [...] is the complex phenomenon which might be called 'Indian humour'. Wherever you go in 'Indian Country' you will find laughter - a laughter which may be bawdy one minute, sacred the next. But whichever it is, you can be sure that it is a humour which makes its points clearly to Native Americans, and those points include the importance of humility and affirmation that laughter leads to learning and survival.

Humour is not 'just for the laugh' but a way for dealing with oppression and tragedy, with survival and healing, it serves as a way to keep one's feet on the ground, i.e. of maintaining social control and unity. Humour is used by Elders and parents as a teaching tool and as a means to transmit cultural knowledge or to hint at cultural 'faux pas' (Spielman 1998, Ryan 1999, Lincoln 1993, Poirier 2000).

The two prevalent types of humour found in Native discourse are irony and teasing. Irony is said to have an "evaluative edge" (Hutcheon 1994). It is evaluative in so far as ironic statement involves the attribution of certain attitudes, which are often of a negative nature as example (17) suggests:

*(17) It seems that we've just come from the ballot boxes to re-elect our liberal Great White Father. Oh the memories. It feels like it was yesterday, when we held up both arms asking him to lift us up in congratulations for being elected our political and economic father figure. Our Great White Father swaddled us up tightly around the pages of the Constitution and the Indian Act and put us in our comfortable bed of the reserve system and rocked us to sleep.*

Some of the terms used to describe how irony works are 'double meaning,' 'incongruity' or 'overt and covert meaning.' The proposition overtly stated, i.e. linguistically realized in example (17) will most likely be rejected in favour of the covert meaning, the unsaid, the implied; the reason for that being the incompatibility or incongruity of the overt meaning with the micro and macro context of the utterance. In (17), the Grician maxim of quality (do not say what you believe to be false, Grice 1975: 53) is flouted in favour of indirection.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, to attribute irony to example (17) some inferencing work has to be done by the readers including shared cultural knowledge, an understanding of the relationship between the federal government and Native people in Canada as well as language skills (e.g. linguistic and ironic competence). This then might lead to an interpretation as such that the author is ironically echoing the Euro-Canadian attitude, namely, that the federal government and its rep-

representatives have always seen themselves as the 'mighty father figure' who is superior to his 'children', the First Nations of Canada. The "Great White Father" referred to in (17) is Jean Chrétien, the then Prime Minister of Canada. Moreover, this phrase invites some interpretation by bringing into play, on the one hand, a usage popular in the nineteenth century. At that time the term "Great White Mother" was used to refer to Queen Victoria. On the other hand, a very different entity is hinted at, namely the Great Spirit or the Great Mystery, the Creator. As such this wording is intertextually alluding to and drawing upon the vast body of cultural knowledge including that of creation told from the Native point of view.

The repetitive allusions to nineteenth-century linguistic patterns founded on a white attitude of superiority and to the Great Mystery respectively do not only disapprove of the superiority attitude of the dominant society but also ridicule and challenge the misguided goal of various Canadian governments including the Liberals under Chrétien, to destroy Native cultures, identities, values and beliefs. The "comfortable beds of the reserve system" are not comfortable at all given the fact that many First Nations communities are in a poor state due to the lack of, and access to, employment, education and adequate living conditions. Additionally, the phrase "rocked us to sleep" can be read as a metaphor symbolizing the attempt of various Canadian governments to silence and assimilate Native people.

The Native writer's method of challenging the dominant attitude then is by the device of paying apparent respect or a compliment to the then Prime Minister Jean Chrétien. However, for those who have the historical and cultural background knowledge it will be clear that the author's statement is a dispraise in the guise of praise, since the delivered but implied propositions in (17) clash with the chosen linguistic format. "[I]rony is simultaneously disguise and communication" (Hutcheon 1994: 95).

Irony has been recognized as a prominent feature in the work of Native artists and in everyday interaction. Irony along with various other contemporary expressions of Aboriginal humour is not only a continuation of traditional humour practices (e.g. Poirier 2000, Vizenor 1990) and a viable method to cope with a changing world. It is also a means for expressing current socio-political concerns by exposing and challenging dominant hegemonic ideologies.

### **Teasing**

Teasing is a 'high risk' type of humour as it is often responded to in a serious and defending way. It "creates a climate for potential

interactional trouble” (Spielman 1998:122). The reason for that is the fact that teasing, as well as irony, works on the ground of some evaluation of the person or situation teased. However, it has been shown that there are differences in how members of different cultures react to teasing. Native people often respond to teasing with self-deprecating humour and participate in the teasing themselves (Spielman 1998:124). Teasing was an integral part of tribal humour:

For centuries before the white invasion, teasing was a method of control of social situations by Indian people. Rather than embarrass members of the tribe publicly, people used to tease individuals they considered out of step with the consensus of tribal opinion. In this way egos were preserved and disputes within the tribe of a personal nature were held to a minimum. (Deloria 1970:263)

Teasing is often defined as face-to-face interaction, i.e. the person targeted or teased must be present. However, I would like to suggest that the cartoons in the *Anishinabek News* and *First Nations Messenger* are good examples of the practice of teasing and at the same time of expressing an evaluation through indirection and visual communication. Various research has been done on the art and functions of cartoons (e.g. Feldman 2000, Somers 1998, Donato 1990, Langeveld 1981) which shares at least the following view of cartoons as symbolic drawings that make a humorous, witty, ironic, satirical etc. point about some action, topic or person. Typically, cartoons appear in the form of a single, non-continuing panel and provide visual images of ideas or issues.

The *Baloney & Bannock* cartoons by Perry McLeod-Shabogiesic<sup>3</sup> appear in both Native newspapers, the *First Nations Messenger* and the *Anishinabek News*.

The sign reads “Name Calling Ceremony Tonight at Band Council Meeting 7:30 pm” and one of the cartoon characters comments: “It’s sure good to see that we’re reviving our traditional rituals again!” Here the cartoonist teases and indirectly criticizes his own people. The humorous effect is created through an allusive pun which depends on specific cultural knowledge and knowledge of modern-day situations. The ambiguity occurs on the lexical level and refers to the conceptual incongruity of ‘Name Calling Ceremony’ and ‘Naming Ceremony’, the latter being a traditional ceremony to provide a person with his or her spiritual name. This name, given by an Elder, grounds the people and provides them with instruction and direction; it shows each his or her place in creation and connects them to the spirit world.

The ‘playing on words’ shows the underlying message and the cartoonist’s attitude of the situation at Band Council meetings. He judges



the practice of name calling as inappropriate and out of line with Native values where criticism or complaints are rather formulated as a general category than in terms of a specific identity or person, at least no name would be mentioned if possible. Spielman (1998:136) affirms this view for the Ojibway and calls it a “preference for categorical identities over naming names.” He goes on to state that this practice goes along with other features of interpersonal relationships, such as the principle of harmony, and that personal confrontations should be avoided whenever possible (1998:137).

Any kind of humour including teasing and irony fulfills various functions in Native discourse. Ryan (1999:8) argues humour and especially irony are the prevailing tools to address diverse issues in Aboriginal art including writing. It is used to amuse and entertain, to educate and point a finger at issues that seem questionable both in a Native and non-Native world. At the same time, it has been a means of survival.

## Conclusion

First Nations in Canada produce their own discourse and it is in this production and the mediation of a specific discursive practice that Na-

tive people challenge and change the image which has been so prevalent in Euro-Canada: instead of a negative portrayal positive self-presentation is emphasized; instead of a dominated people, who are submitted to the dominant society's actions and labels, the Native discourse highlights the existence of independent and sovereign nations and the need for emancipation from outside labelling. In realizing that discourse is not only a means in the enactment of power but a power resource itself, Aboriginal people in Canada take action and fight for access to and power over discourse. They respond to the necessity to introduce themselves on a variety of discursive levels and make their point of view known. A multitude of Native newspapers, journals and books are circulated throughout Canada. Almost every First Nations community boasts its own web side now and the *Aboriginal People's Television Network* (APTN) is unique in the world. APTN was launched on September 1, 1999 in Winnipeg / Manitoba. This network represents a significant milestone for Aboriginal people in Canada: for the first time in broadcast history, First Nations, Inuit and Metis people have the opportunity to share their stories and perspectives with the rest of the world on a national television network dedicated to Aboriginal programming. By having access to various discourse mediating institutions it can be assumed that Native People have some kind of control over public discourse and in turn, over the representations of Native issues from a cultural in-group perspective.

### Notes

1. The terms 'First Nations,' 'Aboriginal' or 'Native' are used in the widest sense to refer to the original inhabitants and their descendents of what has become Canada. The first of these collective terms - First Nations - has become a preferred term of self-reference across Canada in many contexts to underline claims to a separate identity and inherent sovereign status. The term 'Aboriginal' is used in Section 35 of the Constitution Act of 1982. The Constitution of Canada recognizes three groups of Aboriginal people: the Indian, the Metis and the Inuit. Status Indian and non-status Indian are legal terms as defined by the *Indian Act*. I prefer to capitalize the terms 'Aboriginal' and 'Native' out of respect to the preferences of Aboriginal people themselves, and as a way of showing deference to their identity as distinct peoples.
2. Presumably, there is also a Native discourse in French as many First

Nations in Canada use French as their first or second language, e.g. the Huron-Wendat or Montagnais-Atikamek.

3. In everyday discourse 'Turtle Island' is often used in that sense, too. In an interview I conducted with an Ojibway/Mohawk friend he told me: "I use the term Turtle Island sometimes. As I understand it Turtle Island is North America. And in some context they use Turtle Island as all of the land base of Mother Earth. But my understanding is that Turtle Island is North America, and it has been shown before that from certain perspectives North America itself from outer space looks like a turtle. You have to squint your eyes a little bit you know, and imagine a little bit because then you can see how Mexico becomes the tail, California becomes one leg, Florida becomes another leg, up by Alaska becomes the front paw, down by Newfoundland becomes a front paw. And what comes up in Canada on the top, up at Baffin Island almost looks like a head. So, then you understand that our people knew something because they have been talking about Turtle Island for a long time. They knew something about the way the land base looks." (Joe Johnson, Toronto, February 2, 2001)
4. Grice's co-operative principle is formulated on the assumption that the rationale of an interaction is a maximally efficient exchange of information. Often, however, producers of utterances flout one or more of the four conversational maxims (quantity, quality, relation and manner). Then the receivers must draw inferences. This type of implicature is called 'conversational implicature.'
5. I am grateful to Perry McLeod-Shabogesic for permission to use his cartoon.

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