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# Recreating Trickster: Negotiating Cultural Continuity through Discourse

*Hartwell S. Francis*

## Introduction

Meeting with speakers and recording their interactions is critical language preservation and revitalization work. There is a dearth of recorded naturally occurring language interaction for languages of small populations of speakers. Researchers generally work with a single speaker or a few speakers one at a time to elicit language structures for linguistically oriented publications. Learners are often only presented with language structures in lists and other non-communicative formats. Meeting with and recording speakers interacting in their language provides naturally occurring language interactions for research and education. Further, speaker meetings reclaim discourse space for gravely endangered languages. Even when speakers are together, discussion often takes place in English. Speaker meetings with set activities provide sanction for non-English-language interactions.

We are working in the Eastern Band of Cherokee community with the Cherokee Speakers Consortium. We host and participate in meetings that are designed to create space for unfettered use of Cherokee language and to develop language study material. One of our central concerns is the loss of domains for the use of Cherokee language in the community. We are also interested in expanding Cherokee language scholarship in the academy. Our work addresses

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the question of what is lost without community speakers interacting in their language in all domains of human interaction. We find grave loss of cultural transmission as children attend school in the language of another culture. We find grave loss of cultural transmission even in immersion schools, because Cherokee-medium teachers have not had models of presentation of course content in the Cherokee language.

As we develop language models and Cherokee-medium content presentation models with the speakers in the community, the culture of the community emerges in their discourse interactions. As community speakers participate in co-creating Cherokee-language texts, they reproduce cultural styles that are evident in Cherokee literature. In this study we focus on the co-construction of a chaotic or absurd actor and relate that actor to aspects of the rabbit character in Cherokee folklore. The speakers adopt the persona of the absurd actor as they develop the character through an exchange of humorous scenes of the absurd actor's pitiful interaction with the world. The speakers reinforce their community and at the same time develop negative but fictional examples of incorrect cultural behavior. The fictional absurd actor is ridiculed mercilessly, thereby creating a strong model of negative behavior without recourse to rigid rules proscribing behavior.

### Collaboration Exercise Methodology

Stick-figure drawings of characters engaged in different activities were distributed, on cards, to language speakers. The cards are designed to elicit target-language statements and questions about one specific activity at a time. The cards each present a single person engaged in an activity. The cards are designed to provide practice with person prefixes and verb stems, two of the most difficult structures encountered by Cherokee language learners. The Third Person

Singular Imperfective Habitual description of the activity is written on each card in Cherokee, in the English alphabet. Instruction is simple and open-ended: in the target language, discuss the activity pictured on the card.

Manipulating different verb words and manipulating different prefixed pronouns are both very difficult language performance tasks for Cherokee language learners. Verb words are made up of material that indicates tense (location in time), aspect (temporal extent) and mode (speaker perspective on the situation expressed by the verb base). Cherokee language has ten semantic person categories that are referenced by sixty distinct pronouns, each of which has two basic contextually conditioned forms, some of which have further contextually conditioned forms. The person pronouns are prefixed to one of five stem forms to create, in part, Cherokee-language sentences.

The discussion card for the brief conversation under consideration here indicates the activity *cry*. The card shows a rough stick-figure drawing of a person holding her or his head. Tears are falling from the figure's eyes, and tears have pooled below the figure. The card comes from a set of 16 cards. It is labeled 5. The Cherokee Third Person Singular Imperfective Habitual verb word sentence *Atsoyihoi* (she/he cries) is written on the card in the English alphabet.

During this exercise, the speakers and research recorder were ranged around the room, principally around a central conference table. The group met nearly weekly for lunch. After lunch, we held open or themed Cherokee-language discussion and recorded the discussion for research and education. There were twelve participants, including the research recorder. In the interaction based on the *cry* activity card, five participants spoke and the other seven listened. The brief conversation recounted below occurred in the middle of a meeting to go over the set of activity cards.

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## A Summary of the Conversation

In the interaction selected for presentation here, Speaker One (S1) begins by soliciting participation. S1 is holding the card and with the card engages other members of the group in discussion of the card.

Turn01: S1: *Kag soi?* (Who is next?)

S1 makes an attempt to read the card, but S1 is incompletely successful with the language in this case. S1 has admitted the need for language practice, and the other speakers will often assist one another with the language in their work together.

Speaker Two (S2) does help S1 by reading the card.

Turn02: S2: "*Atsoyiho'i,*" *adiha.* ("He/She cries," it says.)

S1 then picks up the statement—but moderately modified. S1 also broadens the discussion by teasing S3 and, in a shift from the Habitual of the card to the Present, stating that S3 is crying.

Turn03: S1: Oh, *atso[hi]ho'i.* S3 *atso[hi]ha.*  
(Oh, she/he cries. S3 is crying.)

S3 gamely participates, both to continue the discussion and to correct S1. In Turn04, S3 adopts the persona of the character represented on the card. (S3 does not generally cry.) Despite the First Person structure, S3's statement is fictional.

Turn04: S3: *Gatsoyiho'i.* (I cry.)

S2 elaborates on the characterization of S3 that S1 and S3 are developing. S2 provides one of the reasons for the fictional behavior of S3. At the same time, S2 reinforces the re-emerging community standard for language for the Imperfective Habitual form for the activity pictured on the exercise prompt. And again, the statement is not a factual statement about S3.

Turn05: S2: *Nogwu yusvna adela, atsoyihō'i.*  
(When he runs out of money, he cries.)

S4 with glee confirms the fictional characterization of S3 and reinforces the correct language structure.

Turn06: S4: *Atsoyihō'i!* (He cries!)

S1 rejoins the conversation and further elaborates on the characterization of (fictional) S3 that is developing. S1 continues to use a moderately unsanctioned form. S1's elaboration of S3's character is again fictional.

Turn07: S1: *Nole uditasdi yusvnelvno, atso[hi]hō'i.*  
(And when he runs out of his drink, he cries.)

S3 picks up and reinforces the ongoing elaboration. S3 reinforces the emerging community standard structure, although in a First Person Singular form.

Turn08: S3: *Sday gatsoyihō'i.* (I cry hard.)

S5 expands the context of the fictional S3, in part based on the Imperfective Habitual structure of the target concept. S5 also adopts First Person Singular structure. S5 provides a First Person Singular variant that is the predicted pronunciation (stem glottal fricative alternates to glottal stop in First Person Singular context) in the literature on Cherokee language. By adopting a First Person Singular form, S5 shifts emphasis from S3, opening fictional First Person identification to the group.

Turn09: S5: *Ugitsvda utsvgv. "Yagtsvgv, gatsoyi'o'i."*  
(The next day he's sick [from drinking]. "When I'm sick, I cry.")

S2 returns to the theme of money and references per capita payments that community members receive from the community

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corporation. S2 lives about forty miles from the meeting. Unlike S5, S2 completely adopts the developing fictional character. S2 adopts a First Person Singular structure without indication of a direct quote.

Turn10: S2: *Agisgi, digatsoyihoi yagwagsvnel adela.*  
(Even though I get it [per capita payment],  
over there I cry when I run out of money.)

S1 elaborates on the theme of per capita payment by indicating that the per capita money is already spent, on credit perhaps, before it arrives. S1 has adopted the repeated emerging standard form for the First Person Singular target structure.

Turn11: S1: *Aya si yigalukvnano, dusvno nogwu gatsoyihoi.*  
(As for me, and even before it [per capita payment]  
comes, it has run out and then I cry.)

S3 picks up and participates in S1's elaboration with a Second Person Singular structure. S3 has accepted S1 as the locus of the developing fictional character.

Turn12: S3: *Halenisgo.*  
(You begin [to cry even before money arrives].)

S2 retakes the fictional identity and imagines speaking as the developing fictional character. S2 references community leadership here. The fictional character in this turn becomes an ungrateful complainer. Despite community largesse and profligate personal spending, the fictional character sees others as responsible for lack of funds.

Turn13: S2: *"Na gayohl si," gadisgo, "Gatsv widanihasga adela?"*  
*gadisgo.* ("It's so little," I say. "Where are  
they putting the money?" I say.)

S4 picks up the theme of greed and profligacy by speaking as the fictional character. S4 more profoundly adopts the developing fictional character with the emphatic interjection *yo* which is characteristic of impassioned conversation.

Turn14: S4: *Yo aniyhgogi! "Dvnehgwo," andisgvgi.*  
(They're liars! "It will increase," they said.)

S5 as self observes some validity in the sentiment of the developing fictional character before adopting the persona.

Turn15: S5: *Udohyudi. "Kagono atsawanv? Higo iyv tsunisdikagwu!"* (That's true. "Who is putting it in their pocket? It's such a small amount!")

Turn 15 ends the discussion. Throughout the discussion, with each turn, the speakers and non-speaking participants are following the development of the fictional persona and laughing at each elaboration of the fictional persona.

## Discussion

Throughout the participation, the speakers are co-creating their language and culture. At the beginning of this interaction in Turn 1, S1 solicits the support of the group. S1 is holding the card, and in the larger context it is clear to all that it is S1's turn. Because S1 is somewhat insecure in the language and in the exercise, S1 solicits assistance, not by asking for assistance but by indicating (moderate) crisis in the context of the exercise. The manner in which S1 solicits assistance and then the manner in which the group co-construct an imaginary actor provide evidence for the process of replicating Cherokee language and the culture represented by Cherokee folklore.

The Rabbit character of Cherokee folklore, among other characters, gets into trouble by acting outside of accepted norms. Rabbit



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gets into trouble when Rabbit tries to take on the characteristics of other animals. Because Rabbit transgresses by adopting alien characteristics, Rabbit can be identified as a representative of the trickster complex. In the story of the Rabbit and the Otter, the Rabbit attempts to profit by stealing the Otter's more beautiful coat. In the story of the Rabbit and the Bear, the Rabbit gravely injures herself/himself by attempting to do the things that the Bear can do. Rabbit ends up harming herself/himself as a result of misguided behavior, behavior that runs counter to Rabbit's physical nature. These tales provide examples of negative behavior and the harmful results of negative behavior, without proscribing behavior.

As the speakers develop and adopt the persona of an absurd actor, they are setting cultural norms for behavior without proscribing behavior. In this way, the speakers reproduce a culture based on positive and negative examples that is interested in consensus, cooperation, and individual choice. The absurd actor is childish, unconscious of consequences, ignorant of the needs of others, greedy, and addicted to drugs.

The participating speakers take turns over the course of a short conversation centered on the artificially introduced crying activity. In our work, we often experience the Cherokee cultural ideal of consensus playing out in language work meetings. The speakers are often involved in developing contemporary elementary education curricula vocabulary. In formal meetings, if the speakers do not reach consensus on the Cherokee gloss for a word, they set the word aside for consideration and revisit the word in subsequent meetings. In the conversation presented here, the speakers quickly and organically reach a thematic consensus and participate in elaboration of the theme.

## Conclusion

In the Cherokee cultural ideal, human actors are not told how to behave. No one presumes to proscribe the behavior of another sentient being by setting out rules. Instead, anecdotes about improper behavior are shared. Cultural participants laugh at anecdotes of improper behavior, and in this way proper behavior is reinforced and encouraged. This cultural mode for reinforcing and encouraging proper behavior conflicts with the mainstream cultural mode of setting out rules to reinforce and encourage proper behavior. In the mainstream school system, for example, students are told what not to do—e.g., Don't run in the hallway. The modes for reinforcing and encouraging proper behavior clash and cause tension for cross-cultural participants who have not analyzed either culture.