

Textual Interpretation in the Amazon

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Yurupari: Studies of an Amazonian Foundation Myth. Geraldo Reichel-Dolmatoff. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996. 300 pp.

Cool Tobacco, Sweet Coca: Teachings of an Indian Sage from the Colombian Amazon. Hipólito Candre and Juan Alvaro Echeverri. Devon, England: Themis Books, 1996. 294 pp.

Reichel-Dolmatoff's *Yurupari* and Hipólito Candre's collaboration with Juan Alvaro Echeverri in *Cool Tobacco, Sweet Coca* are important contributions to the analysis of South American oral literature as complex art forms and symbolic expressions of native philosophy. The work of translation is central, *Yurupari* in its deep semantic interpretation of four Eastern Tukanoan texts, and *Cool Tobacco, Sweet Coca* in its preoccupation with Uitoto poetics and performance. Both demonstrate how the natural world, observations of biological processes, and subsistence activities provide key metaphors for native cosmology, social organization, gender relations, and rules for living. Attempting to remain loyal to native expression and meaning, they free narrative from the last century's stereotypic vision that regards texts as simplistic or infantile stories or as translatable according to European literary standards. Despite parallel concerns of the two books, there are important differences in the methods of translation and interpretation which result in different contributions for South American ethnology as well as for the reader's experience.

Although Reichel-Dolmatoff (1912–1994) states in the summary of *Yurupari* that the texts are intended as an introduction to the general field of Tukanoan oral literature, the book is not an introductory work but represents the continuation of his scholarly and ethnographic research among the Eastern Tukanoans of the Colombian Vaupés since the 1960s. His focus of interpretation is concerned with meaning and values in oral tradition. The texts are part of the *Yurupari* complex, a wide range of Amazonian customs and beliefs, including myths, rituals, sacred instruments, secret societies, and heroes, which has been the focus of ethnographic and literary interest since the last century. He hopes that the translations and interpretations shed new light on the study of this complex since they constitute "an all important statement on the foundations of social organization, gender, ideology and ritual orientation" (p. 265).

Criticizing earlier interpretations and translations, his method is to examine texts recorded in the native languages (one in Tukano proper and three in Desana) in the field and commented upon in detail by the Indians. Antonio Guzmán, his longtime Desana informant, aided in the interviewing, transcriptions, and translations. More prominent than use of the natives' comments is the use of comparative analysis drawing upon his knowledge of other Tukanoan languages, which are closely related "in their metaphors, metonymies, and other tropes," a fact that, in many ways, points to similar "mental processes" (p. xxiv).

A literal translation in prose form is first presented for each narrative, the author admitting that they sound stiff and clumsy and inevitably distort the text. Extensive notes and commentaries follow the texts, exploring ethnographic, linguistic, and biological information to reveal the multitude of associations involved with the tropes. The deep interpretation contained in the commentaries is necessary, due to the untranslatability of Amazonian metaphors and rhetoric from the texts alone (p. 97). After a short summary of these notes and commentaries, an interlinear translation is presented remaining faithful to native syntax but at times rendering the English incomprehensible.

Reichel-Dolmatoff's ability to join linguistic, biological, and ethnographic information is impressive, as well as the sophistication of the Tukanoans' use of keen observations of nature to create texts loaded with complex metaphors and multiple meanings. As in his past works, his elaborate commentaries highlight the sexual and erotic implications of the language, interpreting Tukanoan culture as inherently "pansexual" and concerned with male domination, primogeniture, and exogamy. The sex-food-alliance analogy is the central concern for the possessive, individual adult male, and as the core idea of the texts, it represents the philosophical, ethical, and psychological problems of Tukanoan mental life.

Without intending to detract from the important contributions of this book, there are certain limitations to his method. Despite constant affirmations that Reichel-Dolmatoff is not using psychological theory to analyze the texts and that the meanings are clear to the native listeners, the book's contribution is a dense scholarly elaboration of native texts based on linguistic, biological, and ethnographical information and not the presentation of native exegesis. In part this is due to the object of analysis: recorded texts treated as independent from the context of their performance. At times there are unjustified inferences based upon

linguistic comparisons between Desana, Pira-Tapuya, Uanano, Tukano proper, and Arawak. For instance, in his elaboration of phallic associations with animals based on linguistic evidence, he states that *emó* (Tukano: howler monkey) is related to the Arawakan *ema* (tapir) since the two are seen as allies (p. 55). But *emó* could just as well be related to *emú*, the name for howler monkey used by the Siona, a Western Tukanoan group located far from Arawakan influence. The work is replete with statements such as “abundant salivation . . . is equated with sexual potency” and “weaving is metaphorically related to copulation” (p. 79), which suggest relatively univocal and fixed metaphorical associations that provide a single message for the participants. He seems to ignore the multivocalic quality of symbols, in which meanings emerge from the context of performance and its participants. In the case of the Yuruparí texts, one wonders if both sexes and all ages hear the same message and have the same preoccupations as the possessive adult male.

While *Yuruparí* can be characterized as monologic, at least two voices are heard in *Cool Tobacco, Sweet Coca*: that of narrator Hipólito Candre and that of translator and commentator Juan Alvaro Echeverri. First published in Spanish and winner of Colombia's National Prize for Indian Literature, the book manages to combine a truly poetic translation with clearly conveyed metaphorical associations. Sixteen texts in Uitoto and English are presented, nine central ones and seven that serve as commentaries. Following Hymes, Tedlock, Sherzer, Swann, and Cardenal, Echeverri seeks to discover the native poetic form through analysis of performance. The resulting translation is a pleasurable and highly informative reading in Uitoto oral poetry and daily philosophy.

In addition to its contribution to native poetics, the book reveals the importance and power attributed

to language and orality in Amazonian groups. The texts are the word of life and present the right paths for daily conduct. The power of the word is not in its utterance but in the consequences of being uttered. To invoke the word is to search and to insure. Word is action; it actualizes and transforms things, from the named to the real, from the named to the manifest. Candre's words search for the right conduct in life, ensure right conduct, and teach right conduct. The importance of the word gives clues to understanding the source of power of shamanic healing chants, for it invokes spiritual presence. Finally, the book indicates the potential of the performative approach to language for bilingual Indian education, allowing the incorporation of native socialization techniques and aesthetic values as well as linguistic and subject content.

Like the Tukanoan texts, metaphoric associations between plants, hunting, food, domestic tasks, gender, and social organization are central to the meanings of texts. The highlighting of these metaphors—which represent Amazonian perception of the natural, social, and cosmological world—differs from Reichel-Dolmatoff's approach. Rather than viewing them as untranslatable, the focus is the translation of metaphors. Rarely is the reader told directly that X represents or symbolizes Y. Rather the meanings emerge from the poetry of the language and succeeding commentaries. Equally important is the organization of the book as metaphor. Using the Uitoto metaphor of basketry associating weaving with the flow of threads of thought and dreams, the joining of alliances in marriage and the production of new life, the book is a new basket, intertwining oral and written forms and resulting in a highly successful attempt to reflect the aesthetic and intellectual content of Uitoto oral tradition. ■

The Primitives of Linguistic Meaning

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Semantics: Primes and Universals. Anna Wierzbicka. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1996. 500 pp.

Here is the latest of nine books by which Wierzbicka has periodically summarized her progress in identifying the primitives of linguistic meaning and her thinking on semantic universals. The latter consist of any named concept or process that recurs across most languages, but in contrast, primitives are the irreducible and indefinable stock of primary meanings with

which all other meanings are composed in any language. Primitives are cast in semiotic and lexicographic terms by an emphasis on the sign and by the method of reducing a vocabulary to the smallest set of signs from which its other signs are derived; the optimal dictionary avoids circularity by atomizing each meaning into a few of these primes and by expressing them as propositions. Imagery, metaphor, scenarios, scales, maxims, points of view, componential systems, word fields, and most other latter-day lexical semantic constructs do not contribute. The search for primitives descends from 17th-century philosopher G. Leibniz,