DISCUSSION *Paper*

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Cross cultural communication problems in Aboriginal Australia

MICHAEL WALSH

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North Australia Research Unit
The Australian National University

The North Australia Research Unit (NARU) was established in 1973 – a time when The Australian National University (ANU) itself was fairly youthful. NARU is primarily a research and academic support base. The Unit's frontier days are as much a part of the history of northern Australia as they are of the history of The Australian National University and this is what gives NARU its unique status within the rest of the Australian university network.

NARU occupies a relatively large site – 4 hectares within a 10 kilometre drive from the centre of Darwin – with boundaries contiguous with the more recently developed Northern Territory University. Since opening its door to the north, NARU has expanded its portals into a modern, well resourced complex with strong links to universities, indigenous communities and a continuing political and economic focus on regional issues relevant to the Top End. NARU provides an outlet for research through a successful public seminar series and through general academic publications. The Unit's own publications include a discussion paper series and, over the years, a number of well known authors have published their monographs through NARU. Also, the Unit's library specialises in northern issues – NARU expertise has become known to many researchers over the years.

Physically located in the remote Top End of Australia, NARU has been something of a frontier research post but, in terms of its scholarly output, it has a record of academic research which is anything but remote. The aggregate of scholars over the years, and even today, is a reflection of the interdisciplinary nature of the people who have carried out their research while based at the Unit.

A large chunk of that research has focused on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of Australia and on the social, cultural, political, economic and development issues which are part of northern Australia. The range of research projects which are underway at any particular time depend very much on the priorities of the individuals who are engaged in the actual research. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues are of continuing importance in northern Australia and, consequently, to NARU. The reasons for this would be obvious to anyone who visits northern Australia – outside of Darwin, indigenous peoples comprise the majority of the population in the north.

The academic content of NARU is, of course, its central purpose and, presently, there are five ANU academics on staff and several visitors from other universities. NARU offers its services to a small number of university graduate students who require a base in the north. The students are from universities around Australia and

their research reflects the cross-disciplinary nature of NARU itself. Student research is supported wherever possible by the academics at NARU and by the Unit's administrative contingent. Like many other centres at the ANU in Canberra, NARU regularly publishes academic research which has particular relevance to the Unit's work.

NARU's close alignments with the main campus of The Australian National University are extended not only through the coterie of research networks but through civic outreach activities. Civic outreach is important to every tertiary institution but perhaps, because of the distance – including the distance between the political culture of the north and the Canberra culture – between the ANU in Canberra and NARU, there is an added imperative to keep all channels open.

Guidelines for contributors

Papers should not exceed ten thousand words. The Harvard system of referencing is recommended, and footnotes rather than endnotes are preferable. The styling method of this paper can be used as a guide. Authors are requested to send three copies of their paper and one copy on disk; please include an abstract and short profile of the author.

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Abstract

Encounters between Aboriginal and other Australians too often create
discomfort despite good will on both sides. A few examples of such
encounters are presented and these raise the question of how common cross
cultural communication problems can be avoided.

Despite observations by a number of scholars on communication
problems in Aboriginal Australia (eg Eades, Harris, Liberman) there is no
unifying explanatory model. Two intersecting sets of variables are posited:
dyadic vs communal; continuous vs contained. Anglo Australia is dyadic
and contained in typical conversational interaction while Aboriginal
Australia is communal and continuous. Put briefly the first set of variables
concerns the relationship between participants. In Anglo Australian
interactions there is an ideology of talking in twos in which talk is directed
to a particular individual, people should face each other, eye contact is
important, and perhaps most importantly control is in the hands of the
speaker. By contrast the relationship among participants in Aboriginal
Australia is communal: talk is not directed to a particular individual; it is
'broadcast', people need not face each other and often don't, eye contact is
less important, and control is in the hands of the hearer. The other crucial
factor in characterising talk is how the communication channel is used. The
strong tendency in Aboriginal conversations is to turn the communication
channel (talk) on and leave it on; it is continuous. By contrast Anglo
conversation is contained: talk is packaged into discontinuous bits.

The model has considerable explanatory power: accounting for the
differential acceptance of new communication channels (literacy, telephones
and television) and the differences between the two groups in public
meetings, educational settings and conflict resolution. However, while the
model may help to explain some of the problems in communication it
should only be thought of as one step in the direction of further, much
needed research.

Cross cultural communication problems in Aboriginal Australia

Michael Walsh

If you had asked me some time ago whether I would be talking about this sort of topic I probably would have said not in a million years. It really all began one day about ten years ago at Wadeye (also known as Port Keats) down the coast from here on a particular day when there was an air of excitement around town. The rock group Midnight Oil was coming to town. So the group and its entourage flew in during the afternoon and set up several truck loads of speakers and general paraphernalia associated with staging a concert in a bush setting. Then around about dusk when the wet canteen had opened some of the rock group came over to meet some of the local citizens. While a number of us were sitting on the ground having a can of beer the lead singer, Peter Garrett, being a friendly sort of bloke, approached us, leaned over, put his hand out and said 'Hi, I'm Peter Garrett, what's your name?' with a laser beam glance at an Aboriginal man who had been sitting there contentedly but was now cringing, trying to move away, perhaps even hoping the ground would open up underneath him.

But there is quite a lot of a pressure in our culture, in the Anglo-Australian culture at least, to respond in some way or other. The unfortunate fellow did stumble out what his name was and shook hands with Peter

Garrett but appeared acutely uncomfortable about it.[1] I looked across at an anthropologist who had worked in that same community for quite some years and caught his eye. We looked at each other and were both thinking how unfortunate this encounter had been. The Aboriginal man was not shy, inarticulate or unfriendly. Indeed at one time he had held a position in the community which required him to act quite frequently as part of the interface between a bush community and the fairly constant stream of non-Aboriginal visitors to that community. He had travelled to some of the major cities down south and had even been to Rome where he met the Pope. On the other side of the equation, Peter Garrett had travelled widely in outback Australia and visited many Aboriginal communities. We could be confident that he had no intention to intimidate this man or to make him feel uncomfortable in any way. So what had gone wrong? It was obvious that the anthropologist and I had some kind of shared understanding which made us immediately aware that there had been some kind of cross cultural communication problem. It struck me that this sort of shared experience we had was something that plenty of people that have worked in Aboriginal Australia come to acquire after a time. It also seemed clear that this knowledge acquired by experience was largely implicit. What was needed was to have a more explicit understanding of cross cultural communication problems.[2]

The encounter I have just described points to what Michael Agar, a specialist in the study of cross cultural communication, calls 'rich points':

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[1] This account should not be thought of as reflecting badly on Peter Garrett. On the contrary he has been a most sympathetic spokesperson on Aboriginal issues for many years. The point is precisely that someone with as much good will as this could participate in this situation of communicative discomfort. Nor do I draw any smug satisfaction from being the 'clever' observer of such events: many of us who have spent long periods working in Aboriginal settings can recall incidents that make us cringe with embarassment over our ineptitude. It is not a matter of attributing blame on either side but of seeing to what extent such communicative discomfort can be avoided.

[2] I acknowledge that there has been a good deal of previous work on cross cultural communication problems. Without attempting to be exhaustive I can mention the work of Stephen Harris (for instance in the Milingimbi area) (eg Harris 1977, 1980, 1990; Harris & Harris 1988); Cliff Goddard, Jean Harkins and Ken Liberman working in Central Australia (Goddard 1985; Harkins 1994; Liberman 1985); Diana Eades looking at the greater Brisbane area in southeast Queensland (eg Eades 1982, 1983, 1985, 1988, 1991). Von Sturmer's paper 'Talking with Aborigines' (1981) remains essential reading in this field.

When a rich point occurs, an ethnographer learns that his or her assumptions about how the world works, usually implicit and out of awareness, are inadequate to understand something that happened. A gap, a distance between two worlds has just surfaced in the details of human activity. Rich points, the words and actions that signal those gaps, are the unit of data for ethnographers, for it is this distance between two worlds of experience that is exactly the problem that ethnographic research is designed to locate and resolve. ... The rich point, you assume, isn't their problem; it's your problem. The rich point doesn't mean that they're irrational or disorganised; it means that you're not yet competent to understand it. There is, you assume, a point of view, a way of thinking of and acting, a context for the action, in terms of which the rich point makes sense. Your job, as an ethnographer, is to find out what it is, model it in some way, and check the model out in the subsequent words and actions of the group (Agar 1995: 587).

As Agar points out, the tendency is to find fault with the other culture rather than to utilise initially problematic encounters or points of difference so as to better understand the other culture and thereby to open up improved communication with it.

In this paper I have set myself three tasks. Firstly I want to present you with a number of instances of what I regard as fairly common communication problems between Aboriginal and other Australians. I then want to propose a framework which will explain why some of these particular problems occur. And thirdly I want to consider the implications of this framework.

1. Some examples of communication problems that I have experienced

'Delayed' reaction

The first of them is what I refer to as 'delayed' reaction. I put the word, 'delayed', in 'scare marks' (inverted commas) because it is only 'delayed' from an Anglo[3] perspective. As Agar has suggested we should expect an

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[3] I will adopt the abbreviation, 'Anglo', to refer to non-Aborigines, and in so doing I will really be referring to members of the Anglo White Middle Class. I make no apologies for restricting the group in this way: for better or worse it is the group that has come to exercise a major influence, perhaps, the greatest influence, on remote Aboriginal communities and, as a member of it, it is the group I am most familiar with.

internal logic or patterning in another culture which, for all its initial strangeness, should be respected in its own terms rather than being looked at as deficient compared to one's home culture.

Linguists are prone to hang around eliciting all sorts of strange information. They might ask: 'That frog over there. What is the name for that one? That tree that the frog is in, what do you call that?' Numerous questions are asked. And sometimes the answer does not come back as fast as you might expect. Indeed, often no answer comes back at all. So imagine a situation where I am asking: 'That green frog over there in the tree, have you got a name for that one?' pointing to a tree and pointing to a real frog that is right there – in front of us. What happens? Not only does the person not give me the answer. He looks away. There is no response whatsoever. There is just complete silence. Perhaps I have first asked that question on a Tuesday. When I am down at the camp again on Wednesday of the following week back comes the answer. The man says: 'That one, that green one there, we call that one durket.'[4] When he says this without any kind of explicit linkage to the previous questioning session, it is already over a week. So I ask: 'What *is* this green one?' Perhaps wondering whether I am a little slow, he says: 'You know, in the tree.' And I wonder if he is referring to a leaf. 'No, green one, in the tree, durket.' Eventually it dawns on me that he is referring to the green frog that I asked about over a week ago. It must have been with some relief that my Aboriginal helper felt that we could now move on. So this is what I am calling a 'delayed' reaction. From the perspective of the Aboriginal speaker there does not seem to be any particular delay at all. It is from the perspective of the Anglo speaker that there is a 'delay'. This is the first example of a gap between two worlds: a rich point.

Is this so-called 'delayed' reaction an isolated phenomenon? Far from it. I have spoken to plenty of people who have worked in Aboriginal Australia over the years and in fact nearly all of them agree that exactly the same thing has happened to them. And I have found that it need not just be a week. In some instances the answer might come back several years later but

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[4] The example is taken from Murrinhpatha, the language most widely spoken at Wadeye. The spelling follows the orthography adopted by Chester and Lyn Street who have carried out years of detailed research on the language, as evidenced by a dictionary (Street 1983), a description of the language and culture (Street 1987) and there is an on-line Murrinh-Patha vocabulary by Chester & Lyn Street (November 1989).

not with any explicit linkage to the original question. Quite puzzling for the Anglo, but apparently not at all puzzling for the Aboriginal person.

Why wouldn't Aboriginal people say hello to me? – mostly

The second example of a communication problem relates to why Aboriginal people failed to say hello to me – mostly. As a naive and earnest newcomer to Aboriginal Australia I thought it would be good to get to know people by learning how to say 'hello' – one of these silly questions that linguists sometimes ask. I was persistent enough in my questioning that I eventually got an answer. In retrospect I realise that the people might have been reluctant to give me an answer because there is no direct translation equivalent of 'hello'. But having got my answer, as I walked around the camps I would try to catch someone's eye and say ngarra-nu which, to my understanding, was the local Aboriginal equivalent for 'hello'. Rather than responding in kind most of the time people simply ignored me. Nor did they make eye contact with me. I started to wonder: is there something the matter with me? Have I mispronounced it? Have I made some kind of dreadful mistake where my mispronouncing of the word has coincided with something which was swearing? Just occasionally I would say ngarra-nu and the person would say ngarra-nu straight back to me. So I would think: 'Right, I must have got it correct that time. But why didn't it work all the other times?' That is the second question that puzzled me.

'Aberrant' behaviour in the courtroom

The third example arose in a more recent context – in one part of the Kenbi Land Claim. Like other land claims conducted under the terms of the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976*, the Aboriginal people find themselves having to demonstrate their traditional knowledge about the land under claim. They appear before the Aboriginal Land Commissioner and are questioned by lawyers representing their own interests (in this case, engaged by the Northern Land Council) as well as a variety of other lawyers representing other interests, such as the Northern Territory Government. Although the process has much in common with a courtroom setting one might find in a major population centre, it is often more informal than that. For example, part of the hearing process involves all the interested parties going to places within the claim area and taking evidence *in situ*. All these proceedings are tape recorded and a written

transcript is later produced so it is essential that particular witnesses have a microphone right in front of them. Aboriginal witnesses are called to the microphone where they are asked all sorts of questions about their relationship to land, the names of places that have spiritual significance, and so on.

The 'aberrant' behaviour happened in the early part of these proceedings when a barrister asked a question of a particular Aboriginal witness. While the witness at the front of the room in front of the judge had the microphone in his hand, from the back of the room came the answer from some other Aboriginal person. The barristers were quite taken aback. Not the barristers representing the Aboriginal claimants, but the ones representing other interest groups indicated that this was not the way to run an appropriate court. The courtroom setting was relatively relaxed and the rules of court procedure less formal. Indeed some of these proceedings were not in fact taking place in a room but out bush. Even so the judge was moved to say:

> I do not think taking evidence ought to be conducted as a public meeting and if the evidence is to be meaningful at all it ought to be precise and attributed to people who are witnesses (Australia, Aboriginal Land Commissioner 1989, 149).

One might wonder why it was that the particular Aboriginal witness that was being questioned had the question answered for him by someone at the back of the room. Interestingly this did not seem to be at issue for the Aboriginal people present. If anything, they were curious over what all the fuss was about. Their puzzlement did not diminish when many Aboriginal witnesses had to be asked the same question in turn. This approach satisfied the conventions of the hearing but seemed quite strange to the Aboriginal people involved. Once again what is 'aberrant' for Anglos need not be for Aboriginal people.

2. A framework for characterising interaction

I believe these three examples of cross-cultural communication problems can be explained in terms of a framework for characterising different styles of interaction. This framework consists of two sets of variables: one of them has to do with the nature of the participant relations (essentially, who is talking to whom) while the other set of variables concerns the use of the communication channel.

What I would claim is that within Anglo ways of talking, the participant relations are essentially dyadic in nature. By that I mean that there is an ideology of talking in twos. I use the term ideology because it is as if you were talking in twos. You need not be literally talking in twos – in a one-on-one pair. Consider, for example, the participant relations in a seminar. It is regarded as part of a relatively successful presentation if the people in the audience feel as though they are individually being addressed. As a result there are certain techniques that are adopted. You should direct your talk to particular individuals, establish eye contact with people around the room rather than doing as some lecturers at universities do, which is to focus their gaze on the fire alarm at the back of the room, or perhaps a painting on the wall, and talk as though to no-one in particular. This is regarded as very bad form. Why? Because I would claim Anglo talk is essentially dyadic. In that way of speaking, talk is directed to a particular individual. People should face each other. That is the way seminar rooms tend to be set up, with the chairs all facing the person who is doing the talking, because eye contact is important. It is just one example of how the built environment reflects habitual patterns of communication.

Silence is to be avoided in a dyadic style of communication. This contrasts with what you might call a companionable silence – something that is not uncommon among Aboriginal people.[5] Anglos, at least initially, tend to feel uncomfortable in a situation like this – thinking that the silence has gone on too long. What exactly is a long time? In a seminar this could be demonstrated by simply stopping the flow of talk for 30 seconds. People would get really shifty after 30 seconds, I assure you. I have tried this on audiences and they absolutely hate it.

In a dyadic style of communication control of the flow of talk is essentially in the hands of the speaker. In a seminar the presenter is the one who does the talking, who directs it towards particular individuals, who is in control. And there are all sorts of consequences that flow from that. For instance, there is a vast literature on conversational analysis for Anglo culture which has to do with things like turntaking. If you think of interviews or various kinds of other interchanges, people are constantly trying to get the floor and be the one who is in control. It is not regarded as a

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[5]   This has been noted by various other people like Harris (1980, 1984).

good idea for two people to be talking at once. Nor is it regarded as a good idea for long periods of silence to be there.

On the other hand, Aboriginal styles of communication are what I would refer to as communal. Talk is broadcast and need not be directed to a particular individual.[6] In this communal style people need not face each other. Eye contact is not so important, silence need not be avoided and control is essentially in the hands of the hearer. To summarise we can compare dyadic and communal styles in this way:

dyadic   an ideology of talking in twos
                    talk is directed to a particular individual
                    people should face each other
                    eye contact is important
                    'long' periods of silence should be avoided
                    control by the speaker

communal   talk is broadcast
                    people need not face each other
                    eye contact not important
                    'long' periods of silence need not be avoided
                    control by the hearer

Cross-cutting that first set of variables is a second set of variables. In the first set, which relates to participant relations, we have the distinction between dyadic or 'talking in twos' and the communal or broadcast variety. The second set of distinctions concerns the way in which the communication channel is modulated: how it flows. In my view there is a fundamental contrast between a continuous style of communication and a contained one. In Aboriginal discourse I would claim that the communication channel is turned on and is left on. The communication channel is open continuously. Members of the group can tune in and tune out of this ongoing and continuous communication at will. By contrast, in the Anglos' contained style of interaction, talk is packaged into discontinuous bits. A seminar has

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[6] This is something that Paul Black has drawn attention to in a more restricted sort of context (1993). There is a sort of style of speaking in Aboriginal Australia that is sometimes nicknamed as 'preaching' which has this element of broadcast quality to it. I'm using the term in a more general way here.

to finish within a set time. There is no inherent reason why it has to finish then: it is just the way seminars tend to work in Anglo culture. Even if I can comfortably talk about my chosen seminar topic for three hours, this culture – in a sense – will not allow it. The tendency in Anglo culture is to chop talk into discontinuous bits. So the communication channel is switched off in a relatively explicit way and this can be marked by particular discourse strategies. Even if it is not true we might say to each other: 'I can't talk to you now', 'I've got to go now', or 'We'll talk about this later'. The truncation of talk is quite explicit. To end a flow of talk simply by walking away without any kind of announcement requires explanation: is the person ill, angry, deranged or what? These two sets of variables can be seen as cross-cutting:

Table 1

	Continuous	**Contained**
Dyadic	Extreme Intimacy	Low Remoteness English
Communal	Low Intimacy Any (?) Aboriginal Language	Extreme Remoteness

In one cell we have the dyadic and contained interactional style characteristic of Anglos and the language is English. In another cell we have the continuous communal style which includes at least some Aboriginal languages, maybe all Aboriginal languages. My suspicion is that the other two cells refer to patterns of communication that are not really sustainable – at least by 'normal' people. The two kinds of communication style that are viable are at opposite extremes of the range of combinatory possibilities.

Let me try to demonstrate the extent of the contrast in an actual situation. If one goes to an Aboriginal camp what you will find is people doing some things that Anglos will find weird. Not only are people not facing each other, they seem to throw bits of talk out to no-one in particular. Someone might be sitting behind a shed yelling things out while other people occasionally throw remarks back in what appears to be a relatively random way. But this behaviour is not random or 'weird' when considered in terms of the framework I am proposing. In a communal and continuous style where control is in the hands of the hearer, from time to time people will

tune in to this continuous stream of talk and perhaps throw in some remarks if they feel like it. But there is no compulsion to participate. Why? Because talk is not being directed towards any particular individual. It is just being broadcast.

Why should such a fundamentally different style of interaction arise? I would suggest that one reason is to do with built environment. In an Anglo way of doing things, if you want to discontinue a flow of talk, you can do it by saying explicitly: 'I don't want to talk to you now. I've got other things to do'. And you can go into your office, if you've got one, and close the door. But if you are in a culture where there are no doors and there might not even be any rooms, then you have a problem. The flow of talk is going on all around you from dawn till dusk. Life is – for the most part – lived in full public view not just from dawn to dusk but from birth to death. Solitude is rare in Aboriginal Australia and not something that people usually seek.

The only way of having some kind of control over this continuous flow of talk is to choose to tune out and tune in. In somewhat the same way some Anglos interact with a radio program. They might have the radio going in the background in their study while working and when they are interested in some particular part of it they will 'tune in' and actively listen to it. And perhaps respond to it in some way. Not by talking to the radio of course but in the sense of tuning in to that particular bit of discourse that is unfolding. They might be moved to contact the radio station by phone or letter or perhaps refer later in some conversation to the segment that excited their interest. In this kind of way they have moved a portion of what had been background talk into the foreground of their attention.[7]

I believe it is through these fundamental distinctions I am making that one can make sense of behaviour that otherwise appears bizarre. There is one kind of interactional style which is communal and continuous and one that is dyadic and contained. They sit at opposite ends of the spectrum and are fundamentally different.

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[7] Diana Eades has also drawn attention to the way that privacy is negotiated in Aboriginal settings.

3. Implications/consequences

The framework in relation to communication channels

Although the framework has been developed to explain one particular communication channel (talk), it seems to be applicable to other communication channels,[8] particularly those that are newly introduced.

Table 2

Channel	STYLE	
	Dyadic and Contained	Communal and Continuous
2-way radio	YES	NO
broadcast radio	OK	OK
television	OK	OK
telephone	YES	NO/?OK
conference telephone	?OK	YES
personal letter	YES	?OK
newsletter	OK/?YES	YES
novel	YES	NO
performed play	YES	YES? OK
read play	?YES	NO

where 'OK' indicates that the communication channel is 'neutral'

Let us first consider telephones. Particularly in remoter parts of Aboriginal Australia regular access to telephones is quite recent. At Wadeye, for instance, telephones only became readily available during the 1980s; before that radio telephones were used. Even for someone like myself who first encountered Aboriginal people in outback Australia 25 years ago there have been instances where the Aboriginal use of telephones has seemed strange. An ordinary telephone tends to impose a dyadic and contained style of interaction: dyadic because you have one person on one end of the phone, and one person on the other, and contained because eventually you put the

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[8] Only some communication channels have been considered here; see Walsh 1991 for further elaboration.

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phone down and chop off the flow of talk. On the other hand, in my experience at least, conference telephones tend to be more favoured by Aboriginal people – precisely because they are communal and potentially continuous. Many Anglos have quite strong views about communal telephones: they hate them. Their views are so strong they may even become somewhat irrational about them. For instance they might say they do not like conference telephones because you can not see the person you are talking to. A moment's thought will tell anyone that with a normal telephone you can not see the person you are talking to either! Of course it is not a matter of whether they can see the person or not, it is really a matter of that direct dyadic link between one person and another. In a conference telephone call that link tends to be lost. In a standard telephone call it tends to be maintained.

So how do Aboriginal people tend to use (standard) telephones when they are not used to them? Not surprisingly they tend to use them in a way that is most consistent with their interactional style. In other words they behave exactly like what you would expect. Think of someone ringing up perhaps from Sydney to a remote bush community. In the bush community the phone has been picked up but there is silence – a long silence. Back in Sydney you wait and wait and eventually ask: 'Are you there, mate?' There is another very long silence until a rather aggrieved response comes through: 'Yeah, I'm here'. The response is aggrieved because the Aboriginal person at the other end of the line wonders why it is necessary to state the obvious: of course someone is there – ever since the phone was picked up! And then there is a lapse into silence again. While this telephone encounter might seem strange to an Anglo it seems to me that it is quite predictable in terms of the communal and continuous style. Long periods of silence make perfectly good sense as far as the Aboriginal person is concerned. As far as I am concerned as an Anglo the telephone bill is mounting up. I do not regard the telephone as an appropriate medium for companionable silence. One tends to think: 'Let's get on with it. If we are going to talk then let's talk, otherwise we should both hang up'. From the Anglo perspective this makes sense because their interactional style is contained. From the other perspective, communication should be seen as essentially ongoing so it is not so surprising to see a telephone receiver dangling on its line in the call box on a bush community. Again it should come as no surprise that it tends to be an Anglo who feels compelled to put it back on the hook.

Televisions are used differently according to one's predominant interactional style. In Table 2 'OK' indicates that the communication channel is neutral. If you happen to have a dyadic-contained interactional style then you will tend to use a television set in that way. An individual will face the television, turn the button on when he or she wants to watch it and when they have finished they will turn it off. For those imbued with a particular interactional style this seems so natural that it hardly seems worthy of comment. Contrast this with the way television sets are often used in Aboriginal communities. The television is just left on continuously and often enough there is apparently no-one watching it. The TV set's output is being broadcast, it is not directed towards any particular individual and it is left on continuously because that is the style of interaction the people using it tend to have. Not surprisingly Anglos find this kind of behaviour rather strange and may remark that it shows that Aboriginal people do not know how to use this medium 'correctly'. So both groups use the medium in a way that is consistent with their interactional style. It is not a matter of being right or wrong; it is a matter of doing things differently – not randomly or capriciously but in a principled way.

The framework in relation to communication situations

I believe this framework can also explain why it is that different groups behave quite differently in a given communication situation.[9]

Let us start by looking at the courtroom situation. Courtrooms in Anglo culture must be one of the most controlled form of talk one can encounter. There is a strict hierarchy with the judge at the top, the barristers somewhere in between and the witnesses further down the line. When I mentioned earlier that the judge was prompted to say 'This is not a public meeting' that was because a courtroom – perhaps more so than other situations – adopts a dyadic and contained procedure. In the courtroom situation talk is essentially one-on-one: one witness and one questioner. Even interjections are strictly controlled: the judge has the right to 'interrupt' at pretty well any time; the barristers may interject within defined limits which are largely determined by the judge and the witnesses have almost no options at all. The situation is also quite contained: it is chopped up into discontinuous bits in

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[9] Only some communication situations will be considered here; see Walsh 1991 for further elaboration.

ways that newcomers might find bizarre. Even if a witness is only part way through a 'narrative' it will be not uncommon to call a recess whether it is to discuss a legal point or to have a cup of tea. In a land claim hearing, that rather specialised legal setting, a lot of the people involved are Aboriginals. Of course most of them are more comfortable with a communal and continuous style of interaction and tend to feel somewhat bemused, bothered and annoyed at times by the strange way that Anglos go about things. Sometimes an Aboriginal person will volunteer information without being asked. And someone who you think would want to know, perhaps a lawyer or anthropologist, will say: 'You will have to say that later. The tape recorder is not on. And you don't have the microphone.' This may seem like a funny way of doing things to the Aboriginal person concerned. But it is perfectly understandable in terms of a highly constrained dyadic and contained communicative style.

Table 3

| | STYLE | |
Communication Situation	Dyadic and Contained	Communal and Continuous
public meeting	OK	OK
courtroom	YES	NO
classroom	YES	NO
traditional education	NO	YES
service encounter	YES	NO
doctor-patient	YES	NO
hospital-patient	YES	?OK
caregiver-child	OK/YES	OK/YES
researcher-consultant	YES	?NO

The classroom setting provides a contrastive arena for the two interactional styles. In a sense a seminar is one form of a classroom setting. The expectation is that I, the speaker, am in control. If everyone starts talking at once I am likely to get fairly annoyed and the chair of the session might be expected to jump up and protect me. Even if they are largely implicit there are certain rules about the way to run a seminar appropriately. The same

applies to a classroom setting in a school. Some Aboriginal children who are not used to the rules, unintentionally create difficulties for Anglo teachers. What they fail to do is answer questions that are directed towards them as an individual. So if I ask: 'Kathy, what is the capital of Latvia?' In a dyadic and contained style of interaction you simply have no choice but to respond. You can say: 'Michael, that's a stupid question', in other words a comment on the nature of the question, but only if the power relations are right; you can say: 'I don't know'; you can respond with an answer which might be right or wrong, but you are simply not allowed to ignore it. What tends to happen in some Aboriginal classroom settings is the child is asked a direct question and feels pretty uncomfortable about it and simply does not answer. This is perfectly acceptable in terms of a communal and continuous style of interaction but a bit hard for the Anglo teacher to take. The child is made to feel uncomfortable and the teacher wonders what is the problem.

In traditional Aboriginal education by contrast, as you might expect, the way that children are instructed tends to be communal and continuous. There is no set period where we will do bush craft or some area of the curriculum from 10.10 until 10.30 and then have morning tea. Rather the instruction tends to have no particular beginning and no particular end and is not really directed towards any particular Aboriginal child. Indeed a lot of time the Aboriginal children do not appear to be listening. They may be sitting in a ring turned away from the Aboriginal person 'instructing' them or engaged in some joint activity some distance off. But somehow or other these kids seem to know a lot about bush craft, despite the fact that they have not been taught in a dyadic and contained style. Once again it is not a matter of there being one, 'correct', method of instruction. So Anglo teachers need to be aware that there are different modes of instruction and one is more consistent with the children's socialisation prior to formal education.[10]

Public meetings are another instance of a communication situation that will unfold differently according to the predominating interactive style. In Table 3 'OK' is used to indicate that a public meeting format will adapt to the interactive style. In an Anglo public meeting you tend to have a series of speakers who get up and say their piece. If there is conflict it will often be directed towards a particular individual. In an Aboriginal setting a public

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[10] For a detailed examination see Coombs, Brandl and Snowdon (1983).

meeting can appear rather disorganised from an Anglo perspective. Sometimes it appears as though a lot of the Aboriginal people are not listening to what is going on. I have been to meetings where a ring of people, some of them with their backs to the main speaker, are playing cards while the meeting is going on. Anglos who watch this sort of thing tend to get very insulted and feel that they are being ignored. And the meeting might not have a string of speakers making their statements one after the other. If there is conflict it is rare for it to be directed towards a particular individual – at least in an explicit way.[11]

Applicability

It is reasonable to ask how widespread is this phenomenon. My research and observations draw mainly on my experience in northern Australia, particularly in the Top End of the Northern Territory. I feel fairly confident that the proposed framework is applicable to most of Aboriginal Australia. If we consider cultural comparisons like those of Hughes and Andrews (1988)[12] (see also Hughes 1988) here are the features most relevant to language and interaction:

Table 4

Aboriginal society	non-Aboriginal society
personal lifestyle	impersonal lifestyle
hard to understand an 'impersonal' person	people would rather be alone
basically listeners	basically verbalisers
do not speak unless it is important	think out loud, must speak
illiterate	literate
use symbolic language	use books, and very verbal
little eye contact	lots of eye contact
is impolite to do so	is impolite not to do so
indirect in questioning	direct questions
talk around the point	very much to the point

(adapted from Keeffe *From the Centre to the City* (1992: 99))

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[11] I am very much aware that I have only scratched the surface of this complex issue. See Sullivan (1996, especially p.105) for a very insightful account.

[12] Having said that I am well aware that it is rather glib to make pronouncements like this. See Keeffe (1992, 100–101) for some corrective remarks.

As with many such comparisons there are points of difference which are consistent with my proposed model. After presenting versions of this talk in a number of settings in a number of places and getting feedback from Anglos as well as from Aboriginal people, the framework seems to ring true for many people. The applicability is not confined to bush settings. Diana Eades, for instance, has worked for many years among Aboriginals in the more settled areas of Queensland (in the south east) and has told me that some of these ideas that I am putting forward seem to hold true for Aboriginal people who live in the greater Brisbane area. On the surface it might seem that such people have a relatively Anglo lifestyle. Some of them have houses in the suburbs, drive cars and their children go on to higher education. However Eades argues that they have a distinctive use of English which prompted her to entitle her PhD thesis (1983) 'English as an Aboriginal language'.

'English as an Aboriginal language'

So we can ask: what happens when Anglos move in and take over Aboriginal areas as they have done in Brisbane and indeed in Darwin? Do these interactional styles essentially whither away and die? I suspect that a distinctive interactional style may well be the last thing to survive from Aboriginal languages after nearly all the vocabulary and the details of the grammar are lost. In other words we are not talking about an Aboriginal language in an ancestral sense but rather something that is – at a superficial level – exactly the same as standard Australian English or something fairly close to it. But this English is presented in a fundamentally different way, a communal and continuous way versus a dyadic and contained way. That does not mean you have to change the vocabulary or grammar. It just means that you have got to know how to talk properly (see also Eades 1982, 1988; Harkins 1994). So that raises another question. If Anglos are going to learn to communicate better with Aboriginal people, should they learn an indigenous language or should they learn how to talk in the sense of just learning how to talk English in an Aboriginal way?

Applicability outside Australia

There is some preliminary evidence that the framework may be applicable in settings outside Australia. In the Americas people who have worked with Native American groups like the Navajo have told me that what I have

described for Aboriginal Australia seems to fit fairly well with what they
have experienced. One researcher who has worked in Brazil for some years
informs me that the framework is quite applicable to what he has
experienced among southern Brazilian Indian groups. It has yet to be
established just how widely applicable the framework might be. One
possibility is that a communal and continuous interactional style may suit
any culture in which the built environment is minimal and/or where people
live in very close proximity.

Text and discourse

Another issue that I might raise has to do with text and discourse. If the
framework is an accurate representation then it would predict that text or
discourse in Aboriginal Australia would be communal and continuous. What
that would mean is the text or discourse would not be directed towards a
particular individual. Anglo texts, on the other hand, you would expect to be
directed towards particular individuals. In eighteenth century novels the
author would address his/her audience directly as: dear reader. This is
consistent with a one-on-one, dyadic style of unfolding a text. Not such a lot
of work has been done on Aboriginal text and discourse but one might
predict that it would be communal and continuous. This would have
consequences if you are teaching Aboriginal children the new medium of
literacy. As an Anglo one might feel that there is only one way the text can
unfold – the Anglo way. But if there is another, fundamentally different
pattern of textual development then those Aboriginal children may feel more
comfortable starting with what is familiar before they move over to a second
kind of discourse style.

(Written) text and (spoken) discourse

If the framework is an accurate representation then it would predict that text
and discourse in Aboriginal Australia would be communal and continuous.
In terms of a communal style this would mean that the text/discourse would
not be directed to a particular individual. It would be broadcast. Contrast
this with the varying degrees of directedness that we find in Anglo
text/discourse. At one time it was not uncommon to find an author directly
addressing an unseen and unknown public through such devices as 'gentle
reader'. Or one might address a child at bedtime: 'I'm going to tell you a
story – the story of the Three Bears'. In my experience of Aboriginal

Australia[13] the usual way to start is: 'I'm going to tell a story'. It is not that the Aboriginal language lacks a way of directing the telling to an expected audience; it just happens that there is no directedness and I would suggest that this is what the framework of interactional styles would predict.

One might also expect that the linkages between parts of a text/discourse would not be so clearly marked. We saw this in the example of 'delayed reaction' in a conversational exchange. In a narrative what you tend to find is that on a particular occasion you hear what amounts to a fragment of a much larger whole. The difference with the Aboriginal way of story-telling is that the links between episodes are much less explicit. In the Anglo way of story-telling the links will be made quite explicit: In last week's episode ...; The story so far: ... .

Consultation, negotiation and interaction

Another implication has to do with all that consultation, negotiation and meetings that Aboriginal people have to put up with from Anglos. I have been a witness to plenty of these meetings. Consider a hypothetical situation, for instance, where an Anglo flies down to a bush community in the morning, gets up and gives a speech, gets towards the end of the meeting and aims to reach some kind of closure and says 'Right, so I've discussed this idea of building a new basketball court. Is everyone agreed?' He waits expectantly and perhaps a little impatiently – only 20 minutes before the plane is to fly out – until a few people say 'Yo.' Now that does not mean that they actually agree. It really just means 'I'm still listening'. In their talk, as well as in Anglo talk, you use words like 'Yes', 'OK', 'uh-huh' merely to indicate that you are still tuned in. It is not to say: 'Yes, I agree with everything you have said'. It is simply to be polite – in some sense. Having got unanimous approval, the official then flies back to Darwin and in due course, not a basketball court is put in but perhaps a swimming pool because of some typing error or a shambles in the paperwork at Head Office. And then the local people wonder what it is all about: 'Not only did we not agree to a swimming pool but we didn't agree to a basketball court either' and the person responsible for the consultation says: 'But I got unanimous agreement'. While this may be hypothetical I have encountered plenty of comparable breakdowns in communication. In a communication style that is

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[13] More specifically, this is what I have observed for Murrinhpatha.

communal and continuous it is going to be necessary to make some kind of adaptation if negotiations, consultations and meetings are going to work more effectively.

Using new technology

One might wonder whether Aboriginal people have 'problems' due to a lack of understanding how modern technology works. Recall the examples earlier of a television set being turned on and left on and of telephones being 'misused'. I think it is important that we reject the idea of Aboriginal people being unable to cope with new technology. Let me give one example of why I think this way. Some time back in Central Australia some Aboriginal people were being taught how to use videos.[14] After they had learned how to work the equipment they went off and did some videoing. When some of the Anglos looked at what they produced they felt the Aboriginal people still needed more training: 'It is a good start but you need a bit of work on it. Maybe do some close-ups; we can't see people's faces'. The Aboriginal people had been taking lots of shots from a distance and there was a lot of footage of people's feet. It went back and forth between the students and the instructors until the Aborigines said: 'Look we understand what you're getting at and we know how to use the camera but this is the way we want to do it'. Now if you think of it in terms of the framework it makes perfectly good sense. The last thing you want to do is a close-up of someone's face: it is being too direct and therefore rather impolite. Just as Aboriginal people sometimes complain about newcomers 'staring too much' it would be inappropriate for the camera to 'stare' at them. But their feet will tell you lots about what is going on. You can identify who's who without being impolite and the shots of people in the distance are acceptable as well. So I am inclined to think Aboriginal people often have got a very good understanding of the technology but they just choose to use it in a different way.

Some cautionary notes

It cannot be over-emphasised that what I have been proposing is tentative and incomplete. It seems to me that the framework I am putting forward is sufficiently general that it might apply across a wide range of Aboriginal

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[14] I am grateful to David Wilkins for providing me with this example.

situations. What is now needed is for those who have a long-term familiarity with particular situations to determine whether the framework captures something of what is happening, to indicate what it fails to capture and to make suggestions for improvement. At present it takes most non-Aboriginal people going into Aboriginal communities a fairly lengthy period to work out some of these things by osmosis. By the time they have some idea of how to behave, they are on the plane heading back to some southern centre like Melbourne, perhaps never to return. Then a new lot comes in and often wonder: 'Well, what's the matter with me?' Of course the tragedy is that there is nothing the matter with them, they just do not understand what they are doing. The purpose of this paper has been to give some insights into how they might operate more effectively for the benefit not just of Aboriginal people but themselves.

To conclude, let me recall the term 'rich point' – proposed by Michael Agar to refer to those words or actions that point to a divide between two worlds:

> Rich points are easy to find. They happen when, suddenly, you don't know what's going on. ... Talk to people who produced the rich point and go out and sample their world. Nothing mysterious about that. If you work, and continue to work, with the people who initially surprised you with a rich point, the understandings that you craft, with their help, will grow more and more complicated and interesting. And when you take that new understanding and try it out in another moment of talk, their reactions will telegraph, loud and clear, whether you're on the right trail or not. When you figure out rich points, the grades come back directly, right away. The people who produced the rich points are the judges, the ones you're learning to communicate with (Agar 1994: 106–7).

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