

AVOIDING THE WRATH OF THE THUNDER BEINGS:
RESTRICTED LANGUAGE AND LAKHOTA METAPHORICAL STRUCTURE

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Metaphor gives us a way to relate abstract concepts to things in our everyday lives. What we explore in this paper are the restrictions placed on Lakhota speakers when talking about the Wakíyā, the Thunderbeings. The defining characteristic of the Wakíyā is their anger, but the Lakhota people cannot speak of this anger using the same metaphorical language that is used to describe human anger. The nature of this restriction is discussed here from the perspective of a native speaker of the language.*

Metaphor, in the Lakoffian sense, is used to structure perceived reality, to systematize and make understandable the world around us and our experiences with and within it. As Lakoff says (1987:xii), 'our bodily experience and the way we use imaginative mechanisms are central to how we construct categories to make sense of our experience.' Because so much of the Lakhota world view is structured by the individual's relationships with the Great Spirit, Wakhāthāka, and his spirit helpers, we believed that analysis of the metaphorical language used to describe the spirits would lead us to a fuller understanding of the Lakhota people and their language and culture.

This paper is the outcome of an attempt to analyze the metaphorical personification of the Thunder Beings, or Wakíyā, those of Wakhāthāka's spiritual helpers who bring rain to nourish the earth, and thunder and lightning to punish the deserving. What we discovered through our analysis of the language used by Lakhota speakers to describe the Wakíyā is that the Thunder Beings are not, strictly speaking, personified in the sense of anthropomorphism. Metaphorical expressions of anger used to describe humans, in fact, cannot be extended to the Thunder Beings. There is, instead, a network of characteristics used to describe the Wakíyā in ways that draw from the many years of oral tradition and beliefs about the Great Spirit and his helpers.

As we explored this delicate linguistic and cultural area, we encountered a phenomenon that we feel will be of interest to other field linguists, and that is the phenomenon of restricted language. Restricted language is language that cannot be used by 'mere mortals', but can be used only by a Heyoka, a person who has dreamed about the Thunder Beings and lives out the dream, thereby gaining certain powers. Since neither of us are Heyokas, we had to explore ways of working around the restricted language to make our analysis of the Wakíyā as complete as possible without violating any religious or cultural sensitivities.

We will first discuss what we call 'pressure' metaphors used to describe angry humans, then 'animal comparison' metaphors, and, finally, offer our explanation for the restrictions that exist for the merely-mortal Lakhota speaker on the use of these types of metaphors to discuss Thunder Beings.

The Thunder Beings, the Wakíyā, are winged spirits commissioned by Wakhāthāka to express his anger over the misdeeds of humanity. According to Lakhota mythology, the Wakíyā were given bright eyes and loud voices as a gift by Okaga, the South Wind, acting on behalf of the Great Spirit. The Trickster, Iktomi, jealously 'made their voices terrible and the glance of their eyes destructive' (Walker 1983:159). For this reason, the Thunder Beings generally fly around with their eyes closed, opening them only to direct the anger of Wakhāthāka at evildoers. When lightning flashes, then, it is said that the Thunder Beings have opened their eyes and sought out a target:

- (1) *Wakíyā* *tuwā* *pi.* 'It's lightning.'
 Thunder.Beings open.eyes PL

When thunder sounds, the Thunder Beings are bellowing:

- (2) *Wakíyā* *hóthū* *pi.* 'It's thundering.'
 Thunder.Beings bellow PL

The defining characteristic of the Thunder Beings is their anger. The Wakíyā come in anger from the west every spring, making their presence and their feelings known in the form of thunderstorms, with thunder, lightning, and rain as the physical manifestations of this anger. We have, therefore, chosen to focus our analysis of the personification of Thunder Beings on Lakhota expressions describing the anger of humans, of animals, and of the Wakíyā.

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The general metonymic principle that 'the physiological effects of an emotion stand for an emotion' (Lakoff 1987:382) finds expression in Lakhota metaphor much as it does in English. In English metaphorical structure, the central physiological effect of anger is that of heat as occurs in metaphorical statements of anger such as:

- (3) He got hot under the collar.
 (4) That really made my temperature rise.
 (5) She had a melt-down.
 (6) He lost his cool.

In Lakhota, the central physiological effect of anger is that of pressure rather than of heat:

- (7) *Ité na- phopi kte s'e naži.*
 face pressure pop will like stands
 'He/she is standing there like his/her face might explode.'
 (8) *Hé na- psāke.*
 he/she pressure burst
 'He blew his fuse.'

Notice the instrumental prefix *na-* meaning 'by pressure'. This prefix also occurs in descriptions of the physical manifestations of approaching thunderstorms:

- (9) *Mañipiya ki na- ġeġelya ahiyaya pi.*
 clouds the pressure dangling are.taking PL
 'They're dragging the clouds hanging down ready to burst.'
 (10) *Mañipiya ki wokhokpeya na- hokhukhuči yela yeye.*
 clouds the dangerously pressure hanging.down they.cause
 'They cause the clouds to be hanging dangerously near the ground.'

The agent of each sentence is, of course, the Thunder Beings, the 'they' subject of the causative verb. The clouds are believed by the Lakhota to be garments given to the Thunder Beings above which they fly looking for the targets of their anger. As the Thunder Beings become angrier and angrier, the clouds fill with water, like a balloon ready to burst. Finally, the anger can be contained no longer and the clouds explode as the Thunder Beings open their eyes, looking at those who have enraged them, and bellow their anger.

But, these pressure terms cannot be ascribed to the Thunder Beings themselves, as they can to humans. Seeking to explain this restriction on use of the *na-* 'pressure' prefix to describe the Thunder Beings, we thought that we had come upon a plausible explanation by following through with Lakoff's discussion of heat, anger, and pressure. The pressure metaphor 'works' in a folkloric sense if we consider the body to be a sort of container which can take only so much of that pressure. However, since the *Wakŷā* are spirits and have no body and, therefore, cannot serve as containers, it would be inappropriate to use any of these pressure metaphors. They are not like humans in that way.

Further probing for language that cannot be ascribed to the Thunder Beings led us to recognize that there are, in fact, very few metaphorical expressions of anger that can be used by the Lakhota to describe any of the spirits. We shall consider another set of anger metaphors, that of comparison of angry humans to animals.

For the Lakhota, the ability to control anger is a particularly human capacity; it is not one shared by animals. Of a human, one can say 11, 12, or 13:

- (11) *He čāzeke.* 'He/she is angry.'
 He/she angry
 (12) *He lila čāzeke.* 'He/she is very angry.'
 He/she very angry
 (13) *He čāzegzegke.* 'He/she is angry in spurts.'
 He/she very+angry

But the same cannot be said of a dog:

- (14) **šāka čāzeke.* 'The dog is angry.'
 dog angry

A dog can be made to respond in anger. However, lacking thinking ability, a dog cannot, of his own accord, get angry:

- (15) *Šaka* *ka-čāzeke.* "The dog was made angry."
dog CAUS-angry

In general, lack of control underlies the metaphors of animal comparison used by the Lakota:

- (16) *Kukūše* *s'e wote.* "He/she eats like a pig."
pig like eats
(17) *Pháht* *mnā.* "He/she smells like a porcupine."
porcupine smells

These expressions are primarily used by older women in describing children, or, in the case of the porcupine reference, non-Indians; and it is part of the child's socialization and education to realize that he or she must always be in control of how he or she acts, smells, or looks. The child learns quickly the disgrace of such animal comparisons and tries, by maintaining the required control, never to provoke such a description from his or her elders.

This lack of control is central to the animal metaphors used to describe human anger. When a person is angry, he or she can be compared to a bear (18) or a dog (19):

- (18) *Matho* *s'e čāzeke.* "He was angry like a bear."
bear like angry
(19) *Yu* *hlohlo pi.* "They growl like dogs."
CAUS growl PL

Unlike animals, the human characteristic of anger can be applied to the Thunder Beings because they are thinking beings potentially in control of their behavior. As the dark clouds gather over the people and the low rumbling of the thunder can be heard, it is clear that a storm is imminent. It is then said of the Thunder Beings:

- (20) *Wakíyā* *čāzeke pi.* "The Thunder Beings are angry."
Thunder.Beings angry PL

A more violent storm, one whose onset is accompanied by louder, more ominous thunder, indicates a greater degree of anger.

- (21) *Wakíyā* *lila čāzeke pi.* "The Thunder Beings are very angry."
Thunder.Beings very angry PL

And repeated lightning strikes indicate spurts of anger from the Thunder Beings:

- (22) *Wakíyā* *čāzegzeg pi.* "The Thunder Beings are very angry."
Thunder.Beings very+angry PL

Notice that these are the same terms used to express anger in humans, without need of use of the causative construction present when describing an angry dog.

But the Thunder Beings can never be compared in their anger to an animal by ordinary people because of the lack of spiritual control such a comparison would imply. A Heyoka, eager to show his people that he is very powerful, may challenge the Thunder Beings by using animal comparisons, but he must be willing to undergo the severe punishment that is sure to follow. People fear such spiritual jousting, not only because of the fury of the thunderstorms sometimes invoked by the Heyoka, but because the Heyoka is their intermediary who speaks to the *Wakíyā* for them. They need him and they fear for his safety when such outbursts occur.

To return to the *na-* 'pressure' instrumental prefix, interestingly, this prefix also seems to refer to the movements of animals attempting, for example, to escape from a trap. When a horse is bridled or hobbled, he kicks furiously to escape.

- (23) *Sukawakha* *na-* *gwake.* 'The horse kicks furiously.'
horse with.feet kicks

An angry person can be said to behave like the horse:

- (24) *Sukawakha* *s'e na-* *gwake.* 'He kicks like a horse.'
horse like with.feet kicks

But the same absolutely cannot be said of the Thunder Beings.

Although anger is inferred from these sentences by the Lakhota speaker, in this case, the *na-* is an instrumental prefix meaning 'with the feet', not the 'pressure' prefix encountered earlier.

The homophony of the two prefixes is a result of a historical collapse of distinction between three instrumental senses, 'with the feet', 'by heat', and 'by spontaneous action'. These three senses have distributed themselves in various ways in varying phonological forms throughout Mississippi Valley Siouan. For the Lakhota speaker, these forms have also undergone a semantic collapse, as use of the foot instrumental prefix indicates an animal who feels the pressure of anger and 'explodes' in a frenzy of kicking. As a native speaker, Violet Catches feels that the expression of anger is implicit in the use of the *na-* prefix as either the 'pressure' or the 'foot' instrumental.

Although the physical manifestations of the thunder storm can be discussed using the *na-* pressure instrumental, the anger of the Thunder Beings cannot. Use of the *na-* prefix in either sense indicates a loss of control either from built up pressure or from anger, expressed in the kicking of the feet. Such kicking of the feet is a typically animalistic behavior and, again, such language used to describe the Thunder Beings is restricted, inappropriate for mere mortals.

Finally, the anger/pressure and animal metaphors, and the restriction of the use of such metaphors to describe the Wakfyā, come together in a very interesting way. The Thunder Beings never lose control over their passions. They are not like humans in that way. And they are not like animals. Again, quoting Lakoff:

It is a very widespread metaphor in Western culture, namely, **PASSIONS ARE BEASTS INSIDE A PERSON**. According to this metaphor, there is a part of each person that is a wild animal. Civilized people are supposed to keep that part of them private, that is, they are supposed to keep the animal inside them. In the metaphor, loss of control is equivalent to the animal getting loose. And the behavior of a person who has lost control is the behavior of a wild animal ... In the case of anger, the beast presents a danger to other people (Lakoff 1987:392).

In the Lakhota culture, it is very important to believe that the spirits are always in control of their emotions. Imagine the danger if the Wakfyā indiscriminately let loose with flashes of lightning and floods of rain. They do not do this; no one is ever struck mistakenly by lightning. So the restriction on metaphors ascribed to the Thunderbeings can be explained by the linguistic nature of those metaphors as applied to humans. The defining characteristic of the Thunder Beings is their anger, but the defining characteristic of human anger in the Lakhota system is their animal-like loss of control.

Because loss of control cannot be ascribed to the Wakfyā, metaphors used to describe angry humans cannot be applied to the Thunderbeings. Mere mortals lose their tempers and behave in animalistic ways. Greater Spirits do not.

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