

THE INTERPLAY OF GREETINGS AND PROMISES: POLITICAL ENCOUNTERS BETWEEN THE WARAO AND THE NEW INDIGENOUS LEADERSHIP IN THE ORINOCO DELTA, VENEZUELA¹

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Abstract

This paper addresses the use of greetings and the importance of promises in political speeches performed by Warao and non-Warao indigenous politicians to Warao audiences in the Orinoco Delta, Venezuela. It shows that lack of promises can jeopardize the rhetorical effectiveness of their performance regardless of their use of discursive framings, such as greetings in indigenous languages, and of traditional genres of speech. Promises are important for the Warao because they link political speech with other meaningful events, especially political gift distribution. Promises create trans-semiotic links between events and index the possibility of a continuous relationship with political representatives.

Keywords: Political Discourse; Warao; Orinoco Delta.

1. Introduction

In the frequent discussions about politics among the Warao of eastern Venezuela it is common to hear them talk about promises made by government representatives. Some of these promises include: Government jobs, free motorboats, housing programs, medical assistance and inclusion in the new *Misiones* (special government programs inaugurated by President Hugo Chávez for education and community development). While listening to these discussions one also realizes that the new indigenous leaders² connected with the Venezuelan government are expected to make promises just like any other politician. Ideally, these politicians deliver what they promise and this creates the necessary conditions for good communication between them and their indigenous electorate. This cycle of promise and delivery of state resources fits the stereotype of

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² These “new indigenous leaders” are those either elected or appointed after 2000, when a new constitution and set of laws granted new political rights to indigenous peoples in Venezuela.

populist democracies in which politicians “deceive” the naïve Indian with superfluous gifts (Britto 1989; Calello 1973; Dix 1978, 1985; Hawkins 2009, 2010; Hellinger 1984; Malave 1987; Pineda 1992, 2000; See also Albro 2000; Lauer 2006 and Vidal 2002). Contrary to this stereotype, I argue that far from being passive victims of manipulation, the Warao engage in complex semiotic interpretations of these state agents’ actions. Furthermore, at the core of this semiotic interpretation is the Warao’s expectation that their relationship with the new indigenous representatives will be sustained. Therefore, any successful political speech has to make that possibility clear through the specific speech act of promising (see Austin 1962; Searle 1991).³

In this paper I propose to show how offering greetings and making promises of potential political gifts function as a first step in a trans-semiotic process (that is, the co-referential relation between semiotic events). Further, I will demonstrate that this process is subject to semiotic hazards (Keane 1997, 2007) and failure. These hazards are a consequence of what I will call the trans-semiotic gap, following Briggs and Bauman’s (1992) concept of the inter-textual gap. This gap is the distance between a genre or idealized textual form and its realization in performance. Correspondingly, the trans-semiotic gap is the lapse in space and time between promises and other indexically connected events such as gift giving. The first event is not necessarily an idealized generic form, but it produces expectations of future performances (i.e. promises set expectations of proper gift giving and vice versa). While Briggs’ and Bauman’s (1992) notion of inter-textuality refers to all aspects of the spatiotemporal relations between texts, the trans-semiotic relation refers to the relationship between semiotic events that are different in kind. As with the inter-textual gap, the gap between two semiotic events produces a slippage of meaning and impedes complete continuity between them. Therefore, this gap is the source of much contention for legitimacy, power and sincere connections between politicians and their constituents (Albro 2001).

In section 2 of this paper with Charles Briggs’ work in mind, I describe and situate various genres of political speech in the Orinoco Delta. I show the importance of the trans-semiotic process in sections 3, 6 and 7 with examples of greetings, promises and failures to make promises from three indigenous politicians addressing Warao audiences. The first example is from a speech delivered by a Ye’kuana-speaking politician in which, though the politician performed an unintelligible greeting in Ye’kuana, her transition to promises made in Spanish was effective and created the possibility for a trans-semiotic link with future acts of political gift-giving. The other two examples are from speeches delivered by Warao-speaking politicians who did not

³ Promises and other commissives have been widely studied in speech act theory since the 1960s. Recent developments in research on promising include: Boguslawski (1983), Doerge (2009); Fehlman (2005); Justin (1993); Kissine (2008); Tolhurst (1976) and Watson (2004). The development of children’s understanding of promises has been recently studied by Astington (1988a, 1988b, 1988c, 1990) and Bernicot and Laval (1996, 2004). Recent research on the relation between promises and threats include: Beller et al. (2005); Blanco Salgueiro (2010); Castelfranchi and Guerini (2007); Cornillie (2005); and Verbrugge et al. (2004). Some recent research on social contracts and promises include Coskun (2007) and Henket (1989). The study of promises and intercultural pragmatics include Egner (2006, 2002), Lorini (2000) and Schrader-Kniffki (2004). Ioratim-Uba (1999) has studied the relation between promises and political campaigns from the perspective of speech act theory. Finally, current anthropological discussion and critique of speech act theory derives from the work of Rosaldo (1982) and Duranti (1988, 1990).

make promises and failed to fulfill the audience's expectations. The lack of promises in the last two examples was so salient that it jeopardized otherwise effective discursive framings (Goffman 1974) such as greetings offered in Warao language. Greetings in indigenous languages are known to index legitimacy, authenticity and solidarity in public political performances (Ahler 2006; Graham 2002; Silverstein 2005b; Webster 2009). But, in the Orinoco Delta, if these framings are not followed by promises, political speeches are not circulated and cannot be linked to future events of other kinds.⁴ Greetings in Warao can be accepted as indexes of authenticity and solidarity but not as indexes of a commitment to a sustained relationship between politicians and the Warao. Instead, promises, whether they are made in Warao or in Spanish, are far better indexes of a politician's sustained commitment.

2. Political performance and mediation in the Orinoco Delta

Ceremonial dialogues and greetings between different ethnic groups are part of a pervasive South American tradition that places discursive exchange at the center of political mediation (e.g. Urban 1986, 1988; Riviere 1971; Sherzer 1983, 1999; Basso 1985; Briggs 1992, 1993, 1994, 1998; Hendricks 1988, 1993; Hill 1993, 1994; Graham 1993, 1995, 2002; Surralles 2003; Lizot 1994). Among the Warao, discursive mediation takes a predominant role during conflict resolution. Charles Briggs (1996) has shown the importance of the *monikata nome anaka* ceremony in which internal conflicts within the community are resolved. During these ceremonies the parties in conflict tell their version of what is going on to the *aidamo-tuma* 'elders or leaders'. Then, the leaders in charge of solving the dispute must evaluate what is being said, in other words:

...the official must make sure that good and bad words about the conflict emerge in the meeting in ways that enable him to control their production and contain their effects. His success or failure will ultimately depend upon his ability to regulate conflictual discourse that is produced and received beyond the confines of the *monikata nome anaka* (Briggs 1996: 234).

Thus, discursive mediation takes the form of a complex process in which multiple versions of an event are taken into consideration in the public space of a meeting. The role of a leader is to evaluate the dialogic process and try to impose ideological order in the dispute. This is not to say that the *monikata nome anaka* has the function of reestablishing the social order in a functionalist way, but the parts in conflict reassemble differences on the basis of particular linguistic and semiotic ideologies and regimes of truth. Briggs shows that mediation is commonly defeated by conflicting language ideologies. This process relies heavily on the deployment of multiple indexical orders, which impact the allocation of intentionality and responsibility.

⁴ Although I argue that failing to make promises makes political discourses irrelevant for establishing a relation with other semiotic events, this does not affect the discourse's poetic, phatic, and indexical effectiveness. I recognize with Jakobson (1960) the multiplicity of functions of any given utterance.

Other genres of discourse that mediate gender and power relations among the Warao are ritual wailing and gossiping. Briggs (1992, 1993, 1998, 2008) shows how gender inequalities are discursively mediated during critical events such as death. For Warao women mourning a dead relative is a period of time in which intense feelings can be let out. Women are expected to be around the corpse of their relatives remembering and chanting about them. During these periods they publicly speak their minds about their conflicts with other people and about wider community problems. Furthermore, during their wailings Warao women create inter-textual links with the words and public performances of men. During these events they not only re-circulate men's public speeches but also criticize them and are able to position their own voice in relation to masculine discursive practices.

We can see, then, that in the processes of conflict resolution and expression of public opinions certain discursive practices based on gender and linguistic ideologies mediate political life in the Orinoco Delta. Public encounters with politicians and government officials are not different in this respect. The public display of political speech requires the individual to conform to specific ideas about what a politician must accomplish with her/his speech. Rhetorical devices such as greetings and promises make political encounters fit certain performative expectations in the same way in which women's political complains fit specific genres of speech.

In the following example I present a case which places greetings and promises within broader dialogic interactions between Warao leaders and other indigenous politicians. The following performance was intended to create comprehension and solidarity between the higher spheres of the government and its indigenous constituents in the Orinoco Delta. Like the ceremonial dialogues, the discourse of mediation and the women's ritual wailing described previously, this exchange is a public political performance in which the participants position themselves and others in a risky social situation. This first example illustrates a successful use of greetings and promises and will serve as a contrast for the examples presented in sections 6 and 7.

3. Nicia Maldonado's Maximally Indexical Greeting

In February 2007, the Venezuelan Minister of Indigenous Peoples, Nicia Maldonado, addressed a Warao audience in the center of Tucupita (the capital of the Delta Amacuro State, Venezuela). Maldonado is a Ye'kuana woman from the middle Orinoco region, upriver and to the west of the Orinoco Delta. Ye'kuana politicians are among the most influential indigenous leaders in Venezuela but are geographically isolated from the lower Orinoco area where the Warao live. Maldonado was appointed Minister by President Hugo Chavez in early 2006 and was given the task of promoting the government's Misiones or special programs in indigenous communities all over the country. In her speech, she wanted to introduce what President Chavez called the "fifth revolutionary engine," also known as the "explosion of popular power" which is implemented through communal councils⁵. These communal councils are a new form of

⁵ In January 8, 2007 President Hugo Chavez announced the Simon Bolivar National Project, which included what he called five revolutionary engines: 1) Enabling laws (passed by the congress to give the president special powers over legislatures or issues of national interest); 2) Constitutional reform;

grassroots political organization intended to replace old and corrupt forms of government with new, smaller and more democratic organizations created from the bottom up.

That afternoon Maldonado addressed local authorities and members of the newly formed United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV). Most people in the audience were Warao speakers aspiring to become founders and organizers of communal councils. Also present were local political figures and National Guard officers. Maldonado's first rhetorical strategy during her speech was to use her greetings to create a connection with the audience based on the recognition of their common indigenous origins. For this purpose she used Ye'kuana (her first language) to greet the Warao audience despite the fact that they could not understand her. Ye'kuana is one of the Carib languages of southern Venezuela while Warao is an isolated language with no clear association with any South American linguistic family. Following the work of Graham (2002), I call this strategy maximally indexical because the performance had no referential meaning that any member of the audience could understand. She performed her greeting in Ye'kuana mainly to index her condition and legitimacy as an indigenous woman and political leader.

Other indigenous people in lowland South America are known to use this semiotic strategy. Perhaps the most famous of these examples are the public displays that Kayapo, Yanomami and Xavante leaders perform for national and international audiences (e.g. Graham 2002, 2005; Turner 1991a, 1991b, 1992, 1995, 2002). Generally, ethnographic accounts of these events describe the display of indexical signs of authenticity in front of non-indigenous audiences (Ramos 1998; Oakdale 2004; Graham 2002, 2005), but Maldonado's case is different. She is speaking to indigenous people who do not judge her authenticity by the same standards used by government officials, NGOs and non-indigenous political allies. She is not trying to convince a national or international community of the importance of the rainforest Indians (Conklin 1995, 1997; Conklin and Graham 1995). Rather, she is trying to create a link with a particular constituency. This display of identity emblems (Ahlers 2006; Silverstein 2003, 2005a, 2005b) is aimed at creating a consubstantial link with the new Warao leaders. She wants the Warao to feel that they are listening to a fellow Indian, someone like themselves. This is a semiotic process in which Maldonado uses her minimal knowledge of Warao and her command of Ye'kuana and Spanish.

In this sense Maldonado's greeting, like many South American ceremonial dialogues, can be conceptualized as a form of mediation between indigenous groups that are socially distant (e.g. Riviere 1971; Urban 1986). Her greeting, like traditional ceremonial dialogues, occurs between members of different indigenous communities (Ye'kuana and Warao) at the beginning of a political encounter. Yet, unlike traditional greetings, it has a second indexical link connecting Maldonado to the Venezuelan state and with the Bolivarian revolution, a national political project that has been under construction for the last decade. Her greeting is therefore not only an emblem of her Ye'kuana identity and a strategy to deal with ethnic difference, but is also an index of her condition as a leader sent directly by President Chavez.

3) Education and values; 4) A new geometry of power; 5) An explosion of popular power, especially of communal power in the form of councils.

At the speech event level this greeting showed Maldonado's effort to construct solidarity through co-authorship (Duranti 2001) since it was meant as an interaction with the audience. But she had to deal with the fact that her greeting was performed in Ye'kuana and therefore no Warao or Spanish speaker could understand it. The only Warao word that she used during this greeting was *Warao-tuma* 'warao-pl' to open her speech. This first word is recognizably Warao and she used the plural morpheme *-tuma* to refer to the whole audience and get their attention. Arguably, she uses this word to signal respect for Warao as an official language. However, not being a Warao speaker, she code-switched back to Ye'kuana. This code-switch allowed her to move to familiar ground without resorting to Spanish.

Spanish is the national language that has been imposed by missionaries and educators in the Orinoco Delta (Rodríguez 2008). It is also the most commonly used language in the country. As such, government officials are expected to use it in public events. In the course of her greeting Maldonado used Spanish only to mention place names such as *Alto Orinoco* or *Los Llanos*. She also used Spanish to say *recibí instrucción* 'I received instructions' to describe her relationship with President Chavez and her appointment as Minister.

This minimal use of Spanish and Warao prevents the audience's participation in the greeting and impedes mutual understanding. This becomes more evident after a long pause just before ending her greeting. This pause made evident that the audience needed some help understanding what they should do to complete the greeting. Then Maldonado prompted the audience by saying in Spanish, "*Tienen que decir eeh*" 'You have to say eeh' and the audience responded, their voices overlapping with Maldonado's as they say "eeeh." Maldonado then acknowledges the response in the next line, saying, "*Bien, bien,*" 'Good, good.' She ends this interaction explaining in Spanish that her greeting was performed in Ye'kuana.

4. Code switching to Spanish to make promises

After her greeting, Minister Maldonado switches to Spanish, changing not only languages but also rhetorical strategies, proceeding from an indexical display to a referential use of language. This change allows her to describe the benefits that the "fifth revolutionary engine" will bring to Warao communities in the Delta. She starts by summarizing other programs or Misiones, and explains how they fit within President Hugo Chavez' holistic vision of advancing both the building of infrastructure and the construction of new power relations. In this stage of her speech she attempts again to empathize with the audience by emphasizing their co-construction of the speech. For example, she repeatedly prompts the audience to answer questions. She enumerates all five revolutionary engines and asks the audience to repeat their names with her. This strategy is similar to the one she uses at the end of her greeting when she asks the audience to respond to her Ye'kuana greeting by saying 'eeeh.' Yet, since she has switched to Spanish, the audience responds more rapidly, avoiding delay and the need for an explanation.

Then, taking advantage of the common semantic ground provided by the mutual understanding of Spanish, she starts making promises. She explains that the fifth revolutionary engine will bring state resources directly to the communities and to the hands of the members of the communal councils. She also describes the benefits of this

new grassroots organization as a new step into what President Chavez has called the new “geometry of power” in which underserved populations will participate to a larger degree in community development and local politics. She calls the new geometry of power a gift from the president, and since they worked on the plan during the month of December she even goes so far as to call it a “Christmas gift” for the indigenous people.

She also promised the creation of communal banks to channel money directly to the communal councils. Explaining this process in Warao was impossible for Minister Maldonado. She had to explain it in Spanish and rely on the rapport created by her greeting in Ye’kuana. She gains legitimacy with her greeting, but with her switch to Spanish she can explain the benefits of having communal councils and communal banks. In Spanish she can make promises of money and development.

Months after the meeting, most of the Waraos of my acquaintance continued to comment on Maldonado’s speech. Her speech had a positive effect on the audience. It satisfied the expectations of the Warao public. Even though the greeting strategy was convoluted, the framing of the discourse was appropriate and, more importantly, it was followed by a promise. The focus of further commentaries was not on the display of ethnic identity attempted during the greeting but on the promises made in Spanish. Her display of fluency in the Ye’kuana language was well regarded and helped to create an inter-subjective common ground. But as with any good greeting, it was forgotten while the promises were remembered. As Firth (1972) has argued, greetings are the kinds of cultural devices to which people do not pay attention unless they are absent.

With her promises of communal banks and government assistance, Minister Maldonado opened the possibility of a trans-semiotic connection between her speech and a future delivery of material benefits. In other words, beyond her display of identity emblems, she created a referential connection between her discourse and a future act of political gift giving. This made her speech a success in the eyes of those future communal leaders present that day in Tucupita. It was also the reason why her speech was talked about in subsequent conversations.

Maldonado’s is the kind of performance that is usually criticized by most political analysts as populist because it creates political solidarity based on patron-client relations between a high sphere of the government and an indigenous people. A typical critique would argue that the display of identity emblems and the use of promises are rhetorical strategies designed to convince and somehow deceive the “Indians.” But this kind of criticism neglects, among other things, the fact that this is only one part of a trans-semiotic process, and that the future event in which the political gifts are delivered will also be interpreted in the context of this promise. Therefore, the delivery of the promised material benefits will confirm the legitimacy and sincerity of Nicia Maldonado’s promises. On the other hand, Maldonado is not just following her own “deceptive agenda”, she is also constrained by her position as minister which creates expectations in the Warao audience. She is expected to not follow the pattern of coming to the Delta and then forget about the Indians. In order to create a sustained commitment with the Warao she is expected to promise meaningful things that they can believe will be delivered.

In the same way in which past texts set the standards for future texts, the promises made by politicians are regarded by the Warao as the standards of legitimacy set for the delivery of future political gifts. Yet, the relation between what Maldonado has promised and what she will deliver is subject to a hazardous gap because time and political circumstances mediate between the moment of promising and delivering the

gift. Maldonado makes a promise at the end of her speech which indexes the possibility of a continuous engagement with the audience through time. This promise made her speech successful and interesting for the Warao audience, but it is the future delivery of the gift what will complete the trans-semiotic relation between speech and political gift-giving.

5. The reception and circulation of promises

Maldonado's promise to create the communal councils took place in the city of Tucupita. However, some of the Warao leaders present in that meeting live in the middle and lower Delta. Some of them had traveled up to 6 hours by motorboat to attend this event and return immediately to their communities. Some others, like my friend Tirso Rivero, consider themselves as being from the lower Delta but live in towns near Tucupita such as Barrancas del Orinoco, Volcan or La Horqueta. The diverse origin of these leaders was then a guarantee for the broad circulation of information about the new communal councils.

In the Delta, news like the announcement of communal councils and other government promises circulate in a variety of forms. They can be broadcasted over local radio, printed in the *Notidiario* (the only local newspaper), or they can reach the lower Delta by word of mouth. The constant flow of information between Tucupita and the lower Delta is due to the Warao's need to know when they will receive their salaries from the government (payments from the government are unpredictable in this part of Venezuela), and to receive news from relatives and friends. The flow of information also follows the movement of people seeking medical attention, temporary jobs or those who constantly travel between the Delta and cities in eastern and southern Venezuela to spend periods of time as beggars in the streets. The Waraos very frequently use the public services provided by local radio stations to send messages to the lower Delta. Though not everyone owns a radio in the Delta, important messages are re-circulated by word of mouth until they reach their intended recipients. Finally, the Waraos traveling and visiting back and forth from the city carry with them old copies of *Notidiario* in which other people find information about the political life of the State.

Minister Maldonado's promise was taken to the lower Delta by my friend Tirso Rivero during one of his visits to the town of Morichito in the Winikina River. Soon after our arrival to Morichito, Tirso's nearest neighbors and the members of his extended family paid us the customary visits to greet us. They all wanted to know about us, but also wanted to have news about Tucupita, the government payroll and some family members who were living in Barrancas. Tirso then proceeded to talk about the promise of communal councils for which he quoted the words of Minister Maldonado promising the creation of communal councils and communal banks. He framed the quoted speech with the phrase *...así dijo Nicia*⁶ '...Nicia said so' at the end of his utterances which established the origin of the information as coming directly from the Minister. Quoted speech is a very common form for the circulation of political discourse in the Orinoco Delta. The use of quoted speech guarantees that the information comes

⁶ Most likely these interactions remained in Spanish for my benefit.

directly from someone with authority like Minister Maldonado or President Chávez who are very likely to follow through on their promises. Quoted speech is also a general Amazonian strategy used to qualify information (Basso 1986; Graham 2011) and indexing the distribution of responsibility in discourse (Hill and Irvine 1993).

Another interesting aspect of this circulation is that people passing and receiving this information usually finished their interactions with some variation on the Spanish phrase, *Bueno, vamos a ver...* ‘Well, we will see...’ meaning that the promise, though uncertain, had opened the possibility of a future engagement with the government. The people of Winikina did not simply believe Maldonado. Her promise merely referred to the possibility of a future engagement with the Waraos. It only indexed the creation of a link between the past speech act and the possible future delivery of the gift. This cautious reception was based on the Warao’s interpretation of the likelihood that since Maldonado is a Minister she would most likely deliver what she promised. Yet, it was not an automatic response to a deception, as depicted in theories of populism. Rather, her rhetorical strategy had been successful in the limited sense of having made the Waraos of Winikina cautiously open to the possibility of a future relation with the Ye’kuana Minister.

The promises Minister Maldonado had made were fulfilled the following year. In 2008 President Chavez sanctioned the creation of the country’s first communal councils and a Fundacomunal⁷ office was opened in Tucupita. Through this office the communal councils of the Delta began receiving funds for a number of development projects. In Winikina, the creation of communal councils was interpreted as a confirmation of Maldonado’s promises. The delivery of this ‘gift’ closed the trans-semiotic cycle and enabled the relationship between Minister Maldonado and the new leaders of the communal councils to stand on firmer ground.

Local politicians in the Delta do not always have Minister Maldonado’s leverage and cannot promise as she did. Not every politician has President Chavez’s direct support. I turn now to discourses in which the same kinds of promises cannot be made to illustrate how it affects political communication in the Delta. I show that a speech lacking promises produces discontinuity between the discursive event and any other future meaningful interaction. In other words, the following two sections present examples of violations of the expected trans-semiotic connection in public political speech.

6. Failure to promise and the trans-semiotic gap

A different, and far more common, form of greeting in political events in the Delta are greetings in Warao. In February 2008, during a meeting called by the Regional Office for Indigenous Aid (IRIDA), I had the opportunity to record a number of speakers using different strategies in their greetings. That day IRIDA announced on the radio that a

⁷ Fundacomunal is the Venezuelan national institution in charge of channeling the money for the communal councils.

meeting would take place in the *Auriwakanoko*⁸ auditorium in Tucupita. The meeting was to be concerned with navigation licenses and permits to cut wood and buy gasoline. Though it was intended as a gathering of many indigenous representatives from different parts of the Delta, many of them were absent. Yet, this meeting lasted for over four hours and included Government and National Guard officers as well.

One of the first speakers of the day was Fátima Salazar, director of IRIDA and the person responsible for organizing the meeting and bringing people from the lower Delta. She started her speech with the following greeting:

(1)

1. *Bahukaya-ra ma-warao-tuma?*
'How are you, my fellow Waraos'?
2. *Nome ama tamatika oko-ha*
'We are really here today'
3. *Ka-monikata isia dibubu-kitane*
'To speak about our conflicts/problems'
4. *Takore oko mia-kotai*
'But now we can see'
5. *Warao-tuma ekida*
'There are not (many) waraos'

In her greeting, (and, actually, throughout the first half of her speech), Salazar addresses her audience in Warao. She starts by using the common Warao salutation *bahukaya* which can be used by itself or in combination with the interrogative morpheme *-ra*. (The bound morpheme *-ra* is the grammatical question marker in Warao.) Pragmatically, this morpheme compels the hearer to respond to the greeting and to cooperate in the discourse. However, Salazar does not allow time for a response from the public and jumps to explain the purpose of the meeting. She introduces the speech event to the audience by calling it a *monikata isia dibubu-kitane* 'meeting to talk or to solve problems.' Briggs (1996), as mentioned above, describes the *monikata nome anaka* as a form of speech event in which intra-community problems get resolved and power relations are negotiated. Salazar frames the political event as a variation of the intra-communal *monikata nome anaka*. This framing allows the event to fit within a particular genre, giving the audience a sense of what is going to happen and how things are going to work. This rhetorical strategy indicates a relationship with traditional types of discourse and establishes a basis for monitoring the gap between an actual performance and the *monikata nome anaka* as idealized genre (Briggs and Bauman 1992).

In a *monikata nome anaka* people are expected to give their version of the problem and their speeches are monitored by the *aidamo-tuma* 'elders/leaders'. They take turns explaining the motivations behind their actions but these discursive displays have no direct consequences beyond the meeting. Fred Myers has shown that certain speech events in small-scale societies constitute what he calls a "polity of feelings" in which "... the meeting is vehicle of communion, not so much representing a social

⁸ The spelling of this auditorium's name (*Auriwakanoko*) is an alternative spelling of the Warao word *oriwakanoko* which can be translated as "a place to speak or talk to each other." I opted to keep the spelling as it appears in the banners and the press notes that refer to this place.

grouping as constituting it” (1986: 444). The *monikata isia dibubukitane* is one such case in which the speech event is performed more to constitute and recognize the social positioning of the subjects involved than to actually solve problems.

The consequence of framing the meeting as a *monikata isia dibubukitane* was that the participants formed the notion that no promises would be made, and that maybe the purpose of the meeting was to establish the positions of Warao leaders and to allow them to hear and recognize their constituents. Salazar’s greeting, although intelligible to the Warao audience, did not transition into promises beyond those of permits that mean nothing in the lower Delta since there is no monitoring of wood cutting, gasoline smuggling, or navigation. The framing of the event as a *monikata isia dibubukitane* was uninteresting for those members of the audience who didn’t feel that they had anything to resolve with the National Guard. Some people, however, did use this opportunity as a chance to complain about abuses of power in the lower Delta.

After finishing her greeting, Salazar continues her speech in Warao. She explains the reasons for calling the meeting and describes the lack of money and transportation for the communal council representatives. In contrast to Nicia Maldonado, Salazar does not switch between Spanish and Warao during her greeting. Her greeting is an emblem of identity and is at the same time referentially understood by the audience. Furthermore, she manages to achieve mutual acknowledgement by compelling the audience to respond in the course of her speech. This is apparent when she uses the interrogative in *bahukaya-ra* but also later when she prompts the audience to respond to her statements. Contrary to Nicia Maldonado, whose greeting failed to be co-constructed in her first attempt and needed to be repaired, Salazar maintains a referential connection with her Warao audience at all times.

Salazar also uses *ma-warao-tuma* (my-warao-pl.) after saying *bahukaya-ra* (greetings-int.). She uses the first person genitive *ma-* to refer to the audience. Pragmatically, the use of this morpheme does not indicate possession but a consubstantial link between hearer and speaker. In English this is the equivalent to a phrase such as “my fellow Americans.” It creates a sense of unity and sameness. Therefore, Salazar achieves social solidarity with her audience not only because she is recognized through indexical emblems of identity but also because she can tell the Warao audience that she is one of them.

Salazar is also aware that not all members of her audience speak Warao. Also attending the meeting are military personnel and representatives from the Ministry of Energy and Petroleum who have never been exposed to Warao or whose command of Warao is insufficient. Therefore, after she finishes explaining the issues in Warao, she switches to Spanish. But this switch is not like Maldonado’s because it is aimed at the non-indigenous authorities and not the Warao audience. More importantly it is not used to make promises. After switching to Spanish she performs the following greeting:

(2)

1. *buenos días*

‘good day’

2. *al*

‘to’

3. *a las autoridades presentes*

‘to the present authorities’

4. *y a mis hermanos Waraos,*

‘and to my Warao brothers’

5. *nosotros*

‘we’

6. *le estaba diciendo a mis hermanos indígenas*

‘I was saying to my indigenous brothers’

7. *que me*

‘that I’

8. *que me apena mucho con ellos*

‘that I am ashamed’ [**for the absence of Warao representatives**]

9. *y con ustedes*

‘and with you all’

10. *los que están presentes,*

‘those who are present’

11. *porque es una problemática*

‘because this is a problem’

12. *que nosotros hemos arrastrado*

‘that we have dragged’

13. *desde hace muchos años*

‘for many years’

14. *y que hoy*

‘and that today’

15. *que*

‘that’

16. *que tenemos los derechos,*

‘that we have the rights’

17. *establecidos en la Constitución*

‘established in the Constitution’

18. *cuando se trata de hábitat y*

‘when it comes to habitat and’

19. *comunidades indígenas*

‘indigenous communities’

20. *también nosotros tenemos una ley*

‘we also have a law’

21. *que nos ampara y es por eso que estamos aquí.*

‘that protects us and that is why we are here’.

Salazar switches from Warao to Spanish only for the benefit of the non-indigenous political authorities. She understands that in order to achieve agreement between the authorities and the Waraos she needs to act as mediator and translator. In contrast to Maldonado, whose aim is simply to bring a message from the president and to be recognized as a political leader, Salazar is trying to mediate between the *criollo* politicians and the Warao leaders. Therefore, she uses both languages so as to be understood by all the participants.

After her greetings, as Salazar introduced the topics of the day and the public authorities to the Warao audience at that point Tirso had the urge to leave. He wanted to go to Fundacomunal where the money for the communal councils is allocated. He was more concerned with the transfer of funds to his communal council than attending a meeting in which no promises could be made. In both of her greetings (Warao and Spanish) Salazar had implied that the absence of community leaders was due to the Warao's indifference and lack of organization. From Tirso's point of view it was the result of the lack of expectation that meaningful promises would be made. He told me that, had the meeting been about giving gasoline to the communities or improving

houses and walkways or donating outboard motors, the audience would have been much larger. Many of the participants blamed the small audience on the short notice but Tirso and others challenged these opinions, saying that “gossip” alone would have brought the leaders to town. Salazar had failed to appeal to her Warao constituents in spite of framing the event as a familiar genre of speech and being bilingual and able to mediate between the two audiences (Warao and the non-indigenous authorities). Her speech lacked the potential trans-semiotic relation with material gifts created through promises. Without promises her words were placed within the confines of the meeting but had no connection with any future involvement with the community. Later, it will be impossible to trace any distribution of resources back to this particular speech event. Needless to say, this performance was discussed no further after the meeting. Unlike Maldonado’s speech, this performance never circulated through the local media, was never talked about in visits, and news of it never got to the communities of the lower Delta.

7. Connecting only with the indigenous public

A third rhetorical strategy used by Warao- speaking politicians in the Delta is to deliver speeches in Warao without translation. This is the case of Higinia Hernández, the regional representative of the Ministry of Popular Power for Indigenous Peoples. She was appointed to her office after Maldonado took charge of this ministry in 2006. As a regional representative, she is in charge of advising Minister Maldonado in the creation of public policies that affect the Warao. As a Warao leader with connections to the Ministry of Indigenous Peoples, she tries to reach out to other local Warao leaders during her public appearances. Yet, as a lower- ranking official she is not in the same position as Minister Maldonado to make promises or to speak on behalf of the President. The following is the greeting that she performed in same meeting called by IRIDA that I described in the previous section (6):

(3)

1. A: *yatu yakera-ra ma-warao-tuma?*
‘My fellow Warao, are you all right?’
2. B: *yakera*
‘good’
3. A: *yakera hoko-nae?*
‘did you wake up all right?’
4. B: *yakera hoko-nae*
‘woke up all right’
5. A: *ama-witu*
‘today’
6. A: *oko tamatika*
‘we are here’
7. A: *sanuka dibu-bu-kitane nau-ae*
‘came to talk a little’
8. A: *noko-ae*
‘I heard’
9. A: *diana*
‘already’
10. A: *ama-witu irida-ha*

- ‘today is a big day’
11. A: *aidamo dibuya-ha*
‘we have speeches from authorities’
12. A: (unrecognized line)
13. A: *oko yorikuare nakae*
‘we agreed to have a meeting’
14. A: *awahabara*
‘first’
15. A: *warao-tuma*
‘waraos’
16. A: *aidamo-tuma-witu yorikuare nakae*
‘the true leaders agreed to have a meeting’

Hernández starts her greeting with the question *yatu yakera-ra* ‘are you all right?’ As we saw in Example 1, Fátima Salazar also uses the interrogative morpheme *-ra* which is intended to prompt the audience to respond and create a link with the speaker. Yet, unlike Salazar, Hernández allows the audience to respond. Moreover, she follows the first question with a second one *yakera hokon-ae* ‘woke up all right?’ to which the audience also responds. This establishes a difference between Hernández and Salazar, and between them and Minister Maldonado, whose greeting was not even understood by her audience.

While Maldonado uses Ye’kuana, an indigenous language that nobody understands, and Salazar switches between Spanish and Warao, Hernández delivers her entire speech in Warao without translation. She does not intend to address the Spanish-speaking authorities. Her strategy is to achieve communication solely with the Warao audience. In this sense her speech is the opposite of Maldonado’s in that while Maldonado’s greeting is maximally indexical, Hernández’s is maximally referential.⁹ This is why she puts more emphasis on the co-construction of the first part of her greeting.

After the series of questions and responses, Hernández starts explaining the reasons for the meeting. She depicts the meeting as an agreement with the *aidamo-tuma-witu* (real leaders). The morpheme *-witu* means real or truly and Hernández uses it to lend legitimacy to the non-indigenous state representatives. She also categorizes the day of the meeting as a big day or big moment or *ama-witu irida-ha*. With this introduction she sets the audience’s mood for the next part of the meeting in which she won’t participate but will deal with the distribution of gasoline permits and woodcutting licenses.

Hernández, like Salazar, framed the discourse as a *monikata isia dibubukitane* (example 3) and as *ama-witu iridaha* (an important moment/day) not only for her own benefit but also for the rest of the politicians present that day. This had tremendous consequences for the audience’s expectations because it also meant that no significant promise would be made that day. The audience then diverted its attention to denouncing the abuses of the National Guard and stating the necessities of specific communities. In

⁹ This does not deny that her speech had indexical value for the non-Warao speaking public. For the National Guard and minister representatives, the use of Warao can index ethnic affiliation and authenticity. These are not, however, the primary functions of Hernández’ speech since they are not the main addressees.

view of this change the national guardsmen seemed somewhat offended and probably began to deem the meeting boring and pointless, or at least that is how I interpreted their facial expressions and general demeanor.

Although the guardsmen were accused of abuses of authority and a solution to these issues was sought within the limits of the meeting, there were no signs that this meeting would have any impact upon the future relationship between the National Guard and the Warao. Hernández, like Salazar, was in no position to make promises and therefore no political gift or material benefit would be expected in the future. After Salazar's introduction made it clear that no promises would be made, Tirso left for the Fundacomunal to inquire about the communal council's money. This meeting was not further discussed after our return to Barrancas, nobody was interested in spreading the conclusions at which the authorities had arrived. Hernández's speech, in spite of being in Warao and maximally referential, lacked the trans-semiotic importance of the speech by Maldonado, who is a Ye'kuana speaker with no command of Warao.

8. Conclusion

In this paper I have shown that part of the rhetorical effectiveness of political speeches in the Orinoco Delta depends on their trans-semiotic nature. The Warao expect political performances to open the possibility of sustained relationships with politicians by linking political speeches with meaningful future events. This is achieved by the use of promises. By paying attention to these trans-semiotic links and their interpretation we can understand the relationship between the here and now of political speech and a broader context that goes beyond the speech event in time and space. This approach can also help us link various semiotic events with the specific ideologies that pervade them.

The examples presented here show that in the Orinoco Delta the trans-semiotic process sets the standard for evaluating political speech. Those speeches in which politicians make no promises do not circulate in the same way as political speeches from legitimate authorities who make promises. The absence of promises creates a trans-semiotic gap between the speech and any future meaningful interaction. This is the case illustrated by the examples of Salazar and Hernández during the Tucupita meeting in January 2008. In contrast, Minister Nicia Maldonado makes promises in a way that fulfills her audience's expectations, making them look forward to future events in which their relationship will continue through the distribution of political gifts. This is not to say that promises made by high-ranking politicians are believed and produce automatic support. Promises are only signs of a possible durable connection with high-ranking politicians. They have to be followed by the distribution of political gifts in order to close the trans-semiotic gap.

These three examples also show that the display of fluency in Warao as an emblem of identity is insufficient to make political speeches that create a durable link with the public. As the first example in this paper shows, even a greeting in a completely unknown language (Ye'kuana in this case) is welcome if the politicians make a transition to meaningful promises in their speech. In contrast, Salazar and Hernández, two Warao-speaking politicians, failed to make this transition and therefore failed to link their speeches with any future involvement with their audiences. They could frame their discourse within familiar Warao genres of speech (e.g. *monikata isia dibubukitane*) but their performances offered no hope of future engagement with the

Warao leaders present in Tucupita. These examples demonstrate that the Warao's involvement with new indigenous leaders is mediated by the ideological demand of continuous engagement. This semiotic ideology pervades the interpretation of performances and semiotic events in the politics of the Orinoco Delta.

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