

# Proceedings of the annual meeting of the Southern Anthropological Society

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Volume 39  
Number 1 *Museums and Memory*

Article 13

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2022

## Moving Around in the Room: Cherokee Language, Worldview and Memory

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### Recommended Citation

Altman, H. & Belt, T. (2011). Moving Around in the Room: Cherokee Language, Worldview and Memory. *Museums and Memory: Proceedings of the Southern Anthropological Society*, 2008, 39, 227-233.

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## Moving around in the Room: Cherokee Language, Worldview and Memory

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For the past year we have been examining aspects of Cherokee language and worldview as they relate to health and native understandings of well-being. As a part of this work we have previously described the system of well-being encoded in Cherokee language and how Cherokee speakers view the processes of history (Altman and Belt 2009, Altman and Belt 2008). In brief, Cherokee speakers view the proper state of the world as being *tohi*, or operating according to the processes and pace of nature. In addition, the proper state of individual people in the world is *osi*, which is conceptualized as upright, forward-facing, and existing on a single point of balance. In order for the world to be in its proper state, individuals must also be properly balanced. Much of Cherokee traditional medicine, healing, and wellness is centered around processes designed to return people and the world to these interrelated states. These ideas extend beyond the personal, however. Cherokee views of history also try to understand past events within this framework and then try to determine the proper course for the future.

Prompting our work on these issues has been a practical concern that stems from our work with the Culturally Based Native Health Programs, a suite of community-initiated cultural competency initiatives directed by our colleague Lisa Lefler, Ph.D., with the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians. We are developing a basis for educating

health-care providers to a better understanding of traditional practices, both for elders who are still Cherokee speakers and for younger generations who have been reared with traditional Cherokee values regarding health and well-being.

As a part of studying health and well-being in Indian communities, the issue of multigenerational grief and trauma, or intergenerational trauma, is a constant presence—sometimes in the foreground, sometimes in the background. The past 15-20 generations, since Cherokee people came into extensive contact with Europeans, have been faced with widespread traumatic events that repeatedly turned their world upside down. Disease, population loss, economic dependence, loss of crucial aspects of medicine, persistent European wars and skirmishes, rape, the burning of towns, murder, violence, the Removal, the Civil War, economic disenfranchisement, the boarding school experience, and on and on—all these events and processes forced the Cherokees to adapt continually to new and deleterious circumstances. In reviewing this history we began to discuss the language-based cognitive structures speakers use in processing memory, the past, and experiences that are significant but not necessarily immediately at hand. As these discussions progressed, we realized that these cognitive processes must be taken into consideration in developing programs to address multigenerational grief and trauma in Cherokee communities, and that their analogues in other communities might be instructive as well.

#### CHEROKEE LANGUAGE

The Cherokee language is an Iroquoian language, distantly related to the languages of the Six Nations of New York and Canada. Classified as a polysynthetic language, Cherokee and the other Iroquoian languages have extremely complex inflectional morphology that

provides speakers with the ability to convey very specific and nuanced meaning in the conjugation of verbs alone. In addition, Cherokee is marvelously complex in its inclusion of tone or stress distinctions or both, morphophonemic complexity that often obscures roots of verbs, and the simple extent of its class of pronominal prefixes (60+ possibilities), among other features.

Part of the verbal morphology of Cherokee is an aspect system that marks the quality of actions in verbs, and that in many ways takes the place of the tense system that English speakers rely on. In English, events described by verbs are obligatorily tied to a linear timeline that indicates past, present, or future. English also uses, to a lesser extent, some grammatical indicators of aspect—to demonstrate that an action is ongoing or completed, for example; however many of these kinds of distinctions are made lexically rather than grammatically in English. In Cherokee, however, a speaker can use a variety of aspects to describe the quality of the action (e.g., ongoing, punctative, completed, habitual, reported) without necessarily tying the action to any particular point in time. Tense can be used by speakers if desired; it is not obligatory, however. As a result, Cherokee speakers can easily tell stories about events that happened in the past with an immediacy not grammatically possible in English—or at least not through simply conjugating a verb.

#### METAPHORS FOR TIME AND SPACE

Given the grammar of English, English speakers tend to conceptualize and construct spatial metaphors for time as a linear, forward-flowing process. In any given utterance in English, one can place the action at some point along a timeline. Our metaphors describe this concept with common phrases like “you’ve got your whole future ahead of you” or “the past is all behind you now.” Also, at least

since the industrial age, we have specified this metaphor further by quantifying ever-smaller units of time, now even down to the nanosecond. In this way, the further along the timeline an event is from the speaker's present moment, the greater the conceptual distance between the speaker and the event. Thus in describing or discussing the events of the past, English speakers have a built-in sense of distance in space, as well as of duration.

Cherokee speakers, on the other hand, do not have a linear concept for time and space. The grammar of Cherokee permits a metaphor for the process of time and distance that is infinitely flexible. Rather than seeing events as beads on a string or points on a line that must always occur in the same order with the same distance between them, Cherokee speakers conceive of time (or life) as a room one enters by one door at birth and leaves by another at death. All of the possible events that have happened, are happening, or will happen exist in this room. Over the course of one's life one may interact with the various events that have transpired, or those that have yet to do so, in various ways. We have discussed the process of reading the past elsewhere (Altman and Belt 2008); in short, Cherokee speakers have the conceptual ability to move about in the room and pick up and examine events at any point they wish. So when a Cherokee speaker talks about the Removal, she or he can do so with a sense that the events of that time are still here with us, immediate and ongoing.

#### THE LANGUAGE OF MEMORY

Supporting the metaphors for memory and time, Cherokee speakers have linguistically-encoded models for where memory resides in the body and how it moves from place to place within the body over time. As time passes, the location and fixedness of memories change. For Cherokee speakers, memory has two parts or processes (short-term

and long-term memory) and these are associated with different parts of the body (the head and the heart). For Cherokee speakers, short-term memories reside in the head. When someone has experienced something recently, they can refer to those experiences using simple sense-based phrases such as *tsigoha* (“I saw it”) or *gigvha* (“I heard it”). These verbs are minimally conjugated to include only the person marker, the stem of the verb, and the *-ha* suffix that indicates that the act is complete. As people refer to events in this form, the events themselves are open to interpretation by the individual and his or her interlocutors. If a person wonders about the significance of an event, he or she can discuss it with others to arrive at an appropriate understanding of why the event happened and what it can tell them. In sum, memories of recent events are sense-based, reside in the head, are flexible in their interpretation and open to social construction. Of course, not every event that happens to an individual undergoes this process of analysis and verification, but all are open to it if the speaker feels it necessary.

After about a month, memories that have been interpreted and verified, or that did not need to be interpreted or verified, pass from the head to the heart. For Cherokee speakers, memory, as properly understood separate from events that are still flexible, resides in the heart as an accumulated deposit of indelible experiences. Once memory moves to the heart, not only is it indelible, but it is referred to with different words. These words include *ahndisdi* (“memory”), *gadahn-tehv* (“I am remembering” or “I am thinking”), *agwadahnta* (“my heart feels”) a particular way, and *nohsahna* (“out of sorts”). Each of these words in Cherokee has, at its root, the morpheme *-ahn*, which refers to the heart. Terms that refer to heart/feeling/memory are often used in determining how to treat a patient in the traditional system. The connection between events, memory, and beliefs about health is reflected in this aspect of the traditional Cherokee

worldview. For Cherokee practitioners there are states of being ill that relate to feelings in addition to those that are specifically disease- or injury-related. Understanding the relationships between the heart/feeling/memory terms and health and wellness is the focus of the next stage of our work on this system.

In addition to the words and metaphors for remembering and memory, Cherokee has metaphorical language for forgetting. As mentioned above, we have described elsewhere the Cherokee system for examining or reading the past (Altman and Belt 2008), in which one can move around in the metaphorical room of life and pick up events as one chooses. The language for forgetting is related to this process conceptually. To say “I am forgetting,” a Cherokee speaker says *agikewsga*. This verb shares its root with the word *dikewi* or “blind.” So for a Cherokee speaker, forgetting is literally not being able to see something that has happened in the past. Events become forgotten to a speaker because his or her heart/mind cannot see them in the big room of life. In some instances, speakers cannot see because they are being protected by their heart/mind from something that has happened. Sometimes events cannot be seen for simpler reasons that are more akin to the English-speaker’s concept of forgetting. In either case, when a Cherokee speaker has forgotten something, he or she is unable to “examine or read” the past event or object in the sense we outlined above, or *agoliye*.

#### SIGNIFICANCE FOR APPLICATION AND CONCLUSIONS

Our examination of memory and language among Cherokee speakers has significance in terms of its application in both direct health care and health-care education settings. In the health-care setting, understanding Cherokee concepts of the process of memory and

forgetting allows health-care providers new perspectives on the constellation of behavioral and medical health issues lumped together under the name multigenerational grief and trauma. Insights into the immediacy that Cherokee speakers feel about past traumatic events, and the cultural values passed on by Cherokee speakers to their non-Cherokee-speaking family members, allow providers to realize that there are culturally-grounded methods for dealing with seeing and not seeing what is in the room. These methods, encoded in language and embodied in traditions, are largely missing from existing treatment models.

In the health-care education setting, we advocate that practitioners be educated as to the variety of different ways that speakers of any language other than English may conceptualize their understanding of the world. The bridge between cultures must be built on understandings that become available only by developing hermeneutic models based in language.

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