



On the Ethnohistory of Powhatan Ritual Gestures

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Abstract. – An ethnohistory-of-communication approach is applied to examine such extra-linguistic behavior as greeting and religious gestures in seventeenth-century Powhatan. A case is made for early colonial documents as a source of data for descriptions of bodily movements. Incorporating ethological, interactional, semiotic as well as pragmatic perspectives, it is suggested that Powhatan greeting gestures are extensions of invocative kinesic motions. [*North America, Algonquian peoples, Powhatan, language, ritual gestures, colonial contact*]

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Introduction

The ethnohistory of communication, the diachronic counterpart of the ethnography of communication, has as its goal, according to Drechsel (2007), the restoration of linguistic as well as extralinguistic attestations by triangulation of comparative evidence whose interpretation is informed by ethnological criteria. The feasibility of such an approach was first proposed in Drechsel's (1983) critical interpretation of extralinguistic acts identified in eighteenth-century descriptions of Mobilian Jargon obtained from such archival sources as Le Page du Pratz's (1758) reports on Louisiana. Focusing on formal protocols for greetings, of which Le Page du Pratz sketched in relatively detailed fashion two scenes of speaking, Drechsel pointed out the value of such information about etiquette as symbolic action in piecing together the structure and function through time of such moribund lan-

guages as Mobilian Jargon. Since the publication of Drechsel's seminal paper, other sociolinguists have added their endorsements for the systematic study of communicative behavior through time based on data derived from historical documentation.¹ In expanding this line of philological inquiry, Drechsel (2007) has even advocated the inclusion of semi-fictional works as a resource. For example, in his attempt at the reconstruction of a maritime Polynesian pidgin, Drechsel makes a compelling argument for accepting Herman Melville's (1968) autobiographical novels "Typee" and "Omoo" as legitimate sources of sociolinguistic data. This article represents another attempt to consider archival material for the reconstruction of past communicative behavior, specifically the ritual gestures of Virginia Algonquian, or Powhatan, a seventeenth-century speech community, for which, surprisingly enough, the English colonial record has yielded a considerable amount of ethnographic detail.

Native Kinesic Acts in Seventeenth-Century English Sources

Regarding communicative behavior, colonial sources certainly have their limitations and for that reason have been suspect. The tacit assumption has been that European travelers of previous centuries were simply too ethnocentric to be trusted with the objective recording of Native languages and cul-

¹ Hanks (1987); Choque (1989); Paulson (1990); Silverstein (1996); Bartelt (2008).