METAPHORS OF CONVERSION, METAPHORS OF CHANGE
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Abstract. The following pages explore the use of metaphor in four contexts: biblical metaphors from the New Testament, metaphors used by Moravian missionaries to talk about their work in southwestern Alaska, metaphors Yup'ik elders use to describe past practices, and metaphors Yup'ik men and women create to explain their present situation to both Yup'ik and non-Native audiences. During recording projects in the 1980s, Yup'ik elders repeatedly employed certain metaphors in descriptions of the rules and ritual activities which circumscribed life when they were young. Elders continue to use these metaphors during public forums and debates, primarily when talking among themselves in their own language. Contemporary Yup'ik leaders and educators use different kinds of metaphors when speaking to younger Yup'ik men and women and to non-Yup'ik audiences than those they employ when speaking to their peers. They create “cross-cultural” metaphors which explicitly compare aspects of the Yup'ik past with non-Native institutions and activities. These contemporary metaphors also differ significantly from the metaphors that missionaries published at the turn of the century, which emphasized progress, hierarchy, and opposition. In their concrete comparisons between human activity and features of the world around them, contemporary Yup'ik metaphors are much closer to biblical precedent than to the “metaphors of conversion” employed in early twentieth century missionary accounts.

Introduction

Every good metaphor should both come as a surprise and be obvious after we have accepted it.
—Werner et al. 1975:376

More than 20,000 Yup’ik Eskimos make their homes in southwestern Alaska, scattered in 60 villages ranging in size from 150 to 600 people. Each community supports a cash economy, and families have access to many pieces of Western technology, including television, snowmobiles, telephones, electricity, and, in some cases, running water. In many ways, however, men and women still live a subsistence life comparable to that of their forebears. Especially in coastal communities a primary occupation of men continues to be fishing and sea mammal hunting, and women devote weeks to processing the catch. Yup’ik dancing and traditional ritual distributions are an important part of community life. Although most young and middle-aged community members are bilingual, Yup’ik is still a child’s first language in coastal villages on Nelson Island and at the mouth of the Kuskokwim as well as the primary language of village residents over age 50.

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Change in Alaska Native communities in general, and southwestern Alaska communities in particular, is the subject of a large and growing literature (Burch 1975; Chance 1990; Fienup-Riordan 1990a; Krupnik 1993; Langdon 1986). The following pages examine what different people in these villages have said about change through the use of metaphor by community leaders (both Native and non-Native) over the last one hundred years. Drawing on a range of historical and contemporary examples, I have included biblical metaphors, missionary metaphors, and historical and contemporary Yup’ik metaphors used by Yup’ik men and women, both talking among themselves and describing their situation to non-Natives. Although data on missionary and historical use of metaphor and simile are limited to written accounts, available examples are marshalled to better understand their impact on and relation to contemporary Yup’ik use of metaphor in public oratory. As we shall see, community leaders today tend to shape metaphors in particular ways in certain social contexts. The question why this might be so is addressed.

Aristotle provides one of the earliest definitions of metaphor: “The greatest thing by far is to be a master of metaphor. It is the one thing that cannot be learnt from others; and it is also a sign of genius since a good metaphor implies an intuitive perception of the similarity in dissimilares” (Rhetoric 3, cited in Basso 1976:93). Accordingly, the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one thing in terms of another. For our purpose, the explicit comparison of simile introduced by “like” or “as” is treated as a subset of the implied comparison of metaphor. In either case, when unrelated things are treated as similar, their shared characteristics become the defining features of a new system of meanings to which they both belong. This is why people who use different images can be understood to be saying the same thing (Rosaldo 1975:181, 193). Metaphors do not necessarily constitute understanding of the world (cf. Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Rather, they constitute the creative expression of preexisting and culturally shared meanings. Following Quinn (1991:87), the speaker has reasoning in mind independent of the metaphors used to articulate it.

Ever since the fourth century, when Aristotle described metaphor in such glowing terms, this “master trope” has been an object of serious thought and debate (Basso 1976:93). Recently J. P. Noppen published a bibliography of metaphor studies starting at 1970 that ran just short of 500 pages (Friedrich 1991:48). Current debate on the significance of metaphor has ranged between linguists like Lakoff and Johnson (1980), who argue that mapping one domain onto another by means of metaphor is a central process in human understanding, and anthropologists who use metaphor as evidence in reconstructing the culturally shared framework on which varied individual understandings are elaborated (Quinn 1991:92; Basso 1976; Fernandez 1991; Turner 1991:123).

Scholars familiar with Native American verbal art would be surprised to learn that Yup’ik metaphor has until now gone unremarked. Not only is there a massive literature on metaphor, but figures of speech, especially metaphors, used by American Indian orators were among the first observations made by Euro-Americans. In the 1800s, however, these figurative tropes were not positively valued as a "sign of genius" but negatively valued as evidence of the absence of abstraction in Indian languages. According to one commentator writing on "Indian Eloquence" in The Knickerbocker in 1836, "We would anticipate eloquence from an Indian. He has a poverty of language, which exacts rich and apposite metaphorical allusions, even from ordinary conversation" (Clements 1996:3).

Nineteenth century missionaries working in southwestern Alaska made scant reference to Yup’ik use of metaphor. Ironically, the Jesuits and the Moravians, the two groups most active in the region, commented at length on the use of metaphor among other Native American groups. Moravian missionary John Heckewelder, who worked among the Delaware in the late 1800s, devoted considerable attention to metaphor in their verbal expression, titling Chapter 12 of his ethnographic study of the Delaware "Metaphorical Expressions." Clements (1996:100) remarks that, not finding them particularly appealing himself, Heckewelder (1876:137) regarded the Lenape fondness for metaphors as "to their discourse what feathers and beads are to their persons, a gaudy but tasteless ornament." But he admitted that many literary traditions "even in enlightened Europe" viewed the use of metaphor highly and "the immortal Shakespeare, himself, did not disdain" to use this figure.

The Jesuits working to the north among the Huron also remarked the use of metaphor among their converts. Unlike Heckewelder, the Jesuits regarded the occurrence of these figures of speech not as "tasteless ornament" but as evidence of the use of reason and therefore the need for the civilizing influence of Christianity. Clements (1996:66) quotes Father Paul Le Jeune’s warning: "Metaphor is largely in use among these Peoples; Unless you accustom yourself to it, you will understand nothing in their councils, where they speak almost entirely in metaphors." At the same time that they admired Huron oratory, the Jesuits contended that the need for metaphor indicated "poverty" and lack of abstraction in Native languages. They si-
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It’s hard to [make metaphors] and you have to know a lot about everything. Those old people were smart . . . It’s still that way when someone makes one up. Only the good talkers can make them up like that. They are the ones who really speak Apache.
—Apache consultant, in Basso 1976:118

My fascination with metaphor and simile in Yup’ik oratory dates from November 1991 when I visited Nelson Island to record the life history of community and regional leader Paul John. During that visit I admired not only what Paul John had to say but the eloquent way in which he said it—especially his creative use of metaphor. The examples of metaphor presented in this paper were largely gathered following that visit, although some are pulled from previous work that I did in the region. Essentially, once Paul John “woke me up” to the importance of metaphor in Yup’ik oratory, I kept my eyes and ears open and noted all instances of Yup’ik and missionary metaphor I heard or read during the course of my work, past and present.

Born in 1929, Paul John understands some English but speaks almost exclusively in the Yup’ik language. He interpreted our recording project both as a duty and an opportunity to describe the Yup’ik way of living that he experienced growing up south of Nelson Island in the 1930s. Beyond informing future generations about their heritage, he wanted to make a political statement explicitly comparing the advantages of the old ways to the problems engendered by increased contact with the non-Native world.1

As I listened, I was struck by Paul John’s repeated use of English similes to punctuate his Yup’ik oration. For example, in his discussion of the traditional rules for living that parents taught their children, he interjected in English that a young person’s life is “like a tool box” that contains the advice and knowledge they need to guide them in their future lives.

Waten yuk ayagyuug angluurarqami tuarpiaq imuk Kas’sat aptukégkoot tool box, eillaciminek imirturalriutun ayagyuullermini ayuqettullinigëll’ . . . eillaciminek, like tool box. Tua’i-lu tualkuk tool box imhek cagnarlikunikik tuaktuk tool box aagnun tuarpiaq imiuqullini nakitun akarr-nagelriutun cagnarlikunikik tua-i tool box-aak tuakuk imhek tuknìlutek. Askjalligatunatek-lu


When a young person is growing up his life is like a tool box. From a very young age he begins to fill the tool box with the things he had learned. Then if he doesn’t lose the contents of the tool box . . . if he doesn’t get confused and fumble and lose the contents, the contents of the tool box can give him strength and prosperity. They can be very helpful in the work and tasks of a person. They will help him in his life. I have used the tool box to illustrate my point. There is an expression that says that if a person does not follow the teachings and advice he has learned he will lose the productive and prosperous life he would have led. It would be like abandoning and losing the contents of the tool box.

Later, when describing the traditional men’s house (qasgi) where he received his training from his father and uncles, he looked up and said, again in English, that it was “like a school, like college. These were some of the things we were always taught by our elders. Even though there were no schools, they would continually teach their young. It was like going to college.” When we talked about the arrival of Jesuit priests on Nelson Island, he noted that their words were acceptable in part because they were not new. Before the missionaries came the Yup’ik people believed in Ellam Yua (the Person of the Universe) who was, he added in English, “like God.”

Paul John used both figurative language and code switching from Yup’ik to English to emphasize important points.2 Concrete examples helped him to clarify meaning. They provided connecting links between an invisible Yup’ik past and an all-too-visible Kass’aq (Euro-American) present. Although the code switching was partly for my benefit, Paul John often closed his eyes in concentration and delivered his pronouncements directly into the tape recorder. The comparisons were not meant only for my ears but for posterity as well.

Paul John could have made the same comparisons in Yup’ik or used a Yup’ik construction. For example, instead of using the English simile “like a school,” he might have used the Yup’ik word for school (elitnaurvik) and the aequalis case ending meaning “like” or “similar” to get elitnaurvigtun (literally “like a school”). Alternately, he could have rendered in Yup’ik terms such as “college” and “God” as “college-atun” (with the aequalis case ending) or “God ayuqluku’ (like God) from the verb base ayuqe- (to resemble, to be like).
During our recording week together, Paul John used many metaphors, not all of which involved code switching. For example, when describing the importance of self-esteem, he compared a traditionally educated Yup'ik person to a non-Native college graduate.

Traditionally, a Yup'ik who has great faith and pride in himself will know who he is and will lead a productive life... It could be like a Kass'aq who goes to school and graduates and has faith in what he has learned and thinks, "I will acquire an occupation using this knowledge I have acquired." The Yup'ik pursuit of life is similar.

In public planning presentations between 1994 and 1996 surrounding the Yup'ik mask exhibit Agayulliaraput (Our Way of Making Prayer), Paul John continued to emphasize metaphorical comparisons between aspects of the Yup'ik past and non-Native institutions and practices that directly impact Yup'ik people today. For example, at an exhibit steering committee meeting in Bethel in February 1994, he described in Yup'ik to a Yup'ik audience (plus one non-Native anthropologist) the angalkut ( shamans) as "the scientists of our ancestors" (scientist-ait ciuliamta).

Angalkut [shamans] were the scientists of our ancestors. With their extrasensory perception they could tell what the future held for others. And white people mention biologists nowadays, the ones that keep records on fish. Some shamans worked on the path of the fish the people were going to use. It is said they were clearing the path for the fish. And then the [angalkut] who are able to would go down into the ocean during the winter to make a request for plenty of seals or other sea mammals, so that springtime would bring an abundance when men went out sea-mammal hunting (John 1994a).

At the same presentation he referred to angalkut as "the professors of our people." He described the masks as "like examples of what people can catch."

During the same steering committee meeting, Paul John explained a traditional Yup'ik adage which translates, "Humankind populates the world and all people are one."

There is an adage that has been around since the time of our ancestors: Ella-gguq allamek yuitug [Humankind populates the world and all people are one]. . . When I first heard people saying that adage, I thought people who lived far away were not connected to me. Now during my travels when I meet people, and when a person mentions one of his relatives, we find ourselves recognizing names that our elders mentioned. Since we all come from one Creator, we are related even though we are widely dispersed.

As we shall see, this traditional adage expressing the essential unity of an apparently diverse humankind underlies many of Paul John's more recent metaphorical explanations.

At the exhibit opening in Toksook Bay in January 1996, Paul John described the masks' significance to Yup'ik students and teachers at Toksook Bay High School. Again, he punctuated his Yup'ik narration with references to masks which he said, in English, were "like the resolutions" effecting people's future well-being put forward in meetings today. Although his audience was primarily Yup'ik speakers, his daughter Theresa translated his statements for the handful of non-Native listeners. His primary purpose was to impress upon the high school students the importance of traditional masked ceremonies he had experienced when he was young.

Four months later at the symposium that opened the mask exhibit in Anchorage, Paul John made a similar presentation, spoken in Yup'ik and featuring the same English simile, to a mixed Native and non-Native audience. In October he was invited once more to speak at the Anchorage Museum, this time to a predominantly non-Native group. Although his audience was markedly different from that at Toksook Bay High School, Paul John reiterated his comparison between masks and resolutions, once again grounding the English simile in a Yup'ik narration. As in his presentation to the students in Toksook Bay, his purpose was to educate his audience and to teach them something about the Yup'ik way of life. Unlike his Toksook presentation, he did not assume that his audience already had a respect for the Yup'ik past. When he compared masks to government resolutions, he was making a statement about the importance of a particular ceremonial activity and about Yup'ik traditional activity more generally.

Phyllis Morrow (1990) describes contexts in which Yup'ik speakers are less specific, allowing for simultaneous reference to multiple realities. She writes, "Yup'ik ontology is characterized by multiple simultaneous reference which is an outgrowth of a recognition that meaning is essentially indeterminate." Morrow makes a limited point and does not rule out specific and clear assertions. In fact, there are contexts today in which clarity is valued, when a speaker attempts to be as precise as possible to explain something in one cultural domain by reference to its existence in another. Whereas Morrow notes the use of multiple terms for phenomena which may be experienced in different ways by different people, Paul John brings single terms to the fore and underlines them in English to bridge the gap between unique cultural contexts.

Paul John is not the only person who uses English similes and extended metaphors during formal Yup'ik oration. I have heard English inserts included in Catholic church services otherwise
conducted in Yup’ik for a Yup’ik audience. In one sermon at Toksook Bay, Yup’ik deacon Joseph Asuluk compared preparation for life in heaven through careful acts on earth to making a reservation. He explained in Yup’ik that when people travel to Anchorage they often plan ahead and make a reservation in a hotel. Before going out to eat, they make a reservation at a restaurant. In the same way people must plan ahead during their lives and act on those plans, making a reservation in heaven.

Along with code switching and the use of English similes to draw comparisons between Yup’ik and Kass’aq lives, Yup’ik deacons often employ the parable, or ayuqe’tasqigun, literally, “device for comparing or showing likeness” (from ayuqe-“like,” plus -tassiir “to determine how [verb] something is,” plus -(u)n “device for V-ing”) (see also Jacobson 1984:566). For example, James Gump, a deacon from Hooper Bay, recently narrated “The Parable of the Two Buckets” in his village church. Spoken in Yup’ik to an all-Yup’ik audience, this story describes the relationship between Yup’ik and Christian teachings.

In the old days,
people had everything they have
from what they catch.
When the time comes they have
a celebration in thanksgiving for
what they have.
Men talk to young boys.
Women talk to young girls, to
teach them how to live good.
The first Christians came.
They have teachers.
They teach us how to live
good, too.
The elders and the teachers all
teach about God and how to live
good.
There are no accidents because
everybody follows the rules.
The buckets are filled.
The people all come.
Everybody drinks and is filled.
The elders fall silent.
The teachers fall silent.
Hard times come. Difficulties come.
People forget how to live good.
Accidents happen because
people no longer follow the rules.
The buckets are empty
. . . all the water goes out.
The people are thirsty.
Now . . .
The elders speak again.
The people are teaching again.

Now . . .
The people know how to live
good.
The buckets are filled.
The people all come.
Everybody drinks
and is filled.

Discussing the use of the drum during the Catholic mass, Dick Lincoln of Tununak reiterated the close relationship between the Yup’ik past and the Christian present: “To me the dances are prayers. They are prayers that come down from the ancestors.” The qaaggi was more than a dwelling, it was “like a church” where men taught others what it meant to be Yup’ik. Elders, he said, were “like the priests of yesterday.” As another deacon put it, “God speaks and the elders deliver.”

Men like James Gump and Dick Lincoln often draw their inspiration from the Bible, especially the New Testament, the most widely read book in both English and Yup’ik in southwestern Alaska. The Bible is awash in metaphor and simile. The metaphor of the harvest is one of the most commonly employed. For example,

Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is in-
deed abundant but the workers are few. Therefore
pray the Lord of the harvest that he may send out
workers into his harvest” (Matthew 9:37–38).4

The metaphorical comparison between the
“Holy Shepherd” and his human sheep is ubiqui-
tous in biblical rhetoric. For example, Matthew
(9:36) reads, “He was filled with pity over them
because they were like shepherdless sheep that are
wearied and helpless.” And later, “Go to the lost
sheep of the house of Israel” (Matthew 10:5–6; see
also 7:15). The opposition between light and dark
is another common biblical metaphor: “On those
who dwell in the land of the shadow of death a
light has dawned” (Matthew 4:16).5

What is most impressive about the New Tes-
ament is not the frequent use of a handful of com-
mon themes but the variety of metaphors it em-
loys, reflecting the life and times of Jesus and his
disciples. Nothing is too mundane to invite com-
parison, from a thorn to a wineskin to a rock to a
potter’s jar. Again, examples are abundant in

Matthew:

He told them another parable, “The kingdom of
heaven is like yeast which a woman took and
buried in a bushel of flour until it was all raised”
(Matthew 13:33).

No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old
coat, for the patch would tear away from the coat
and the tear become worse (Matthew 9:16).

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed
(Matthew 13:31).
The kingdom of heaven is like a net cast into the sea (Matthew 13:47).\textsuperscript{6} Yup’ik deacons like Joseph Asuluk and James Gump follow Jesus’ example in their regular citing and restating of these biblical metaphors:

Jesus said all this to the crowds in parables and never spoke to them except in parables, so that the saying of the prophet was fulfilled: “I will open my mouth in parables; I will express what has been hidden since the creation of the world” (Matthew 13:34–35).

Metaphors of Conversion

We have few records of the quantity and quality of metaphorical language employed by Yup’ik orators before 1900. Written accounts by missionaries working in the region at the time record that non-Native missionaries regularly employed metaphorical language, biblical and otherwise, in their sermons. Missionaries also made ample use of biblical metaphors in published reports on the condition of the missions. These metaphors reflected the nineteenth century commitment to perceived progress from a lower to a higher stage of civilization. From the range of metaphorical choices offered in the Bible, missionaries tended to choose those involving hierarchy (shepherd/sheep; parent/child) and opposition (dark/light; night/day; sleeping/waking; heavy/light).

The metaphor of the shepherd and his sheep made regular appearances in missionary accounts of the conversion process. In 1925 the Moravian Proceedings (p. 39) read, “Lloyd Neck was chief herder of the Quinhagak herd. He will now work under the great Shepherd, Who gave his life for his sheep.” And again three years later: “The Native young people there are very much like sheep without a shepherd” (Proceedings 1928:45).

Missionaries also used the metaphor of the harvest in describing what they hoped to accomplish. For example, “There is a splendid opportunity for Christian activity among the up-river people. The grain may be standing thin here in this field, but it is true that the grain is ripe for the harvest and the laborers are few—far too few” (Proceedings 1919:49; see also 1909:53).

The harvest and shepherd metaphors were sometimes mixed. In the late 1920s Moravian missionaries wrote to the Home Board that “there is great danger that the seed sown be entirely smothered . . . by ugly weeds. To change the metaphor. They have become followers of the great Shepherd’s own, but just now they are as sheep without a shepherd” (Proceedings 1929:44). Four years later, Ferdinand Drebert queried, “Are the Moravians going to stand aside and let [the Catholics] take our field and our fold?” (Proceedings 1936:39).

The missionaries also metaphorically employed the relationship between parent and child to describe their relationship with their parishioners. Moravian missionary Arthur Butzin wrote, “We must do more for these children, lest they grow up semi-pagan” (Proceedings 1920:55). Similarly, “in things spiritual they are still children and need to be instructed and led along” (Proceedings 1910:63).

The patronizing attitude of the missionaries was often expressed in even less flattering terms, analogizing the Yup’ik to animals. Following his visit to Alaska, Bishop Gapp (1936:102) compared the Yup’ik eating needlefish to a robin eating a worm:

They prefer these fat little pinfish raw and alive—the more lively they disport themselves in the dish before they slip them into the mouth, the more pleased they are. They eat them just as red-breast eats a worm. Only the Eskimos always make sure to start the little fish down head first so the prickly projections will not scratch.

The Yup’ik were not only like animals, but like animals that the missionary figuratively “hunted,” as when the Proceedings (1906:52) described the 200 new people claimed by the mission as creatures “drawn within the net and kept in view as hoped-for trophies of divine grace.” Just as they saw their converts as children and animals, they saw themselves as “pilgrims in a desert land” (Gapp 1936:97).

As common as these hierarchical metaphors, oppositional metaphors played upon the contrast of unconverted to converted. All of these metaphors placed the negative images—dark, sleep, heavy, night, cold—on the unconverted, while the newly converted were seen as warm, light, awake, and in daylight. Hinz wrote, for example,

On my trips . . . I have often noticed a great difference between the heathen and our Christians. The difference is as marked as between darkness and light or between night and day. The understanding of the heathen is darkened; there is no light, no hope, no comfort, no joy in them (Proceedings 1901:65).\textsuperscript{7}

The missionaries also made use of the contrasts between light and heavy and hot and cold:

Young People’s rallies . . . and special evangelistic services . . . have all been used of God to raise the spiritual temperature of our church (The Moravian 1957:6).

The staff . . . continues to bear the heavy load (The Moravian 1956:9).

The metaphoric use of warfare, in which missionaries present themselves as “fighting the good fight,” leaves no doubt concerning their view of their work as a progressive enterprise:
[To advance this work as it ought to be advanced there is immediate need of reinforcements. The Alaska Mission is a battle front where all of the reserves have been called into the trenches. There are no more reserves to call upon. When the time comes that our veterans... step out... it will become necessary to withdraw... It means retreat before the forces of darkness and superstition (Proceedings 1921:56).

As in the Bible, missionaries often employed the metaphor of the garden, comparing the Yup’ik to the soil itself. The Reverend Butzin wrote:

Native superstitions and vices have merely been stirred by the pioneer’s hoe. They are taking root again. The enemy has also been busy sowing more seed—of another kind. From the white man’s acreage of vices he is endeavoring earnestly to scatter the seeds of making illicit liquor. And the Eskimo soil is very fertile for this sort of seed (Proceedings 1929:44).

In this mixed metaphor, employing both images of agriculture and of war ("the enemy has also been busy"), the agricultural motif is primary. For Butzin, the seeds of sin, sown by Natives and non-Natives alike, are quick to grow in Native soil. The missionary is the farmer, wielding the pioneer’s hoe in an effort to rid the garden of weeds and, presumably, prepare it for cultivation of better things.

Moravian missionaries also recorded the early use of metaphor by Native helpers—converts who worked with the missionaries to spread the Word among their own people. Initially, the helpers' metaphors paralleled those of their missionary teachers. For example, Yup’ik helpers also spoke of conversion to Christianity as "waking up": "Being himself awakened [Helper Neck, one of the first and most devoted Native helpers] was glad and happy to tell me [the Reverend John Hinz] that some people at Tuluksak are awakened too, although some are sleeping yet" (Proceedings 1905:61). In 1889 John Kilbuck wrote, "The school children are quite awakened this winter... Another young man came into our sitting-room... and said: 'While I sat listening to your words, it seemed to me that I was just waking up from a long sleep. I am indeed thankful, for now my eyes are open' " (Fienup-Riordan 1988:255). This "new" Yup’ik metaphor, however, may also have been rooted in the past, as the Christian image of "waking up" may well have been understood by Yup’ik converts to correspond with their notion of ellange-, meaning "to gain awareness" (from ello, "awareness," plus nge-, "to begin"). Very young children were believed to lack awareness or lasting memory of experience. As they matured, however, they gained awareness, recognized their surroundings, and remembered their experiences. To this day many oral accounts begin "Ellan-
gellemni...", "When I became aware" or "When I awakened."

At the first Yup’ik Helpers’ Conference in 1895, ten years after the Moravians first settled on the Kuskokwim, Brother Augustus spoke of changes he had seen: "In looking back at our past living it seems to me as though we were coming out of black darkness, where we knew nothing, and now are approaching the light. We begin to see and can make out the true outlines of real objects of life" (Helpers’ Conference Minutes 1895:12). Other helpers at this same conference echoed the hierarchical metaphors of the missionaries:

We are only the instruments and the power is God (p. 4).
We are God’s servants, he is the Master (p. 7).
We must not hide our light, but show it to others what a true believer should be (p. 5).

Early Yup’ik converts also employed the parent/child metaphor to describe the conversion process. Helper David said of the Reverend Adolf Stecker, "He did not deal with us as one who scolds, but he admonished us transgressors as his own children. We know when a man has a child, which he loves, doing wrong, he forbids it because he loves the child. Thus he has been toward us" (Proceedings 1910:65). Note the subtle shift in meaning. Whereas in the original missionary metaphor, the Yup’ik-child is subservient to the missionary-parent, here the child is not so clearly subservient but is the parent’s beloved. Although the relationship between parent and child still signals hierarchy, the affectionate rather than the authoritative aspect of that relationship is emphasized.

The issue of translation of biblical metaphors was a serious one for the newly converted. Just how serious is intimated in the Reverend Hinz’ account of his work with Helper Neck: ‘In translating I often had to ask [Helper Neck], in order to find the right words, and he never got too tired to answer me. He said: ‘The labor in the word of God is the most important here on earth, for the word of God is life’” (Proceedings 1905:61).

The literal translation of biblical metaphors also presented problems. The pastoral metaphors did not ring true to the Yupiit, who traditionally husbanded neither cattle nor sheep and cultivated nothing. After his visit to the Alaska mission, Bishop Capp (1928:111) noted, “How could they speak of ‘the Lamb of God’ when no Eskimo knows what a lamb is? In the new Eskimo bible it will appear as the Mountain Sheep of God. The Shepherd and the sheep will be made clear to the Eskimo mind in the form of the reindeer and its herder.”

But Yup’ik converts did more than restate and revise biblical and missionary metaphors. Like Jesus and his disciples and the biblical prophets...
before them, some created new metaphors and similes out of their everyday experiences to describe the conversion experience. Said Helper Neck of work among the unconverted, “It is like going up a mountain stream. Only by persistent effort” (Arthur Butzin, Bethel Station Diary, July 25, 1922). A new Christian from Quinhagak compared the converts to oil lamps: “We have had our lamps refilled with oil. Now let us go back to our villages and turn the wicks up higher” (Proceedings 1927:42).

Helper Neck’s sermons were replete with metaphor. Once, when he was away, his fellow villagers “slid back” and listened to the advice of a shaman. When Neck heard of their doings on his return, he preached a sermon on the necessity of abandoning the old ways to enter the Kingdom of God:

We cannot enter the Kingdom of God because we have stretched out our arms on both sides, and on each arm is tied a long piece of wood. The entrance into the Kingdom of God is not so wide that we can enter in such a condition. The long pieces of wood which hinder us are our bad habits (Proceedings 1906:63).

On another occasion he gave this extended analogy:

A man without faith is like a man without oars in a swift stream. How is a man without oars in a boat out in a strong current? He is helpless. The current drives him where it will. It drives him out to sea. He is tossed about until the tidal swells are reached. Then he disappears. He does not reappear. He is lost (Proceedings 1914:53).

In the recital of the beatitudes, early Kuskokwim missionary Edith Kilbuck noted that “the Natives translate the poor in spirit, by comparing the spirit of man to the bits of hay that fall to the floor and are trampled upon.” Another helper criticized the new converts by means of a waterfowl simile: “Too many are like geese following the leader” (Halpers’ Conference Minutes 1895:6). One Yup’ik “doubting Thomas” used a flapjack metaphor to describe resistance to the missionaries’ new order:

We also met the hypocrites. Here are the words of one of this class: “We are like flapjack, burned on the one side, well done on the other. When the missionary comes we show the well done side, but when he is gone, up we flop the other side!” (Proceedings 1927:42).

Yup’ik converts were not the only ones to draw on their personal observations to create metaphors about their situation. In the 1920s Edith Kilbuck compared herself in her old age to the wheel dog on a team—unable to pull her weight but still wanting to run with the group. Instead of a missionary using biblical metaphor to explain the Yup’ik condition to non-Natives, this mission-}

ary employed a metaphor constructed in terms of local images to explain the missionary condition.

**“Masters of Metaphor”**

The most respected conveyers of Yup’ik knowledge are those who express things that listeners already know in artful or different ways, offering new expressions of the same.

—Elsie Mather, cited in Morrow 1995:32

In his use of simile in contemporary oratory, Paul John may in part be drawing on his exposure to biblical metaphor and Yup’ik variations on biblical themes which he has heard since he was young. Not only has he listened to weekly sermons by non-Native priests in his local Catholic church, but a well-worn copy of a Yup’ik translation of the New Testament is within easy reach in his home.

Along with missionary and biblical precedent, the Yup’ik rules for living, including both alerqujet (prescriptions) and inerqujet (prohibitions), also employ analogical thinking. For example, as a young man Paul John was admonished to perform numerous acts to allow him to be a good hunter. He must rise early so that illness would not find him a comfortable place to lie on. He must rub dirt on his abdomen as a barrier to illness. This dirt should come from the walkways of the people so that illness could “walk out of his body,” using this walkway as its path. Here the dirt was not “like a pathway for illness,” but was the actual path illness took out of the body or, alternately, the barrier that prevented its entry (see Fienup-Riordan 1994).

In the past a young man was taught to perform numerous acts while keeping thoughts of the seals and other animals foremost in his mind so that the animals would perceive him as worthy. He had to clear the walkways of snow and the water holes of ice so that the animals would, literally, come to him along these paths. He also had to be careful about what he ate. For instance, he would row more slowly if he ate the marrow of geese wings. He would be like a bird without wings.

If he performed all these acts while hunting in the ocean, the seals would see him as a little seabird and would be irresistibly drawn to him. Again, the good hunter did not appear “like a seabird” but was actually believed to become a seabird in the seal’s eyes. Finally, when the hunter killed a seal, it would experience death as an enveloping soporific mist. Death was not compared to sleep. Rather, a dead seal was believed actually asleep, and if its body was cared for properly, its soul would later awaken and return to the sea (Fienup-Riordan 1990b).

In describing their traditional rules for living, contemporary Yup’ik elders repeatedly select the metaphor “clearing the path” to explain their view
of the world as well as to communicate what they hope listeners will incorporate into their own lives. This image of Yup’ik activity, both physical and mental, is an indigenous articulation, and “clearing the path,” “creating a barrier,” and “cutting off one’s future catch” are the explicit metaphors older Yup’ik men and women use to describe past practices in narrative accounts recorded in the 1980s (Fienup-Riordan 1994). Unlike the biblical metaphors of hierarchy and opposition employed by missionaries, the emphasis in indigenous Yup’ik metaphor was on the circumscribed movement between different but related worlds. It is in the context of this metaphoric tradition that Yup’ik converts first heard missionaries proclaim that the wafer and wine were the body and blood of Christ. Ironically, “conversion” is a metaphor insofar as it is a process that draws comparisons, clothing new ideas in familiar terms and presenting old ones anew.

In his use of English simile, Paul John draws on both his understanding of traditional Yup’ik metaphor and his exposure to biblical metaphor and Yup’ik variations on biblical themes. He is not alone in employing this rhetorical tool. Today, metaphor and simile are widely used in public conversations (including speeches, publications, and classroom explanations) concerning the changing conditions of the Yup’ik people. Though these conversations take place in many arenas (school, church, home, community center) and are intended for a variety of audiences (Native, non-Native, and mixed), many can be seen as part of a larger conversation on what it means to be Yup’ik in a changing world.

For example, at a meeting of the elders’ council of the Yukon Nation in Akiachak in April 1991, 50 elders discussed in their own language the present state of affairs. During debate they employed traditional metaphors to describe their view of their role as leaders and the place of their efforts in the future of the Yup’ik people (Fienup-Riordan 1992). Elders repeatedly compared the laws of the past to paths that must be followed: “Like they tell us, let us follow our Yup’ik laws so that we will live without having to encounter disaster in our path” (Yupit Nation 1991:25). According to Kenneth Peter of Akiachak, “Your ancestors made a path for you! You will not go by any other path! . . . And also from the past, all the oral teachings are like roads!” (Yupit Nation 1991:37). Leaders are the ones who help people to know which path to take:

They had those that could predict the future accurately as leaders, because they know the future, they taught their young that was the way to live. And following them, they lived right, like following a path. But those that did not took the wrong way. That is how it is now (Yupit Nation 1991:25).

Non-Natives were faulted not for the path they had chosen, but for their intolerance, their unwillingness to let other people follow their own ways. As prominent as the admonition to lead followers down the proper path was the expressed need to work together “with one mind.” This perception of their role has roots in the Yup’ik view of personhood and the susceptibility of the human mind to injury in the face of overt conflict (Fienup-Riordan 1986). Elders believed that the success of the Yupit Nation rested on their ability to allow people to work together “with one mind.” Kenneth Peter argued, “If people are of one mind [unyualgukta], it will not take forty years to get the land, if you are of one mind having one speaker for the land . . . Let people hear at the same time then we will become one . . . People who talk as one are to be reckoned with” (Yupit Nation 1991:15).

Yup’ik leaders recognized their responsibility, but elders no longer are the sole teachers of the younger generation and the result has been division and confusion. According to Kenneth Peter: “At the present time, we do not teach them. And because you do not make people wake up, what you say is mixed up; it has become like akutaq without berries . . . A leader must lead by taking care of the people, not being impulsive, he woke the people up, made people think” (Yupit Nation 1991:1). Some believe the Yupit Nation can help provide the leadership necessary to create a unified voice within a region of diverse interests. According to Paul John, who was among the leaders attending the meeting, “If we truly work with the same mind we will dull those piercing points and make things soft and warm to bear. So we will work on them if we are of the same mind” (Yupit Nation 1991:36).

Paul John once again demonstrated his outstanding capacity for experimenting with adjacency in describing “these modern times” as they relate to the Yup’ik past. He spoke at length in Yup’ik at a Tribal Court Conference in Bethel in September 1994 to a large, primarily Yup’ik audience about the “divided minds” and “clouded vision” of the State of Alaska versus the “one mind” and “Eye of Awareness” of his ancestors. On this occasion, speaking to an audience of his peers, Paul John did not employ code switching. Rather, his elaborate metaphors made reference to traditional Yup’ik vision imagery that his audience could both understand and appreciate (Fienup-Riordan 1996:164–168). Sophie Evan, a school board member for the Lower Kuskokwim School District, made a simultaneous translation which was later published in Tundra Drums, the weekly Bethel
newspaper. Her translation of Paul John’s (1994b:A8) remarks reads:

Today we have been talking to one another, but our minds are not one. Our forefathers worked with one mind . . . The state is breaking up our lives. The state has poor vision. Their eye is bad. Look at this Eye of Awareness [Ellam innga]. Our forefathers followed the Eye of Awareness. They would go to that person and make them aware of what they were doing wrong, with compassion. But the state has clouded vision. Its eye is closed. A lot of our people are in trouble because the state has this bad eye. When we ask them from the state, they always say we cannot help. That is how bad the state’s vision is.

Along with formal Yup’ik orations, some of which make use of traditional Yup’ik metaphors, many contemporary Yup’ik speak their metaphors entirely in English, creating striking new juxtapositions. According to one Yup’ik speaker in public testimony concerning oil development in the Bering Sea, Yup’ik people are being treated like tomcod—in and out with the tides. Still another compared Native people to land covered by asphalt—still alive underneath but crying in the dark. Speaking in English to a Senate Subcommittee Hearing on Native Education in Fairbanks in March 1969, the late Margaret Nick Cook provided another example of just how fresh and pointed Yup’ik metaphor can be:

I can’t predict how [my children] should be educated, but one thing I know is, if my children are proud, if my children have identity, if my children know who they are, they’ll be able to encounter anything in life. I think this is what education means . . . This is why it’s a must that we include our history and our culture in our schools before we lose it all . . . We’ve got a lot of ideas about how we should improve our Indian education. Now that we have the information, let’s not kick it around like a hot potato. Let’s take the hot potato and open it before it gets cold (Nick 1969).

Yup’ik men and women use metaphors in public writing as well as public speaking. In his article “The Long Suffering,” written in English and published in the Alaska Native weekly paper Tundra Times, Charlie Kairaiuk (1993:4) of Chefornak wrote,

The Native spiritual being is said to be like a moist clay ball. When it is deprived of the right amount of moisture, it begins to dry up and the surface cracks. Eventually dried pieces start to fall off. The good thing about clay is when the clay ball and the fallen pieces are moistened you can reconnect the pieces to make it whole again.

The spiritual state of Yup’ik people, past and present, is a major issue on which much pub-

lic debate and commentary today are focused. Deacons are not the only ones emphasizing the similarities between the Yup’ik and Christian views of the world. Laity do the same. Cecelia Martz, a native of Chevak who teaches courses on Yup’ik spirituality and cross-cultural communication at the University of Alaska in Bethel, often compares Yup’ik and Christian world views. Speaking in English during a teleconference to a mixed student audience in the fall of 1992, she likened the stories her father told her as a child to Bible stories because the meaning of each is revealed only after years of experience. Lecturing on family relations, she said, “For Yup’ik people, a woman donning a marriage parka made by her in-laws is like putting on a ring.” She described the Yup’ik practice of putting bones back in the ground after eating, while saying “Qvyan [thanks], come back in abundance” and concluded “That’s the Amen.”

In another presentation, Martz explained the traditional Yup’ik practice of purifying oneself with the smoke of ayuq, or Labrador tea, likening it to the Catholic use of incense and holy water: “For instance, during the Bladder Festival or other festival, they used to purify the qasgi with wild celery or Labrador tea smoke. It’s just like incense in the church . . . Native people used ayuq and ikittuk [wild celery] just like people use holy water.”

Younger Yup’ik speakers continue to employ metaphors of movement and pathmaking, although infrequently. In a report about her student teaching experience at Bethel Regional High school, Paul John’s daughter Theresa wrote, “It’s important to teach our future leaders proper knowledge and build solid trails so that they too can successfully lead their young peers.” Although Theresa was writing in English, she intended her words for a mixed Native and non-Native audience.

Another accomplished Yup’ik “master of metaphor” is the author and translator Elsie Mather. Although not a political force like Paul John, she is a leader in the study of the Yup’ik language. On my way through Bethel in 1991 after my work with Paul John, I visited Elsie and she asked me to read an introduction she had written for her translation of Phillip Charlie’s telling of the story “Man Who Left.” Both the story and introduction have since been published in English in an edited volume intended for Native as well as non-Native readers, in much the same form as the draft I read sitting at her kitchen table (Mather 1991:17). The first paragraph describes the church steeple that Mather could, until recently, see from her window. “The simple shape,” she wrote,

is not particularly striking or beautiful, but over the years my appreciation of it has deepened because I seemed to have absorbed something new each time I looked at it . . . Recently I have been working on a traditional Yup’ik story . . . I first
heard this story on tape about eight years ago and have since listened to it many times. And like my experience with the church steeple I have, over the years, absorbed different aspects of it, understanding a bit here and there . . . I have come to liken it to a symbol . . . There is no one set of words that could adequately describe what the story is about.

For Mather, stories are like people with whom one’s relationships change and deepen through time. She makes this comparison explicit with another metaphor: “Stories connect us to our place, our past, and to each other, and they can continue to speak to us about our human condition.”

This is far from the only instance of Mather’s deft use of metaphor. Metaphors abound in her essay “With a Vision beyond Our Immediate Needs: Oral Traditions in an Age of Literacy,” originally presented as a keynote speech at the 1986 annual bilingual-multicultural conference, sponsored by the Alaska State Department of Education in Anchorage. Her ideas were recently presented to a national audience as part of the essay collection When Our Words Return (Morrow and Schneider 1995), the title of which is itself a reference to the Yup’ik view that animals return if properly cared for. In the beginning of her presentation Mather (1995:19) notes, “Our language, as a gift, ought to be used and shared.” She continues, “We as translators are, in effect, cogs in a machine—a machine used in the business of transmitting English concepts to the Natives” (Mather 1995:22). And in the concluding paragraphs she writes, “Let’s not just teach our children the skeleton of our language which is cold. Let’s bring our language to life through imaginative use in all its flesh, warmth, and vitality” (Mather 1995:24).

Conclusion: Metaphors are Tools

First you have to learn what the story says. Then you learn what the story can do when it is engaged as a strategy of communication. Unless we pay attention to the reason a particular story is selected and told, we will understand very little about its meanings.

—Julie Cruikshank 1995:71

Most of the Yup’ik metaphors discussed in this paper were used in the process of teaching or preaching. Speakers addressed them as explanations, primarily to the uninitiated. Traditional metaphors of “following a path” and “working with one mind” are still used in public contexts in which older Yup’ik men and women speak among themselves in their own language. The similes and metaphors I have concentrated on, however, are primarily used to educate younger or less knowledgeable men and women, both Native and non-Native.

Metaphor is well suited to educating listeners, a fact understood by Jesus’ disciples, Moravian missionaries, and contemporary Yup’ik public speakers alike. Basso (1976:111) cites Aristotle’s early recognition of this didactic function of metaphor: “Most smart sayings are derived from metaphor and thus from misleading the hearer beforehand. For it becomes evident to him that he has learned something when the conclusion turns out contrary to his expectations, and his mind seems to say, ‘How true it is! But up to now I missed it’ (Rhetoric 3).”

Those who see metaphor as expressive of cultural meanings already in place (Fernandez 1991; Turner 1991; Quinn 1991) have taken issue with those who see metaphor as constituting understanding and creating new fields of meaning (Basso 1976; Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Yup’ik metaphor used in didactic situations displays a plethora of unique expressions. Yet these expressions do not so much constitute meaning as express it. When contemporary Yup’ik orators use such varied metaphors to “educate,” in the broadest sense, what do they want their listeners to learn?

Paul John, Elsie Mather, Cecelia Martz, and Margaret Cook each in their own ways compare and weigh a rich and valued Yup’ik past with objects, institutions, and beliefs new to their region within their lifetimes. These educators use similes and metaphors as strategic tools in the process of cross-cultural communication. We may, in fact, refer to them as cross-cultural metaphors. Just as metaphors in general are expressions that establish relationships of similarity among conventionally unrelated categories, these cross-cultural metaphors establish relationships between originally unrelated ways of life. The shared characteristics of a person’s life and a box of tools, of the qasgi and college, of quyama and “amen,” are used to specify a new field of meaning to which both elements belong.

All of Paul John’s images, as well as those of many of the other Yup’ik speakers cited above, are creative reorderings of the diverse and complicated contemporary world in terms of a small set of culturally meaningful themes. These themes are linked by a set of associative connections to a shared thematic core—the unity of humankind. This underlying unity allows speakers to use such different images when talking about the changes they have seen during their lives, yet they can be perceived as saying the same thing.

The underlying theme of Paul John’s cross-cultural metaphors, I believe, is his profound belief that all humans are essentially related. I have heard him express this view on a number of occasions—one to a group of Yup’ik high school students, once to a group of adult Yup’ik men and
women, and once to a primarily non-Native audience. Each time, he stated it not as his personal opinion, but as an explanation of the Yup’ik adage that translates, “Humankind populates the world and all people are one.” His explanation refers not only to Yup’ik culture, but to the concept of human nature as well.

As a skilled orator, Paul John employs metaphor as only one among many tools. In the same recorded conversation in which he used so many potent figures of speech, he summarized his view of the relationship between Yup’ik and non-Yup’ik people.

I wish and hope that the Yupiit and the Kass’at begin to understand each other. If they learn and understand each other they will recognize and accept who they are. You know, they would recognize and see each other and one would say, “These Yupiit aren’t stupid after all. They are aware and alive.” The Kass’at themselves are human like us. It would be much better if we understand each other and not fight and resist each other.

I urge and push that we, especially those who are working with the people, work towards the better understanding of the Yupiit and the Kass’at...

If we integrate the teachings of the Yupiit and the Kass’at, their knowledge will be greater (John 1991:5).

Paul John’s plea for understanding and acceptance of difference, as well as his use of metaphor in making this point, contrast markedly with the missionaries’ metaphorical expression of their fundamental belief in the progressive development of humankind, placing themselves at the top rung of the ladder. Contemporary Yup’ik orators do not turn this hierarchy on its head. Instead they use metaphors to delineate similarities between the Yup’ik and Kass’aq ways of life, while also affirming the differences. Yup’ik educators use these metaphors in a variety of situations to enable their listeners, whether students learning to be Yup’ik or non-Natives relatively unfamiliar with the Yup’ik way of life, to simultaneously recognize their shared humanity and reevaluate their special place in history. Their metaphors emphasize similarities between things Yup’ik and Kass’aq, to explain them, validate them, and put them on an equal footing.

Yet, however much Yup’ik acts and practices may be likened to their Kass’aq counterparts, they emerge more as cousins than as identical twins. Unlike the missionary metaphors published at the turn of the century, the ideas of progress and hierarchy are notably absent from contemporary Yup’ik metaphors. The ongoing conversation between Yup’ik educators and their “students” does not describe the primacy of one view of the world over the other. Instead, explanation seeks to elabo-rate the relationship between the two. Yup’ik metaphors are tools used to build bridges of understanding rather than walls of separation. They focus on concrete comparisons between human activity and features of the world around them, both natural and cultural. In this respect they are much closer to biblical precedent than to early missionaries’ conversion metaphors.

Yup’ik use of metaphor does parallel missionary metaphors in one important respect. The early Moravian missionaries rarely wrote metaphorically in their private journals and personal letters, saving this rhetorical tool for formal published accounts and sermons. Similarly, many Yupiit reserve these figures of speech for public oratory and matters of weight. To transmit local traditions in ways which the young will understand, contemporary Yup’ik elders, teachers, and leaders augment their traditional metaphors, such as “making the path clear,” with examples from modern contexts to explain and give meaning and equivalent value to traditions no longer practiced. When Paul John describes the shaman as “the biologist of our ancestors” and a mask as “a resolution” asking for a future benefit, he both shows his shrewd understanding of non-Native institutions as they reach into contemporary Yup’ik communities and positively represents the Yup’ik past he wants his children and grandchildren to inherit.

Paul John’s orations on change during his life are influenced by both traditional Yup’ik oratory and biblical precedent, yet are used to reflect contemporary Yup’ik concerns. As with any narrative, oral or written, the audience needs to know the means used to understand the ends. The English similes and metaphors I have heard in contemporary Yup’ik oratory dealing with changing times use new concepts (college, God, hotel reservations) to explain life in the past and use common everyday things (tomcod, asphalt, hot potatoes) to understand complicated contemporary life. They are tools orators can use to give depth and precision to their narrations. Perhaps these mixed metaphors provide a metaphor for the process of culture change itself, where a single idea, with all its associations, is placed in the context of a broader discourse on life. This metaphoric juxtaposition both informs that talk and broadens its reference, changing it in the process.

End Notes

1. Paul John has since received statewide recognition for his leadership and continued efforts to ins - sure that pieces of the Yup’ik past carry into the present. In October 1996 the Alaska Federation of Natives named him Tradition Bearer at their annual meeting in Anchorage.
2. John Gumperz (1982) states that the essence of code switching is that it constitutes a self-conscious use of foreign materials to create a "meaningful juxtaposition" of distant language systems. By code-switching, speakers add meaning to their speech through invoking different emotional tones, values, and contexts associated with the languages in their repertoires.


5. See also Matthew 5:14 and 5:16.


7. The Proceedings (1933:41) record a brilliant, literal embodiment of the metaphor contrast between darkness and light: "Our young people presented the Mission Pageant, 'From Darkness to Light.' It was somewhat shortened and given in one evening. Mrs. Drebort prepared the large map of the world which, when Part 2 of the Pageant was completed, was dotted with 28 tiny electric lights."

8. One early rendition of the 23rd Psalm into Tlingit was rife with such translation problems. Back-translated, it read, "The Lord is my goat-hunter, I do not want him, He knocks me down the mountain and pushes me into the sea" (Naish 1985).

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