

# **Maintaining tradition: Thematic and structural coherence in personal stories by Northern Athabaskans<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

Tradition of oral narratives is one of the most prominent types of communicative behavior in Northern Athabaskan cultures. This paper focuses on personal stories as material for the study of linguacultural models and their persistence in the situation of a linguacultural shift. The data comes from the personal stories, told in English, by the Athabaskans inhabiting inner Alaska, namely by the representatives of the last bilingual generation speaking the Upper Kuskokwim Athabaskan (UKA) language. The goal of the paper is to analyze specific formal and thematic features of the UKA storytelling tradition, to the degree in which they can be traced in spite of the language shift. A brief sketch of the UKA cultural values and sociocultural dynamics of the community in the last 50-70 years is given prior to the analysis of the culturally relevant themes and formal features of the personal stories told in English. The results confirm the hypothesis that coherence in Alaskan Athabaskan stories of personal experience is based on the integrity of the linguacultural models needed for their interpretation and Alaskan Athabaskan cultural traditions of storytelling, determining both the structure of the stories and the dynamics of storytelling situations.

## **1. Introduction.**

This paper aims at describing the ways in which the cultural tradition of oral narratives of the Alaskan Athabaskans (AA) whose first language is Upper Kuskokwim, makes their English-language personal stories different from that of Anglo-Americans', and how cultural schemas underlying discourse help to negotiate meaning interculturally (Malcolm and Sharifian 2001). The analysis focuses on the impact of culture(s) on discourse contents and organization, and the topics involved are: *cultural schemas characterizing AA personal stories, formal properties of the AA stories performed in English, and correspondences between the narrative tradition and the specific linguistic features of the produced narratives.*

This paper is based on the data I gathered, as part of my Fulbright research project, in the town of Nikolai, Alaska, in 2001. It was the second time I was staying in Nikolai with my husband, Andrej Kibrik, who has been involved in the UKA documentation project, gathering data for a comprehensive grammar of UKA since 1997. In 1997, I was assisting him with a sociolinguistic survey, and in 2001, I have started this project and was talking to the Nikolai elders, recording their personal stories told to me in English. Both times, we stayed in Nikolai for four months, our daughters attended the local school, and we were fully integrated in the life of the community, where, by that time, communication took place only in English. Since then, we regularly come to Nikolai for the purposes of Andrej Kibrik's fieldwork and other culture- and language-related projects. In these twenty years, I have been witness to a very sad narrative of the majority of my storytellers, the generation of Nikolai elders who still knew their language, passing away. When

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we talked back then, and I asked their permission to record their stories, I promised not to publish them in English under their names. Though I keep the promise, I think it is important and long overdue to pay them my respect by telling the story of their lives and deeds as seen through their own narratives.

### ***1.1. Theoretical approaches.***

A modern version of the linguistic relativity hypothesis (Leavitt 2015) indicates that languages do not reflect, but interpret, the reality, that these interpretations are essentially creative, and that language structures manifest most stable and recurrent of these interpretations.

Based on that, the relations between the language (L) and the culture (C) are better revealed using a modular approach when language L1 and culture C1 are used as operational parameters. For the purpose of this paper, by 'culture', in the narrow sense, I understand communicative patterns of storytelling. In the situation when a certain discourse community shifts from L1 to L2 we may expect that storytelling, as communicative practice, and oral narratives, as a discourse genre, will be determined either by patterns from C1 or C2, or by combination of both. (Agar 1994, 248-50). Therefore, by analyzing certain discourse genres in L2, one can demonstrate to what degree communication is motivated by C1 or C2 cultural schemata. The former case may be considered an example of *cultural resistance* (Rushforth and Chisholm 1991), and the latter – of *cultural shift*. Thus, those unfortunately frequent cases, when an ethnic group abandons its language for the language of the dominant group, creates almost ideal conditions for research of the interrelations between Language and Culture within the borders of specific discourse genres. As Field (2001, 249) puts it, “researchers have noted ways in which indigenous patterns of interaction or communicative practice are retained even after the language being used has shifted to English.”

This study takes advantage of some ideas and terms of the *cultural linguistics* paradigm (Palmer & Sharifian 2007) which represents «[s]ynthesis of antropological linguistics with the newly emergent field of cognitive linguistics. The approach centers on linguistic imagery, which is largely defined by culture” (Palmer 1996, 290). The concept of the *linguacultural model* (LCM) used in my research is shaped after the *cultural schemata* and *cultural conceptualizations* used by Malcolm and Rochecouste (2000) and Farzad Sharifian (2017). The term *cultural model* was also used by Cienki (1999). See in (Sharifian 2000) "...schemas are cognitive structures that can be formed by cultural experiences and that can be reflected in linguistic expression. In other words, schema theory provides a powerful tool for examining culturally determined cognitive structures which underlie the production of distinctive discourse patterns.”

Two other theoretical perspectives, relevant for any research involving linguacultural shifts, would be *intercultural* (including – *interlanguage*) *pragmatics* and *narrative analysis*. Intercultural pragmatics allows looking into how L1 constructions are rendered in L2, and how meaning is constructed in communication involving intercultural settings. The narrative analysis toolkit is lent by both – classical Labovian (Labov 1972, 1997, 2016, Gee 1985) and current paradigms (De Fina & Georgakopoulou 2008, 2015, Johnstone 2016).

Kecskes (2012) contrasts intercultural and interlanguage pragmatics. The latter focuses on the acquisition and use of pragmatic norms in L2. The main research issue of interlanguage pragmatics is how L2 learners produce and comprehend speech acts, and how their pragmatic competence develops over time. This line of research (e.g. Kasper and Blum-Kulka 1993; Kasper 1998) holds, as its basic concept, the idea of 'pragmatic transfer'. Current cross-sectional, longitudinal, and theoretical studies in the field have led to a special tie between interlanguage pragmatics and second language acquisition research, mostly in the classroom context – see, for example, chapters on interlanguage pragmatics in Trosborg 2010. Intercultural pragmatics

(Kecskes 2013) looks into how language systems are used in social encounters between speakers who have different first languages and cultures, yet communicate in a common language. In the core of this line of research lies a sociocognitive approach to communication. It is based on two types of contexts: the pre-existing network of knowledge, common for a community of practice, and the context emerging in the process of a communicative act.

Being central to cultural traditions of Northern Athabaskans, stories are widely used in classrooms (Webster&Yanez 2007) and in studies of social and cultural activities (Meek 2012, McIlraith 2012). In this paper, I do not discuss the instructional value of Athabaskan stories told in English, and use the ideas of intercultural pragmatics as a backstage for the discourse analysis of my narrative data. The starting point for my research is an idealized image, established in both literary and linguistic research of Athabaskan linguacultures, of what the narrative structure of Athabaskan stories is, and how different it is from the Anglo-American, and broader – Euro-American tradition. I call it an ‘idealized image’ because being based on data from various specific Athabaskan languages and communities, it becomes an ‘Athabaskan’, or ‘Northern Athabaskan’, or ‘Alaskan Athabaskan’ story.

Departing from this image, whose formal features were worked out by Dell Hymes (1974, 1977, 1994), a researcher is left either with language-specific narrative elements: discourse markers, lexical and morphological features, or with a general toolkit of the narrative analysis: Labovian form-and-function analysis and/or focus on the local occasioning of narratives in interaction (De Fina& Georgakopoulou 2008). For the latter approach, the buzzwords will be social practice, genre and community of practice.

## ***1.2. Research questions***

The research informing this paper lies in the focus of cultural linguistics quest for correlations between language and culture, and the instruments of these correlations. How much freedom, while choosing linguistic forms, do members of a given culture have in communication?

The research data comes from the personal stories told in English by the representatives of Athabaskans inhabiting inner Alaska. They are speakers of the Upper Kuskokwim (UKA) language (Kibrik, this volume) residing in the town of Nikolai, AK. Using the terms introduced above, UKA is L1, English – L2, and the cultural component C1 is the tradition of Northern/Alaskan Athabaskan oral narratives, which is dramatically different from that of Eurocentric (Euro-American) narrative tradition (Basso 1990, Kintsch, Green 1978, Moore&Wheelock 1990).

Research questions include the following issues:

- Are there similarities in the conceptual and formal organization of the AA stories told in English and in the native (here - UKA) language?
- What cultural themes are dominant in the UKA stories told in English?

The most logical way to address these questions would be to start with a detailed description of the narrative structure of personal stories in Upper Kuskokwim. Then, using the data gathered in English, one could look for differences and similarities, and argue to what extent they are determined by the differences in linguistic structures and to what extent by dramatically different narrative structure. But the problem is that there are stories written down in UKA and then translated into English (Collins 2004); there are certain types of discourse recorded and analyzed in Andrej Kibrik’s data, in particular, syntax and morphology of the UKA coordination (Kibrik 2004), but there is no description of the UKA narrative schema per se. Whatever is known and described in literature, refers to stories from other Alaskan Athabaskan (Kari 2010, Lovick 2012), or other Alaskan (Krauss 1990, Webster&Yanez 2007), and often – other Northern Athabaskan, communities (Meek 2012, Moore 2002, Moore&Wheelock 1990, Ruppert&Bernet

2001, Scollon&Scollon 1990). A significant part of this knowledge is about genres, storytelling situations and interactional aspects of stories (Basso 1990, Gee 1985, Scollon&Scollon 1979, 1981, Piper 1989, Lovick 2010, Moore 2002, Kari 2010). Strong tradition of folklore and literary research, especially the formal organization of micro- and macrostructure of Native American narratives, best known as ethnopoetics, is firmly based on the works of Dell Hymes (1974, 1977, 1994).

Thus, my starting point is this ‘exemplary (Northern) Athabaskan story’, characterized by its own genre structure, interactional patterns, sociocultural functions, thematic and formal structures, all of which are in stark contrast with the Eurocentric tradition.

The methods employed in this paper include discourse analysis of conversational stories following Polanyi (1989). This approach attends to discourse evaluative devices (repetition, special lexical items, pauses, pitch, pace, etc), which helps to reveal the underlying cultural schemas and demonstrates certain formal features of a given discourse genre. I also use the *contextualization clues* analysis (Gumperz 1982) and the situational analysis of communication failures in an intercultural storytelling setting (failures and repairs, types of misunderstanding, turn-taking and pausing), which is demanded by the intercultural interaction context.

### **1.3. Language data**

Personal stories, told as part of informal conversations, are the most ostensive material for the study of linguacultural models (LCMs) and their persistence in the situation of a linguacultural shift. All the more so, because traditional, or cultural, stories, myths and tales are not remembered in the UKA community, where the shift from L1 to L2 has taken place quite abruptly, in the lifespan of one generation, after an English-language school was introduced in 1948 (Rodli 1963). As a result, English-language narratives of personal experience turned out to be the only narrative genre available for my research.

Serious efforts for UKA revitalization were undertaken in the sixties-seventies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by Ray Collins (Collins 2004) and trained, for this purpose, speakers of UKA: Betty Petruska, Willie Petruska and Helen Dennis (later joined by Stephen Nikolai). Many traditional stories and tales told by Lena Petruska and Miska Deaphon were recorded, written down and translated into English (Ruppert&Bernett 2001, 279-280). But these parallel texts, where English was a result of conscious and rather literate translation, could not serve as data for my research. As Chafe (1990, 52) put it, “it is always important to keep in mind that conversational language reflects the natural workings of the mind more closely than language of any other kind.” (also Chafe 1997.) To see whether stories produced in English, in conversation spontaneously taking place in English as lingua franca, would bear any structural resemblance to what is considered an ‘Athabaskan story’, I needed them to be produced ‘here and now’. They had to be oral performances of personal experiences, not written down accounts, preferably narrating about some dramatic events, like being in danger, because the analysis looks into linguistic means of evaluation that are more visible in this kind of stories.

The data I have gathered consists of three groups of oral narratives: stories of personal experience about a dramatic, or dangerous, event, life narratives that would occasionally have an embedded story, and a number of narratives that are not stories in the narrow sense, mostly descriptions of the traditional routines.

### **1.4. Consultants.**

My consultants – the narrators and authors of the stories – were representatives of the village elders. This generation has witnessed and gone through the most dramatic changes in life style. They were born in tents and dugouts, hunted as kids with bows and arrows, and their mother-tongue was the only language they knew while kids. They listened to tales of how life had been before and imbibed stories of personal experience by their elders in Upper Kuskokwim, not in

English. They started speaking English between the age of 8 and 20, shifted to it completely with their own children and practically did not use their native language when I was conducting my conversational interviews in 2001. But they still remembered many words and could build sentences, make utterances and say things, thus using UKA in some restricted functions. They lived long enough to get a full taste of the modern consumerist society of the 21st century and used to call themselves a 'generation of changes' – a fancied topic in their stories.

Their English, definitely their second native language, had visible regional features. Within Alaska it is called *Bush, or Village English* (Tabbert 1978). This term refers to English speech by Native Alaskans of different ethnic origins. When someone uses this English variety, it points to association with certain ethnic groups and identification (often forced) with the minority culture (Kwachka 1985, 112).

The following key features define the pool of authors of the analyzed stories: older generation by age and status ('village elders'), the only generation of the UKA full bilinguals, relatively late (after 8) introduction to English, and late and/or incomplete knowledge of the written (English) tradition.

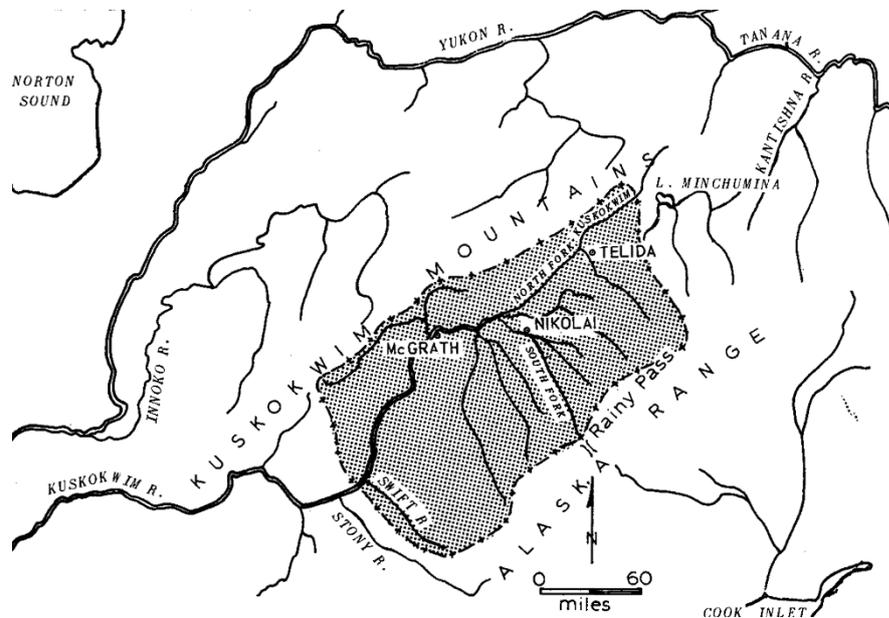
Out of 18 representatives of the older generation, who lived in Nikolai in 2001, 15 took part in the project. I have also recorded two stories from Anglo-Americans of the same age as my UKA consultants, who lived in Nikolai for a prolonged period. They served as an example of a different storytelling tradition, even though the scarcity of Anglo-American narrators did not allow me to use them as real control cases.

The data was taken for analysis consists of 15 hours of audio and 3 hours of video recordings. Altogether this amounted to 40 narratives, out of which approximately 20 can be considered stories of personal experience. They were transcribed according to general requirements of the discourse analysis (Riessman 2008).

Women made up 50 % of the narrators. The proportion of stories of personal experience as compared to all narratives was significantly lower among women. Female narrators used narratives for recounting events, not for making points or expressing opinions based on descriptions of the events that had taken place. Both male and female narrators did not demonstrate competence in Eurocentric tradition where stories are told to report the uniqueness of the personal experience on the backdrop of common knowledge. As for the Northern Athabascan tradition of integrating socially valuable knowledge through verbalization of personal experience, in my data, it seemed to be more of a male prerogative, possibly be due to different traditional gender roles-

## **2. Upper Kuskokwim: ways of life and patterns of cultural behavior**

The data for this paper was gathered during my fieldwork in the town of Nikolai from representatives of its indigenous population – Upper Kuskokwim Athabaskans (UKAs). The name of this ethnic group comes from the river Kuskokwim, and they inhabit the upper river region - see Map 1.



Map 1. The town of Nikolai, AK and the Upper Kuskokwim area (from Hosley 1968)

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Russian explorers used the term *Kolchan* for the Native American population in this part of Alaska (Zagoskin 1956), but this ethnonym did not become official, even though some American anthropologists used it (Hosley 1968). Athabaskans have inhabited this area for several thousand years, but due to very rough conditions, the UKAs never significantly exceeded two hundred people (Dzenishevich 1987, Hosley 1968, Oswald 1980). As of today, Nikolai counts less than one hundred people, the majority of them are UKAs. A few other people are representatives of the Caucasian Americans and Yupik Eskimo people. Several UKA families live in McGrath (Tochak'), a regional center with mixed population, located downriver. Another traditional UKA place – Telida became uninhabited just a few years ago. Since 2001, quite a few Nikolai families have moved to Anchorage (Raskladkina 2018).

### 2.1. Ways of life

A sketchy description of the UKA ways of life is necessary to see their influence on the UKA worldview and communicative patterns. Some of the features characteristic of the Alaskan Athabaskan lifestyle are typically circumpolar (Kwachka 1985), (Rushforth, Chisholm 1991),

some demonstrate their kinship with other Athabaskan groups outside Alaska (Beckham 2006), (Kintsch, Green 1978), (Krauss 1990), and, finally, there are features and patterns specific for this small, resistant, counting many centuries of separate existence ethnic group (Collins 2004, Kibrik 2004).

Up to the mid-twentieth century, UKAs were semi-nomadic. Moving within their traditional area, following a seasonal round, has been always determined by the staple food available at that period of the year. UKAs are primarily hunters and trappers, and in the second place, fishermen (as opposed to coastal Athabaskans). Even today, traditional ways of life, ‘living from land’, play an important role in their economy. A significant part of their everyday life is related to subsistence hunting, which has had strong influence on the UKA values, beliefs and communicative practices. The majority of the ‘Being-in-dangerous-situation’ stories are related to hunting.

Traditional attitudes towards subsistence hunting, common among other polar and circumpolar hunters’ societies, are based on the assumption that the world is inhabited by two kinds of animated beings – people and animals, who live in harmony and need each other for the balance. Animals will offer themselves to a skilled hunter, and he may not refuse this offer. Otherwise, the animals will be offended and will leave the area. When there is fish going in the river, one must catch it. If ducks and geese are coming to the lakes nearby, one should hunt them. There are certain rules that people should obey while hunting or fishing. The main one is to use every piece of what can be used, which is, basically, everything. No piece should get wasted. Otherwise, it will be killing for nothing. The catch is perceived as ‘gifts of the land’, not as ‘goods’, and this attitude is not compatible with the consumerist economy. The catch may not be sold for money. One can only consume it, and – when too much – to give it those in need for free – cf. Nelson 1983.

## ***2.2. Religion and Russian influence***

One of the conspicuous and special cultural features of the UKAs, and some of their neighbors, is their adherence to the Orthodox Christianity acquired from the time of Russian America, when Alaska was part of the Russian empire (Oswald 1980). This part of their culture is quite entrenched and, along with the UKA language and parts of material culture, is the major constituent of their cultural self-identification. The Orthodox Christianity also sets the UKAs apart from those of the former Orthodox neighboring ethnic groups who changed their denomination. Besides the religion, the UKAs owe Russians quite a few artifacts and words for them. Russian borrowings count almost one hundred in the UKA language. (Kibrik 2018).

## ***2.3. Contact with the American culture***

The UKAs engaged in contact with the Euro-American culture rather late. Due to their location in the heart of inner Alaska, beyond the Alaska Range, the UKAs managed to keep their traditional way of life and cultural integrity longer than other Native Alaskans. Up to the 1930-ies, when first airplanes started to deliver mail, their contact with white people (Russians and then Americans) was indirect. The Upper Kuskokwim area lies at the intersection of two major routes crossing Alaska: one, by land, across the Alaska range, from the Cook Inlet seacoast into the inner Alaska; another - by Kuskokwim river to the Bering sea. At the same time, it lies far away from the resources that the advancing civilization needed. Travelers crossing the area very much depended on the local resources, and the UKAs used the advantage that their location gave them: it was them, who were providing necessary food and other supplies to the outlanders, not vice versa. There were two positive outcomes of this situation. For one, the newcomers did not harm traditional subsistence hunting and fishing; just the opposite – the small but steady influx of people traveling through the area created demand for the UKAs’ skills and knowledge of the land. The second advantage was that such relations allowed local people to retain control over the ways and intensity of contacts. They were borrowing from people, who traveled through their territory, what they needed, not more. One example is fish wheels introduced in Alaska

since 1918, which enhanced intake of salmon. In modern Nikolai, they are re-introduced for cultural and educational purposes, as an artifact belonging to local tradition<sup>2</sup>. Ultimately, this type of interaction with the Western civilization led to a positive cultural adaptation and self-identification. At that time, UKAs took their part in delivering mail with dog teams through the system of roadhouses. Sometime they owned them, which was socially prestigious. Introduction of mail airplanes put an end to these activities and manifested many other changes (Schneider 1985).

In 1959 Alaskan Territory became a state, and in 1971 the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act was signed into law. Together with the petroleum dollars, it significantly influenced living conditions of the native population in such places as Nikolai. But even more dramatic changes in the realm of non-material culture took place earlier.

#### ***2.4. Language loss.***

English was barely spoken by UKAs up to 1948. That year two missionaries from the Assembly of God denomination, who came from the 'lower forty eight', opened a school in Nikolai. Later, one of them described their experience of living three years among UKAs in a book (Rodli 1963). Now, seventy years, or three generations later, the ethnic language of the UKAs is dying. There are no speakers under fifty. The specifics of the UKA situation (though common for many languages around the world) is that the bilingual period of parallel existence of UKA and English was very short, and the loss of the UKA language took place within a life span of one generation. The majority of the Nikolai population who took part in the sociolinguistic survey undertaken by the author in 1997, mentioned school they attended as the main reason for abandoning their language. Students in the village school were not allowed to speak language other than English, and though they were not physically punished (often the case in many other places in Alaska and elsewhere), the feeling of helplessness and shame stayed with the nowadays elders for the rest of their lives.

In the same survey, the majority of the respondents said that the UKA language is very important for their cultural self-identity, but they did not believe in the possibility of its revitalization, even though such attempts were undertaken. In particular, the native language has been taught as a subject at school for several decades. As in many other places in the world, where revitalization efforts are visible, a few hours per week of the native language instruction cannot make difference.

For the people of Nikolai, the native language is associated both with positive memories of childhood, home, traditional lifestyle, but also with feelings of humiliation they felt during school years. Such reaction of Nikolai residents is typical for many native communities in the circumpolar regions and agrees well with the peculiar features of the Northern Athabaskan mentality and communicative practices described in literature. Rushforth and Chisholm (1991) wrote about the Bearlake Athapaskan-speaking Indians of Canada's Northwest Territories that they had valued industriousness, generosity, individual autonomy, and emotional restraint for many generations. They also highly esteem 'control' in human thought and behavior. The latter value integrates the others in a coherent framework of moral responsibility that persists as a central feature of Bearlake culture. Similarly, the Alaskan Athabaskan basic cultural values include

- *Industriousness and Self-reliance*
- *Generosity, Mutual aid, and Support*
- *Individual autonomy*
- *Personal Restraint and Control*<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Personal observations from fieldwork in Nikolai in 2017

<sup>3</sup> This exact list was copied by the author from a leaflet on the wall of the Nikolai Village Council in 2001. A more detailed variant can be found on the website of the Alaska Native Knowledge Network - <http://ankn.uaf.edu/ANCR/Values/athabaskan.html>.

The first three values naturally result from the environment of the Sub-Arctic peoples and subsistence hunting life style. Individual self-sufficiency (cf. *industriousness, self-reliance* plus *individual autonomy*) and care for one's group: family, band, clan, or tribe (cf. *generosity, mutual aid, and support*), are essential for the group survival. The fourth value (*personal restraint and control*), also called 'deference' in intercultural politeness studies (Scollon&Scollon 2005), follows from the former three. Self-sufficiency can only emerge from non-intrusion. Judgments and assessment of other's actions is definitely intrusion, imposition on the other's freedom. It is especially visible in child rearing. That is why in Alaskan Athabaskan culture, not only one will never criticize child's behavior (which is normal for many cultures), but will not give positive evaluation of their achievements. This cultural value explains, among other things, why the generation of UKAs who went through the missionary school have such negative connotations towards speaking the native language. Though language attitudes were not among my research issues, they were coming up during data collection, in the interview process.

**2.5. Cultural models and communicative behavior.**

Basic cultural values are not just abstract categories; they underlie representations of the hierarchically organized behavioral models. This hierarchy is graphically presented in Fig.1, starting from models for physical activities, like subsistence hunting, to more abstract educational patterns and storytelling models.

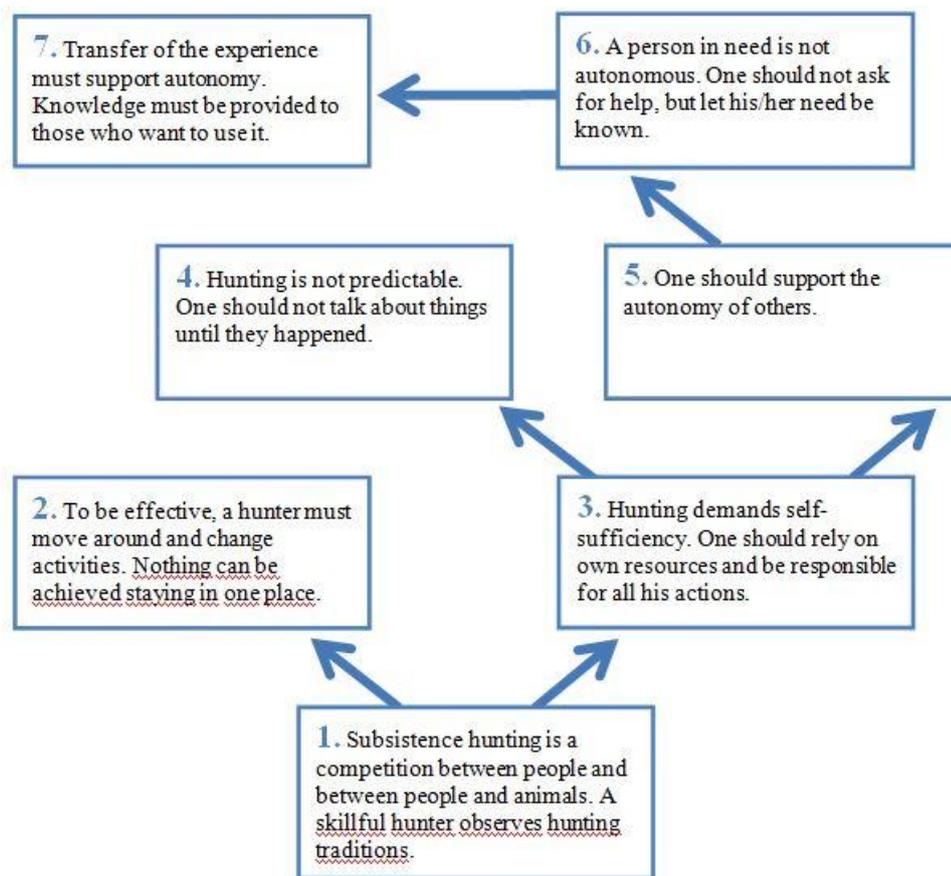


Fig.1

Hierarchically organized models of behavior, based on cultural values, motivate beliefs and behavior (actions and activities), including communicative practices. As such, they represent *linguacultural models(LCMs)*. Tradition of oral narratives, one of the most prominent types of

communicative practice for many cultures without literacy, strongly depends on the hierarchy of LCMs. This dependence can be observed in the special strategies used in narrating, and in the narrative structure. As will be demonstrated below, main cultural schemas, giving coherence to the UKA narratives, are immediately following from models in boxes 2, 4 and 7.

## **2.6. Role of the narratives in the NA culture.**

Oral narratives play very important role in any culture without written tradition. They serve as natural peepholes into both the language structure and cultural patterns of a given group. It is only natural that since the very first attempts at language documentation in Alaska, recording and analyzing narrative discourse was one of the main goals pursued by the researchers (Jetté 1908, Hymes 1974). The recent literature on Athabaskan narrative discourse is abundant, and I would like to structure it along a few dimensions relevant for this paper. First, it is the scope of conclusions and, sometimes, of data, used in a paper: the analysis may apply to a certain Athabaskan language (Lovick&Tuttle 2012, Kari 2010, Berez-Kroeker 2019), or take into account several Alaskan Athabaskan, or – even broader – Northern Athabaskan languages. In some cases, a paper may list scholarship pertinent for more than one category (Lovick 2012). The second dimension is what a paper is about: genre identification, quite topical for the Northern Athabaskan narrative discourse (Moore 2002, Lovick 2012), or specific discourse features: prosody (Lovick&Tuttle 2012), use of directionals (Berez-Kroeker 2019), or discourse markers (Lovick 2010, Rice 1989). Another set of issues for which narratives serve not as objects, but tools of research, is related to language shift, obsolescence and revitalization efforts (Meeek 2012).

Besides that, other factors add to our understanding of the importance of storytelling at Northern Athabaskans. First, the material culture and its artifacts had to be kept at minimum in the harsh conditions of the semi-nomadic life style. People could only keep the stuff that would fit in their backpacks. Their cultural identity could not be expressed through the elaborate pieces of material culture. It revealed itself in the oral narrative tradition. The other factor follows from the basic cultural values and corresponding interactional strategies of deference and respect for the autonomy of the others. Minimal interference into other's actions leads to special communicative practices, especially in child rearing. It made stories of personal experience, and other tales, the only (besides simple imitation of adult's action) instrument of transferring traditional knowledge. As Scollon &Scollon (1981) put it: "Athabaskans have invested the best of their artistic energies in education of children, the management of their social relations and the entertainment of their elders through the performance of oral narratives."

### **2.6.1. Audience role.**

One important characteristic of Athabaskan storytelling mentioned by several researchers (Basso 1979, Cortazzi 1993, Scollon&Scollon 1981, 1984, Webster&Yanez 2007.) is referred to as "The listener tells the story." Deference towards the listeners (audience), based on the respect for autonomy and the need to share important experience, 'reduce' the main goal of the narrators to providing enough facts on the given topic, without making conclusions, sharing their opinions or expressing viewpoints. All this is reserved for the listeners. Their role is to foresee the outcomes, anticipate the conclusion, make the inference and express it in their own words, as a feedback to the narrator. If it doesn't take place, then the narrator has to repeat the story, adding more facts and details both to the orientation part (descriptive passages) and to the main line of the story (narrative passages), until the listener responds with the conclusion that will satisfy the narrator. Thus, narration happens as interaction between the narrator and the audience. That is why the same story can be either very brief and condense, or rather long and boring (from the Eurocentric point of view), depending on the audience's degree of understanding and participation.

In the intercultural communication settings, it may seem, to the 'foreign' audience, that there is no action in Athabaskan tales, and that narration goes in circles (Kintsch, Green 1978, Scollon&Scollon 1990). In fact, traditional Athabaskan narratives have the form of a quite an

organized sequence, where the formal and the semantic structure both serve the main goal of communication: to maximize the social value of the shared knowledge, while minimizing the threat to the autonomy of the addressee.

The example (1) below features such a storytelling situation, where the listener cannot at once grasp the story point and return it to the narrator as her feedback. As a result, the narrator has to repeat the story two more times in what ends up to be three cycles of telling the same story with more details added. The story point is to make the listener laugh at the main character's boastful behavior. And further, by dragging attention to such a frivolous attitude to hunting and its dangers, disrespect for the animal, its strength and vitality – the narrator wants to reach his communicative goal, which is bringing up the socially important information, the cultural model of how to behave while hunting.

In the example, the narrator is marked **N.**, his wife who takes on the function of the narrator in the third cycle of the story, is **O.**, the listener (**M.**) is me. (I have played the role of the listener in all storytelling situations described in the paper. By a number of parameters, these storytelling sessions were, in most cases, instances of intercultural communication.)

### 2.6.2. Presentation of the examples.

My examples in this paper are recorded and transcribed excerpts of the stories, told to me in response to the request formulated more or less as: “Can you tell me about some situations when you were in danger?”<sup>4</sup> The following types of information are additionally marked in the text, besides dotted pauses and a mark of the final rising prosodic contour (“/”): types of information (*new*, *story point*); components of the Labovian-style narrative structure (*orientation*, *mainline*, *abstract*, *coda*); types of discourse passages (*descriptive*, *narrative*, *explanatory*); components of Hymes-style formal structure (*verse*, *line*, *stanza*). I use the same notation system in the examples in this and the following section (Section 3, discussing the formal structure of the UKA stories). For the examples on the thematic structure of the UKA stories (see Section 4), where some of these distinctions are not relevant, I use much simpler notation, which is explicitly mentioned before the example is given.

Starting with the example in (1), **bold** is used for the passages on the mainline of the story; underline - for the descriptive passages; *cursive* is for the new information that the narrator has to add during the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> cycles of the story; **bold cursive** is reserved for the new information about events and actions, and *underlined cursive* – for the new information adding to the circumstances of the situation. The point, that the narrator expects the listener to make (and which he himself has to make after the 1<sup>st</sup> cycle), is marked with SMALL CAPS. Laughter (<laugh>) is part of the expected reaction and thus belongs to the point of the story. Dots between the words in the sentences mark pauses.

(1)

M: So what was with this caribou?

N: It was a crippled caribou . you know .

I was= . we were tracking it .

**and we found it .**

laying down .

I was coming to get hold of the antlers . you know .

**I get pull on them . wring its neck off ..**

caribou is not that= that big . you know ..

well . **it got up ..**

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<sup>4</sup> Not always would I immediately get a story in response. In some cases, I would get another kind of narrative, or – in a few cases – my request would be declined.

it was a . black spruce ..  
**it jump on that one . and knock out .**  
**then I start backing off .**  
**then it jump at me ..**  
it was .. under.. spruce . down . you know .  
**somehow it miss my sn= snowshoe ..**  
**the guy I was with ... shot it . couple of time .**  
**with a pistol . you know .**  
**somehow . I just jump from it .. <LAUGH>**

SO THAT WAS THE CLOSE CALL I HAVE ON CARIBOU ..

(2<sup>nd</sup> cycle of the storytelling)

M: You shot it?

N: Yeah . **he shot it with a pistol .**  
while . he jumped at me . **threw it down**

M: And why would you approach this caribou .. you thought it was dead?

N: No . I kn= I knew it was alive . you know .  
I was gonna . get hold of him antlers . and **twist his neck . you know .**  
**break his neck . down .**

(3<sup>rd</sup> cycle of storytelling)

M: Oh . without killing it first .

O: No . **they shot it to kill it .**  
**and then it got away .**  
**and they were tracking it .**  
**and they got up to it laying down .**  
AND HE WAS JUST GONNA . BE MR. STRONG GUY .  
AND KILL IT ..

M: I know . MR. STRONG GUY  
<LAUGH>

After the first cycle of storytelling, the listener does not demonstrate that she understood the point of the story, though the narrator gives her a hint with a laugh, wrapping up the sequence of actions, and thus showing that he expects some reaction, expects the listener to say something appropriate. He does not reach his communicative goal and has to embark on a 2<sup>nd</sup> cycle that almost completely consists of additional clarifications (descriptive passages). In the 3<sup>rd</sup> cycle, a new narrator interferes and helps out the listener on both levels of analysis. First, she makes the point that was expected from the listener (*he was just gonna . be Mr. Strong Guy*), second, her input in the 3<sup>rd</sup> cycle is exclusively about the events on the mainline (narrative passages), worded as concisely as possible. This is the gist of what happened, or using Teun van Dijk's (1997) term – the macro proposition of the story. The storytelling is done, when the listener confirms her understanding by repeating part of the story point.

This example serves to show a typical interaction in the process of storytelling, featuring miscommunication, but also the ways the participants manage it. On the one hand, there are no

conflicting LCMs involved, which would prevent understanding by the listener. Of course, communication takes place in English, which she speaks as foreign language (EFL), but it has been a long established routine for these very participants, to tell and listen to stories, as part of their regular conversations. The recording takes place in the fall of 2001. By that moment, the conversation participants have known each other for four years. Therefore, being formally intercultural, this communication situation does not bear its main features: lack of common code and incongruent LCMs. Formally, English here serves as lingua franca (ELF), as participants have different first languages: Upper Kuskokwim and Russian. Still, it is hard to imagine that the narrator would tell this story in UKA even to a UKA-speaking audience. As I have mentioned above, the speakers of UKA, with whom I worked in 2001 (with one exception see below examples 2 and 3), would not tell stories in UKA for another, documentation, project undertaken by Andrej Kibrik at that same time.

On the other hand, inability to grasp the story point after the first cycle of storytelling leaves the listener helpless when, in the second cycle, a real intercultural failure takes place. This time, it is directly related to the way an Athabaskan story evolves: the narrator does not explain things, nor makes causal connections between actions, but repeats narrative passages/clauses (*he shot it with a pistol*), supplying additional descriptive passages (*I knew it was alive*). The failure is due not to the lack of factual knowledge, or conflicting LCMs, but to the dramatic differences in the structure of the storytelling situation, roles performed by the narrator and the audience, and patterns of interaction – see below in section 4.

In the rest of this paper, I am going to analyze formal and thematic peculiarities of the UKA stories, told to me in English. I am interested in finding specific features of the Northern Athabaskan storytelling traditions, to the degree in which they can be traced, notwithstanding the language shift.

### **3. Formal characteristics of the AA stories**

It was repeatedly shown in literature that one cannot adequately assess the richness of the oral Athabaskan tradition if only looking at *what* it is about. No less important is *how* they do it. Hymes (1974, 1994) stresses that a skillful narrator deals with two types of sequences: one is the chain of events that have to happen, for the narration to become a story. The other is a pattern, made by the connections between lines and groups of lines, and recognizing this pattern is essential for starting to understand how the story is perceived by the members of this narrative tradition. To describe this latter sequence Hymes (1977) uses a set of units consisting of *lines*, *verses*, *stanzas*, *scenes* and *acts*, presenting the structure of traditional Athabaskan folklore tales in these terms.

#### **3.1. Terms for analysis of the narrative structure.**

In order to use these terms for a more language-oriented study of narratives, one needs to somewhat re-define them. I don't have to use the term *act* (and the corresponding component of the story macrostructure) because personal stories I have studied in this project are shorter than the traditional (tales, myths, etc) ones. *Lines* are understood more or less as Chafe (1994) elementary discourse units (EDUs). As opposed to the Eurocentric tradition of discourse analysis, where lines/EDUs are determined through the combination of syntactic and prosodic features, in the Northern Athabaskan oral narratives, they serve to pace the story (Scollon&Scollon 1981). One or more lines, unified by a completed intonation pattern (prosodic accent), make up a *verse*. Lines within a verse are separated with pauses. Verses are language specific, they start as a new proposition (the term 'sentence' is not relevant for the oral discourse), prototypically, they correspond to a situation in the real world. The verse end coincides with the end of the line, followed by a pause and a special *marker of completeness*. As

opposed to English and other languages, where the falling intonation usually marks completeness of an utterance, Athabaskan languages use special morphemes – discourse markers showing the end of the verse. They are important because as noted in (Scollon&Scollon 1984), in several Northern Athabaskan languages, including Koyukon (the closest neighbors of the UKAs), falling intonation may denote both – a completed situation (verse) and the one that continues<sup>5</sup>.

Likewise, these languages feature special discourse markers of the yet uncompleted verse – see Kibrik 2004 for discussion of the UKA clause-final particle *ts'e*<sup>2</sup>.

Verses sort information according its value. In Athabaskan clause chains, which normally make up a verse, the most important information is in the final clause. This holds true also for the UKA clause chains (Kibrik 2004, Kibrik this volume).

A *stanza* consists of one or a few verses united by one perspective. A new stanza will start with the change of perspective: a new actor, another time, place, another world<sup>6</sup>. Northern Athabaskan stories, lacking explicit logical cause-effect or temporal connectors, progress by introducing new stanzas. As Kintsch and Green (1978, 2) state it «... abrupt changes in the hero are common». The end of the stanza (it coincides with the end of the verse) is marked with special discourse markers and longer pauses. A few stanzas make a *scene* understood more like a drama term. They are less relevant for this project because they do not have any specific linguistically meaningful markers. They are also characteristic of longer stories – see example in (2) below. One more important feature of the North American traditional stories is a tendency to maintain a balanced, or equivalent, rhythmic structure by keeping the number of elements at each level even (Hymes 1977, 1995). It means the same number of smaller discourse quanta for verses, stanzas and scenes respectively. In case of Northern Athabaskan narrative tradition, this number will be four, as argued by Hymes and other ethnoepic analyses. See already cited work Kintsch and Green (1978): «... the structure of episodes is based upon a principle of fours: four actors, four instruments, four episodes». Still, there is evidence, provided by the same authors (Hymes 1995), that adherence to even numbers of 2 or 4 lines per verse should not be overestimated. It might hold true not for all narrative genres. See also the critique of the strict opposition between three-partite Eurocentric and four-partite Northern Athabaskan verse in Wichmann 1998.

### 3.2. Persistence of narrative strategies

The main, one can say – professional – storyteller in Nikolai was recently deceased Chief Bobby Esai, a person of many skills and great integrity. His stories are best suited for the analysis targeted at perseverance of cultural traditions in the situation of language and cultural shift. He learned spoken English by the age of 18, then, in the course of his long life, taught himself reading and writing in English. He was still speaking the UKA language and could tell personal stories in UKA (Kibrik, this volume) during the time I was working on this project. As any real storyteller he had one ‘main’ story – a long narrative about a personal ‘miracle’: how he was saved by the icon pendant of Virgin Mary. When he was young, he traveled with his sledge dog team and together they fell through the ice. The point of his story is wonder and admiration of the fact that he stayed alive and did not fall ill after walking a few miles in wet clothes in sub-arctic winter. The corresponding places in the story are abundant with evaluative devices. In this and his other stories, evaluation is mostly expressed by repetitions and special prosody that can be defined as ‘surprise intonation’ - see below examples (2.1) and (2.5).

The point of the story serves a specific communicative goal: in keeping with traditional integration of individual experience and maximization of the relevance of common knowledge, using personal experience as an example, to show what the right behavior must be in the perilous circumstances. Here it is the importance of believing in God and performing rituals, which also amounts to holding to traditional values. This communicative goal is pursued in the ‘main’ story about the icon pendant of Virgin Mary and in four short stories told immediately after that one –

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<sup>5</sup> But see Berez 2011 and Lovick & Tuttle 2012 for a somewhat different interpretation

<sup>6</sup> Shifting between the world of the story, the narrator’s world, or world of narration

examples (2.1) and (2.2 – 2.5) respectively. Each one is concluded with reiteration of the true character of what had happened (*that is what happened*) and the last one – also with coda.

(2.1)

I was all right . next morning I was ready to go . **and uh ..**  
So I been in cold water long long time . and I survive .  
and nowadays I find out they say . uh ..  
I don't think . people will survive in . ice water . ten fifteen minutes /  
compare to that uh .  
I was say . same ..  
what saved me I guess .. almighty god or Jesus . saved me . because I didn't get cold /  
and when I was walking up . my clothes got start to freezing . and start to brittle / . **and uh**  
...  
I was saved that time \ . **and uh ...** .

(2.2)

Another time ... I was . uh .. saved ...  
these time ... I was working at . uh .. Medfra airport . **and uh ...**  
<beginning of the story>  
..... [9 lines omitted]  
That way it happened ..  
I didn't get hurt / .. **and uh ...**  
<end of same story>

(2.3)

I got all right ... **and uh ...**  
All along at that time uh .  
since my parents told me always \ pray .  
always \ pray . **and uh ...**  
That is what happened . **and uh ...**

(2.4)

He<sup>7</sup> said . no-o \ . there's no life after death . nothing ..  
one day we gone uh . it's nothing . he tell me . I don't believe you .  
I don't believe that . there is . there is a life after death .. **and uh ...**  
And this shortly after that he died . was accident .. **and uh ...**  
That is what happened .. uh ...  
yeah . I had a lot of close call . **and uh**

(2.5)

That's= . what happened was this . I 've been saved ..  
essentially . I've been saved from . lot of danger close call . **and uh ...**  
**For that case . uh .**  
**I told the story to my people not only myself . my people but others / .**  
**I told them how I've been saved / . and that's what happened . uh ...**

The colored font in (2) emphasizes two features that are in the focus of attention for these examples. One is the final coda, the one that wraps up all the five stories about various dangerous situations. The narrator directly states the reason he is telling all these stories of personal experience: there is moral obligation to make personal experience of a sophisticated

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<sup>7</sup> In this excerpt from the story 'He' refers to a person with whom Chef Esai had conversation about life and death

member of the group part of the collective pool of experience for all its members. In doing this, the narrator follows the Northern Athabaskan, not Eurocentric, tradition. (The latter, reversely, sees stories as means of focusing on individual experience on the backdrop of common linguacultural models shared by the group.) Still, the narrator sticks to his cultural pattern of non-imposing information on the addressee. By saying *for that case . uh . . I told the story to my people not only myself . my people but others / . I told them how I've been saved / . and that's what happened . uh ...*, he does not preach, he positively evaluates (by repetition) the very fact of telling, of making 'public' his story.

The other feature marked with the same colored font signals the pacing of the story. The story is divided in the chunks, very similar to what is usually described as stanzas in the NA stories. In (2) each stanza ends with the following sequence of verbal and paraverbal signals: <pause> followed by <and > followed by <filled pause > followed by <long pause>. In this case, *filled pause* is a breathing sound rendered as *uh*.

This sequence marked by color is a kind of a complex discourse marker (DM). In the same way, as in traditional narratives, DMs mark the stanza end and cling to it prosodically. One should not be misled by the English *and*. In Standard English, *and* as a DM opens a sequence, not closes it. In the UKA stories told in English, the DM closes the sequence, in accordance with how it is in the traditional stories told in the native language.

One very important fact about this story is that Bobby Esai, being a professional storyteller, did perform it also in UKA for the Kibrik's project, so it might be possible to observe certain parallels between rendering this story in two languages. In Kibrik 2004, story excerpts are taken not from this story, but a few glossed examples from the stories of personal experience by other narrator and from another Bobby's story, feature a marker of coordination *ts'e<sup>2</sup>* at the end of conjoined clauses. Kibrik (2004) describes *ts'e<sup>2</sup>* functions as follows: "*ts'e<sup>2</sup>* does not fundamentally mean 'and'; it is a particle of a very general meaning; if it can be captured at all, it might be something like 'incompleteness, entropy'; the continuation function of *ts'e<sup>2</sup>* is apparently contextually inferred from its fundamental meaning in the context of clause conjunction." It is worth mentioning here too, that Lovick and Tuttle (2012) report the same for Dena'ina *nch'u*, which is cognate with the UKA DM. Thus, it is, potentially, something true for a number of AA languages.

Another parallel usage in two languages is observed in the examples from the same paper. The final clause (line) of the example (21) in Kibrik 2004 is quoted in (3):

- (3)  
 hwnghit<sup>2</sup>an' nehwdalninh.  
 I.saw.them it.got.to.be.like.that  
 I saw them, so it happened.'

The expression *nehwdalninh* ends a chain of clauses, basically, a story. Its translation into English as 'so it happened' is very similar to what Bobby Esai says at the end of his English-language stories: '*and that's what happened . uh ...*'.

Though in its form, the marker *. and uh ..* is not a UKA expression, but uses an English word, its functioning in the discourse reminds a UKA DM *ts'e<sup>2</sup>*. Moreover, in the story excerpt in (1), an English collocation *you know* plays the same role; see also (5) below.

In (1) the narrator speaks much faster, his pauses are shorter and less pronounced. In a regular conversation, he uses *you know* according to the Eurocentric communicative pattern – almost as a filled pause, an interjection. As an interjection, it can be found at every possible point of discourse. However, while storytelling – as (1) demonstrated – it is used at the stanza's final position, and the relative length of the following pause plus the intonation pattern show that *you know* is included in the previous discourse fragment.

### 3.2.1. Story of the divine salvage.

In (4) I present an excerpt from Bobby Esai’s story featuring usage of *and* as an English conjunction and as a DM in the UKA narrative pattern. In (4) narrative passages are in **bold**, English conjunctions/ discourse markers *and* and *so* are underlined. The *.and uh ...* discourse marker is colored and put in a separate line as an ‘afterclause’.

(4).

<b>I took off with seven dogs .</b>	
<i>and uh .../</i>	<DM> End of stanza 1.
There was no trail yet . from Big River to Medfra /	<rising intonation>
<u>so</u> I could go through a portage .	
<i>and uh ...</i>	<DM> End of stanza 2.
Lot of tall grass .	
<i>and uh</i>	<DM> End of stanza 3.
When I cu= when I pass through uh ... second portage .	
and there was one more portage to Medfra /	<rising intonation>
at= at= Medfra .	
~ one more portage .	<intonation of clarification>
<u>and</u> I know that place .	
is awfully tall grass, ta-all grass there .	End of stanza 4.
O-oh I think . may be best to . stay on the river . all the way to Medfra . that used to be a portage too below Medfra .	
<i>and uh</i>	<DM> End of stanza 5.
I never think anything about uh . river might be danger /	<rising intonation>
<i>and uh ..</i>	<DM> End of stanza 6.
<b><u>And</u> I stay on the river uh . <u>and</u> stay good to the portage . <u>and</u> I stay on the river . <u>and</u> I didn’t go long . all of a sudden . my sled went through . to river .</b>	
<i>and uh ...</i>	<DM> End of stanza 7.
<b>My dogs went through . but then they climb on top of the ice .</b>	
<i>and uh ..</i>	<DM> End of stanza 8.

The excerpt in (4) describes the climax of the story, when the narrator falls with his dog team through the ice. Stanzas containing the culmination point (#7-8) are narrative passages only. At this point in the discourse, events are tightly packed in a series of actions. The narrator skillfully speeds up the story by using sequences of verb phrases, connected with the conjunction *and*. Until that, all stanzas but #1, were descriptive passages. Altogether, this scene contains canonical

8 (4x2) stanzas, but this may be pure coincidence. However, all eight stanzas are easily detected by the change of perspective:

- from the narrative passage to a descriptive one (1→2);
- from a plain descriptive passage to clarifications and explanations of the character motives (3→4);
- from explanations of the character motives to rendering the inner speech (4→5);
- from the inner speech of the character in world of the story to description of the character's cognitive state by the narrator in the narration world (5→6);
- returning to the story world at the culmination moment (6→7);
- change of actors (7→8).

In seven cases the stanza's end was marked with *and uh ...* Altogether, two pages of the story about divine salvage contained 54 instances of this DM. It should be noted that this long story contains many pauses, which is characteristic of the oral discourse. However, the majority of these pauses are not hesitations, false starts, or mental searches for a word. These are rhythmic pauses, characteristic of the UKA traditional narrative pattern. The narrator told this story many times. He 'performs' it in accordance with his native tradition of storytelling.

### 3.2.2. Story about the wounded caribou.

In order to sustain my claims, I would like to analyze, along these lines, one more story by another author. Example (5) represents an excerpt from the story already discussed in (1). This time I am looking at how the story is structured, or better – paced, by pauses, DMs, and at the function of various components of the narrative schema. This is a good example of a modern UKA personal story featuring brevity and condensed information structure.

(5)

N: <u>It was a crippled caribou .</u>	General orientation/Abstract
<u>you know .</u>	<DM >
<u>I was= . we were tracking it</u>	Localized orientation/descriptive passage (DP)
<b>and we found it .</b>	Action on the mainline /narrative passage
<u>laying down .</u>	descriptive passage
<u>I was coming to get hold of the antlers .</u>	descriptive passage
<u>you know .</u>	< DM> End of stanza 1
<b>I get pull on them . wring its neck off ..</b>	Action on the mainline/narrative passage
<u>caribou is not that= that big .</u>	Localized orientation (=clarification)/DP
<u>you know ..</u>	<DM > End of stanza 2
<b>Well . it got up ..</b>	Action on the mainline /narrative passage
<u>it was a . black spruce ..</u>	Clarification/descriptive passage
<b>it jump on that one . and knock out .</b>	Action on the mainline /narrative passage
<b>then I start backing off .</b>	Action on the mainline /narrative passage
<b>then it jump at me ..</b>	Action on the mainline /narrative passage
<u>it was .. under .. spruce down .</u>	Clarification/descriptive passage
<u>you know .</u>	<DM> End of stanza 3
<b>Somehow it miss my sn= snowshoe ..</b>	Evaluation/narrative passage
<b>the guy I was with ...</b>	Action, the culmination point/narrative passage
<b>shot it . couple of time . with a pistol .</b>	passage

you know .	<DM> End of stanza 4
somehow . <b>I just jump from it</b> .. <LAUGH>	Evaluation/narrative passage
SO THAT WAS THE CLOSE CALL I HAVE ON CARIBOU ..	Coda

Example in (5) demonstrates practically all features of the narrative structure, characteristic of the traditional communicative pattern, that can be found in the UKA personal stories performed in English. Those are:

1. The story is broken in stanzas marked by discourse markers at their end.
2. Within the stanza, information is organized as a sequence of one to four verses (situations): the first verse normally represents events and actions on the story mainline; the following verses are explanations, motivations and clarifications – descriptive component for these actions maintaining local coherence and providing background information; presumably, it will be used by the addressee for interpreting the story and formulating its point.
3. Number of stanzas in the story (or – story scene, or episode) is one or four. More rarely the number will be two or four-fold.
4. Evaluative component is rather scarce. It is used sparingly and only after the main actions on the story line; its elements often do not belong to stanzas.

I have to admit that statements in 1 and 3 are validated mostly by research of traditional narratives (see Wichmann 1998 with its critique of the analyses breaking stanzas and verses into sequences of four elements only). Though this genre was dominant in the traditional culture and should have had impact on communicative strategies in general, it would be strange to expect seeing all its features in personal stories, which are not traditional narratives by definition. Especially point 3 is not necessarily true for all stories even by the same narrator. Points 2 and 4 are illustrative of the traditional narrative and follow from the basic cultural models and communicative practices, as described above in section 2.5. They relate narrative strategies to the respect for the autonomy of the addressee, avoiding imposing on him unnecessary explanations and redundant details. As such, they can be easily transferred to stories of personal experiences, including those told in English.

Besides features pointing at the traditional narrative culture, the text in (4) demonstrates some features of the personal and, more specifically, ‘action story’. Such stories cannot do without Evaluation and general Orientation components. Both do not belong to the ‘traditional schema’, and are located outside stanzas. The orientation (*It was a crippled caribou . you know*) includes two lines, the latter of them is a DM (*you know*), marking this separate story component. In the same way, the evaluation line (*somehow . I just jump from it*) does not belong to any of the story four stanzas. In fact, evaluation here is rendered by one word (*somehow*) and, to a certain degree, by the modifier *just* inside the action part, but the role of the whole remark in the story is to add to the contents, make it more intense, having exposed all the facts. These two separate moves are in the very beginning and the end of the story. Strictly speaking, the very end of the story is made by coda (*So that was the close call I have on caribou*), but one can reasonably believe that its appearance is necessitated by the fact that the listener did not ‘catch up’ and did not provide feedback at this point of the story, by making conclusion herself. This is what the traditional Athabaskan storytelling situation would demand. As Scollon&Scollon (1981, 99) put it, «take-it-or-leave-it manner».

## 4. Thematic coherence through linguacultural models (LCM)

This section of the paper describes thematic coherence of the UKA personal stories through the set of linguacultural models (LCMs), dominant in the discourse of the Nikolai elders. In the previous sections, I discussed communicative practice of storytelling, including communicative patterns and narrative structures. Here I will concentrate on the topics people cover when telling stories. Simply looking at what people talk about, when telling stories, allows to uncover LCMs underlying them. Arguments for viewing a recurring topic as a LCM include: uniformity of the model, its components and the inner structure across different narrators. As opposed to communicative patterns, LCMs determine not the way the information is presented, but the cognitive lexicon of a given culture. Language loss cannot but trigger changes in the related elements of cultural identity. The need for other ways to manifest cultural identity is realized through the special role of LCMs central for the group existence. For UKAs (and likely, in other Northern Athabaskan communities) those are: SUBSISTENCE HUNTING, FAMILY, and LOCAL TRAVEL. These LCMs are fundamental for any hunting, recently semi-nomadic culture – see early work in the cultural linguistics paradigm (Sharifian 2000, Malcolm, Rochecoste 2000, Malcolm, Sharifian 2002) and more modern research in (Sharifian 2017), especially (Degani 2017).

Moreover, the drive for maintaining cultural identity in the modern environment leads to profiling new non-traditional topics related to new behavioral patterns. New LCMs emerge around these topics. UKA personal stories analyzed in this project reveal at least three of them, focusing on traditional artifacts but discussing them in new contexts: ETHNIC FOOD, OLD WAYS, CHANGES OUTSIDE TRAVEL.

In the following sections, I will briefly discuss traditional LCMs around which UKA personal stories are built. Those are *HUNTING*, *GUIDING* and *TRAVELING*.

### 4.1. Linguacultural model of HUNTING.

This LCM naturally takes the central place in the stories. Even those speakers, who refused to talk about dangerous situations while hunting and ‘leave’ their stories on the tape, because many things related to subsistence hunting were tabooed, even they will profusely describe other aspects of hunting. The importance of this LCM is easily detected in the richness of the verbal vocabulary, especially compared to the brevity of style and lack of synonymic rows in the local variety of English. Narrators will use such verbs as *hit*, *kill*, *nick*, *bugger*, *crack*, *drop*, *cripple*, *shoot*, *wound* and others to talk about shooting an animal. Incidentally, for some of them (*drop*, *nick*, *bugger*) the shooting meaning is either a rare one, or not represented in the dictionaries at all. It is a rare case, when one uses words not in their main meanings, or rare words, for this English variety. In this section, the examples profile mostly lexical items and expressions revealing the importance of information for the narrators, and evaluative devices they used. Accordingly, due to the scarcity of graphic means, I have to redefine conventions for using fonts in the examples. In the examples that follow, I use **bold** to render the important, or stressed, information; *cursive* is reserved for evaluations; and underline – for specific elements discussed in that example.

The excerpt in (6) features in one line two verbs (*drop* and *nick down*) in their local meaning ‘to kill at once’, which leads to misunderstanding by the addressee speaking EFL.

(6)

N: And I turn around . I **shot** .

and **nicked down** thing ..

I **dropped** it . <laugh>

M: The gun?

N: No . moose / .

M: Oh, you= you= fr= *from one shot* .  
[yeah]

The prototypical part of the LCM *HUNTING* consists of subsistence hunting themes and activities. But the word *hunting* is often used when talking about another traditional activity – trapping. These two differ in instruments, seasons, types of work and many other things, but presumably, they belong to a super LCM that can be defined as “activities involving relations between humans and animals.” This is the central part of both LCMs, and the speakers feel it. That is why they can use one word instead of the other – *hunting* instead of *trapping* (not vice versa) in the contexts where differences are not important.

This differs from the stories about *GUIDING* – guiding sport hunters who come to Alaska having won in a drawing and having paid a lot of money. This is a relatively new job for Native Alaskans (less than 50 years), requiring licensing. Differences between *GUIDING* and *HUNTING (TRAPPING)* are not in the vocabulary; they are different models of behavior, reflected in stories. The point of the stories built around the *GUIDING* LCM is not the relations between people and animals, not the skill of the hunters, their respect for the animal, their tremendous efforts to get the animal, and the fantastic capabilities that animals demonstrate – all this is about *HUNTING*. *GUIDING* is about stupid, lacking skills and stubborn clients. I don’t discuss guiding stories any further, because together with the stories built around LCM *CHANGES*, they constitute emergent LCMs not included in this paper.

#### 4.2. Linguacultural model of FAMILY.

The concept of family is central for any traditional culture. I am only discussing it here in connection with what UKA narratives allow the listener to learn about this basic cultural domain. In Nikolai, they gladly talk about family life, stress the role families play. Respect for elders and for traditional wisdom is one of the most central values. However, stories about families are not stories as such. At best, there will be micro-stories found in the descriptive narratives about childhood and young years. They consist of one or two narrative propositions surrounded by descriptive passages. In (7) I ask a question about Telida Chief, Karl Sesui, in hope to get a story about a real event described in Schneider 1996: the Lieutenant Joseph Herron's 1899 expedition to Upper Kuskokwim, and its rescue from starvation by the Athabaskan Chief Sesui. But they don’t remember these stories in modern Nikolai, so this is the response I got.

(7)

M: Do you remember how Chief Sesui saved Leutenant’s Herron expedition?

J: Ah?

M: How the white guys were saved by the Telida Chief?

J: Telida chief? Karl Sesui?

M: Yeah

J: **That’s my uncle ..**

M: Yes . on mother’s or father’s side?

J: Eh . their . their mother . uh . **used to be living in Telida too ...**

I remember . uh . we used to live in Telida . and uh ..

we got . **our own house ..**

**my uncle lived uh . at two houses ...**

**he get big house .. he lived in good house ..from log**

In (7) only two last lines make a micro-story where the narrator has a point he wants to express and not just give some information about his uncle. This is deducted from evaluations used in

describing his uncle’s house. He repeats *big house, good house*, trying to underscore the high status his relative enjoyed. But the strongest of the enhancements of the uncle’s status is mentioning the fact that the house was made with logs (*.. from log*). Said as an afterthought, added to the main clause, this phrase is in the focus. Indeed, at that time (1930-ies), having a log house was of high value in the UKA community. Probably, Chief Sesui was the only owner of a log cabin.

When talking about family, it is not at all important for the UKAs to provide data on the structure of the family (characteristic of the Eurocentric family narrative), but giving exact locations of who lived where and when is very important. The reference point is the location of the narrator in the story world. In (7) the narrator does not answer the question whether his uncle was on the mother’s or on the father’s side, but tells where his grandma lived (*their . their mother . uh . used to be living in Telida too*). The reference point is the narrator’s location, so this *too* infers that it was him and his grandma, not his uncle and the uncle’s mother (who, actually, is his grandma) who were living in Telida at that time.

One special feature of the traditional LCM *FAMILY*, which can only be detected in the process of discourse analysis of the relevant micro-stories, is a taboo on mentioning the names of the dead relatives and even more – on reference towards them. In (8) the narrator describes her childhood, things she liked to do, but omits reference to her mother- and father-in-law in the first line (the longer than usual pause here is underlined) and then avoids their names by using *those* in the third line.

(8)

D: I like<sup>8</sup> to stay like this .all by myself . and ..in a camping .. I love going camping ..

M: Was it hard . to learn English . when you were already grown up?

D: Uh-u . you don’t talk English with *those* . *uh* ..

when school start we= we learned a little bit . we . learned a little bit ..

### 4.3. Linguacultural model of TRAVELING

Northern Athabaskan stories often start with the main character leaving from the base camp (home) – see (Scollon&Scollon 1984, 188). Modern personal stories by Nikolai UKA residents are also full of moving around. There are two types of moving around, or traveling, corresponding to two different (though logically interconnected) LCMs. One is about getting around the local area. It follows seasonal routine and is necessitated by the traditional activities – subsistence hunting, fishing, and trapping. Such stories, typical for other Alaskan communities too, feature many location marks – place names and directional references (Kari 1985, Kari 2010, Kibrik 2009, Berez-Kroeker 2019). The importance of this knowledge makes sharing it through storytelling twice as relevant: “Knowledge of the surrounding terrain is not only essential to survival but also plays an important role in ethnic identity and the assertion of the connection of one’s social group (tribe, band, family) to the land ...”( Berez-Kroeker 2019: 76). Another, more recent LCM, is about traveling outside of the local ecumene. These LCMs are only united by the subject moving from point A to point B. As for the rest, they have very different componential structure, which is demonstrated in the Table 1.

Table 1

	Local Travel	Outside Travel
Goal	Perform necessary activities in the year cycle.	Health issues. Education <Representational

<sup>8</sup>The regional variety of English (“village English”) does not systematically make differences between past and present forms of the verbs.

	<For pleasure >*	functions (cultural, ethnic activities)>*
End point	Hunting camp in the woods. Fish camp on the river. Telida, Medfra, Various places named after the Upper Kuskokwim forks, other traditional place names being used	Cities: Anchorage, Fairbanks, McGrath
Manner of traveling	<u>Old days:</u> Dog team, walking, boat <u>Nowadays:</u> Snow machines, four-wheelers, motor boats	Airplane
Other obligatory components	Explicit mentioning of the directions with reference towards the river flow <sup>9</sup> .	
Points of the personal stories based on these LCM	Persistence, stamina and endurance of the narrator. Ability to cover long distances in the extreme conditions, endure hunger and cold weather.	Feeling homesick as a result of separation from the family and well-known routines. Feeling scared and unprotected. Anxiety and depression from being in the city.

\* Recent feature.

The importance of the LCM components is demonstrated by their explicit verbalizations in personal stories built using the corresponding LCM.

Among the various points that people make in their stories, or better say – the points, for the sake of which stories are being told – there is one universal idea commonly present in traditional cultures. Narrators report events, and, using this opportunity, present themselves as competent members of their communities, who possess skills, highly valued by other people from their group. Cultures differ by what qualities, skills and behaviors are positively assessed, and what LCMs are used as the central theme for these stories.

For this purpose, Nikolai elders use stories about local travel (‘moving around’). It is here that one can boast and show prowess, not appropriate in the hunting stories.

(9)

M: Do you like it now with . all these snow machines

J: Snow machines . yeah ...

**I drove my fourwheeler that winter .**

in December .

from McGrath to here ..

**one day ..** I had it ...

They couldn't flew airplane .. too . too wide ..

The first line in (9) is a question by the interviewer targeted at having conversation on the ambivalent role of changes and technical progress. Instead, the narrator tells a micro-story how

<sup>9</sup>Cf. Kibrik 2009

he went in the middle of winter from McGrath to Nikolai on a four-wheeler (instead of a snow machine, which would be much faster) because he needed the four-wheeler delivered to Nikolai and it would not fit into an airplane. These few lines, indeed, constitute a story with the mainline event (*I drove my fourwheeler that winter . . . one day*) and clarifications and explanations in the descriptive type of passages (*in December . from McGrath to here . . ; I had it ... They couldn't flew airplane . . too . too wide . .*). These descriptive lines should tell a lot to the sophisticated listener and serve as basis for the evaluation to be made by the addressee. In December, when the story took place, it could be 40-60 degrees Celsius. Even with a snow machine, the trip would have taken a few hours. On a four-wheeler, it would be twice as long. The narrator managed to show his prowess and aptness, and did it in such a way that his micro-story is an ideal manifestation of the traditional communicative strategies of storytelling, both structurally (additional clarifying information follows narration of the events) and in style: of many variants to tell an Athabaskan story, the shortest one, avoiding evaluations by narrator, will be considered the best.

A comprehensive story by the same narrator featuring the LCM *LOCAL TRAVEL* is presented in (10).

(10)

J: A story to get a head start on that ..

I've been walking to Telida from here . one time ...  
but . that much snow . and a crust on top . on top of the snow ..  
it is not too good for dog / ..

I've been trapping in Telida ..

**Oh . I just . I just left dog . . I walk on snow shoes ..**

**I . I walk till sixteen mile a camp to stay overnight over there too ..**

**I stay overnight . and next day I walk till fourteen miles ..**

**next day . I walk all day to Telida . *it's twenty miles* <laugh> ...**

**ab~ out there at Telida . at a camp . and it's over there . *about ten miles* ..**

**I camping there . I get no sleeping bag .. *just parka* ..**

and uh .

**I stay overnight ..**

**next day I went~ . I walk back to Telida ..**

and uh ..

I just have heard about that . McGrath had the air services .. he used to run ..

he had airplane .. he ran it to Telida ..

**I fly back . down there . <laugh> .**

MY THREE DAYS WALKING PRETTY BAD . AND THEN COMING BACK . ON THE PLANE  
.. <laugh>.

The story includes all the components of the LCM *LOCAL TRAVEL* mentioned in the Table 1. The narrator explains the goal of this journey (*I've been trapping in Telida*). Describing the way back the narrator mentions that it was *down there*, meaning that Nikolai is down the river from Telida. Evaluative elements (marked with cursive in the example) are represented by the repeated pointing at exactly how many miles the narrator covered per day and at his scarce resources for survival, and by laughter. Evaluations follow a short pause and make a separate clause. Even from the syntactic point of view, it is not part of the verb phrase like in narrative passages (*I walked till fourteen (sixteen) mile*).

Particle *just*, a modifier to the word *parka* also serves as evaluation. The narrator quite obviously presumes that the addressee will deduce the story point: the main character of the story can do well things that a real Athabaskan man should do – overcome difficulties, walk long distances, and survive in low temperatures.

On top of this, the last stanza and the coda bring in one more culturally relevant topic – arrival of the airplanes as means of transportation. The narrator laughs, also because for him airplanes belong to another LCM – *OUTSIDE TRAVEL*, not related to what he was talking about.

#### 4.4. Linguacultural model OUTSIDE TRAVEL

The excerpt from the long story in (11) below is an illustration of the LCM *OUTSIDE TRAVEL*. The narrator tells about her first experience of leaving Nikolai, when she was sixteen and was the first of the Nikolai children to fly to Anchorage and farther away, to the boarding school. All the evaluation made by the main character in the story world is related to sad feelings and longing for home.

(11)

M: Do you remember your first trip out of Nikolai ?

O: <laugh>

my first trip out of Nikolai .

yeah . it was pretty exciting . I think so .

I didn't think so at that time ..

when I first went to high school / .

I . my teacher . as I was going to school .

I= . she was always telling me . that I would= that I would .uh .

show good example for . other kids in this community .

to . be the first one to high school .

and I always liked the idea ..

So **I said** . «I could do it» .

and uh ..

( .... )

**I got on the plane .**

**I went to Anchorage ..**

There was-s . a man and the woman . uh .

as we were going in . in the building .

**he said** . «somebody here is supposed to be going to Mount Edgecumbe» .

**I just walked past them ..**

I . was regretting that I was leaving .

**I just walked past them and went to . to a . to a bathroom ..**

M: But you knew they were looking for you

O: I . I know it's gonna be me . they were looking for .

but I was . I want to cry . so **I went to the bathroom .**

**I cried and . smoked the cigarette . and . came out back . and .**

**I . wished I had a way to come back to Nikolai .**

<laugh>

Right then and there . I would've . I would've . if I know the way .

*I would've gone back . come back home ..*

*I was just missing home . already . really ba-ad ..*

Again, the structure of this personal narrative follows the main principle of presenting factual information first and only adding evaluations and expressing opinions (the last four lines) after that.

## **5. Conclusions**

In this paper, I was looking into whether, how and to what extent traditional communicative practices and storytelling strategies of the UK Athabaskans are transferred to their communication in English. I was participant observer in various communicative practices in the town of Nikolai in 2001 and later, and conducted a series of informal conversations with the elder members of the community – the ‘generation of changes’, the last generation who was born and raised in the families speaking UKA. Later in their lives, they acquired English and shifted to English in most of their communicative practices, including storytelling. In 2001, some of them were still able to tell their life narratives and better part of their personal stories in UKA, but refused to do it for recording.

This research is descriptive in its essence and qualitative in its methods. The stories discussed in the paper are presented as excerpts illustrating the points made. The starting ground and the assumptions, on which the data analysis is performed, are based on the scholarship related to various aspects of linguistic and cultural life of the Native Alaskan / Northern Athabaskan communities and focusing on their storytelling practices. Building upon the information accumulated in the literature, I paid attention in my research to three aspects of storytelling practices: role and social context of storytelling, formal organization of personal stories performed in English, and the knowledge network, as expressed in the linguacultural schemas underlying the contents of the stories.

My results concur and confirm that coherence in UKA stories of personal experience is based on the integrity of the linguacultural models needed for their interpretation and on Northern Athabaskan cultural traditions of storytelling, motivating both the structure of the stories and the dynamics of storytelling situations. These results demonstrate a certain degree of cultural persistence among the elder generation of UKAs (Rushforth 1991). This persistence is visible in the following characteristics:

- Preservation of the stories’ traditional themes related to the most basic linguacultural models: HUNTING, FAMILY, LOCAL TRAVEL.
- Self-identification of the UKA community through retention of traditional narrative strategies in storytelling.
- Relative independence of the communicative behavior models from the language; the degree depends on the age at which the UKA speakers got acquainted with the English-language schooling system and at which age and how fully they learned the written Euro-American tradition.
- Preservation of narrative strategies at the various levels of stories’ macrostructure, structure of the episode, narrators’ communicative goals and their interactions with the addressee (audience).

On the other side, the degree of retention of the traditional Native American tales’ formal features, as expressed in the ethnopoetic tradition, remains unclear for at least two different reasons. One depends on how seriously a researcher believes in the line~verse~stanza four-partite structure as a universal feature for all narrative genres. The other is related to genre distinctions: to what extent a narrator associates her/his personal story with the traditional

storytelling situation. When this association is strong, we may expect a more visible retention of traditional narrative structures.

One direction for future research on this topic would be a thorough case study of some stories told by Bobby Esai in UKA and English. This situation with one speaker, one topic, but two languages would allow to exclude extra variables. Yet another promising topic, though in a different line of research, is comparison of the two communicative traditions not from the point of differences in formal narrative structures, but the 'pace of narration'.

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