This paper reflects my long-standing frustration with the analytic language available to cross-cultural students of language, of various disciplinary persuasions. I am entirely in sympathy with the comparison of cultural systems in a search for universals — at least in principle. But there is a persistent methodological problem which anthropologists run into every time they do fieldwork. The relationships between speaking, co-presence in a social group, and the *Weltanschauung* of a particular society do not usually coincide with those of the analyst’s western society. So we learn in the field to do the things which the people whom we study consider inoffensive. In the case of native Americans, the instructions are almost always phrased in negative terms: do not talk to fill conversational pauses, avoid direct eye contact, do not ask direct questions, etc. But there has been considerably less attention to what native people are doing when they are not talking. One comes out with the uneasy feeling that “their” communicative system may be deprived, in some very serious way, if we take our own analytic system seriously. It is clear to anyone who has ever had extensive contact with it that “their” system is systematic and that “they” do not see it in terms of deprivation; indeed, if anyone is deprived of the possibility of satisfying social communication, it is the “loud-mouthed whiteman” (the most common gloss of the Cree term *moniyaw*, ‘white man’; cf. Basso (1979) on Western Apache jokes about whitemen).

My purpose in this paper is to state, in positive terms, what the Cree take as the premises of the social space in which “we” expect to find conversation. Talk is not a focus of attention in this implicit system; it is an occasional and in many contexts not highly valued side-effect of more general values about the nature of human persons (or even more accurately, living beings) when they come into contact. Of course, it is unlikely that
any Cree person would state these premises in postulate form. Nonetheless, the postulates which follow are consistent with Cree praxis. The postulates are normative, reflecting the way people ought to behave, ideally. They are, therefore, not predictive of the actions of individuals; they are highly predictive of how native individuals will evaluate the behaviour of their fellow human persons. In that sense, they are closely related to behaviour and the wish to look well in the eyes of others.

The inclination of the linguist to tack on extra-linguistic or pragmatic rules to a description of the grammar will not permit the radical restructuring of interactional assumptions that communication in the native system requires. Conversational analysis has similar problems in practice; the only anthropologist to apply the model in detail to an ethnographic case (Mor- erman 1987) assumes that the categories defined by Sachs, Schegeloff et al. are applicable to his Thai material. Perhaps they are; certainly his analysis appears to reveal much of interest. But for native Americans, the emphasis on conversation in the first place does violence to their conceptual system. There is ample evidence that societies vary dramatically in the place speech holds among communicative resources (e.g., Hymes 1967; Sherzer and Darnell 1972; Bauman and Sherzer 1974). Ethnographers of speaking who work with native Americans have, however, been forced by the people with whom they work to reconsider the basis of the theory. Basso (1979, 1990) has focused on Apache uses of silence, Philips (1975) on interactional styles which are carried over into English-speaking Warm Springs classrooms, Black-Rogers (1988) on how to structure fieldwork in terms of respectful talk, Ridington (1990) on dreaming as the symbolic focus of everyday reality, Rushforth (1988) on stories and their reticences; Scollon and Scollon (1981) Darnell (1974, 1981, 1988) on taciturnity, non-verbal behaviour and interpretations of interaction in terms of power. The articles in Darnell and Foster (1988) focus on the extent to which many of these patterns are shared across native North America. Philips (1976) discusses cultural variability in the regulation of talk, arguing that many of the assumptions of interactional sociology (mostly of the Goffmanesque variety) cannot be extended as an unexamined whole to Warm Springs Indians, who refuse to follow Grice’s conversational maxims. She is quite explicit that they are not being bloody-minded just to drive analysts nuts — they have a different system.

The literature of our various disciplines, however, yields few examples of information structured from the point of view of the cultures studied. Yet this is the logical consequence of our avowed commitment to emic description. My favorite is Ken Hale’s collaboration with a Papago Indian, Albert Alvarez, in writing a grammar of Papago in Papago (1972). Unsurprisingly to an ethnographer, the categories of transformational grammar
are not replicated in Alvarez’s articulation of his native speaker knowledge of his language. The effect on grammatical models as conceived by linguists appears to have been non-existent. It should follow that transformational-generative grammar and its derivatives are local systems, characteristic of the languages of linguistic argumentation, primarily English. English is certainly a case of language universals, but to assume which features are the universals without attending to cross-linguistic variation seems perverse at best. There is a long tradition in Amerindian linguistics of seeking grammatical categories without immediate recourse to Latin and Greek models; but it doesn’t seem to extend to assumptions about parole, or interaction more generally.

Recent reflexivity within the social sciences about what we are up to when we describe and attempt to explain things in the social and natural worlds has led to some new forms of ethnographic writing. But this trend doesn’t seem to have come to terms with exegetic traditions, or potential traditions, accessible in collaboration with members of other cultures. So, if a Cree person were going to write a series of postulates for language, its place in interaction, and the grounding of language and interaction in the domain of power, I think it might look something like the following (with the proviso that this is a preliminary version and suggests no closure or inherent ordering to the postulates; clearly they involve different levels of generality and interrelationship):

The 39 Postulates

(1) Interaction usually proceeds dyadically.
There is a link between individuals who interact, whether or not they communicate in words. The bond between a hunter and his prey is comparable, for example, to the bonding of individuals who engage in talk. Talk is focused on the particular person(s) addressed in a situationally-specific way. Others who are present are not excluded from being socially-present, but it is respectful to acknowledge the uniqueness of a particular addressee (and often to make the same point somewhat differently to several persons sequentially).

(2) Social occasions are defined by co-presence rather than talk.
Everyday interaction (in the secular domain) is structured around people being co-present; co-presence may involve talk, but its presence or absence does not change the nature of what is felt to be going on.
(3) Under many conditions, the most respectful speech is silence.

Respect for other human persons is often expressed by silence. Silence is virtually obligatory in many contexts for the domain of power. To use language casually in the presence of power, also an attribute of most respected persons, is dangerous. Black-Rogers (1988) reports Ojibwa anxiety about discussing dangerous weather conditions and the care with which her consultants constructed restricted contexts where it was possible to talk to her about power. Silence is understood to be full (not needing to be filled up by talk or even activity) and complete in itself, like the circle which is the image of harmony in the world.

(4) The personal autonomy of living beings precludes attempts to interfere with or control their behaviour or opinions.

Each individual's integration of his or her personal experience is unique and should not be interfered with. Controlling someone's opinion or participation in a conversation or interaction is an imposition on that person's autonomy. It is disrespectful to all living beings and the harmony of the world as well as to the individual person. In the domain of power, the consequence of autonomy and the dyadic bond between an individual and his or her spirit helpers (see postulate 1) is that each medicine person will have a different, unique cosmological and pragmatic model (c.f. Hymes 1966, for Crow).

(5) Respect for autonomous persons precludes direct contradiction.

Each individual has the right to his or her opinion and should not be contradicted directly. Teachers, traditional elders or in modern classrooms, should not tell students their answers are wrong. It is better to agree non-committedly and continue talking until the desired answer emerges naturally from further consideration. It is also polite to answer the question that should have been asked if the questioner had good manners.

(6) Deniable strategies, often non-verbal, are preferable to confrontational talk.

Because it is so important not to offend other persons by disrespect, it is good to avoid confrontation — where it seems likely — by substituting non-verbal responses. The individual who is unhappy need not say something that he or she will regret, and the relationship can be repaired when consensus is ideally reached, often through the mediation of later occasions of other persons. Talk under conflictual circumstances is dangerous because it cannot be changed or negotiated once a commitment is made.
It is respectful to avoid eye contact.

Autonomous individuals have a right to their privacy, of thought as well as of body space. Physical closeness is less invasive than eye contact, which is considered very rude. Cree have various techniques for being aware of social space without staring at their fellow living beings. Peripheral vision is used to monitor group interaction; this allows focus on the group, not the speaker alone, and is consistent with the high values placed on listening and on co-presence. Individuals also rely on rapid eye scan which does not pause long enough on each person to invade their autonomy. Both speakers and listeners often focus in mid-space where eye contact with them is impossible to attain. This is less a defensive posture than an internal contemplation. People are most likely to look directly at an elder or medicine man, because his power is sufficient to protect his inner being; in any case, they will be unable to catch his eye. Posed photographs are almost always at sharp angle to the camera, equated to the eye of the observer. If one looks directly at someone, focus on the mouth, the focal point of talk (which is not essential to the inner being of a person), is more polite than eye contact.

Face-to-facedness is incidental to effective communication.

It follows from the inappropriateness of eye contact that interactants need not be directly aligned to one another in order to communicate. People will often sit with their backs to other participants in an interaction. It would embarrass people to have a group shift to align them within it. It is better to listen and not force oneself to the center. Attentiveness is signalled by subtle non-verbal cues and brief verbal acknowledgement of ongoing speech.

The participants in interaction are not interchangeable.

Because every living being is unique, a model of conversation that sees two equivalent persons exchanging turns at talk does violence to the personal autonomy of these persons. Interaction cannot be satisfying or meaningful if it does not acknowledge that all persons are different (thereby giving them things to communicate to one another). The notion that everybody should be equal is extremely uncomfortable.

The asymmetry of social relationships makes interactional control residual to the oldest or most respected person present.

The non-equivalence of interactants places the burden of organizing co-presence or conversation on the eldest or most powerful person present. This does not mean that this individual will do more talking than others, only that he or she (usually he, however) will have the choice in deciding who will speak, how long and about what. The direction of talk will be signalled
primarily by non-verbal cues, easily read since all present are highly aware of what the most respected person present is doing.

In the domain of power, asymmetry is also focal. Spirit helpers are asked to pity the human person who approaches them. The supplicant is not in control of the interaction, except insofar as his or her respectful behaviour will increase the likelihood of help.

(11) Initiative to structure the progress of an interaction is dangerous and to be avoided wherever possible.

Most people do not like to be on the spot and responsible for directing the actions or talk of others. The elder or medicine man gets interactional control partly because of respected judgment and partly because others consider this a burden. Putting oneself forward is stressful and possibly dangerous in relation to the power domain (because it is disrespectful). The role of master of ceremonies at a powwow, for example, is virtually that of a buffoon.

(12) Knowledge is age-graded and those who know things are to be treated with respect.

Individuals are assumed to increase in wisdom as they move through their life cycles. Growing older brings increased respect to almost anyone, because experience is highly valued; older people are also respected through their grandchildren and other descendants, to whom they are expected to convey what they have learned from life experience. There is a continuum from the old person to the elder, whose wisdom is recognized outside his or her own family, and the medicine man. It involves power and respect. Sometimes a young man is treated as wiser than his chronological years (a woman rarely attains such status during her child-bearing years); the man is expected to behave as an elder in spite of his age.

(13) Questions should be phrased indirectly.

A direct question is disrespectful. To ask a question is inherently to impose upon another. There are various strategies of indirection. Grammatically, the imposition of an obligation to respond is often phrased in terms of an open-ended construction beginning with “I wonder about . . . ”.

(14) Questions, direct or indirect, do not require a reply, although they remain on the floor and open to response at any later time.

An open-ended question often fails to receive a reply. A direct question often receives a trivial or inaccurate reply, which is not rude because the question was rude in the first place. Response may be made on a future
occasion with no sense of disjuncture or transition. (The implication is that conversations or interactions are not bounded by particular events or occasions.) People assume that it takes time to decide how to respond to a serious question, that it may not be answerable at a given moment in terms of the respondent's experience, that the context is not appropriate or that the relationship to the questioner is not strong enough to sustain the solicited conversation — so the response is deferred until it is appropriate and delay in time is not considered rude.

(15) The ideal speech is a monologue, in which someone speaks who is culturally defined as authoritative, as having something to convey to others.

The model of conversation in which two persons exchange turns at talk does not work for Cree persons. Although such conversations certainly take place, they are not the form of speaking which is valued, the norm against which to measure particular occasions of talk. When someone speaks who has something to say, like an elder or a grandparent, the speaking tends to be a monologue, punctuated by audience acknowledgements of continued attentiveness. The monologist will pause at structured segments of narrative, the points at which questions may be inserted and responses incorporated into the monologue. Questions, however, do not deflect the monologic control of discourse by the respected speaker. The opinions of his listeners are irrelevant, at the moment of the speaking.

(16) Eye-witness accounts based on personal experience are privileged over the theoretical, abstract and second-hand.

Narrative genres in particular emphasize whether something is known by first-hand experience or only by hearsay. The former is acknowledged as valid even if others have had different experiences or disagree with the conclusions that follow from the experience. Part of the respect for the old person is that he or she has more experience than most people. Abstraction not tied to first-hand experience is deemed superficial and unimportant.

(17) Old information is preferred over and subordinated to new.

Emphasis is placed on the sharing of information by people who interact with one another. If new information is to be conveyed, politeness requires that it be couched in terms of what is already known among the persons interacting. Conversations between traditional adults thus often sound quite trivial because they are confirming the information they share and the bond this creates between them.
When people are together, they are assumed to be known to one another. Cree live in small, face-to-face (in western terms) communities, in which persons are known to each other and have relatives in other small communities. The assumption is that people would not interact unless they already knew each other. Introductions are avoided, on the rare occasions when they might be considered necessary (actually fairly frequent but normatively the postulate overrides statistical analysis). A non-known person will be known to someone in a group. His or her ties to known persons, especially through kinship, will be rapidly established. If someone is unknown, information about them is obtained privately, usually later; neither party is embarrassed by their failure to function immediately as known persons. There is little value placed on public behaviour among non-known persons. Personal names are rarely used in either address or reference, this being seen as an imposition on personal autonomy.

Known persons express respect by assuming the on-goingness of their social relationship(s).

Valued social interaction between known persons requires these persons to continuously reaffirm their shared knowledge, both cultural and individual, and ongoing common interests. It is important to have involvements in the social community which keep people in touch with one another and about which they can talk.

Closure of topic precludes further interaction. Closure means that further negotiation of conflict and elaboration of consensus cannot take place. Politeness requires leaving all discussion open-ended so that its thread can always be picked up on a later occasion. (When I and my family first went to Africa, our grandmother kept a coat she was mending for me; that was her reassurance that our relationship was not ending by our, to her, worrisome departure.) Whites often summarize what has been agreed upon in a discussion, without realizing that the closed summary makes it impossible to continue discussion later.

Referential speech is less important than expressive speech; reference should be embedded in social relationship. People's relationships to one another are more important than any information they could convey on any given occasion. The reference level of speech is trivial, though years of it build up strength in a relationship. What is conveyed, referentially, is less important than who one conveys it to, which in turn depends on established social relationships.
(22) **Listening and speaking are equally active roles in communication.**

The speaker and the listener are part of a single system in which neither could exist without the other. Even though turns at talk do not change frequently, both parties remain active participants in the communication. Listening is a skill which is taught explicitly to children; speaking is less problematic — the ability to do that comes with age if one knows already how to listen. People spend more time listening than talking, which is how they learn.

(23) **A listener must confirm his or her attention to the speech of another, signifying attentiveness rather than agreement.**

Ehe, 'yes', is a conventional acknowledgement of hearing the words of a speaker. It is inserted frequently at pause junctures in narrative. It does not commit the listener to agreement, simply to attentiveness.

(24) **A thoughtful pause is necessary before any verbal response in an exchange of turns at talk.**

There should be respectful silences (long by non-Native standards) between all utterances, for all parties to contemplate what has been said. Pauses are also present within a single turn at talk, while the speaker considers what is being said and whether or how to proceed. These pauses mute turn-taking cues and make order of speakers more dependent on relationships between speakers and listeners which precede the occasion and continue beyond it.

(25) **Spoken words are available for exegesis at any future time.**

After someone has spoken, particularly the formal, monologic speech of an elder or medicine man, that speaking becomes a text open to exegesis. People will discuss, often disagreeing, the meaning of a message. Such exegetical commentary is not considered appropriate at the group level or in the presence of the respected speaker. It is a private behaviour, although multiple persons may be present. Public business meetings also set up conditions for exegesis. After the meeting, it is time for people to discuss the issues brought forth, until consensus is reached. Philips (1975) gives an example from Warm Springs, Oregon.

(26) **Everyone present is addressed when serious words are spoken.**

There is often a direct addressee of important speaking. But others who are present or who want to hear the words are welcome to be present as long as they do not interfere with the autonomy of the speaker. This includes very young children, who are felt to learn by such incidental hearing, particularly of the words of elders. In an oral tradition, of course, such words are only
available for later discussion if they are heard, preferably by as many people as possible.

(27) *A speaker needs an audience of at least one listener; others present may join in at their own will at any time.*

A speaker, however formal or highly respected, will rarely have the attention of everyone in his or her audience when he or she begins speaking. It would be boasting to assume that one could cut off whatever other interaction was going on. An audience of one listener is sufficient to initiate a discourse. Once that discourse has begun, others will begin to attend to it. In practice, if a highly respected person is present, people will attend to their potential speaking. Schoolteachers have more trouble gaining the attention of a group as a whole.

(28) *In storytelling or narrative, say as little as possible.*

It is respectful to listeners to assume they can interpret meanings which are not explicitly stated. Many Cree say it is exhausting to tell stories to white men because they have to be so long (to put in everything that could be assumed in a native audience). Moreover, stories are aesthetically valued for saying as little as possible. Keith Basso (personal communication) reports a metaphor by an Apache storyteller of hanging clothes on a clothes line. The storyteller strings the line and puts the pegs on it. The listener must hang his or her own clothes (life experiences, which are variable) on it; it is taken for granted that everyone’s clothes are different. “Be brief” is a maxim taken very seriously.

(29) *Storytelling or narrative should be tailored to the situational context of a particular telling.*

In an oral tradition, versions of the same story proceed differently on different occasions by the same storyteller, depending on the particular situation, and by different storytellers. The plot or characters may be quite traditional but the combination of features and framing in relation to social facts of the occasion of telling will be variable. On situational moral application of stories, see Basso (1990) “Stalking with Stories”.

(30) *Interpretation is open-ended and will differ among listeners.*

There is no single interpretation of the meaning of a story. Every listener has his or her own interpretation, both at the time of telling and with reflection in relation to ongoing life experience throughout a life cycle. (Paul Ricoeur seems to have had important precursors here.) Partly this is a question of experience being valued over words, or the words being valued
as constellations of experience. Partly there is a sense of reflexivity over time being appropriate when words are serious.

(31) *Formal verbal instruction is only necessary for things which cannot be conveyed in any other form.*

That which can be taught by demonstration or imitation should be. Verbal teaching is reserved for things which cannot be conveyed except in words. Such instruction involves that combination of religion/philosophy/culture history/epistemology, etc. for which English has no word. The speakers who provide such verbal instruction are grandparents, elders and medicine men, i.e., persons acknowledged by the community to have had generalizable experience giving them the right to speak to others.

(32) *Someone who knows something is under obligation to pass it on to an appropriate successor who will use it wisely.*

In an oral tradition, it is crucial that a person of wisdom choose and train a successor. If his wisdom dies with him, it will be lost to the community. The apprentice, however, rarely practices (except as an assistant) during the lifetime of a teacher. The explicit verbal teaching is expected to be considered carefully in relation to life experience until the point in that life experience when it is appropriate to use the teaching (i.e., to practice a curing ritual or call upon a spirit helper).

(33) *Teaching is deliberately cryptic.*

Because teaching is intended to be considered over time in relation to individual life experiences, which differ for each person, the formal speaker tries to make his words metaphorical, ambiguous, cryptic, multiply interpretable, multivocalic, etc. There is not supposed to be a simple or a single answer. Medicine men often respond to inappropriately direct questions in such terms.

(34) *The community of living persons is extended to the ancestors and to the animate powers of the natural world.*

The Cree divide the world into the living and non-living. The inanimate is a residual (grammatical and conceptual) category for that which has no claim to power, self-awareness or capacity for action. Human persons are included in the category of living beings, but its prototypes are to be found in the spirit world rather than the human. Living beings are united by their ability to function in the world of power. (Cf. Hallowell 1954 on Ojibwa about some stones that talk or thunder spirits whose words were not understood but were assumed to be intelligible.)
(35) Persons who have died and spirits are potential addressees and respondents. Any grammatically animate being theoretically has the capacity to interact with human persons, though not always in human language. Animals, helping spirits, are particularly likely to be addressed. A special suffix to the usual kinship term is used in Cree for deceased relatives. The definition of the ancestors (etymologically) as “the grandfathers who have died” is consistent with the notion that the world of the spirits to which the dead go is partially accessible to human persons.

(36) Personal knowledge, particularly in the power domain, must not be disclosed in detail except on the person’s deathbed. Knowledge is owned (in a way that land is not; cf. Ridington 1990). It is also a product of very particular interactions between spirit helper(s) and a human person. The inherent power of such knowledge is dissipated by talking about the details of the spirit connection, except in quite specific contexts in which the power is used. The exception is that someone on their deathbed should pass on this information. When a ritual life is completed, there is no danger to the bond between helper and supplicant.

(37) Use of the future tense jeopardizes ongoing processes in the world of power. Hymes (1966) discusses Chinookan unwillingness to compromise the ongoing nature of natural and social processes by talking casually about them. Thus, traditional stories are told at night in the winter, both times when activity comes to a pause. Future tenses are avoided, as is prediction of the what will happen in the future. This would be arrogance and asking for trouble.

(38) When a speaker moves between the secular and the sacred world, in either direction, a transition is necessary. When a traditional story is told, the movement from the secular world of the story’s situated telling to the sacred one which is outside time as understood in the everyday world must proceed gradually. Often the narrator will begin with personal experience, go back through oral tradition to the things he or she did in the past, to history as reported through grandfathers (in oral tradition, not written history), to the sacred time when things were new and men and animals had special powers. At the end of a story, the route back out must be traced, though often more briefly. See Darnell (1974) for a detailed example.
Although genres of speaking are distinguished in principle, assignment to a genre is often problematic in practice. In principle, there is a clear distinction between sacred stories and historical narratives/news/gossip. In practice, however, there are non-ordinary events in stories about present-day reality and certainly in individual narrations about life experience; characters from the sacred time may appear in the present, and so on. There is a lively tradition of genre exegesis in trying to adequately interpret narratives.

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