Finding the Riverbed: Language Uncertainty in a Nunamiut Eskimo Village

Erin M. Cline, Belmont University, Tennessee Eta Chapter of Alpha Chi

Three hundred miles south of Alaska's northern coast, at the summit of a broad glacially carved valley in the Brooks mountain range, lies the Nunamiut Eskimo village of Anaktuvuk Pass. Surrounded by mountains rising to almost 6,000 feet, the Nunamiut, meaning "people of the land," are believed to have been the last nomadic people to settle in North America. Today, in a remote village that can be reached only by plane, they combine modern conveniences with traditional practices and speak English in addition to the Eskimo language of Inupiaq.

I spent a week in Anaktuvuk Pass accompanied by my father, who was a teacher/researcher in the village for several years and who enjoys a continuing friendship with many villagers. This provided me with the extraordinary opportunity to stay in the home of two village elders, observing and engaging in conversation and a wide variety of village activities. I was especially interested in an unusual language phenomenon in this culture: a prominent, consistent spoken expression of uncertainty.

A prime illustration of this language use is that in Nunamiut culture it is common practice to answer a question with "maybe" when in the West one would answer the same question with a definite "yes" or "no." This spoken uncertainty makes the Nunamiut an example of a type of people discussed, somewhat hypothetically, by the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein in his work *On Certainty*. Here is the aphoristic passage from Wiggenstein:

> But imagine a people who were never quite certain of these things, but said that they were very probably so. . . . *How* would the life of these people differ from ours? For there are people who say that it is merely extremely probable that water over a fire will boil and not freeze, and that therefore strictly speaking what we consider impossible is only improbable. What difference does this make in their lives? (par. 338)

In this paper I will explore the use of the uncertainty language "game" as a reflection of the importance of community in Nunamiut culture, drawing upon Wittgenstein's discussion of language games and certainties to support this interpretation. My goal, as Wittgenstein writes, is to gain a "clear view of the aim and functioning of the words" (*Philosophical* par. 5) in this language pattern.

The contrast between modern and traditional life in Anaktuvuk is remarkable. While virtually all households have CB radios for communication and significantly fewer have telephones, television is an ever-present part of home life. With the television on in one corner of the home, villagers cook whale meat or pluck geese in another. Two copies of the Lord's prayer hang on the wall: one in Eskimo and one in English. At a village feast, hot dogs await on one table and large pots of traditional duck and caribou soup on another. In addition to the outward appearance of such contrasts, a strong pragmatic orientation encourages both collectivist and individualist tendencies in Nunamiut culture (Cline 13-14). A pragmatic orientation, as Sam Chan puts it, is characterized by "situation centeredness," in which the context of a situation is an important determining factor in what is considered appropriate behavior (213). In the midst of such contrasts in behavior, perhaps it is not surprising that a language embracing the middle ground, or "maybe," as opposed to the definite "yes" or "no," has emerged.

Coincidentally but interestingly, the fact that Anaktuvuk Pass was formed by a glacier—a river of ice—makes this setting appropriate as an illustration for Wittgenstein's discussion of certainties, because Wittgenstein elaborates his idea through an analogy of a riverbed. He writes, "When we first begin to *believe* anything, it is not a single proposition, but a whole system of

propositions" (*On Certainty* 141). That system, he says, is like a riverbed; then he extends the analogy:

> It might be imagined that some propositions . . . were not hardened but fluid; and that the relation altered with time, in that fluid propositions hardened, and hard ones became fluid. . . . And the bank of that river consists partly of hard rock, subject to no alteration or only to an imperceptible one, partly of sand, which now in one place, now in another, gets washed away, or deposited. (*On Certainty* 96-99)

He writes of this process that it "forms a system . . . and in that system some things stand unshakably fast and some are more or less liable to shift" (*On Certainty* 144). Anaktuvuk Pass, carved through a lengthy process of glacial movement and river erosion similar to movement of the riverbed described by Wittgenstein, is the setting of such a system: a form of life.

The metaphor of the riverbed, according to Gertrude Conway, "may hold the key to Wittgenstein's concept of the form of life" and the "unbridgeable gap between language, thought, and reality" (24). Forms of human life, which are matrices of interconnected meaning and activity, become world pictures when they are brought to awareness and articulation. Conway adds, "Some positions held in the world picture are flexible, reversible like the movement of waters in the river" (88). The world picture is the background against which one's thoughts are shaped, as the riverbed is the foundation into which the river flows. In addition, one's thoughts and experiences can shape the world picture, as the river shapes the riverbed. As Wittgenstein puts it, the world picture "gives our way of looking at things . . . their form" and belongs to "the *scaffolding* of our thoughts" (*On Certainty* 211).

One's certainties, according to Wittgenstein, are the "unmoving foundation of his language-games" (*On Certainty* 403). The language game one learns is built on behavior, as Wittgenstein demonstrates when he discusses how a child learns "a new pain-behavior" by means of words connected with the natural behavior of crying (*Philosophical* 244). Oswald Hanfling explains Wittgenstein's point as follows:

> For what the child is taught when he learns about chairs, trees, and hands is not a belief (that these things, or physical objects in general, exist), but to participate in an activity, a language-game. Thus if we tell him, "This is your hand," we are not teaching him a belief, but the meaning of the word "hand"—how to use this word in "the innumerable language-games that are concerned with his hand. (166)

In *Zettel* Wittgenstein writes, "There isn't any question of certainty or uncertainty yet in their language-game. Remember: they are learning to *do* something" (par. 416). He applies this to the concept of a world-picture in *On Certainty*: "I have a world-picture. Is it true or false? Above all it is the substratum of all my enquiry and asserting" (162). Following Wittgenstein's assertion, the world-picture of the Nunamiut is the substratum of the uncertainty language game they use, and in such usage they are *doing* something.

The Nunamiut have a high-context culture, one in which, as Chan says, "most of the meaningful information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person who receives the information, while relatively little is contained in the verbally transmitted part of the message. The speaker or sender's true intent is thus often camouflaged in the context of the situation" (232). This is a contrast to low-context Western cultures, where information is usually conveyed in an explicit and straightforward verbal manner. Norman Chance notes that for the Nunamiut, subtle, nonverbal cues in conversation are often important clues to meaning, and the crucial resource is not words or things, but people (29). This fact requires one to pay attention to the actual *use* of the words to determine their meaning.

With especially strong consideration given to the high-context nature of this culture, I intend to place Nunamiut language usage in the proper context after describing the uncertainty language game I observed. Anaktuvuk Pass currently has four generations: the first generation, or elders, who helped establish the village from nomadic life; the second generation, their children, who were quite young at the time of settlement; the third generation, or grandchildren, who range in age from newborn to early twenties; and the fourth generation, or great-grandchildren, mostly

under the age of five. The uncertainty language game, in English, is used frequently by the first, second, and third generation. With the exception of a few elders, all members of the village speak English fluently.

Each scenario of the uncertainty language game among the Nunamiut involved one of five responses: “I don’t know,” “maybe,” “probably,” “I guess,” and “might be.” Among third generation children, the uncertainty language game was phrased in two of these ways. For example, two girls, both about seven years old, were visiting with me at a feast and one of them said, “We’re related.” When I asked how, one responded, “We’re cousins. We’re cousins, maybe.” From all visible signs, the girls did not doubt the fact that they were cousins, except for the addition of “maybe” to the statement. In another instance, a group of third generation children were telling me about their families, and when I asked a question about a family member, one responded, “I don’t know.” A few seconds later she proceeded to answer my question clearly, almost as if she didn’t remember her former statement.

The second generation adults appeared to use the uncertainty language game not only in response to questions, but in their everyday conversations as well. Over the CB radio, one woman was discussing when she might be able to visit with someone, and said, “I will probably be at my mother’s house today.” Everyone in the village knew she was spending every day at her elderly mother’s house, caring for her. Another time, a woman who was temporarily away from the village and expecting a visit from her mother said, “Maybe my mother [will] fly in tomorrow,” and from all apparent signs, she knew her mother would fly in the next day. In yet another instance, a villager was planning a visit to someone’s house, and said, “Maybe we’ll come over there.” An hour later the family arrived at the home, and it appeared that everyone, host and visitors alike, had known they were definitely coming to visit.

The first generation elders also used the uncertainty language game quite often. Following a whale feast, I asked one of the elders what technique is used to hunt the whales, and he said, “I don’t know.” A few moments later, he began describing in detail how the whales are hunted. In another instance, a conversation was interrupted by Christian music being played over the CB radio, and an elder said, “That might be Ron playing that. He always like to play that kinda music.” The conversation about the music continued, and all statements about Ron’s playing (which everyone seemed certain was the case) were prefaced by words of uncertainty. Another example of the uncertainty language game occurred in the discussion of Eskimo games, which, as several villagers had told me, are held on Tuesday nights. A village elder mentioned this, saying, “Tuesday night, game night,” and referred to a couple of games that are usually played. Recognizing what he was referring to, I said, “Yes, they told me that they have games on Tuesday nights,” to which he responded, “Maybe.”

In almost every instance, it could be determined from the context of the situation that the individual using uncertain language was not actually uncertain. Wittgenstein’s comments are pertinent here. Following his description of a people who use the uncertainty language game, Wittgenstein writes, “Isn’t it just that they talk rather more about certain things than the rest of us? . . . [Such a person] does everything that the normal person does, but accompanies it with doubts” (*On Certainty* 338-39). Wittgenstein’s words here describe the Nunamiut quite accurately; there is substantial evidence that this uncertainty language game is not intended to communicate actual uncertainty.

That is not to say that it did not originate with actual uncertainty. In an examination of why the Nunamiut use such language, a potential contributing factor is their cultural history, which is characterized by instability and change. Two major elements have influenced such instability. First is the nature of life in north Alaska, where the Nunamiut have always been closely bound to their natural environment and thus have had to adapt to seasonal variations. The aboriginal calendar demonstrates the impact of seasonal change, particularly on food sources: April is “moon for beginning whaling,” June is “moon when rivers flow,” and September is “moon when young geese and brant fly south” (Chance 88). The second source of change is Westernization and modernization. As explorers, whalers, and other Westerners moved north, the Eskimo world

changed dramatically, and change continues today with the introduction of new technology. Instead of resisting change, the Nunamiut have been quite receptive to it, an attitude that anthropologists have attributed to their pragmatic nature. They acknowledged their interest in and appreciation of technology, services, and schooling because these things made their lives easier in some ways. But the Nunamiut disagreed with the notion that such acceptance would result in the loss of their cultural way of life, Chance concludes, and were selective in what they adopted and what they didn't (62, xiv). As they shifted from nomadic life to village life and learned new ways of doing things, the Nunamiut moved farther away from the instability and uncertainty that previously characterized their life. This is an example of how certainties now fixed in the riverbed were once part of the flow of the river.

The uncertainty language game may represent parts of that riverbed in the form of important values in Nunamiut culture. One possibility is that uncertain language is used because individuals do not want to make a statement that will turn out to be false. An anthropologist Nicholas Gubser writes, "The Nunamiut are very concerned with truth . . . . [T]hey are interested in the truth of a person's statement—the extent to which his statement coincides with observable reality." Gubser continues with the following description and analysis of the culture. Because, historically, errors or miscalculations in the prediction of weather patterns and food sources could be fatal for the entire community, the Nunamiut have a very strong sense of community. Thus, those qualities attributed to the *inualautak*, or "good person" in Nunamiut culture, reflect the importance of community and harmony. The role language plays in the preservation of these values is seen in the following Nunamiuk description of the *inualautak*: "A good person never becomes angry; he works hard and is never lazy, helping friends and relatives in building a house or making clothes in time of need and giving them food, skins, and firewood; he does not steal; he does not lie; and he refrains from arguing or talking to people in a funny, affected, or 'neurotic' way." In contrast, a bad person is easily angered, lies, acts strangely, refuses to help others, and is overly aggressive (218-19). An emphasis on mutual aid and reciprocal obligation is especially visible in the qualities of village leaders. As Chance says, "The leader who ceases to share the norms, objectives, and aspirations of the group ceases to be a leader. Nor may he be authoritarian or aggressive in his actions, for this goes directly against Eskimo values" (64).

Similarly, modesty is seen as a means of fostering a sense of harmony within the community. While competition is encouraged and quite present in village activities, it is expected to be good natured and the winner must always show modesty. This modest communication style of the Nunamiut resembles that of high-context Asian cultures, especially in indirectness. Of the Asian style, Chan writes, "In the interest of preserving face, there is a characteristic reluctance to contradict, criticize, disappoint, or otherwise cause unease or discomfort in another . . . . The listener may also be noncommittal or hesitant in response to a direct question" (233). This is true of the Nunamiut as well, and as Wittgenstein might say, their language is a reflection of their form of life. Hesitancy in answering definitely can be seen to reflect cultural values, imbedded in their world picture. The Nunamiut value harmony, and their concern with preservation of harmony by refraining from all appearances of immodesty or presumptuousness may cause them to couch their statements in language of uncertainty.

In addition to using the language of uncertainty in all of these ways of the "game," the Nunamiut must also use it to communicate actual uncertainty. This raises an important question: how do the two uses of uncertainty differ in their language? Of this kind of question, Wittgenstein writes:

> Uncertainty: whether a man really has this feeling, or is merely putting up an appearance of it. But of course it is also uncertain whether he is not merely putting up an appearance of pretending . . . . Am I really always in some uncertainty whether someone is really angry, sad, glad, etc., etc. No. Any more than whether I have a notebook in front of me and a pen in my hand, or whether this book will fall if I let go of it. (*Remarks* 137)

As in Wittgenstein's example, one way of discerning between actual and apparent uncertainty is by experience: one knows the book will fall because according to every prior experience, it has

fallen. Similarly, in Nunamiut culture one may determine instances in which an individual means to communicate actual uncertainty because of his experience with the individual. The Nunamiut community in Anaktuvuk Pass is small, and everyone is quite aware of everyone else's circumstances, allowing determinations about expressions of uncertainty based upon the context of the individual and his circumstances. Often, the use of uncertainty is evident verbally, such as when the individual follows language of uncertainty with a statement of certainty. Nonverbal communication is an important factor in discerning between the two uses of uncertainty language as well. As Gubser writes, "The Nunamiut consider the eyes to be the most reliable means of determining the truth of a statement" (227). Presumably because of the high-context nature of their culture, the Nunamiut pay very close attention to subtle behavior that may indicate meaning. Considering this, determining which use of uncertainty is intended might not be difficult for a member of the Nunamiut community, but for an outsider it poses a substantial challenge.

The way the uncertainty language game reflects cultural values is an illustration of Wittgenstein's riverbed certainties. As the riverbed is the "inherited framework" within which one learns to reason, inquire, and assert, so too is the world picture, including cultural values, the framework within which one learns to participate in language games. It is not surprising that one sees evidence of the framework in the play of the game because as Wittgenstein states, the facts sometimes "show" themselves in the language game but are not stated in it (*On Certainty* 7, 501, 618). This, in turn, is an illustration of the high-context nature of Nunamiut culture, where things are often not explicitly stated but shown, a culture in which the meaning of "maybe" is ultimately something like "harmony is important to me," or an expression of respect for members of one's community. In the words of one Eskimo man, "We always try to help each other. That is the Eskimo way."

In *On Certainty* Wittgenstein writes, "[M]y convictions do form a system, a structure" (102). That system is formed when we show in our behavior what is expressed in the world picture. Quite appropriately, Wittgenstein discusses the nature of questioning, and it is questioning that often evokes the uncertainty language game in Nunamiut culture. He writes, "In answering the question, I should have to be imparting a picture of the world to the person who asked it" (*On Certainty* 233). Questioning brings the Nunamiut world picture to recognition because the response, in the form of the uncertainty language game, reflects cultural values as an important part of the world picture. For the Nunamiut, a people who live in a glacially carved valley, indeed a riverbed of sorts, an understanding of their words is found in the examination of context, and of those things that lie not on the surface of a language game, but in the riverbed itself.

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