Language loss, language gain: 
Cultural camouflage and social change among the 
Sekani of Northern British Columbia

GUY LANOUE

Università di Roma “La Sapienza”

ABSTRACT
The creation of a large artificial lake in 1968 that flooded a large part of the Sekani homeland has led to change in the political outlook of the reorganized Sekani villages. In particular, there has been a reemergence of a universalist social-political philosophy, pan-Indianism, that had as its precursor the cultural-political category of phratry. The association between disruption and the emergence of this system of categorization is historically grounded. The particular problem addressed is why the Sekani speak English when there is little direct contact with Euro-Canadians and no particular advantages, in terms of adaptation to the new economic regime, in doing so. Changes in Sekani English in the political sphere and in relationship terms are examined within the context of maintaining a commitment to pan-Indianism/universalism. (Language loss, bilingualism, political culture, ways of speaking, British Columbia, Athapaskan languages)

In the summer of 1978, a young Sekani girl asked me when I was going to learn Sekani so that I could then teach her and other young people on the Reserve. I responded that I was trying to learn Sekani, with little success, from her parents and people of her parents’ generation. Why didn’t she, I suggested, simply ask them directly to teach her the language? This, she replied, was impossible; her parents wouldn’t talk to her “about that.”

This exchange took place in about the third month of my fieldwork. At that point, I had almost abandoned the idea of learning Sekani, an Athapaskan language once spoken by perhaps 500–1,000 people of north-central British Columbia. Now, few people spoke it; most preferred English as their everyday language. At that time, I judged the desire shown by some of the young people to learn their grandparents’ language to be a political gesture that was in line with the pan-Indian sentiments common among the young. It seemed not more than a symbol, reaffirming self-identity for purposes of political solidarity with other Native groups. A short while later, I abandoned my attempt to learn fluent Sekani when the last
monolingual speaker, aged about 108, died. It seemed clear from my brief time in the community (one of two I was to live in) that research into the traditional preoccupations of the Sekani seemed a waste of time. There were more urgent and pressing problems to study; namely, why was there such a high level of violence, drinking, and stress in the community?

It seemed clear that the stress was caused by or was at least linked to the flooding of the Finlay River and Parsnip River drainage basins (flooded in 1968 by the British Columbia hydroelectric authority’s decision to dam the Peace River, downstream from these two tributaries). Parts of the flooded territory were Sekani homelands, and people had been moved. It also seemed self-evident, though not because of any clearly formulated theoretical viewpoint on my part, that English had “naturally” become the dominant language under such circumstances. The White world was moving in on the nearly 600 Sekani living in the Rocky Mountain Trench (the huge valley formed by the two easternmost ranges of the Rocky Mountains); the Indians were on their way out.

The process had already started with the arrival of the fur traders in 1805, accelerated after World War I with the decision to educate some Sekani in a far-away residential school, and was completed by the arrival, after World War II, of elements of the White southern society and its government and economic apparatus. Now, the Sekani were attending local White elementary schools, and a few were attending high school and community colleges in nearby towns and cities. Sekani was intermittently taught a few hours a week in one of the Reserve schools; this too seemed like another political gesture (the teacher was a young person, related to the Chief, whose own knowledge of Sekani was, I suspected, not as complete as an older person’s would be). The death of the last monolingual speaker seemed as emblematic an event as any if one had to choose a breaking point between the old and the new regimes.

Nonetheless, some questions still remain unanswered. These became even more disturbing as time went on. Why did they now speak English at all times when they had been isolated for so long without contact except for the fur trader and various explorers? If, as some Sekani told me, they had been forced to speak English (more often than what they had spoken for purposes of trade, in any case) because of the polyglot situation of the residential school some had intermittently attended, why did they speak English now, more than 20 years after the closing of the school, when they had generally come into contact only with other Sekani before the late 1960s (the southern community had no White residents in 1978, and the northern village possessed a sole White trader)? Nor could the usual agents of transmission be easily invoked. There was no regular television, radio, or telephone services in the northern town, the elementary school was new (built in the early 1970s), attendance and staffing were not regular, and mail service was intermittent (and most of these conditions had also obtained in the southern community before the mid-1960s). Was the decision to adopt English just an earlier example of the politics of self-identity, comparable to the desire to learn Sekani in 1978? Had the Sekani, in other words, decided to “assimilate” in the same way that they now wanted to reclaim their self-identity? And just what did “assimilation” and “self-identity” mean in this context?

In this article, I explore the problematic question of the mechanism by which English came to be adopted as the everyday language of the Sekani. In particular, I recreate the motivations behind why the Sekani came to adopt English while they had remained relatively isolated from White contact. There is almost no direct evidence available, as the last anthropological records date to 1924, and other sources of evidence are equally scarce (fire destroyed almost all church records in the 1960s, and some archives still keep closed their records from the 1920s to the present). Unfortunately, therefore, there are no records, and memories are dim, about the period between 1920 and 1940, during which time the Sekani consolidated many of the important organizational features that led to the adoption of modern patronyms and English. Yet, nonetheless, I think that an adequate scenario can be reconstructed, given current Sekani tendencies and the earlier records that have survived.

I contend that the decision to adopt English, apparently arrived at in the late 1940s or early 1950s (the only documentary evidence is from 1917, where a traveler reported [Haworth 1917:119] that most of the Fort Grahame Sekani could not speak English), is directly related to the same tendencies and pressures that led to the violence and stress I was then seeing. It is my hypothesis that the Sekani are caught in an existential and political paradox that favors the elimination of certain types of categories if others, more relevant to their immediate purposes, are to be implemented in their political culture. I contend that the use of English, like violence, is part of the process of weakening particular categories, especially those that relate to political self-definition, that the Sekani have been forced to abandon. In particular, I argue that the political culture has been heavily influenced by the historical circumstances of Sekani occupation of their homeland in the 18th and 19th centuries, including dealings with foreigners, White and Native. These circumstances created a tendency toward what today is often labeled, in political discourse, pan-Indianism, and what might be called a tendency toward universalism and abstraction in the Sekani definition and articulation of social organizational principles. Current events have awakened and consolidated this tendency to the point that alternative definitions of social reality are no longer tolerated. English is a vehicle that aids in the implementation of such changes. I contend that it is not so much that the Sekani value the positive economic and social benefits that English might bring from the outside world, but that English is preferred as a necessary outcome of a particular historic process, de-
spite the fact that English, as an obvious symbol of identity, is at odds with the Sekani’s own pan-Indian sentiments that exhort them to be proud of their Indian identity.

LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY

Much of the modern discourse on language change has centered on the question of national or ethnic identity. The theoretical argument that social boundaries depended, in some ways, on more, or less arbitrary conventions of transgression maintained by cultural mechanisms (see, e.g., Barth 1969) gained new ground in the last two decades, perhaps influenced by the moral climate of the 1960s and its validation of the concept of ethnicity.

Fishman’s seminal article (1964) proposed that major language shifts are linked to important social changes such as industrialization or urbanization. Subsequent arguments appear to have divided on the question of the extent to which any change in language reflects intrinsic structural features, or whether language is influenced by the larger political context. As language is both systemic and permits self-reflection, it can change according to its own properties despite the political uses to which it can be attuned by its speakers. The weight of the evidence, however, was interpreted to favor the position that language change is a political, social, and economic phenomenon.

Fellman’s study (1973) of the influence of an international language on a national language in the Middle East reached much the same conclusion. If members of an underdeveloped country hold an uncertain self-image, their linguistic integrity with respect to the foreign languages will also vacillate. If they have a long-established sense of self-definition, then borrowing will not complicate the language picture. In brief, these studies implied that social identity is the independent variable, whereas language is seen as a political instrument in the hands (and mouths) of people whose social and political identity is uncertain. This conclusion is supported by the work of Kress and Hodge (1979), in which they argued that language systematically distorts reality in the service of class interests, problems of defining reality notwithstanding.

Among studies of Native North American languages per se, a descriptive study by W. Miller (1971) attributed the rapidity of the shift to English among the Shosoni to absence of loyalty toward their traditional language and culture. M. Miller (1970) demonstrated that Pima children think that English is “best,” despite their knowledge of their own cultural tradition. Here again, English is a contact language; presumably Pima preferences point to their implicit belief that their own culture holds little in the way of a future for them.

There is not much doubt that the feelings of the Pima accurately reflected the social context of the times. Indian languages were everywhere reported to be moribund. Grubb (1981) predicted that some Indian languages were two generations away from extinction, whereas Sekani itself was more or less “officially” given the kiss of death by Krauss and Golla (1981) in their treatment of northern Athapaskan languages in the prestigious Handbook of North American Indians. Phillips (1985:73) listed about 100 speakers of Sekani, although I think that this figure cannot realistically refer to the Sekani of the Rocky Mountain Trench but also includes those in largely non-Sekani (but Athapaskan nonetheless) communities, where the presence of a rival but cognate language may favor the use of Sekani as a means of maintaining identity. Rhodes and Todd (1981) suggested that linguistic and cultural isolation is an empirically verifiable condition for the survival of some Algonquian languages. In some cases, they implied (ibid.: 64), special programs may be necessary if the language is to survive. It is not surprising that such a dramatic change led one scholar to label the decrease in the numbers of Native speakers in Ontario as representing the “waning” of Ojibwa “under English pressure” (Burnaby n.d.:2); terms that are dramatic and analytically imprecise in equal measure.

On the other hand, work by Dorian (1973, 1978, 1981) on the survival of a Scottish Gaelic dialect in a situation where speakers of English clearly hold the upper hand in regional and national political and economic questions supports the identity hypothesis. Dorian concluded that interference from English is an insufficiently powerful factor to account for the waning of Gaelic, because the two languages are too alien to allow for mutual interference. Nor does a decrease in the use of Gaelic explain the pattern of change in the language. In other words, language death is not akin to uniform simplification in all aspects of language, a point also made by Mohan and Zodor (1986) in their examination of Trinidad Bhojpuri. They preferred to invoke a biological model of species succession, in which language death is a dramatic form of adaptation failure that follows from an overwhelming change in the environment. In the Gaelic case, some elements remain as complex as ever while others fade.

No clear factors emerge from these investigations, save the obvious conclusion that social identity is not a factor that can be invoked in an all-encompassing manner to explain language death. In the same vein, Hill (1983) explicitly concluded that Uto-Aztecan language death does not demonstrate enough homogeneity to justify the invocation of universally applied explanations. Nor is “pressure” from English an easily observable concept that lends itself to methodologically rigorous examination. Robinson’s (1985) study of language retention among Canadian Indians used factor analysis to demonstrate that education (by which she seemed to mean assimilation) is the most important factor in maintaining (or not) an Indian language as a mother tongue. However, she did not examine the factors that prompt a desire for education (in English, for the most part) among Indian groups.
The importance of social identity in language use was invoked by Scollo (1979), whose study of the social context of Chipewyan narratives demonstrated that the presence of a second language is not necessarily the only means by which different and competitive world views can emerge. Chipewyan has developed modern as well as "bush" implications, just as Chipewyan English has a "bush" sector. Both languages seem to support an internally consistent world-view in each domain. This suggests that competition does not necessarily lead to the automatic extinguishing of one language by another. As for an ailing patient, efforts are made to rally the organism by means of usurping, albeit in a limited arena, one of the advantageous roles supposedly held by the invading language. It also implies that when the language of the host society — in this case, Sekani — is abandoned, the decision is clearly political. The Sekani could have developed a "modern consciousness" in Sekani, just as they have developed a "bush consciousness" in English (at least, English is spoken while in the bush, and it is certainly of a different register than "town" English). They chose not to do so, or rather, past choices conditioned this particular selection when it became necessary to choose.

These examinations of the ways in which languages live or die are indications of the importance of the particular social and cultural circumstances of contact between diverse language groups. In sum, language is a sufficiently flexible element in defining social identity. At the very least, we should be looking at cultural and linguistic boundaries in the same sense that Barth (1969) examined ethnic (that is, social and political) identity. Boundaries are erected only so that maintenance can be observed in the breach.

The Sekani Past and Present

In large part, the Sekani resemble other contemporary northern Indian groups. They are generally poor; there is a high rate of displacement of people as some emigrate to cities to avoid the immediate consequences of the disintegration of their physical and social environment, whereas many others choose to remain live away from the Reserve so as to lessen their contacts with those who remain; levels of education and training are generally lower than the Canadian average, preventing easy assimilation into the new frontier economy; levels of health care and housing are below Canadian standards; relations with their White neighbors are not good due to hostility on the part of many marginal Whites who see Indians as competitors (clearly more in the cultural and social sense of competing for marginal status rather than for economic benefits). Not surprisingly, given the recent upheavals to which they have been subject, many Sekani have negative feelings toward Whites. Finally, levels of violence — including rape, homicide, suicide, and accidental death associated with episodes of violence or tension — are higher than the Canadian norm or even local White standards (Jobson et al. 1978). Clearly, the Sekani are by now politically and economically marginal and in a difficult position.

Pan-Indianism

Most of these traits have developed over the last 25 years, thus aggravating the divisiveness and alienation that are characteristic features of the younger generation. This is especially true as the young increasingly must deal with a very different reality than that faced by their elders. Perhaps the greatest difference between young and old lies in the espousal of pan-Indianism as a political stance by the former. Pan-Indianism is manifested as a view of history as well as contemporary society; "all Indians are brothers"; "we were all communists before the Whites came"; "we'll go back to the bush and live like Indians and shoot any Whiteman who comes after us"; "we used to own all this country, and you [Whites] stole it from us." It is not that the discourse can be dismissed as completely false (it is not), as it is that the terms of reference are inapplicable to anything like the traditional forms of social and political thought that we think characterized their society. It is hard to read any accounts of Sekani history and see where "nation," "communism," "politically united front," or even "brother" (as they define it today) played a dominant role in their political discourse of social organization.

A constant pan-Indian theme is the proposed unification of Indian people in a common political front. For the Sekani, this view is more than lip service to a faddish political pose. They held several meetings on this issue and even held at least one large gathering, in which many Sekani from three communities were flown in for a 3-day reunion after 15 years of nearly complete isolation. Yet, ironically, a summary of my own research into Sekani history was the basis of the discussion about political options. Associations have been formed with other Native political Councils (although each of the three Sekani communities has joined, at one time or another, Councils that did not include the other two). And in the everyday world, "brothers" fight and sometimes kill each other. Clearly, there was something at work that was just as remote from political faddism as communism was from their history.

Historical circumstances have played a part in selecting this modern form of universalism. First, there is the influence of broader contact with the outside world. One man, for example, fought in Europe during World War II. As he stated, the experience was difficult, but not so much the war itself as his return after demobilization.

In Europe, it made no difference that I was an Indian; I was a good soldier. I was a sniper because they figured that an Indian was a good shot. I fought with Whites, and nobody treated me like an Indian. We [he and other Canadian soldiers] used to go visit girls together. But when I came back here, I was an Indian again.
Although it did make a difference to his officers that the man was an Indian (he was made a sniper on that basis), he believes (and it is plausible) that it made no difference to his fellow soldiers. Today, this man lives in a region where there is considerable and palpable anti-Indian feeling among many local Whites; there is no question that his pride suffers when Whites label him "one of the dark ones." This man, in his late 50s, is an influential person within the Reserve. His stories were listened to, if not always respectfully, then at least with interest (his unusually eloquent English bears out his reputation as a powerful orator). Not surprisingly, a few of his sons are very active politically and give voice to pan-Indian sentiments; most of his daughters have emigrated to nearby towns and cities and married White men or live and work in White occupations in town. Although this man was the only Sekani to have fought in Europe, the simple fact that he has had many children in the context of a very small community has made local political discourse sensitive to the resentment that many people feel toward White racism.

His children are perhaps exceptional in that most of them have more or less become permanent residents of the White world, while their father still lives in the Reserve community. But the education and political activities of other young people have also brought them into contact with Indian political activists, with politically motivated people from neighboring tribal groups, with White anti-Indian sentiments, and with pan-Indian literature. Some young Sekani have met American Indian political activists; their rhetoric ("it's our land," "you stole it from us," etc.) surfaced in a Sekani confrontation with local roads authorities a few days after the encounter. Second, no matter how much some people crave isolation from White culture, they cannot help but become sensitive about their identity as Indians when the pattern of their everyday lives brings them into contact with obvious anti-Indian resentment or, something they are equally sensitive to, paternalistic liberalism. Third, those who stay on the Reserve come in contact with pan-Indian magazines. Most are periodicals from the United States. Among other things, these publications contain material that validates a confrontational approach in Indian–White relations. Their news content is slanted toward documenting oppression of Indians by Whites (and other dominant political and ethnic groups in other parts of the world) and successful Indian resistance to cultural oppression (Price 1972). This viewpoint calls attention to the need for unified political response and reinforces the already-existing sense of isolation and powerlessness experienced by the young. Most importantly, such views are popular because they introduce a discourse about unity that is expressed in very abstract terms, terms that concord well, as I examine herein, with an already prevalent and traditional idea of universal brotherhood. In brief, there is every opportunity and encouragement for political sensitization, but the real impetus comes from history.

**Tension**

Tension, violence, and pan-Indianism are correlated with the length and degree of involvement in the modern Canadian economy; violence is more widespread in the southern community than in the relatively isolated northern community. In this community, for example, I noted only three threats of violence in 8 months. By contrast, 19 pairs of people fought or made definite threats of physical violence in the southern community over a 9-month period. In a community of 65 people, of whom one-half were under 20 years of age, these are relatively high numbers. Furthermore, there is a generalized air of tension. People claim that nearly 35 persons have lost their lives in a violent fashion since 1962, when the village had about 200 people living in it. Not all were suicides or homicides, but people are clear about the causality involved. Tension leads to excessive drinking, and drinking often leads to accidental or violent deaths. A loss of nearly one-seventh of the community in a relatively short time has been drastic for the Sekani, especially for the younger generation (the remainder of the people who left, nearly all under 35, have emigrated to nearby cities and towns).

Most violence is between husbands and wives, whereas most of the balance (about 40%) occurs between unmarried people, especially men, who are members of different patronymic networks. Very nearly all husbands and wives (including people living together with children but who are not legally married) had different patronymic identities before marriage (there was one exception, and the marriage was regarded as "too close" by many people). There is no clearly stated kinship category that defines the exogamic boundary. Although some people state that "cousins" ought not to marry, many did marry their cross or second cousins. Today, many men seek wives from outside the community because the local women are considered "too close." In sum, nearly 100 percent of violence and threats involve people with different patronymic identities. This might seem to be a mere demographic accident (there are, after all, few patronymic categories in such small communities) were it not for the fact that many people cite the different patronymic identities of litigants as the cause of violence.

**Patronymic networks**

Patronymic networks are also the focus of other tendencies. Hunting partnerships are still maintained in the northern community, unlike the southern one. Typically, a young man will first apprentice himself to an older sister's husband, then take his wife's brother and, later, a younger sister's husband as a partner when he is considered a senior hunter. Twelve of 25 partnerships identified in Fort Ware were of the second kind, whereas the rest fell into the first and third categories or consisted of a man trapping with his wife. Given that marriage is patronym–exogamous, partnerships also cross patronymic boundaries. So it is with the inheritance of trapline rights, in
which a man often gives rights to his present junior partner, a younger sister’s husband (about 50% of cases for which there are records going back about 30 years). Within these networks, the choice of a particular partner is largely based on instrumental considerations; availability of people, relative age (middle-aged men prefer to trap with each other, older men trap with younger men), and equipment and land owned by each. To all intents and purposes, opportunities for hunting and trapping have been reduced to zero for the southern Sekani. Although trapping is not physically impossible (everyone still has rights to a trapline, and a few people still set several traps every spring), the majority no longer consider it a viable way of life. That is, the inescapable presence of loggers and White sportsmen (many local, but a large number not) has so changed the conditions under which hunting and trapping occur that people have become disheartened and discouraged.

Emigration also involves patronymic categories. The “social capital” (hunting and trapping experience, a house, and hunting gear) that a man needs is provided either by his immediate family or his household (which often includes members of his patronymic network other than those in his immediate family). Therefore, a man with a small patronymic network has fewer social and economic assets at his disposal with which he can attain full adult status and marry (the two are basically coterminous) than a man who is, literally, well connected. Even if all young men were to have the opportunity of trapping and hunting with their fathers in order to gain experience (and this is not possible for everyone), not all could depend on their immediate family for a house. Houses are usually allocated by the community (Band) council and remain the property of the Band if they are vacated. If a man wants a vacant or recently constructed house, the system of local political decision making—which tends toward a mix of consensus, majority rule, and old-fashioned horse trading among powerful (well represented) patronymic groups—will favor a man who has a large patronymic network. In political decision making, for example, care is usually taken to assign political positions such that all competing patronymic factions are represented according to their relative strength. The Chief will be from the largest patronymic category, whereas other Council positions will be assigned according to relative numbers (while assuring that the Chief and his patronymic network control the majority of political offices). Hence, a man who is not well connected or well liked will have difficulties in obtaining both training and assets. He will more readily leave the community than one who can more easily establish himself through his broader networks.

Clearly, patronymic networks have replaced other forms of lower-level associational matrices. This is especially obvious in the southern community, where patronymic-linked violence dominates the social climate in the almost complete absence of other forms of association. Given the nature and level of tension and violence, aggression between members of different patro-

nymics is virtually the only remaining structural feature of social organization, apart from the village itself. In a word, violence tends to involve the same exogamic boundaries that hunting partnerships once crossed and still follow in the relatively more isolated and traditional northern community. In this limited sense, violence is functional. Whatever its ultimate causes, it is channeled in such a way that the absence of more traditional associations and related categories is compensated by means of inverting the behavior and sentiments that were associated with important lower-level categories. All North American Indian people use patronymics, yet the Sekani have invested these with many unique functions. Patronymics were not typically used by the Sekani in the early or middle traditional fur trade era; records from the turn of the century list people by one name, usually “Indian.” And yet patronymics are a type of network whose composition does not change over time or according to changes in mundane conditions. They are exclusive, and patronymics are universally applied without regard to a person’s activities in lower-level domains. They are, in a word, precursors, or at least another example, of the abstract form of unity that the Sekani favor under particular conditions. The reasons for this are largely historical; these have also produced tendencies that have encouraged the adoption of English.

Phratry

Relative isolation had allowed the development of a slow and relatively unchanging pace of life between 1805, the year of first contact with Europeans, and the early 1950s. In this “traditional” period, the Sekani were geographically isolated and somewhat insulated from the outside world. The Hudson’s Bay Company acted as a barrier to integration, protecting its source of furs by maintaining the Indians in as pristine a condition as it could. The fur trade, however, had profound effects on the Sekani. Not only was a dependency on European goods gradually inculcated, somewhat in the manner described by Leacock (1954) and Henriksen (1974) for the Montagnais-Naskapi, but the trade also accentuated a division into northern and southern regional bands (using Helm’s [1965] terminology). In all likelihood, this division already existed as a result of the different immigration histories of the various component local bands, but the establishment of two trading posts in the southern and northern regions (1805 and 1849, respectively) cemented the self-identity and relative autonomy of the northern and southern groups. By the time a political crisis was precipitated around 1890, the political culture of the Sekani had become sensitive to the exigencies of the fur trade as much as it had once been attuned to hunting and gathering. From 1870 to 1890 the Sekani experimented with an alternative means of constructing social identity, the phratry. The phratic system is the direct outcome of the interplay between the early-contact system of in-
corporative band organization and the circumstances of contact with Europeans and, more important, with neighboring Indian groups.

Sekani hunting was organized into small hunting bands. These small groups intermittently occupied particular ranges within the homeland, thus demonstrating ownership to outsiders who might have claims or otherwise cast envious glances on vacant ranges. Intermittent frequency of occupation is a structural feature of the basic dynamics of this type of social organization. Turner and Wertman’s (1977) examination of Cree social structure suggested that two other features emerge as a result: a certain size of homeland and a particular political structure. They argued that the political autonomy of the band is best maintained by establishing a sufficiently large range and a correspondingly small population, such that self-reliance is possible. "Small enough" and "sufficiently large" depend on the number of people who could survive in time of severe resource scarcity. Hence, people are rarely forced to move into homelands claimed by outsiders or into areas of which they have little knowledge. A relatively low population density fuels a tendency for the local hunting bands to become change. This is accomplished through the agency of a headman or council whose duties include urging people to move into areas that ought to be occupied for the sake of demonstrating ownership. It is an accident that most, if not all, Indian territorial band societies place a premium on the communal ownership of land while generally disdainning attachments to particular zones (Turner 1978a). In sum, the mobility of these semidependent groups is what allows the band to constitute itself as a self-defined body. All the bits and pieces of fragmentary evidence point to a similar form of social organization obtaining among the Sekani in the early contact period. Thus, the way was paved for enabling a particular response to foreign encroachment when a series of circumstantial events intervened in the 1870s.

This crisis was a direct outcome of the organization of the fur trade in this region. The movement of the semidependent hunting groups had become a political instrument aimed at striking a compromise between, first, the control of prices set by the Hudson’s Bay Company and, second, the continual pressure exerted by foreigners on Sekani land. Movement of the local hunting groups (2–4 men with dependents) to other tribal homelands (Glenbow Foundation Archives 1823–48 B112-M165:7; LeJacq 1874:348) allowed the Sekani to maintain a relatively favorable trading position, because the various posts were more or less isolated from one another, and the Sekani could take goods in advance with no intention of coming back to pay their debts.

After 40 years of Sekani demands, and in order to exploit a recent rise in the number of moose in the Trench, the post that had been located on the periphery of Sekani territory was moved in 1870 to the heart of the northern homeland (H. B. C. Archives 1823–24, B119/a/2, fo.8; H. B. C. Archives B190/a/2, fo.35, cited in Yerbury 1980:225; Rich 1955:188; the earliest direct records from the post, from 1890, mention that the post was moved to increase the trade in mooseskins; contemporary Sekani and White accounts accord that moose had been absent in the Trench before 1913 for “about 30 years”). The results, for the Sekani, were unprecedented. They started aggregating around the post for longer periods and in larger numbers than had traded at the older temporary rendezvous point established 40 or more years earlier on the same site. Unfortunately for the northern Sekani, other Indian groups also used the post. The evidence is far from overwhelming on this point, as no records survive from before 1890, but the 1893 post journal mentions that 12 of 46 hunters were “attached” to other posts (H. B. C. Archives 1823–24 B119/a/2, fo.8; H. B. C. Archives 1891–97, 249/d/8, fo.1,1,1d). It seems that the northern homeland had been exempted from the trapping restrictions that the Hudson’s Bay Company had applied to the areas adjacent to Trench (H. B. C. Archives 1906–08, B249/a/8, p. 13). It can be surmised that the combination of year-round trapping, relatively abundant supplies of moose, and the ban on summer trapping in their own homelands attracted foreign, presumably “friendly,” Indians (probably Kaska). Around the beginning of the 1890s, the number of moose in the immediate vicinity diminished and the Sekani began to go farther and farther afield in their hunts.

As much as it is tempting to think that the Sekani stayed around the post because they saw it as an assured source of trade goods and only went farther afield to chase the declining moose population, the earlier records tell a different story. Every single instance in which the Sekani are depicted huddling around and reluctant to leave the relative security of the post occurs in a situation of scarce food resources, a fact that was not lost on the traders themselves (H. B. C. Archives 1829–30, B188/b/8, fo.9). It seems obvious, therefore, that the absence of moose in the early 1890s was not a factor that initiated a return to wide-ranging hunts. If anything, such a decline would have encouraged people to stay at the post. Nor would they have stayed in 1870 only because of the abundant moose. The other crucial factors seem to have been the relative poverty of the Trench and surrounding areas, and the presence of a trading post in the heart of a zone rich in moose. These conditions would have discouraged the Sekani from wide-ranging hunts in 1870 and encouraged “foreigners” as well as the Sekani to trade at “their” post. Hence, the crucial factor in the Sekani decision to resume wider hunts around 1890 seems to be the presence of foreigners. Their presence must have urged the Sekani to once again demonstrate that they should use a larger portion of their homeland than they had occupied for the preceding 20 years, despite the decline in the local moose population. The Sekani were evidently involved in a political crisis of ownership and self-identity.

There was a consequence to the cessation of movement of the hunting groups and the presence of foreigners. In the period between 1870 and 1890,
when the Sekani were relatively less mobile and the non-Sekani relatively more numerous, a phratrie system of identification was adopted (Jenness 1937). Despite some features of the Sekani system (the names of certain clans and phratries, for example) having been influenced by their Northwest Coast neighbors (Dyen & Aberle 1974; Jenness 1931, 1932; Kobrinsky 1977), the phratries were attuned to independent ends. There was no strict correspondence in form or function among the Tsimshian, Carrier, and Sekani systems (Jenness 1937:44-46). Nor did Sekani phratries have any of the political or religious functions typical of Northwest Coast phratries. They seem to have functioned only on occasions of burials and marriages (Jenness 1937). In a word, phratic identity was important, but not on the level of everyday relations.

And for people so acutely attuned to movement over territory as a means of inculcating and expressing self-identity, phratries are a strange device indeed. Unlike categories based on territoriality (or locality-incorporation; see Turner 1978b), phratic membership does not depend on the immediate circumstances of work and residence. Phratries create a form of identity that is completely different from the regional or local band. In this case, the Sekani took the very traits—common work history and residence—that were no longer sufficient to construct identity that asserted their ownership of the homeland in a manner convincing to outsiders, and they inverted the major structural terms of reference. The self-identity of the regional band depended, in some measure, on shared occupation as a criterion by which the solidarity of members was expressed. However, phratries recreated the solidarity and structural divisions of the regional band (each phratry had several small clans, which seem to have corresponded to nothing more than the hunting groups) by using criteria that were, in comparison, ephemeral. Phratries unify by means of dividing the group into several exogamous categories, yet do so in such a way that immediate circumstances of occupation—no matter how they change, as they obviously did in this case—no longer affect the process of self-definition (see Table 1).

Sekani strategies of identity

The point here is not whether one accepts the argument I am proposing about the conditions under which phratries were adopted, but to note the particular tendency that the Sekani developed as a response to what they see as fundamental aggression by outsiders. When immediate circumstances prevent the assertion of self-identity by means of common occupation of the homeland, and when outsiders are identified as the cause of problem, then the Sekani deploy an alternative form of identity that is based on a type of universalism, of overriding unity that transcends the immediate collapse of the more traditional mechanism of self-definition. These might be phratries (current coin in the 1870s on the Northwest Coast), patronymic networks (probably adopted after World War I when the local fur trade changed from a barter to a cash basis), or pan-Indian unity (a modern phenomenon). Although there are no direct data on the introduction of patronymics, surely the Sekani tendency to favor abstract rather than more concrete expressions of unity played a part in assigning broad functions to something brought in by the fur trade and other aspects of contact with the European world. Nor is it an accident that pan-Indianism (once again, a form of popular discourse brought in from the outside) has been adopted by the Sekani as a reaction to and defense from outside encroachment, especially when such encroachment is causing the Sekani to lose what little autonomy the frontier economy has left them.

History and identity

Sekani social structure has recourse to two opposed ways of affirming self-identity. Each is deployed under particular circumstances that, in the south, have encouraged the re-emergence of unvarying, exclusive, and abstractly defined networks. Today they consist of little more than the system of the lineal inheritance of surnames and political categories justified by reference to pan-Indianism. This is in contrast to the older system of flexible incorporative networks, represented by the community as such and the domestic group. The immediate circumstances that impinge on the categories of discourse associated with incorporation necessarily change a person's contingent social identity. The categories to which he belongs are reorganized to accord with mundane conditions, whereas everyday events do not affect the second system, that of phratric/clan/pan-Indian brotherhood. Hence, whenever flux exceeds the contingencies anticipated by the territorial/incorporative system, universally applied definitions of brotherhood prevail.
Yet although problems of self-definition were and are being acted upon, the Sekani were participating in the money economy. They more or less experienced the same pressures toward the breakdown of communal ties as other Canadian Indian groups. This was accomplished through the continual replacement of the bush economy by the money economy, of exogamous marriage and partnership ties based on incorporation via short-lived ties determined by contract and instrumental considerations, and of dispersal by aggregation. In a word, the significance of the band as a network of cooperative co-owners has diminished. The first signs came as trapping and hunting in designated family traplines became the norm. Later, opportunities for hunting and trapping declined. Given the presence of easily obtainable welfare money, it is not surprising that some people ask themselves, “why bother trapping? It’s too hard work.” It is a comparison and implicit acceptance of an alien economic rationality that would have been inconceivable 20 years earlier.

Just as phratries in essence did nothing to stop the influx of foreigners 100 years ago, the Sekani are today even less empowered to stave off the inexorable economic forces that have rendered the circle of incorporation increasingly small and meaningless. This change toward smaller personal networks and the new sense of the loss of control over their destinies – combined with the already existing idea of brotherhood as an alternative definition of group solidarity – has resulted in the application of the term “brother” to increasing numbers and categories of people. The credo of pan-Indian unity has not only gained in popularity as the significance of lower-level relationships (such as domestic groups and trapping partnerships) has become ambiguous, it has also become essential. The Sekani, in brief, are supplanting one form of unity with another, one that has its roots in their traditional political culture and that, despite its historical roots (to which the credo of pan-Indian sanctioned traditionalism accords great importance), overtops the incorporative base of their society.

And for the Sekani, this is the core of the problem they face. They already had an anticipatory countervailing form of unity when the older, territorially based system proved inadequate to the task. Hence, they are, in a sense, trapped by their own history, urged to deploy a type of unity so abstract that its failure, its sterility as a practical political philosophy, cannot really be gauged until it has exhausted all of its endless possibilities. Given the limitations of the older system and the openness of the second, there is little alternative but to continue. Like the Hawaiian history of contact that Sahlin (1982:81) described, there is often a disproportion between objective causes of change and cultural effects. In this case, what may seem like a relatively small change in “objective conditions” has led to large-scale (albeit much less dramatic than the Hawaiian case) cultural results. In general, all people act within the terms of reference of their culture. The Sekani have an example of the practical deployment of universal categories that were enabled in mundane affairs. The patronymic networks did form the basis for partnerships in the south. In Sahlin’s terms, the Sekani response was coded for by the structure-in-history. Hence, the Sekani vision of an uncertain future is very much informed by their past.

As fighting and antagonism have become the counterpart of brotherhood, two tendencies emerge. First, other, nonpolitical, criteria are introduced to clarify, or perhaps, to reinstate the village boundary vis-à-vis others (“those people [other Sekani, but never Whites] are dirty”; “they chew stuff [tobacco]”; “they don’t know how to hunt”; “they always get lost in the bush”; “they bother [a euphemism for sexual contact] our women”; etc.). Second, although violence undermines lower-level associations, tension becomes a necessary part of social organization. The strength and, hence, significance of lower-level relationships are overtly denied while their structural form is enacted and reaffirmed by the categories that are engaged in praxis. The highest level of violence is between people who once maintained close cooperative ties. Does violence arise to create boundaries where a political philosophy of pan-Indian unity avows that none exist, or does a unifying philosophy of brotherhood emerge as a consequence of the divisiveness that can be traced to events in the infrastructural domain? There is no answer to this question. Yet it remains true that the Sekani have limited violence against the “enemy,” who is publicly identified in their political discourse (Whites), and have channeled it precisely into an unsanctioned locus (other Sekani).

THE ROLE OF ENGLISH

It is in order to maintain this ambiguous yet necessary paradox that English emerges as the language of choice. English directly hides certain possibilities that are realized in everyday discourse and confirms others. But this occurs in such a way that Sekani English provides another level of discourse that contradicts particular categories or practices. Thus, English provides another insulating layer that preserves intact the notion of brotherhood: contemporary Sekani culture. Hence, it is not surprising that the greatest divergence between Sekani English discourse and praxis lies in the two key areas of categories that express relationship terms – especially crucial for the partnership system – and in political discourse.

Relationship terms

Although there is no reason to doubt that English could easily have been allowed to develop a bush consciousness in the use of relationship terms, contemporary bonds are labeled by a mix of Sekani and English, neither of which is an accurate reflection of everyday events. This is hardly surprising, as descriptions rarely match actions in most societies.
What is at play here, however, is the way in which the disjunction is managed. There are several noteworthy patterns in English usages that point to a process of camouflage, to a precise and necessary disjunction between events and their descriptions. According to Jenness' (1937) and Honigmann's (1954) lists of relationship terms, traditional nomenclature proposed an equivalence, for male and female speakers, between children of same-sexed siblings and children of opposite-sexed siblings (see Table 2). This held true for the first descending generation for male speakers, although a woman addressed her brother's children by the special terms *esdje* and *esdje*, terms which were also applied to a woman's own siblings. The terms were not used reciprocally by her patrilateral nepotic kin. The significance of this skewing, apparently the norm as long as the terms were in current use until shortly after World War II, is not clear, although the different usages by husbands and wives imply that the domestic group of marriage was conceived as being more confederative than incorporative in organization.6

Today, however, the English terms “niece” and “nephew” are used by both men and women to refer to *esdje* and *esdje*. This suggests that a process of isolating the domestic group is at work. The domestic group of marriage expresses a unified (incorporative) view of social structure (husbands and wives use the same terms), and the domestic group of marriage is at the same time isolated from other domestic groups (a woman now distinguishes “niece” and “nephew” from “brother” and “sister”). Linguistically, therefore, this aspect of English usage conveys the essence of current Sekani social-structural principles while remaining at variance with their political ideology of unity. The domestic group is an incorporating isolate adrift in a sea of sentiments of unity.

The opposite tendency can be seen in the merging of terms that takes place on the second and third ascending generation levels. All old people tend to be addressed as “grandfather/mother” or “auntie/uncle,” depending on relative age and regardless of the link to the speaker. This is a much wider target audience than Jenness’ or Honigmann’s observations. Here, the importance of the bonds that establish the autonomous domestic group of origin are implicitly weakened by transferring the common focus that normally characterizes the domestic group to the entire village. Hence, this usage concords with English usages and a universalistic philosophy.

Nor do English usages accurately reflect the traditional oscillation between the bilateral and lineal structures of the partnership networks, where these still exist. The structure of English terms is generally bilateral and implies a blurring of identities between patrilateral and matrilateral kin, especially in Sekani English. First and second cousins are not distinguished (most are “cousin,” whereas second cousins are “friend”). There are a few exceptions, which suggest that English is not used in the same way that obtains among Euro-Canadians. One man distinguished parallel cousins from cross-cousins by applying the term “brother” to the former, “cousin” to the latter. Another labeled his parallel cousins “first cousins.” When asked to draw a kinship map of the Sekani relationship terms that are remembered (despite the fact that English terms of address are always used), senior hunting partners, who usually select sisters’ husbands as partners, include WiFB, WiFBS, WiZHu, and FBDHu within the term *uslah.*7 However, the older definition (*isla*, collected by Honigmann) seems to have included all potential hunting and trapping partners (ZHu and FBCh). Nor is there a contemporary Sekani term that corresponds to the older term *klaz* “sister’s husband” (and possibly his collateral kin as well).

The terminological focus in modern Sekani (which ignores the one term that would more or less accurately reflect the practice) is largely on networks that use the domestic group of marriage as a point of reference. Practice (which limits itself to English as the idiom of communication) recognizes the primacy of the domestic group of origin. In this case, English and Sekani terms are neither interchangeable nor are they accorded completely separate domains in maps of social structure. Both languages essentially imply a description of the “facts” of everyday relations that is at variance with mundane activities. The Sekani terms point to the central importance of the domestic group of marriage, whereas there are no equivalent English terms of address that reflect the articulation of the domestic group of origin in the formation of partnerships. Such people are “friend” (less common) or “partner.”

Last, the tendency toward camouflage concords with the strength of pan-Indian sentiments. In the south, “cousin” tends to be restricted to first cousins (with the two exceptions already noted), whereas nearly everyone else is “friend.” In the north, people do not distinguish parallel and cross-cousins and tend to include second cousins in the generic term “cousin.” “Friend” is applied to a small circle with whom the speaker has limited contact and, hence, few opportunities for developing a partnership tie.

The political sphere

In the political sphere, however, Sekani and English have more clearly demarcated fields of use. Where the northern Sekani shine in their use of English is in the use of a bureaucratic register. It was not at all unusual for people at Fort Ware Band Council meetings, for example, to switch from the usually restricted verb phrases and vocabulary of their everyday English (which shows interference from Sekani; people often confuse pronoun genders, for example) to a near perfect bureaucratic form: “I move that we propose to B. C. Hydro that immediate action be taken to remove the debris from the far end of the lake.” It is interesting that people often mispronounce words while in this register (e.g., debris can become derbis) but that such forms, of course, rarely occur in everyday speech. Apart from this tendency, it is
fairly clear that Sekani bureaucratese is not a mere misinterpretation of English Euro-Canadian bureaucratic jargon. It is their most synthetic and correct form of speech ("correctness" is, of course, not an issue for the Sekani). The apparent formality of the speech register is supplemented and reinforced along the same dimensions that Irvine (1979) described. There is obvious increased code structuring relative to "normal" speech (not significant in itself, as Irvine argued), an invoking of positional identities and the emergence of a central situational focus.

It is not that this formal register limits interaction or expressivity; rather, it occurs in a type of political forum in a context where there is fairly strong pressure on people to integrate or move out of the community. Nor is the speech register imposed from above, in the sense that the Chief or Indian Affairs Branch people have decreed this as a correct form within the political context. Few master its structural code. This depends, after all, on exposure to specific Euro-Canadian contexts, which is the privilege of a few rather than the many. In this connection, it is perhaps significant that northerners were loathe to hold elections for a new Chief despite private complaints of favoritism. But everyone recognizes the situational focus and the "impersonality" associated with this way of speaking. For example, in a Band meeting where the main agenda was the allocation of housing, one man repeatedly insisted on putting his son's name forward as the recipient of a new house, because, his father claimed, he needed privacy and wanted to start a family. The person to receive the house, however, had already been agreed upon before the meeting and the tension rose in the hall every time the man renewed his demand. The Chief ignored the man and directed the discussion ("I move we pass on to . . .") to the disposition of old houses, and thereby ruled him out of order: "Your motion is improper since [new] housing is no longer the subject under discussion" (in this meeting, "housing" was used to refer to the construction of new houses; the allocation of empty, older houses was called "distributing" houses or the "distribution of houses," though I do not think the Chief made this distinction consciously). This effectively silenced the man (who was not completely sober; a rare occurrence at a northern Band meeting) and, significantly, relieved the mounting tension by reinstating a normative focus. People had momentarily started discussions as they seized the breach opened by the protestor to suggest their own favorite candidates. (Significantly, I heard no one say that the man had a point and that his son should receive a house. It was more along the lines of, "Well, how about me?" "So-and-so's got three kids and lives with his father," etc.)

No matter that housing was in short supply and that there were many candidates who undoubtedly needed houses, if the criteria of space and privacy were used. The Chief's candidate, for example, was single and had the use of his father's house. It was more important to reestablish the overriding community concern that governs the allocation of housing and all other important resources (traplines, for example), which is ultimately related to participation in the community within the integrative framework of multiple ties among the various patronymic networks. That is, the ties a man develops outside his patronymic category are the measure of community integration and "seriousness" of a person. The inebriated man's son had no such ties, and everyone knew it. The favored candidate had them, despite less physical or objective need for living space. Formal speech, positional control, and code consistency (to use Irvine's terms) all help maintain this particular emphasis (either through their use or - more important in relatively democratic Band meetings - their recognition) and exclude extraneous (but nonetheless recognized as objectively important) themes.

Here too, camouflage operates in synthesis with pan-Indian sentiments, or, rather, the lack of a clearly articulated pan-Indian philosophy. The northerners, in other words, have developed a register that roughly corresponds to Bernstein's description of an elaborated code, permitting differentiated others - the various domestic groups of marriage - to maintain communication despite the presence of divisive forces that might favor the hegemony of the domestic group of origin. In a more prosaic sense, use of formal speech in the context of political decision making effectively screens out very real and pressing alternative forms of discourse associated with the Euro-Canadian economic regime: economic and physical needs rather than social needs linked to more or less traditional terms of reference, the patronymics. At the same time, however, northern formal political speech implicitly focuses on and emphasizes those very same categories that in some sense it hides. The recognized common situational context is the extending of cross-patronymic ties, a context that becomes or has become meaningful because of the very real economic pressures (presence of individualized welfare, registration of traplines, etc.) that favor the autonomy of the domestic groups of origin.

The relatively isolated northerners excel in this kind of speech, whereas southerners, who might seem to be in greater need of clear and decisive political action, could realize their pan-Indian political philosophy, run meetings in an informal style and using normal (in their terms, of course) speech. Although informality as such is not limited to a mere speech register, and whereas it could be taken to indicate a more practical and hands-on approach to the very real and immediate problems that southerners must confront, this is not the case. Informal speech here accords with almost complete disorganization in meetings, which is hardly surprising given the divisiveness that runs throughout the community. Few clear aims or policies emerge in discussion. Political speeches by the Chief and Councillors, for example, either alternate between the folksy let's-all-work-together-in-harmony type ("we should do this") or invoke personal rather than situational roles, including references to the individual contributions - or lack thereof - that
based on modern pan-Indianism categories is to emerge. Yet the community
resists it at crucial points in order to maintain pan-Indianism as a world view
rather than a political policy.

The real question is why such informality in the south emerges in English
as opposed to Sekani. Surely, Sekani could have handled the informality
needed to maintain (but not implement) pan-Indianism. This, I believe, is the
result of a developmental gradient, represented by a commitment to English
in the system of social categorization first and the development of a politi-
cal register second. In other words, the important first step to implement-
ing universalism is to deny or at least undermine the importance of
traditional categories, especially as these are expressed in daily working
relationships. Implementing a particular political register comes second. The
developmental gradient in language change, in other words, corresponds to
the slight delay between north and south in the degree of assimilation into
the Euro-Canadian world.

The disjunction between discourse and practice also obtains in those few
domains where Sekani is used. The two times that I heard Sekani spoken in
the north were both in clearly domestic or traditional contexts: once during
an ax-throwing contest (considered a traditional pastime because of its bush
connotations), and once during a domestic dispute between husband and
wife. This is not much to go on as far as generalizations are concerned, but
in contrast, the only times Sekani was spoken in the south were while peo-
ple were drinking. Here, Sekani is confined to the modern activity of excess-
ive drinking. Hence, two more equations emerge that more or less summarize
the overall situation. In the north there is a "modern" form of
English that is associated with a largely "traditional" context. In the south,
a "traditional" language is associated with and, indeed, supports a "modern"
activity (these terms are placed in quotation marks only to indicate that the
distinctions are relative). These equations invert the relationships between
language register and practice that obtain in political activity and discourse.

CONCLUSION

Brenneis (1988:597) proposed that indirectness in speech maintains ambigu-
ity and helps maintain a precarious egalitarianism in societies that were once
largely dominated by egalitarian ethics but are today part of an international
market economy and political system. Here, I have argued that the Sekani
use English as a form of indirect speech in order to maintain a precarious
political philosophy rather than a system of assigning status. Yet the Sekani
are not unequivocally egalitarian. Individual liberty is linked to maintain-
ing a headman system.

The Sekani have a well-defined pattern in their traditional social life, and
this pattern is as paradoxical as the phrase "well-defined ambiguity" is oxy-
moronic. For example, the Sekani favor patrilineal inheritance of hunting and trapping rights in theory and in fact, with its concomitant restriction of the resultant networks. At the same time, people favor extending ties in a wide net, but there is a double irony involved, which perhaps adds up to one paradox. Ties are extended in another sphere of social relations, but this is accomplished by reinforcing ties that link a man and his sisters in the category domestic group of origin. Hence, linearity is stressed, albeit in a weak, ambiguous, and contradictory manner. The Sekani fight, apparently undermining the traditional cooperative bonds that linked the various partnership networks to one another. Yet even as cooperation is displaced by distrust, social ties are maintained, fueled, and relatively strengthened by a continual cycle of feuding that effectively removes alternatives to cooperation. Naked antagonisms between patrilineic networks are left as the only bond between people. They adhere to a philosophy of unity based on abstractly defined brotherhood, but each of the three Sekani communities belongs to three different pan-tribal associations (none long lived). They have never formed a united association among themselves.

I have argued that the Sekani have been more or less forced to deploy their "alternative" set of principles with which they define themselves as an autonomous group. This has come about largely as a result of the steady and dramatic erosion of lower-level associations that once defined the cooperative and coownership group. As circumstances have rendered these incorporative and territorial principles increasingly impotent, the tensions that have accompanied the disintegration of the infrastructure have preserved the form of the older system by reproducing the elements that composed it. Yet such preservation has only accelerated the hegemony of the alternative in its modern form, pan-Indian unity. I contend that English provides a camouflage for the traditional and modern systems of self-identification and organization.

I have also argued that at least in one sphere—relationship terms—modern Sekani fails to accurately depict the structural underpinnings of the society. But there is a crucial difference between the two disjunctions of thought and deed. In one sense, modern Sekani terms leave out bits and pieces of praxis, whereas English provides a new focus that accords with the new reality. A common viewpoint on society emerges within the domestic group of origin, and this locus isolates the domestic group within a vaguely defined totality, the community of brothers. Such isolationism is a revisionist glorification of the traditional system, but stripped of the finer details of its operation. Hence, English is congruent with the new pan-Indian reality in that it implies an idealized vision of unity derived from quasi-spiritual individual values. On the other hand, English has also provided the Sekani with a bureaucratic register, but one that is much more pronounced in the north than in the south, where its absence in southern political activity contributes to the Sekani inability, or perhaps unwillingness, to create a format for dis-

course in which pan-Indianism could move from political platform to political program.

By their commitment to English, the Sekani have indicated that the substitute unity based on brotherhood is the only viable means they have left by which they can arrive at a shared definition of themselves. Older, bilingual people can still maintain networks of relationships (as do perhaps one half of the people of the northern community) without Sekani as a linguistic context, but their children will be forced to embrace another way of life and thought, just as the younger generation in the south has done, once the communicative context of such networks has been erased by a full commitment to English.

Much more than survival or disappearance of a set of relationship terms is involved. English provides a new situational context for all behaviors and attitudes that concord with the newly imposed requirements of the political culture. I have argued that the desire to eliminate or at least restrict the behavioral tendencies associated with the incorporative aspect of political culture has acted as the triggering point for the change to English ascendancy. The influence of other factors involved in the change—such as political, economic, and social domination by English-speaking Canadians—cannot be ruled out. On the whole, however, these factors are insufficient to account for the change. Neither do they suggest a mechanism by which English—and in some sectors, a certain type of English—supplanted Sekani as the language of everyday discourse. English, once a minor trade language and the knowledge of which is at present useless as a means of entering the White world, is an instrument that maintains the new identity the Sekani have been forced to adopt if they are to remain Sekani.

NOTES

1. The research for this article is based on fieldwork undertaken in 1978-1979. Historical records are drawn from the Hudson’s Bay Company Archives, whose staff gave me valuable assistance and permission to quote material in their care. Funding was provided by the Ontario Graduate Scholarship Programme and the National Museum of Canada Urgent Ethnology Programme. Valuable criticisms were made by D. Hymes and J. Hill, to whom I offer grateful thanks.

2. People are particularly sensitive about their dealings with agents of the Department of Indian Affairs, which, in Canada, has fairly intensive links with local Band administration.

3. Price’s analysis concluded that there are two types of North American Indian literature: rural based newspapers, which tend to be newy and limited to presenting factual reports of local events that impinge on the new Indian political consciousness; and the larger urban-based periodicals of national scope, which tend toward explicit pan-Indianism in their outlook. Price noted that the Canadian literature tends to be more emphatic and extreme than its American counterpart (Price 1972:58). The most important periodicals that were received in McLeod Lake and Fort Ware in 1978-1979 were Akwesasne Notes (American), The Native Voice, and Unity: Bulletin of the Union of B.C. Indian Chiefs. Regional newsletters also appeared infrequently.

4. "Closeness" is defined by young men in terms of a theory of sexual relations that seems to be linked to the more traditional concept of the husbanding and preservation of male "power";
sexuality among the young are quite casual and frequent, and so women are said to be "used up" before marriage. The men say that the women are too "well known," but it seems clear that it is the women who have too much knowledge and, hence, potential control, of men.

5. The move toward phratic organization can be placed in the wider ethnohistorical and theological context concerned with the origins and spread of matrilinial phratic organization on the Northwest Coast. The Gitksan Tsimsian particularly influenced the Sekani (Dyen & Aberle 1974; Jenness 1931, 1932; and Kobrinsky 1977).

6. Hence, the news could reflect the influence of phratic (confederative) organization. Honigmann apparently collected a list in 1949, whereas Jenness spent 3 weeks among the McLeod Lake and Fort Grahame Sekani in the summer of 1924; no one knows the later terms. Given both scholars' interest in reconstructing the past, the terms then in use must have been traditional, that is, going back at least 50-50 years.

7. W = wife; F = father; B = brother; S = son; Z = sister; H = husband; D = daughter.

8. Northern Sekani run band meetings in a formal political style. The chief announces the agenda, the business of the day, and sometimes rules people out of order if they propose something he is not willing to accept.

REFERENCES


