

Putting the hunt into words:
Formal features of Nanti hunting stories in Montetoni
(Southeastern Peruvian Amazonia)

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The telling of hunting stories is one of the most frequent – and most entertaining – components of Nanti social interactions in Montetoni, a community of some 180 people located on the Camisea River in southeastern Peruvian Amazonia. Whether as part of everyday conversations or as part of multi-party banter during community-wide gatherings, recounting the exploits of the hunters and the hunted is a constant topic of interest among Nantis. As small-scale horticulturalists, Nantis rely on hunted animals, birds, and fish as the best (and most valued) sources of protein in their diets. As such, the activities of hunting – and one’s potential status as a successful hunter – are of central economic as well as social importance in Montetoni. Yet almost all hunting activities necessarily take place outside of the village, and most hunting is done by solitary men or by small groups of individuals, with the result that many of the most exciting moments of the hunt go unobserved. Without the tellings of hunting stories back in the village, then, hunting would remain a highly individualized experience.

Well-told hunting stories consist of much more than a simple report of events, however; they are told with a characteristic style that at once sets this genre of discourse apart from the rest of Nanti verbal life and brings into play locally-shared expectations about talk as a fundamentally social activity. The purpose of this paper is to outline the formal characteristics of Nanti hunting stories that make them both a unique verbal genre in the Nanti repertoire, and an often-used resource in the formation and maintenance of certain types of social relationships.

Hunting stories are an important part of Nanti social interaction in multiple ways. Most obviously, through them Nantis share information about their activities and their environment, adding to the pool of knowledge that community members share with one another, both about each other and about their surroundings. At the same time, these stories constitute a frame in which individuals may foreground their own experiences, hunting prowess, near misses, and concrete successes against the background of shared village life. They also provide a recognized interactional context in which individuals can involve others, through collaborative tellings and stylized repetitions, in what originates as a relatively solitary and individualized activity. Considering these key aspects of hunting stories together, from the perspective of linguistic anthropology, an analysis of Nanti hunting narratives demonstrates the close relationship among the content of talk, its formal characteristics, and the strategic social uses to which Nantis put specific instances of this genre of discourse.

In this paper, I present a set of examples from hunting stories that were told as part of naturally-occurring interactions that I recorded in Montetoni between 2003 and 2005. Through these examples, I discuss the linguistic, pragmatic, and sociocultural characteristics of this genre, and examine the kinds of social outcomes one can come to expect through its deployment. I argue that contextualization cues, such as stylized intonation contours, speech rhythm, and voice timbre; and poetic devices such as repetition and parallelism, constitute a metapragmatic frame within which hunting stories are co-created, interpreted, and remembered.