

Culture



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Discriminations Concerning the Article, “The”, and Capitalization: A Further Comment

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We write not as Anthropologist but as anthropologists, and rather generalist ones, at that, who admire Bill Reid's sculpted "The Raven and the First Men" on the cover of *Culture* 4.2 (1984). His commentary in the same issue, "The Anthropologist and the Article" (1984: 63-65) engaged our attention as well, though in a quite different way. We read with fascination Bill Reid's arguments concerning his preference of "the raven" versus "Raven", and so on for Bear, Whale, Halibut, and all the other supernatural figures in Northwest Coast mythology.

At this point we change voice, not to Monolithic-Native-Speaker-of-English, but to our position of just two native English-speakers who have, as anthropologists, an only cursory knowledge of the cultures and languages of the Northwest Coast. However, the issues "itching" Mr. Reid can, we feel, be competently addressed by native speakers of English and by other culturally-sensitive individuals. We hope our "scratchings" will further any debate which ensues.

Being sensible individuals, as anthropologists try to be, we respect the practices of any group, and are particularly responsive to explicit sentiments such as Mr. Reid has provided us. Accordingly, regional linguistic practices—in this case, in English—are of paramount relevance and cannot be faulted, regardless of whether the speakers have

English as a first or second language. Had a Boas, for example, collected texts for the first time today among monolingual or bilingual English-speakers referring to "the raven", the ethnographic literature for *this* region *might* have conformed to Mr. Reid's preferences, at least for a while. But sooner or later, unless the English language should radically change in the meantime, these mythic texts would likely be "translated" into another, more classic form of English by someone who recognized the texts as literature deserving the best possible rendition in English, apprehending the supernatural creatures as personified disembodied forces only incidentally manifest in material form. The *syntactic* way of expressing this in verbal English is by eliding the article, as is done for generic, collective concepts generally, for example:

1) "Most anthropologists restrict *culture* to human beings." The *orthographic* convention further marking this in written English has been to capitalize the collective noun, as,

2) "Most anthropologists restrict *Culture* to human beings." In the 19th century, English orthographic practices incorporated so much capitalization as to resemble German, as,

3) "Most Anthropologists restrict *Culture* to Human Beings." This, fortunately, has been streamlined without detracting from the richness of content, so that no contemporary writer would use

(3), and few would choose (2), even if they considered “culture” to be culture-*qua*-culture, or culture *sui generis*, although they might then capitalize it.

Consequently, most English-speaking poets, scholars, scientists and the like will be most comfortable with Raven, and God, capitalized in written forms and without any article, whether written or spoken. Nothing at all childlike should be connotated by such poetic usage, nor should we imagine that myth, folklore, or fairy tales, have as either targets or practitioners primarily youngsters. On the contrary, these essential forms crystallize the most fundamental cultural themes and values for everyone. What child really understands any fairy tale, any cartoon, any song? These profound media resist exhaustive appreciation even by the old and wise.

It is because of the cultural importance of myth that there exist special, marked linguistic forms for their recitation, enactment, and derivative discourse. The practices of capitalization and article elimination place the special terms in high relief, permitting us to distinguish for example, “God” (of the Judeo-Christian tradition), from “god” (anything more vague in personal experience or tradition), from “a god” (one of many in an open set), from “the god” (a particular one from a fixed set), as well as from “gods” (several from an open set), and from “the gods” (all of a closed set). We suggest that it is equally desirable to be able to distinguish “Raven” from “raven” (for the indeterminate or inclusive category), from “a raven” (a single bird or representation thereof), from “the raven” (a particular bird or representation, or the inclusive taxon for the genus *Corvus* or the species *Corvus corax* in particular), as well as from “ravens”

(several from an open set), and from “the ravens” (all of a closed set).

Far be it from us to invoke authority, particularly with respect to language which is always emerging through use, but ambiguity, contradiction and other confusion can often be illuminated, if not deconstructed, by reference to way-markers such as *The Chicago Manual of Style* (1982: 194):

Article 7.31: “The personification of abstractions—giving them the attributes of persons—is not a common device in today’s prose writing. When it is used, their personified noun is usually capitalized...”

For all of the reasons above, we do not find any tinge of “baby-talk” in references to Raven, Bear, Whale, Halibut, and the like in Northwest Coast mythology. In fact, this linguistic and orthographic device appears entirely congruous with English conventions for marking awe, reverence, power, essential meaning, volitional forces, personified abstractions, mystery, and/or complexity. In our own quite separate fields of study—the Saami and Scandinavians of Fennoscandia and the Papago of southwestern U.S.—we also confront awesome categories, often ones with which only masters can hope to engage. These, too, are best rendered as is Raven, for example, briefly, Stallo of the Saami, Thor of the Scandinavian, and Owl of the Papago. This rhetorical device emerges in our everyday English as well, when we make references to Big Brother and Everyman, and hear on the radio the refrain of Cat Stevens, “Morning has broken, like the first morning; Blackbird has spoken, like the first bird.” Much would be lost, to adult and youth alike, were it to be, “The morning has broken like the first morning; the blackbird has spoken, like the first bird.”