

Yi He

Communicating Across Boundaries: Wampanoag and English Communication Systems

Welcome to the lecture “Communicating Across Boundaries: Wampanoag and English Communication Systems” in this course! What do chicken soup, an English pilgrim named Edward Winslow, and the Wampanoag leader, or sachem, Massasoit have in common? In this lecture you will learn a story involving Winslow, Massasoit, chicken soup, and other foods. Winslow was English and Massasoit was Wampanoag. Yet, through this particular exchange, they had to learn about how the other typically communicated and anticipate how the other might communicate. My lecture engages with some ideas in the second chapter of Matt Cohen’s book *The Networked Wilderness*, in which he focuses on this particular interaction between Winslow and Massasoit. In this lecture, I’ll discuss the Winslow-Massasoit exchange, briefly summarize some of Cohen’s points, then analyze Cohen to come up with some of my own points about this exchange. The learning goals are for you to be able to explain Cohen’s concept of a publication event, tell key elements of the story of Winslow and Massasoit, and identify some communications occurring in the encounter that might go beyond mere speech or writing.

Another note is that in this lecture I focus on the pilgrims, not the Puritans. In my lecture “Who were the Puritans?” I discussed some differences between the Pilgrims and the Puritans so you can refer to that if you want. The Pilgrims largely lived in Plymouth, MA, the Puritans in the Massachusetts Bay colony around what is now Boston, and the Pilgrims first came over about 10 years earlier; they were interested in completely separating from the Church of England while the Puritans were not. Though the course largely focuses on the Puritans, since I am building upon Matt Cohen’s ideas, I decided to use his example with the pilgrims.

Before I tell the story, I will start describing one of the main characters. Edward Winslow was a leader in the Plymouth colony, a translator of the Wampanoag language, and a kind of diplomat to the Wampanoag. He had met Massasoit before. Massasoit was a powerful and highly ranked leader of the Wampanoag; this role is also known as the sachem. Winslow travels to see Massasoit with two companions, John Hamden, a visitor from London, and Hobbamock, a Wampanoag guide.

A simplified, but still commonly told narrative, is that Edward Winslow visited Massasoit to cure him from a disease and Massasoit responded by affirming his friendship with the English and also warning them of a planned attack from other Native groups. But actually, the story is more nuanced than this. The only version we have of it is from Winslow himself. Even so, his story contains many different details and emphases. Winslow included it in his book *Good News from New-England*, which is about Plymouth colony from 1622-3. This exchange happened in March 1622. Let’s look closely at Winslow’s version now.

Winslow begins with the pilgrims receiving news that Massasoit was ill. Knowing that Native customs dictated that friends were those who helped others in their illness, Pilgrim leaders wanted to visit Massasoit to continue friendly relations with the Wampanoag. Governor Bradford sent Winslow to visit Massasoit. Winslow had to travel for a few days—stopping at Namasket, then Mattapuyst, where Massasoit’s successor lived, and then to Puckanokick, where Massasoit was. Namasket, Mattapuyst, and Puckanokick are Native place names; I am not as familiar with where they are in our present-day geography—but this would be an interesting future research project if anyone is interested in taking it up!

The day after Winslow and his group arrived in Namasket, they heard that Massasoit had died, so they tried to decide whether to continue. They did end up going to Mattapuyst in order to

form good relations with Massasoit's successor. But it is here that they learn that there is a possibility that Massasoit is not dead, as the people at Mattapuyst aren't sure if he actually is. Winslow sends a messenger to see and the messenger reports that he isn't dead. Winslow and his group attempt to make it to Puckanokick as fast as they can. It's about five or six miles away. Winslow, Hobbamock, and Hamden finally reach Puckanokick and see Massasoit, who is surrounded by people rubbing his limbs to keep him warm. Massasoit recognizes Winslow when he comes over. Winslow asks Massasoit if he wants him, Winslow, to give him something that could help him in his illness and Massasoit agrees. Winslow gives him conserves, which is probably some sort of medicine from a plant, dilutes the conserves to make it drinkable, and also makes a chicken broth with the help of Native women. Winslow and the Native women continue to obtain food for Massasoit. Winslow finds strawberry leaves, and sassafrass root, and the women in the village prepare pieces of corn. These are mixed into a kind of broth which also seems to help Massasoit feel better.

Massasoit asks Winslow to obtain some fowl for food, which Winslow does, and Massasoit proceeds to eat a somewhat rich meal and gets sick, throwing up and also having nosebleeds. Those attending to Massasoit, both Native and English, become concerned he will die. But he sleeps for around 6 or 8 hours. When he gets up his nose starts to bleed again, and Winslow advises the others that it probably would not get worse but he might be in a stable state. Although Winslow sent for chickens for soup as well as medicine earlier, when those he sent return bringing what he asks for, they are not used. Winslow writes, "The messengers were now returned; but finding his stomach come to him, he would not have the chickens killed, but kept them for breed. Neither durst we give him any physic, which was then sent, because his body was so much altered since our instructions; neither saw we any need, not doubting now of his recovery, if he were careful." It seems that he will get better. Eventually, Winslow insinuates, he does.

Massasoit then apparently states that he sees the English as his friends. Winslow and his entourage are entertained mightily while at Massasoit's after he recovers. Winslow describes Massasoit saying, "Now I see the English are my friends and love me; and whilst I live, I will never forget this kindness they have showed me." Then Massasoit tells Hobbamock, the Native guide to Winslow, about an apparent upcoming attack from other Native people against the Pilgrims, advising them to be prepared. He intends for Hobbamock to tell Winslow later and for Winslow to tell Governor Winthrop. Winslow returns home, staying with Cobatant, who would have been Massasoit's successor, along the way. Hobbamock reveals to Winslow towards the end of the journey the information that Massasoit had revealed to him about the upcoming attack.

Matt Cohen analyzes this story of Massasoit and Winslow from a few angles: the two that I'll focus on are how various customs are a part of this communications environment and also, applying the concept of a "publication event" to the exchange. First, Cohen discusses the rituals and customs involved with a sachem dying and the possible succession of a new sachem. These rituals and customs are themselves communications between different people in this encounter: they include gestures, the giving of gifts, ceremonies, particular kinds of rhetoric, and more. These communications are not just limited to the categories of speech and writing. Winslow might not point out these facets specifically in his story, but Cohen shows how they are present. Remember, at the beginning of the story, the Pilgrims receive news that Massasoit is ill; and at one point they hear when they are at his successor's that he was dead. (They later discovered this to be inaccurate, of course). One scholar (Neal Salisbury) shows us that Wampanoag sachems had more of an obligation to the people in their community than we might assume for leaders.

Obedience to the sachem could not always be expected. Due to this, they and their community communicated with each other in a variety of ways besides speech, as if the sachem were trying to make use of as many avenues as possible to win their respect: he might communicate with them via both words and gifts, might acknowledge previous tribute someone has paid, and craft elaborate speeches. This would have led Winslow and Massasoit to consider not just words, but also different rituals and customs as part of what was being communicated. Cohen argues that Winslow knew that this particular moment was a significant one for the Wampanoags in terms of the power play and that Winslow knew of the diverse communications involved.

Secondly, Cohen also calls this interaction a “publication event.” He brings up the older sense of the word “publication” as simply meaning making something known broadly. For example, one might say, “they wanted publication of his misdeeds.” That means they wanted his misdeeds to be made known widely—but it does not necessarily entail a written document that was distributed. Cohen also uses the word “event.” He indicates that a publication event involves information that is broadcasted at a particular moment, with particular people involved, at a particular place. He emphasizes the materiality of publication: that it is rooted in real people and places, that it is not just about seemingly ephemeral texts and ideas. Cohen actually divides his book into four different publication events, making up four chapters of his book. The Winslow-Massasoit exchange is one event, but he also discusses an English colonist named Thomas Morton and his festivities, the Pequot war, and Roger Williams’ interactions with the Narragansetts.

Let’s look at Cohen’s analysis more deeply. Let’s look at this concept of the “publication event.” What are ways in which this term is useful and ways in which this term is not as useful? How does this concept help us to analyze the Winslow-Massasoit exchange, and what does it obscure? One thing to consider is how widely the information from this exchange was disseminated. “Publication” normally means something that was provided to the public, made known to more people. But to how many people was what went on made known? Massasoit tells Winslow about an upcoming attack from another group of Native people, so that seems to be made known to Winslow. But how much of it is eventually disseminated to more people, to more English people? How much of Winslow’s knowledge about the conserves, about the healing nature of a particular plant, is made known to Massasoit and other Native people there? Do they just accept it, and what is their interpretation of the conserves and the chicken soup? And how much of Massasoit’s perspective on his own recovery is made known to Winslow and to the other English people there? The paper publication of Winslow’s narrative provides this story to readers of English, but how much of the event is really captured in the paper copy and made known to these readers? Maybe some of this information was disseminated, but the dissemination appears limited mostly to the people only in this particular encounter. Another aspect is the question of what exactly was published. What does Cohen identify as the material that was “published”? There’s the information that Winslow and Massasoit learn about each others’ actions and plans—but I don’t know that they would both agree on each other’s versions of this information. It is possible that a more specific term rather than “publication event” might be helpful to examine this particular exchange—maybe a “translation event”? “Publication” implies unity of information and equal dissemination, but what seems to have happened is that people understood each others’ perspectives without exactly agreeing on a secure meaning.

Finally, one thing I want to emphasize about the Winslow-Massasoit story, something Cohen indicates too, is the mixing of Native and English communication networks to form one hybrid network. Massasoit and Winslow seem to be aware of some differences in communication

and take this into account in talking with each other. Winslow, aware of the precarious nature of a current leader extremely ill, may have conveyed greetings from the Plymouth governor to show his respect for Massasoit's position. Massasoit may have shared his knowledge of the upcoming plot against the Pilgrims as a kind of thank-you to the Plymouth governor; in fact he indicates that they should tell the governor as soon as they got home. This use of each others' communication styles provides an alternative to the common model of European technological dominance over Native technology. According to this somewhat common model, English technology and knowledge completely dominated Wampanoag, Nipmuc, and other Native technology and knowledge, and what happened in New England was only a microcosm of what was happening in other places in the Americas. This model can be traced to the "guns, germs, steel" thesis, which comes from the title of a book published by a Geography professor, Jared Diamond. It refers to how diseases and military technology from European societies led to the conquering of indigenous people.

From the guns, germs, and steel model we might see Edward Winslow curing Massasoit as showing superior English medical knowledge to Wampanoag ones. However, there is another way to see the story which Cohen helps us to see. It is about the mixedness of ways of communicating and the different ways in which information is passed along. First, this story shows a Native person recovering and flourishing, due to the knowledge and work of both English and Native people. Massasoit recovers with the help of Winslow but also with the help of the Wampanoag women and other people in his community. Winslow attempts to feed Massasoit various foods, but he doesn't give him any English "physic," or English medicines, because the foods seem to help. The Native women and Winslow both search for herbs to help cure Massasoit. Secondly, Winslow himself relies on another Native person—Hobbamak—for help, in finding his way to Massasoit and in understanding him. Winslow has to understand how some Native communication conventions work and relies on them for his own goals. It seems to be Hobbamak, more than John Hamden, who is especially useful and helpful here. Even though Hamden is an English person, Winslow doesn't seem to rely on any of his help or knowledge in his encounter. And thirdly, the English needed to recognize Native communication styles in order for them to survive and thrive. Winslow needed to perceive some of the rituals around sachem succession, the significance of a potential change in leadership, and how Conbatant, Massasoit's potential successor, would have understood what was going on. He needed to respond to Massasoit giving them information about the surprise attack in an appropriate way, trying to show goodwill to both Massasoit and the Wampanoags, and the Narragansetts who were purportedly attacking. This encounter required Winslow to understand and defer to various Native ways of communicating with other people.

In this lecture, I've discussed a story that involves a meeting between an English man and a Wampanoag man and how that shows us the mixing of Wampanoag and English systems of communication. What is your response to the Winslow-Massasoit story? In what ways do you agree or disagree with Cohen's interpretation of the story, or of mine? I'll look forward to reading your thoughts in the discussion forum.

Discussion question 1: Read the exchange by Winslow. (It can be found in this online version <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/66332/66332-h/66332-h.htm> in the 4th chapter) What is something you found interesting that the lecture missed or didn't address fully? Why is it interesting to you?

Discussion question 2: Discuss Cohen's concept of a "publication event." What piques your interest about this term? What is something you can think of from history or your own life that you think of as a "publication event," and why?

Additional Reading and Works Cited

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