"We Don't Know What We Become": Navajo Ethnopoetics and an Expressive Feature in a Poem by Rex Lee Jim

BLACKHORSE MITCHELL
Red Mesa High School

ANTHONY K. WEBSTER
Southern Illinois University at Carbondale

Abstract. We offer an ethnopoetic interpretation of an expressive feature—insertion of a velar fricative after the stem-initial consonant—that aids in indicating a "lack of control" in a poem written in Navajo by the poet Rex Lee Jim. We focus on how this expressive device is used to indicate an affective stance; the affinity in sound between the optional consonant cluster -chx- in this poem and the chx- found in the Navajo verb stem -chxo' "ugly, disorderly" is crucial in understanding the expressive work of the velar fricative. That such expressive features have sometimes been neglected in the linguistic representation of Navajo is also of interest.

It makes no sense to ask if this work is linguistics, cultural anthropology, folklore, or something else. It cannot be done without some command of linguistics, but it cannot be done without some command of Native American traditions, some sense of the voices to be imagined behind the words. A dash of poetry is helpful, too.

—Dell Hymes, "Tonkawa Poetics" (1987)

1. Introduction. A number of years ago, Dell Hymes (1965) chastised anthropologists and others for relying on overly romantic translations of Native American song-poems. Hymes argued that vocabular or so-called "nonsense" forms that lacked semantic meaning had structural import in the organization of the songs and that, rather than be excluded, they needed to be included in the translations of such song-poems. (See also the remarks on Navajo vocabular by Frisbie [1980] and by McAllester [1980].) He went on to state emphatically that in the study of Native American poetry and poetics, "the study of languages is too important to be left solely to linguistics (in any narrow sense of the term), the texts too valuable to be interpreted by any who ignore linguistics" (1965:337). We agree with this. It is our hope that in this article we can combine the knowledge of a Navajo poet and educator who has thought a great deal about languages and poetry (Blackhorse Mitchell) with that of a non-Navajo linguistic anthropologist who has also thought a fair amount about languages and poetry (Anthony K. Webster).

In this article, we seek to describe and offer a measured interpretation of the use of an expressive feature that indicates a "lack of control" in the protagonist.
of a poem written in Navajo by Navajo poet and Blessingway singer (among other things) Rex Lee Jim.\textsuperscript{2} We also take note of a performance of this poem by Jim in July 2001 to an audience primarily (though not exclusively) of Navajos. Our goal in this article is not so much to translate the poem by Jim (there is some of that), but rather to discuss the way that Jim uses this expressive device—the inserted velar fricative—along with consonantal rhyme to indicate an affective stance towards the actors and actions in the poem. In other words, this expressive feature does not so much change the semantico-referential content of the poem, but rather indicates how one should orient to that content. That such expressive features have sometimes been neglected in the linguistic representation of Navajo is also of some interest to us.

We see this article as a contribution to a greater appreciation of Navajo ethnopoetics (Webster 2009). Two of the hallmarks of ethnopoetic research have been careful attention to linguistic details (often linguistic details overlooked in more "formally" or "theoretically" based models of language) and an appreciation for the role of the linguistic individual (see Hymes 1981, 1998, 2003; Toelken and Scott 1981; Tedlock 1983; Becker 1995; Johnstone 1996; Sherzer and Woodbury 1987; Sherzer 1990; Friedrich 2006; Kroskrity 2009, 2010; Webster 2009). We seek to recognize both in this article.\textsuperscript{3} A third goal of ethnopoetics should be to recognize local aesthetic judgments about such poetic forms (see Kroskrity 1995; Baur 1966; Kimball 1993). For this reason, we are not offering an explanation of what Jim meant by this poem. Many Navajos that Webster has worked with have been reluctant to speculate on the "whys" or "whats" of what a given poet meant, but instead offer interpretations based on the images evoked by a poem (Webster 2009). In general, Navajo poets should not force an interpretation onto the reader or listener, nor should the listener or reader force an interpretation onto a poet. This ethos is an important feature of what one might term Navajo ethnoliterary criticism and resonates with a wider Navajo ethos of t'áá bi bee bōholmíí ‘it's up to her/him to decide’ (see Rushforth and Chisholm 1991). People should be allowed to make their own decisions, their own interpretations.

2. The poem: na'ashchxidi. The poem that is the focus of this article comes from Rex Lee Jim’s all-Navajo collection of poetry entitled saad (which can be glossed as ‘word, language’). The book was published in 1995 by the Princeton Collection of Western Americana. The entire book is in Navajo, including the page numbers and the title page. The poem that we are concerned with here—which is untitled—can be found on page tą́į́tį́n dóó bí’ą́ą tseebií ‘thirty-eight’. Both Mitchell and Webster have seen Jim perform this poem on the Navajo Nation (Webster recorded it on three different occasions). At such performances, Jim offers the book for sale, but Webster has not found the book available at other venues on the Navajo Nation and the surrounding area that sell Navajo books of poetry (see Webster 2009). We discuss Jim’s performance of this poem
in Window Rock, Arizona, on 18 July 2001 at the end of section 7. Immediately below (1), we present the poem along with a translation produced in consultation between Mitchell and Webster. Webster has also had the poem translated by other Navajos; some of their commentary is interspersed with the discussion of the translation in the next section. The poem, so far as we know, has not been published in English translation before.

(1) na’ashchxidi
   biłkaii
   ni’deeshchxidgo
   ni’ishchajiih
   chxap’ bee
   námbichaad (Jim 1996:38)

   The badger’s
   nose
   stretched round
   shouting
   with shit
   is full

In its brevity and its dense use of sound, this poem is very much like the other poems in saad (see Webster 2005). Indeed, when Webster interviewed Jim about some of the poems in saad, Jim told Webster that “sounds were very important.” Elsewhere, Jim has noted the role of what we call sound affinities and phonological iconicity (sounds echoing sounds) in the poetics of his poetry.9 “Sound affinity” owes a debt to Dwight Bolinger’s (1940) “word affinities” and “phonological iconicity” owes a debt to David Samuels’ (2001) discussion of Western Apache punning (see also Webster 2009, 2010c).8

3. Translating the poem, or seeing the morphemes but not the feeling. Here we present the basic morphological components of this poem. The first thing to note is that each line includes the sound -chx-, which can be described as a voiceless palatal affricate (here written <ch>) and a velar fricative (here written <x>). This is a form of consonantal rhyme. Here the rhyme is based on the “consonant cluster” at the beginning of the verb or noun stem. In this poem, the stem-initial consonant cluster chx- is due to the insertion of the velar fricative by an expressive phonological process. All of the forms in this poem that have this consonant cluster can also appear without the velar fricative [x] (both spoken and written discourse); in fact, none of the words in this poem is commonly produced with the velar fricative. We describe velar fricative insertion in more detail in section 6; here we merely note that the use of -x- is the crucial expressive feature of this poem. In section 7, we argue that it is the sound affinity or phonological iconicity between the consonant cluster chx- and the chx-found in the Navajo verb stem -chx-‘ugly, disorderly’ that is crucial in understanding the expressive work of the velar fricative in this poem.
The first line in the poem is the nominalized verb form that means something akin to ‘badger’. The form is the first line is also written as nahashch’idi; and in an earlier poem in saad Jim writes the form as na’ashchiidi. The form can be glossed as ‘the one who scratches, gropes, paws about’ (where the word final –i is the nominalizing enclitic in Navajo and turns the verb phrase into a noun). As with many Navajo names for animals, some Navajos can and do recognize this word as morphologically complex, segmenting it into its constituent morphology, while others do not find the morphology readily apparent, but understand the word as just the conventional term for something akin to ‘badger’ (see also Webster [2006] for another example from a Jim poem). Indeed, there is some question as to what verb stem is being used here. There are two likely candidates. First is the verb stem -ch’idi ‘to paw, scratch’, which is the common verb stem for nahashch’idi (see Young, Morgan, and Midgette 1992:106). However, note that this verb stem begins with the glottalized (ejective) affricate ch’, not the plain affricate ch. Another verb stem, which does not have the glottalized form, is -chidi, which Young, Morgan, and Midgette describe as relating “to the abrupt movement of the hands in ‘grabbing, reaching, touching, placing the hand, sticking the finger, gesturing, releasing’” (1992:83) and as cognate with the verb stem -chidi, which means “jittery, fidgety”—presumably describing the aimless movements of the subject’s hands (1992:85). Note that this verb stem seems to indicate a movement of the hands and arms in a non-controlled manner (see Cook and Rice 1989:28; see also section 5). We also note that Reichard (1963:382) presents the form for something akin to ‘badger’ as na’actidi; which in the current Navajo orthography that we are using would be na’ashchidi. Reichard (1963:xxxi) was aware that the use of glottalization was phonemic and thus indicated it accordingly. That she did not indicate glottalization here is evidence that it did not occur. Since we have not found examples of insertion of the velar fricative after a glottalized affricate, we assume that the form on which na’ashchxidi is based most likely is one with the plain affricate. In either case, the verb stem is marked with the si-perfective prefix, and has either the prefix naahi ‘one after another’ or the prefix na’a- ‘around.’ All of the Navajos that Webster asked about this form, however, translated it as ‘badger’ or ‘ground rodent’.

The second line presents fewer concerns. It consists of an inalienable noun with an attendant possessive prefix: bi- ‘his, her, its’ and -ch’i’hy ‘nose’. This form is most commonly found without the velar fricative as bich’hy ‘his, her, its nose’. Mitchell’s translation indicates possessive, which in the Navajo is marked on the noun, by using the English possessive suffix on badger in the first line.

The third line, ni’deeshchxido, ends in what we call the relative enclitic -go (see, however, Mithun 2005); the rest of the word can be glossed ‘fleshy, thick in a circle’ (Young, Morgan, and Midgette 1992:83). Young, Morgan, and Midgette present this verb as ni’deeshchid (it is quite common for i and the alveolar nasal n to fall together as syllabic ni; see McDonough 2003:95). The form is based on
yet another verb stem with the shape –chid (Young, Morgan, and Midgette 1992:83; these authors indicate no –x– in this stem). Although Young, Morgan, and Midgette have suggested that the verb “relates to the mouth” (1992:83), both Mitchell and another Navajo consultant were clear that it also related to the nose. Here it might be best to think of the verb stem as relating not just to the mouth, but instead to both the oral and nasal cavity (perhaps a ‘snout’). Mitchell translated the form as ‘stretched round’, describing the nostrils of na’ashchxiiidi.

The word in the fourth line, ni’ihchya’ii, is based on the verb stem –chya’i ‘to defecate’, which can also occur as an independent noun chya’i ‘defecation’. This form is most likely to be analyzed as containing the prefix na’ahi- ‘around’ and the si- perfective. Mitchell translates the form as ‘shitting’, but in conversations with Webster has also noted that the form has a sense of ‘shitting around’. Another Navajo translated the line as ‘shits all over’. Note that again the –x– is optional in this form; Young, Morgan, and Midgette (1992:76) do not represent the form with the velar fricative.

The fifth line—the only one in the poem that contains more than one word—consists of the noun chya’i ‘shit’ plus bée ‘with’, used in an instrumental sense. As in all of the previous lines, the velar fricative is optional; Young, Morgan, and Midgette (1992:75) give the noun stem as chya’i ‘excrement, manure, offal’. Both Mitchell and another Navajo consulted on the poem translated this noun as ‘shit’.

The sixth line, nániichxaad, can be glossed ‘to be full of food (a person)’ (Wall and Morgan 1994:119). This form is based on the verb stem –chaad ‘swell, bulge’ (Young, Morgan, and Midgette 1992:73) plus the prefix ná- ‘to return to a state, condition, place’ and the thematic prefix ni(i)-, which is used for ‘roundness’. As Young, Morgan, and Midgette explain, this form can be glossed morphologically as ‘to swell back up, recover a bulging appearance’ or ‘to get full eating’ (1992:73). Once again, the –x– is wholly optional and is not indicated in Young, Morgan, and Midgette’s lexicon. Mitchell translates this line as merely ‘is full’.

Having worked through the morphology of the poem, one should bear in mind a conversation Webster had with Rex Lee Jim in early 2001. Webster showed Jim a translation of a Jim poem based on the morphology of phrases in the poem, and Jim replied, “You got all the words correct.” Webster understood this to mean that although he (Webster) could segment Navajo morphology, he had no understanding of what the words actually meant. As Edward Sapir suggested decades ago, “the understanding of a simple poem, for instance, involves not merely understanding of the single words in their average significance, but a full comprehension of the whole life of a community as it is mirrored in the words, or as it is suggested by their overtones” (1923:209). It is to the “overtones” that we now turn.
4. Expressive features in Native American languages and their discontents. Languages do not merely refer to things in the world (Jakobson 1960). Instead, they (among other things) also create felt attachments and attitudinal stances towards referents by means of expressive features. A discussion of the semantico-referential meaning of a poem, then, is only a partial discussion. Sapir’s seminal article on Nootka ways of speaking noted the creation of affective associations, both humorous and disparaging, between linguistic forms based on “consonantal play” and people through literary uses of reported speech (1985:181). In an influential article, Hymes (1979, 1981) argued for the expressive role of the voiceless lateral / in Takelma mythic discourse. Hymes, in correcting a position taken by Sapir, argued that the alternation between voiceless laterals in the speech of bears and the addition of a voiceless alveolar fricative s in the speech of both the bear and coyote together expressed differing degrees of social distance from those actors. The lateral /, linked as it was with neighboring Athaboaskans, expressed a greater social distance for the Takelma than did the use of s, which was linked with the neighboring (and perhaps distantly linguistically related) Siouan. Such uses of expressive forms were a “choice in use” (1981:69)—they were optional forms. The alternation of these expressive forms sided in an affective stance towards the characters. As Hymes notes,

The _s_- prefix seems somewhat closer in emotional distance, somewhere in the range of diminutive meanings that have to do with condescension, sympathy, even affection on the part of the audience. . . . [I]- prefix seems somewhat greater in emotional distance, somewhere in the range of diminutive meanings that have to do with condescension, perhaps, but also deprecation, disdain, for coarseness and stupidity. [1981:74]

Hymes (1981:342–81) would later make a similar claim about the alternation of _wa_-, _a_-, and zero as prefixes on words for bears in Clackamas. In each case, Hymes (2003:207) showed how careful attention to “presentational” or “expressive” meaning provided insight into the attitudes towards the characters who spoke in such a manner or were named in such a manner. The expressive forms did not change the semantico-referential meaning of the words, but rather changed the affective attitude towards the speaker of those words or towards the names of the characters that were inflected with such forms (see also Hymes 1998:19–22).

Anthony Woodbury has challenged a received view of the “double articulation” of language,” whereby “syntactic (not phonological) representations receive semantic interpretation, and . . . phonology is a purely formal, interpretive component of grammar” (1987:685). According to this view, phonological units build meaning-bearing morphological, lexical, and syntactic units, but phonology, in and of itself, does not bear meaning. Or as Dani Byrd and Toben Mintz explain this view,
In any particular language, words, new or old, must draw from a stable, small set of nonmeaningful units called phonological units. So in human language the meaningful messages (both sentences and words) are infinite in variety by virtue of the fact that words are produced from a system of combining a finite set of meaningless units. [2010:10]

In contrast to this view, Woodbury points out phonological processes in Central Alaskan Yup’ik, such as foot cloning, used to display an affective stance (“benign, slightly pedantic patience”), and vowel doubling, used to display one’s orientation towards the supernatural, that is, “speakers use [them] to organize and contextualize information and to enhance the expressive value of a line, rather than alter its truth-functionality” (1987:708; see also Bolinger [1940] and Jakobson [1960] for other critiques of a narrowly truth-functional view). Woodbury, instead, argues for “meaningful phonological processes” and against any strict division between phonology and meaning-bearing units of language.

As can be seen, then, expressive features in Native American languages have been a topic of some interest in the work of linguists and linguistic anthropology, especially in the ethnopoetic tradition (besides the works cited above, see also Reichard 1948; Hymes 1979, 1996, 2003; Toelken and Scott 1981; Tedlock 1983; Silverstein 1994; Hill and Zepeda 1998; Sherzer 2002; Woodbury 1998; Bunte 2002; Webster 2009; issues of expressivity and phonation are treated by Hill and Zepeda [1999] and Sicoli [2010]). To be sure, expressive features have not been at the forefront of recent concern with endangered languages (though see Woodbury 1998; Samuels 2004; Nuckolls 2010; Webster 2010a). In that field, the concern has been with “words for things” and “lost words, lost worlds”—that is, the kinds of ecological knowledge that are encoded in the semantic domains of indigenous languages (for a sampling, see Harrison 2007 and Nettle and Romaine 2000; for a critique of this literature, see Hill 2002; Nevins 2004; Moore 2006; Webster 2010a; Moore, Pietikäinen, and Blommaert 2010). Such discussions have been less concerned with felt attachments to linguistic forms and the expressive features that can evoke such connections (see Woodbury 1998; Webster 2010a).

Although it is beyond the scope of this article to explain why the uses of expressive features have been largely “neglected” (Nuckolls 2006:39) in the linguistic literature, we would like to note two relevant points. First, as Samuels (2004) has noted, much of our modernist visions of languages implies a primarily referentialist view of language—that is, language is primarily understood as about referring to things in the world. This is, as Bauman and Briggs (2003) have argued, a profoundly modernist language ideology. Expressive features of languages, especially those features based on iconicity (a resemblance of something to someone), for example, have been largely ignored or trivialized because they were deemed “prelinguistic” or “primitive” (see Farnell 1995; Nuckolls 1999; Samuels 2004; Webster 2009). When a linguistic feature does not contribute to semantico-referential meaning it violates a basic assumption of Western
language ideologies: that language is equivalent to reference. As Bauman and Briggs (2003) note, this particular Western language ideology has sometimes been construed as the essential nature of languages.

A second reason, related to the first, is that the shift from a relatively phonetics-centered view of documenting languages to a phonemic view of languages has led to many expressive features simply not being recorded (Hymes 2003; for a critique of “formal” phonology, see Port and Leary 2005). As Hymes describes, this shift from phonetics to phonemics is intimately connected with concerns about “reference”:

Descriptive linguistics developed on the basis of the kind of contrast that underlies the phonemic principle. Only differences in referential or propositional meaning were addressed. The general term “language” was reduced to that one, basic dimension of language. . . . The phonemic principle led many linguists to omit features of the second sort [expressive meaning] from their recordings of texts from the 1930s onward. Recordings that included nonphonemic features were even thought of as “old fashioned” and of no scientific use. [2003:207]

He goes on to note that, “we want to be sure that features that were part of the teller’s performance, conveying emphasis and attitude, are represented. . . . In Wishram and Chinookan languages, these features especially include vowel length, shift of stress, and vowel color” (2003:207). The phonemic view had the potential to obscure locally evocative ways of using language. Sapir, in his work with Nootka and Takelma, to his credit tended to record expressive features because he had not yet decided on the phonemic inventory of a language. Later linguists and linguistic anthropologists would ignore such nonphonemic or expressive features because they did not fit a narrow view of “grammar” (see below).

Webster sees the present article as an opportunity to encourage research that broadens our descriptive horizons (Dorian 2002) and investigates expressive features of languages, especially as they are creatively deployed in contemporary Native American written poetry that can be performed orally. There has been, in fact, very little discussion of expressive features in Native American poetry written in indigenous languages (see, however, Webster 2006, 2009). While Webster would single out as exemplary the discussions by Pamela Bunte (2002) on the expressive uses of reduplication in Paiute verbal art, Hymes’s (1979, 1981, 1996, 2003) work on expressive features from prefix variation to sound symbolism in a variety of Native American narrative traditions, Tedlock’s (1983) concern with onomatopoeia and “raised up speaking” in Zuni discourse, Barro Toelken and Tacheeni Scott’s (1981) discussion of the metanarrative exhortation huáhgoóshíjj’!!! in Navajo Coyote narratives, and Woodbury’s (1985, 1987, 1998) concern with affective devices in Yup’ik narratives, these researchers have all been concerned with spoken discourse and not with written poetry that can be performed orally. Webster believes that the ethnopoetic approach that underlies the work of Hymes, Tedlock, Toelken and Scott, Bunte, and
Woodbury can also be usefully applied to Native American written poetry that can be performed orally (see Webster 2006, 2009).

5. Control in Navajo. Before returning to the velar fricative, we want to first note an important distinction in Navajo, both linguistically and culturally, between control and lacking control. Reichard once noted, “Good then in Navaho dogma is control. Evil is that which is ritually not under control” (1963-5). While we would not go so far as to speak of “dogma,” we do think there is an important distinction among some Navajos between things that are “controlled” and things that are “out of control.” The anthropological literature on this topic is immense (see Reichard 1944, 1963; Kluckhohn 1949; Wyman and Haile 1970; Witherspoon 1977). Control and lack of control are important components of the meanings of the verb stems -zho ‘control, order, beauty, harmony’ and -chxq ‘lack of control, disorder, ugly’. Gary Witherspoon describes it this way: “hózhó may be conceived of as the imposition of form, order, harmony, beauty, and, therefore, good upon the world. When hóchxq occurs in one’s world, it is as though things have returned to original chaos” (1977:44). Or, as he describes it earlier, “hózhó is everything that is good, harmonious, orderly, happy, and beautiful. The opposite of hózhó is hóchxq’, which, of course, is the evil, the disorderly, and the ugly” (Witherspoon 1977:34). Hóchxq’ is often expressed in Navajo English (a local way of speaking and writing) as “ugly” (Webster 2012). Behaving (including speaking) in a controlled manner, as has been widely noted in the literature, is a basic tenet of Navajo philosophy (Witherspoon 1977; see also Rushforth and Chisholm 1991:146-48).

The importance of control is not just relevant to some Navajos culturally. It has sometimes been noted for Northern Athabaskan languages, too, that a distinction can be made between verb stems that indicate an agent engaging in an activity in a “controlled” manner and an agent engaging in an activity in a “non-controlled” manner (Scott Rushforth p.c. 1996; Cook and Rice 1989:28; Rice 2001:238; Rushforth and Chisholm 1991:146-48). Cook and Rice describe the distinction between doing things in a “careful, humble, controlled manner” and things “done less carefully, more quickly” (1989:28). In discussing this distinction in Slave (Northern Athabaskan), Rice notes that

it turns out that the stems, while conveying largely the same information, have a very different sense about them. In one case, the verb embodies a way of carrying out the event that is highly valued culturally—it is humble, polite, and so on. . . . The other verb stem does not embody this; it is not negative in force, but rather ordinary. (2001:238)

Cook and Rice point out that Navajo also appears to have a distinction between “controlled” and “non-controlled” verb stems (1989:27). They give three examples, which we reproduce here (for the third example, we have included references to the verb stems in Young, Morgan, and Midgette’s lexicon).
(2) -'és vs. -lasl 'move or act with foot'
-k’éggh vs. -tlaad 'burn'
-nűh vs. -chůd 'act with hand, arm' (Young, Morgan, and Midgette: -nii’ [1992:451],
-čhid [1992:83])

Note that -čhid, found in the first line of the poem, is a movement that is not controlled. Note, too, that the discussion above implies a cline here from controlled, through noncontrolled, to uncontrolled.

6. The expressive work of -x- in Navajo. Navajo has an expressive phonological process whereby -x- is inserted after the initial consonant of the stem. In an early article, Gladys Reichard called attention to this expressive device in Navajo, whose phonetic implementation she called "aspiration" and whose expressive effect she termed "augmentative": "a more forceful action, a state exaggerated in size or quantity, or a pejorative may be expressed by aspirating the voiceless stem initial so strongly as to form a consonant cluster" (Reichard 1948:15). In her mammoth and important grammar of Navajo (1951), she listed a number of contrasting pairs of stems where the addition of "aspiration" changed not the semantico-referential meaning of the words, but rather the expressive implication of those forms (e.g., from neutral to pejorative). In table 1 we present a number of such pairs (from Reichard [1951:141–42]; we have amended the forms to present them as they are currently written in Navajo orthography). Two of the forms that Jim uses in his poem are also included in Reichard’s list: -chiih (from -čhii) and chqua’ (from čhqua’).

Although Reichard’s is the first work to indicate the importance of this expressive feature in Navajo, she makes at least one claim that we wish to qualify. Her consistent use of "aspiration" or "strong aspiration" as a label for the process is misleading. Navajo does distinguish phonemically aspirated stops and affricates from unaspirated ones, but the inserted velar fricative is not an instance of phonemic or phonetic aspiration (we concur with Joyce McDonough [2003:86, p.c. 2010; see also McDonough and Wood 2008] that the phonetic property in question is a velar fricative rather than aspiration; compare the spectrograms in the appendix). Joyce McDonough notes that "the -x- is concatenated to the stem’s onset: it makes it longer by the addition of that segment" (p.c. 2010). One piece of evidence that the velar fricative is concatenated to the stem onset is that in monosyllabic words (sxq, chqua) no resyllabification occurs.¹⁰

Reichard was not the only linguist to call attention to the use of this expressive feature, though her discussion of the topic is by far the fullest. In The Navaho Language, Young and Morgan note that "a deprecative sense is injected by inserting gh after an unaspirated, or x after an aspirated consonant. Thus, só’, star; sxó’, that such and such star; dzit, mountain; dzghil, that such and such mountain; dzgá, here; dzghá, here (with an intonation of disgust or displeasure)" (1943:142). Later, in their own mammoth dictionary, they write, "h used as a deprecative-augmentive in certain stems is written x, as in hitsxo,
orange (litso, yellow), t'áá 'altso, absolutely all (t'áá 'altso, all), hólchxon, the
place stinks (hólchon the place stinks—less emphatic)" (Young and Morgan
1987:xiv). (Mitchell once glossed litso as 'dirty yellow' for Webster; see also
Landar, Ervin, and Horowitz 1960:381–82.) Young, Morgan, and Midgette also
note that a number of stems seem to "occur more frequently" with the -x- form;
for example, the verb stem -cho: 'bad, ugly, sulk, dirty, filthy' "occur[s] most
frequently in intensive form, with -x- (CHXQ’ in lieu of CHQ’)" (1992:90).
Likewise, the verb stem -txas 'whip, lash' seems to always occur with the -x-
(Young, Morgan, and Midgette 1992:592; Reichard 1948:16). The verb stem
-chosh 'rumpled, disheveled, bushy' also "often appears in intensive form as
CHXOSH" (Young, Morgan, and Midgette 1992:96). We specifically note these
verb stems (-chq’, -txas, -chosh) because in other poems in Jim's saad they
always occur with the -x-.

Table 1. Examples of Expressive Implication Changed by "Aspiration"

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FORM</th>
<th>GLOSS</th>
<th>FORM</th>
<th>GLOSS†</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-tih</td>
<td>'cover, wrap'</td>
<td>-txih</td>
<td>'protect, conceal'†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-eat</td>
<td>'move like a feather'</td>
<td>-sxat</td>
<td>'heavy object (as person) moves like a feather, gracefully'§</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-si</td>
<td>'make numb'</td>
<td>-sxi</td>
<td>'paralyze, deaden'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sq’</td>
<td>'star'</td>
<td>sq’</td>
<td>'a fearful star'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-sos</td>
<td>'glitter like copper'</td>
<td>-ssos</td>
<td>'glitter like a red star' ‡</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-tsaa’</td>
<td>'grow big'</td>
<td>-tsaa’</td>
<td>'grow very large'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-chah (-cha)</td>
<td>'cry'</td>
<td>-chah (-cha)</td>
<td>'scream'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chq’</td>
<td>'manure, excrement, feces'</td>
<td>chxq’</td>
<td>'excrement (vulgar)' ‡</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-chin</td>
<td>'have, exude odor'</td>
<td>-chxin</td>
<td>'have strong odor'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-chq’</td>
<td>'nose'</td>
<td>-chq’</td>
<td>'muzzle'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-cho’</td>
<td>'bad'</td>
<td>-cho’</td>
<td>'wicked, essentially bad'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-tstal</td>
<td>'hate'</td>
<td>-tstal</td>
<td>'be exasperated'</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

†These glosses are Reichard’s and should not be understood as "literal" translations;
rather, they attempt to capture the sense implied in the use of "aspiration." Elsewhere,
Reichard (1944) was critical of those who would attempt literal translations from Navajo
into English. We share her caution.
‡Mitchell does not use the velar fricative in this verb stem.
§Mitchell describes the insertion of the velar fricative here as suggesting the "light fall
of the first snow on the ground." Webster has the impression from conversations with
Navajo consultants that the distinction is between something ‘floating’ and something
(heavier) ‘floating’ and ‘falling’ (with the -x-).
¶Mitchell describes this as a glinting "deep pink."
††Mitchell suggested this was not so much vulgar, but had the sense of ‘smelly’ and
‘nasty’. 

From the above and from our own investigation we can see that the velar
fricative (both the voiceless and voiced forms) is inserted after the initial con-
nsonant (either a coronal fricative or a coronal affricate) of a stem (noun or verb):
-x- after an aspirated coronal affricate or a voiceless coronal fricative and -gh-
after an unaspirated coronal affricate or a voiced coronal fricative. The insertion of the expressive feature is not possible in all Navajo words. Mitchell, for example, felt that -tih ‘cover, wrap’, to ‘water’, and ‘auwé ‘baby’ could not take the velar fricative; in each of these forms, inserting a velar fricative would violate the phonotactics just described.  

It seems clear that the use of the velar fricative indicates an affective stance. Discussing the use of -x-, Reichard and Young and Morgan describe that stance as variously “augmentative,” “pejorative,” “intensive,” or “deprecative.” Here we wish to suggest a slightly different interpretation, one that leads us back to the poem by Jim. First, Mitchell characterizes -x- as “very descriptive” (i.e., it is evocative of certain characteristics). Second, when describing the sense of the form used in minimal pairs, Mitchell often came back to the terms “too much,” “dirty,” “ugly,” “awful,” and “an extra description” in contrast to the unmarked form. For example, “the word nizeedi [your opposite sex cousin] is a clean cut description of a cousin, and if the x falls in there like nizhgeedi would indicate the two [related cousins] had been sleeping together or sharing blankets.” The difference between chin and chxin is the difference between “dirt” and “dirt with grease, really dirty.” The difference between bicháá’ and bícháá’ was the difference between “just a blend of shit” and “very dirty and nasty” shit that “smells awful.”

We think the distinction discussed in section 5 between controlled and non-controlled, which is both culturally salient and linguistically salient to some Navajos, is relevant to an interpretation of the expressive function of -x-. First, the affective stance of augmentative or pejorative may be coupled with the view that a particular referent is lacking in control (i.e., hóchxo’í). Things that are “too much,” “nasty,” “ugly,” or “disorderly” are things that may well lack control and therefore need to be returned (through ritual) to order or control (Toelken and Scott 1981:86). The very kinds of things, then, that would be depreciated, pejorated, or augmented can also sometimes be understood as things that would lack control. For example, nizhgeedi does not so much suggest that the cousin is “dirty,” but rather that the cousin is behaving in a manner that lacks control. The use of the velar fricative may, then, imply an additional affective stance that something also lacks control.

Second, the verb stems for -cháá’ ‘ugly, disorderly, bad, pout’, -tszas ‘whip’, and -chaxé = ‘rumpled, disheveled’ are almost always produced with the velar fricative. This is probably because they are all states or events that are “disorderly” or “out of control.” Mitchell told Webster with reference to the form nícháá’í ‘it is ugly’ that “we most always use x when we say that” (this verb is based on the stem -cháá’). Indeed, -cháá’ is the prototypical verb stem for describing things that are “ugly” or “disorderly,” things, that is, that need to be brought back under control or order or balance—made hózhó. Likewise, both a whiplike action and disheveled hair, for example, are things that are also “disorderly” and “out of control” or, again, in Navajo English, things that are
ugly. In fact, Young, Morgan, and Midgette describe the verb stem -texas in the following manner: "act in a violent whipping-lashing manner, whip, strike with a slender flexible object, slam (as in slamming a door, or slamming down an object)" (1992:592). Insertion of the velar fricative, then, potentially evokes two associations: using it for things that are augmented or depreciated may imply that they are also out of control, and using it specifically in the consonant cluster -chx- can evoke the verb stem -chax- 'ugly, out of control, disorderly'.

Finally, to recall a point made by Hymes (2003) above, the fact that inserted -x- is an expressive feature that does not change semantico-referential meaning meant that linguists found it easy to ignore it. Reichard makes this point as well, in reviewing previous collections of Navajo textual materials, "The Sapir-Hoijer [1942] texts do not differentiate the regular forms from the augmentatives because they treat both types of initial as a single phoneme" (1948:17). In Harry Hoijer's (1974) A Navajo Lexicon, he never includes -x- on any of the verb stems noted above; they appear as -chq- 'bad, ugly, ill-natured, evil' (1974:220), -chosh- 'unevenly cut, ragged' (1974:219), and -tsas- 'whip' (1974:182) (we have updated Hoijer's orthography to match the current Navajo orthography). Indeed, Hoijer (1974:186) also misses the distinction between titso- 'yellow' and titxo-, conventionally glossed as 'orange' but also with a sense of 'so and so yellow' or 'dirty yellow' (see figure A2 in the appendix). Thinking the velar fricative unimportant because it did not contribute to the semantico-referential meaning of a lexical item, Hoijer omitted it from forms in his lexicon. Sapir and Hoijer (1967:7) (we assume that it is principally Hoijer speaking here) go so far as to dismiss Reichard's discussion of -x- as indicating augmentative or pejorative sense. They claim that it is a "nondistinctive feature" (1967:7) and can therefore be excluded from the serious work of describing Navajo morphology and phonology. In Leonard Faltz's (1998) insightful discussion of the Navajo verb, he spends a good deal of time discussing the verb stem -cha- 'cry' without noting that there is an optional expressive form with the velar fricative -chax- 'scream, cry without control, wail' (see Reichard 1951:142). Credit, then, must be given to Reichard, Morgan, and Young for recognizing the expressive work that the velar fricative did and for including it in their grammars and dictionaries. Not every linguist did.

7. -x- marks the spot. By way of a first approximation of a Navajo ethnopoetics concerned with ethnoliterary criticism, we would like to argue that the expressive use of -x- in this poem resonates, or echoes, with the -x- that is normally found in expressions such as nischjo' or hóohjo'. We find this probable because Jim does not simply repeat the sound -x- throughout the poem, but in fact creates a consonantal rhyme by way of the repetition of the consonant cluster -chx- in each line of the poem. This, of course, the very consonant cluster that is normally pronounced in the verb stem -chax-'. The velar fricative, as we noted above, resonates across a number of lexical items, some of which,
like *hóchx̄p̄*. are most typically found with the velar fricative. Jim highlights this sound affinity or phonological iconicity even more by repeating the consonant cluster -chx- throughout the poem. By phonological iconicity here, we mean a resemblance between words or consonant clusters, where sounds echo each other. Such expressive and poetic features based on phonological iconicity—from puns to poetry—are much appreciated by some Navajo (see Webster 2009, 2010c). In each line of the poem, the expressive consonant cluster -chx- iconically evokes the stem -chx- through phonological similarity and thus suggests that that stem’s lexical meaning of lack of control applies. Jim’s use of the velar fricative is thus a richly layered and textured poetic accomplishment in Navajo. To see this more clearly, let us now go back through the poem, this time adding in comments that Mitchell made about the various forms, and supplementing these remarks by comments that Webster elicited from other Navajos about the poem.

The introduction of *na’aschchx̄idi* ‘badger’ with the velar fricative indicates a pejorative affective stance towards this character. As Mitchell noted, without the -x- this might be a badger from a storybook or Disney DVD, “these animal characters in those movies, there is no ugliness, it’s nice and clean movies.” But with the -x- there is a pejorative sense and, also, a sense that the badger is out of place, ugly, and uncontrolled. First, it is possible that the verb stem here is in fact -chid ‘to move hands and arms in a noncontrolled manner’. Second, the addition of the -x- in conjunction with -ch- suggests, because it evokes the -chx- sound in *hóchx̄p̄*, that not only are the hands, arms, or paws moving in a neutrally noncontrolled manner, they are moving in a negatively evaluated, uncontrolled manner (see section 5). The badger lacks control.

Let us turn to the second line, *bichx̄iżh* ‘its nose’. Recall that Reichard (1951: 142) translated -chx̄iżh as ‘muzzle’. In conversation, Mitchell has tried to explain the expressive work done by -x- through lexicalizing it into English in various ways. Mitchell has used terms like “big nose,” “fat nose,” “dried and cracked,” and “ugly nose” to describe the expressive quality of the line *bichx̄iżh*. Another Navajo that Webster worked with on this poem suggested “protrusion.” The velar fricative expresses a pejorative stance towards the badger’s nose, and again the consonant cluster -chx- evokes—through phonological iconicity with the verb stem -chx̄p̄—being out of control or ugly as well. The character *na’aschchx̄idi* is not only uncontrolled in behavior, but also uncontrolled in appearance.

In the third line, Mitchell translated the form *ni’desx̄hchx̄iżdgo* as ‘stretched round’, and described the situation in the following manner: “its nose is widened out,” “its nostrils, horrible looking,” “the rim of its nose is open wide,” and “it’s expanding its nose, getting big.” Webster would suggest that *na’aschchx̄idi’s* nostrils are flaring in a “horrible” and, hence, uncontrolled manner. That is, the badger is behaving in an uncontrolled manner here as well. The badger’s actions are done in an “ugly” (i.e., *hóchx̄p̄*) manner.
The next line—ni‘iihchajh—suggests that the badger is taking a “nasty shit.” It is “a shit” that “smells awful.” It might be the case that the badger has lost control of his bowel movement and has become incontinent. This seems suggested, anyway, in Mitchell’s comment that the form had a sense of “shitting around” and another Navajo’s suggestion “shits all over.” In either case, it is “a vile shit” that the badger is taking. This is, of course, affirmed in the fifth line. Here we find chqqa’ bee and, similarly, the use of the -x- here indicates that the badger’s defecation is “too much,” “like you filled up the toilet bowl,” “dirty,” “nasty,” and “smells awful.”

This brings us to the final line, náníihxaad ‘to become full (bulge or swell) with food’ or, as Mitchell translates it, ‘is full’. Mitchell has described the use of the -x- here as indicating that the badger “overate,” “ate till it was too full,” “its belly became too round,” “ate till they became ugly with a round belly hanging out,” and “it ate more than it needs.” As Mitchell further noted, “we shouldn’t overeat, we shouldn’t have a round stomach.” The velar fricative here suggests both an augmentative and a pejorative affective stance. Thus, the use of the -x- in conjunction with -ch- seems to indicate that the badger ate in an uncontrolled manner, that it ate too much, much more than it needed. Note also that the vowel that follows the velar fricative in this poem moves from a high front vowel i (na‘ashchxidii) to a low central vowel a (náníihxaad). In producing these vowels, the mouth physically gets more open—larger—and rounder as one reads down the poem. The mouth thus replicates—iconically—the very fullness of náníihxaad. In this line, too, the consonantal rhyme -chx- occurs, suggesting a connection with the verb stem -chxq'.

Mitchell stressed to Webster that each listener of this poem would get “a different image, a different picture” from this poem, and that Jim was “creating a descriptive picture” and “playing around with words” in this poem, but Mitchell did note that, for him, the poem suggested that “we don’t think about what we are doing, we don’t know what we become.” Na‘ashchxidii is not behaving in a proper manner and according to Mitchell the -x- seems to add to the impression that the badger does not “think about what it is doing.” The badger is not paying attention to what it is doing to itself. The badger is out of control, eating too much and eating its own vile shit. It is, quite literally, “full of shit.” For Mitchell and for Webster, this poem seems to suggest that some people are not paying attention to what they are doing to themselves. They are, like the badger, acting “out of control” and doing “ugly” things.

This poem, written as it is in Navajo, has Navajos as its audience. However, literacy in Navajo is still relatively restricted among Navajos (see Spolsky 2002; Benally and Viri 2005; Webster 2009). Most Navajos encounter this poem, not as a text artifact, but rather as an oral performance. Mitchell has pointed out to Webster that Jim does not always pronounce the velar fricative in the first line when he performs, though all subsequent lines do include the expressive feature. In such cases, it would appear that it is not the badger who is out of control,
but its actions. Note that when one reads the poem, the -x- is always available. When it is performed by Jim, the velar fricative is optional. When Webster has seen Jim perform this poem, most notably in July 2001 in Window Rock to an audience primarily of Navajos (including Mitchell), Navajos in the audience laughed during the performance. There is, indeed, something absurd about the badger acting in such an uncontrolled manner, becoming satiated from its own “shit,” its nostrils flaring. Here it is useful to remember, as Toelken and Scott suggest, that for some Navajos, “any kind of extreme like... gluttony... is considered the kind of weakness that must be cured by ceremony, and is often in the meantime subject to laughter” (1981:86). Thus, it also appears that Jim is encouraging Navajos to think about their own actions, their own behavior—to reflect, that is, on the possibility that they, too, are acting without thinking, letting their bellies get too large, that, in Mitchell’s words, “we don’t know what we become.”

8. Conclusion. In this article, we have attempted to give an interpretation of the use of the expressive feature -x- in a poem written in Navajo by Rex Lee Jim. The first thing to note is that the -x- is an expressive option. The words that occur with -x- in this poem can all (and most of them usually do) occur without the -x-, in which case they lack the kinds of pejorative implications that appear in the poem. Use of -x- represents a creative and poetic choice by Jim. We believe that in making that choice, Jim is suggesting something about how this poem should be understood. We have argued that the -x- indicates an affective stance towards the character and actions that occur in the poem. This stance is reinforced throughout the poem not simply by the repeated use of -x- but also through the fact that the consonant to which insertion of -x- applies is -ch-, producing a consonant cluster that is phonologically iconic with the one in hóchξąp ‘ugly, disorderly, out of control’. The affective stance that emerges in this poem, then, is not just augmentative or depreciatory, but rather implies more specifically that the badger lacks control over its actions. The badger is not paying attention to what it is doing. This is an important distinction in Navajo, both linguistically, where there are verb stems that differentiate between doing something in a controlled manner and doing things in a noncontrolled manner, and culturally, where a premium is placed on acting in a controlled manner and where much ritual is associated with restoring order to things that are disorderly (see Reichard 1963; Witherspoon 1977). We emphasize, however, that this is one interpretation developed in conversations between Mitchell and Webster. We would not presume to argue that it is the only interpretation.

While we have focused on one poem by Jim, it should be noted that Jim also uses the optional velar fricative in other poems in saad as well as in his other books of poetry (Jim 1989, 1998). And while we do not want to discuss these poems here, it appears that Jim is using the velar fricative for similar expressive purposes. When one reads or hears a poem in Navajo by Jim, we
would suggest—echoing Jim—that it is important to be attentive to what sounds are highlighted in that poem; to look, then, for what other words those sounds may evoke. Mitchell’s command of Navajo and his own interests in the importance of the sounds of the language are, obviously, the crucial component for our interpretation here. We would add that our discussion of the poetic use of the velar fricative and consonantal rhyme and of its interpretation by Mitchell suggests the creative agency that is involved in both the production and the reception of poetic forms (see Krookritsky 2010). This is at the heart of a Navajo ethnoliterary criticism.

We also suggested that some linguists and linguistic anthropologists (among others) have not been overly concerned with the expressive features of languages. In fact, there has been a tendency to ignore such features because they do not aid semantically-referential meaning. We saw, for example, that Hoijer (1974; Sapir and Hoijer 1967) did not indicate the velar fricative in verb stems where the -x- always occurs (-tsxas) or almost always occurs (-chxp). (We are not aware of any noun stems in which the velar fricative always or almost always occurs.) An examination, for example, of Sapir and Hoijer’s text collection (1942) for evidence about uses of the velar fricative would be misleading at best, because Sapir and Hoijer did not record that feature in their texts. Imagine if, as is sometimes the case, that were the only evidence of an indigenous language in use. Such texts would then reproduce a Western fascination with reference at the expense of local feltfully expressive features. We might add that the use of -x- as an expressive feature that indicates augmentation, intensity, or depreciation receives no explicit discussion in two important recent Navajo language textbooks—Irvy Goosen’s (1995) Diné Bizasdz: Speak, Read, Write Navajo (though an implicit suggestion does appear [p. xiv] that -x- indicates “intensity”) and Evangeline Parsons Yazzie and Margaret Speas’s (2007) Diné Bizasdz Bináhoo’ah: Rediscovering the Navajo Language. Mitchell, who has long been a Navajo language instructor, has told Webster that he does not get to -x- when he is teaching Navajo. One Navajo language teacher with whom Webster discussed some of Jim’s poetry in 2001 went so far as to claim that Jim had misspelled some of the words with the velar fricative.

Hymes once noted that “we tend to forget that the usual way of writing languages on the page is one that implies, or, one might say, conceals, linguistic information” (2003:42). Echoing this, Webster would suggest that as the Navajo language becomes standardized in a written form that is not attentive to expressive forms, some Navajos may not realize that inserting the -x- is an expressive option, or may find that such expressive features have been devalued through not being indicated in writing. Mitchell notes that today, “people use x without thinking.” Instead, Navajos may see the velar fricative in words in which it is normally produced and written (e.g., titsx ‘orange, dirty yellow’) as merely how one spells the word—so that, e.g., titsx ‘yellow’ and titsx ‘orange’ constitute a minimal pair for semantically-referential meaning—and not as a productive ex-
pressive feature. In fact, Webster has been told by some Navajo consultants that *litso* means only ‘orange’, and one Navajo-English dictionary sold at Diné College (both Tsail and Shiprock campuses) lists *litso* as meaning only ‘orange’ (Parnwell, Yellowhair, and Burns 1989:104); the expressive use of –x to indicate “so and so yellow” or “dirty yellow” is thus obscured, and a false equivalence between English and Navajo is created. We can think of this process as an instance of the vocabularization of language, where languages are reduced to interchangeable ways of labeling the world (see Meek 2010). Concomitantly, some Navajos may agree with the teacher that Webster talked to in 2001 and see the insertion of the velar fricative in other words (like *bichxį́h*) as a mistake. This is, however, not an inherent problem of literacy, but, rather, of a particular literacy that promotes a referentialist view of language at the expense of expressive features (see Tedlock 1983). This is an especially important point given the current language shift from Navajo to various forms of Englishes now occurring (see Benally and Viri 2005; Webster 2010a). We see both Jim’s poem and this article as promoting, and calling attention to, the poetic work that the velar fricative can do in Navajo. Here we echo the concerns of Woodbury (1998) and Dorian (2002) in appreciating the local aesthetics of expressive forms in use.

We close by noting that the serious work of understanding Navajo poetry written in Navajo has not yet fully begun. We hope that this initial exploration into Navajo ethnopoetics and ethnoliterary criticism will encourage renewed interest into the poetic and expressive features of written poetry in indigenous languages. A more complete understanding of Navajo poetry will mean a more detailed investigation of the ethnopoetics of Navajo, that is, into the poetic potentials and options that are available through Navajo. Understanding Rex Lee Jim’s poem means not just understanding the semantico-referential meanings behind the poem’s words, but also catching a glimpse of the expressive meaning of the use of –x as an optional poetic device, a poetic device Jim chose to use in this poem. As Mitchell noted, Jim’s use of the –x is “very descriptive” and helps in “giving a picture” to those who hear or read this poem. Mitchell also noted that, Jim’s poem “is very strong” because it inspires continued thought. Those are some of the qualities of an aesthetically pleasing Navajo poem—that it evokes an image for the listener or reader to ponder (Webster 2009). Such expressive features may, as Mitchell told Webster, be hard for “White people” to understand. This lack of understanding may of course be predicated on a Western language ideology overly focused on semantico-referential meanings and not on the expressive and affective features of languages (see Bauman and Briggs 2003; Samuels 2004; Webster 2009, 2010a). However, we hope to have suggested something of the artistry of Jim’s poem through our investigation of the velar fricative. We hope to have shown, in concert with Hymes (1961, 1981), that Native American poetry is too important to be ignored by linguists, too important as well to be left solely to linguists.
Appendix

Figure A1. Characteristic spectrograms of *nishcha* (top) versus *ch'innitchxesh* (both produced by the same speaker). Note the differences in the duration of the stem's onset in *ch* [ʧ] versus *chx* [ʃʃ]. The velar fricative is added to the onset of the stem. (Produced with the assistance of Joyce McDonough.)

Figure A2. The velar fricative as an augmentative: the contrast between *itso* 'yellow' and *itso* 'orange' contrast for two female speakers. Note the additive *x* segment in the second token of each pair. (Produced with the assistance of Joyce McDonough.)
Notes

Acknowledgments. Webster would like to thank Rex Lee Jim for a number of valuable conversations about Navajo poetry. He would also like to thank all the Navajo poets who have taken time to talk with him about their poetry and Navajo poetry more generally. Webster would also like to thank Joyce McDonough, Scott Rushforth, David Samuels, M. Eleonor Nevina, and Aimee Hosemann for useful discussions taken up in this article. Joyce McDonough helped with the discussion of the basic phonetic features of the velar fricative and provided the spectrograms in the appendix. We would also like to thank two anonymous reviewers for a number of useful suggestions. Original funding for this research on the Navajo Nation during 2000–2001 was provided by Wenner-Gren, the Phillips Fund of the American Philosophical Society, and the University of Texas at Austin. More recent research on and around the Navajo Nation from 2007–11 was funded by a Faculty Seed Grant from Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, a Phillips Fund grant from the American Philosophical Society, and a Jacobs Fund grant from the Whiscon Museum. Webster would like to thank them all. Research by Webster on the Navajo Nation was conducted under permits from the Navajo Nation Historic Preservation Office. He thanks them.

1. Mitchell is an accomplished singer and writer. He has released three CDs of his distinctive shepherding songs, is the author of the semi-autobiographical work Miracle Hill (2004), and has had a number of poems published in various venues over the years. He is also a longtime Navajo language educator. Mitchell and Webster first met in 2000 when Webster was living on the Navajo Nation doing dissertation fieldwork on the emergence of contemporary Navajo written poetry. They have worked together off and on since then. Most recently, Webster has stayed at Mitchell’s home during the summers of 2007–11, where they have regularly talked about Navajo poetry (among other things). Mitchell first translated this poem for Webster in the summer of 2008. Since then they have discussed this poem in person, via email, and on the phone. Comments by Mitchell quoted in this article come from these discussions. Both Mitchell and Webster have also discussed this poem with other Navajos as well.

2. In Jim’s full-page advertisement in the Navajo Times (5 November 2009) announcing his bid for the presidency of the Navajo Nation, he lists “Blessing Way Singer” as one of his accomplishments. He also states that he is “fluent” and “literate” in Navajo. As of 2011, Jim has been vice president of the Navajo Nation.

3. Webster dedicates this article to the memory and work of Dell Hynes. Hynes took an early interest in and was supportive of Webster’s initial work in ethnopoetics (see Webster 1999).

4. Urrutia and Sherzer (1997) and John McDowell (2000) offer useful discussions of the implications of attending to local aesthetics and their value in the work of ethnopoetic translations. Urrutia and Sherzer call this process “transcreating” (1997: 355) and McDowell terms it “collaborative ethnopoetics” (2000: 211). Webster has been influenced by both of these works. Toelken and Scott (1981) offer an important early example, though they call them neither, of both “transcreating” and “collaborative ethnopoetics.”

5. In a video for Princeton Alumni Weekly in 2010, Jim describes the role of sound in one of his poems; see http://paw.princeton.edu/issues/2010/11/03/pages/8440/index.xml (last accessed 9/26/2011). There, Jim discusses the homophony between ni ‘you’ and ni ‘ground, earth’ as a key to thinking about the poem in the video. Jim is not the only Navajo poet to exploit phonological iconicity for poetic purposes. Webster (2009: 211–12) describes examples by Luci Tapahoson and Laura Tohe as well.

6. Bolinger (1940) termed this “word affinities,” but Webster feels that “sound affinities” better captures what we are describing here since the affinity is found in the consonant cluster –ohr–.
7. This is a voiceless velar fricative [x]. Navajo also has a voiced velar fricative, written in the standard orthography as gh; this, too, can be used as an expressive feature in alternation with -xo-. Where the expressive feature is concatenated after an aspirated alveolar or palatal affricate or a voiceless fricative stem initial, it is -xo-; when it is concatenated after a nonaspirated alveolar or palatal affricate or voiced fricative, it is -gh- (see Young and Morgan 1943:142; Reichard 1948). In both cases, it serves similar expressive functions. David Samuels (p.c. 2010) comments that Western Apache does not appear to have a similar expressive feature.

Contrary to the claim of Yazzie and Speas (2007), the voiceless velar fricative [x] can occur word-initially, as was documented by Reichard (1948:17, 1951:17, 19), although there is individual variation on the point. For example, Mitchell pronounces xoch ‘cactus’ with a word initial velar fricative (see also Neundorf 1983:xi), while other Navajos pronounce the word as haaw. Mitchell is aware of this variation. On Navajo linguistic diversity, see Reichard (1945).

8. For a discussion of Badger’s role in Navajo myth, see Reichard (1963).

9. Reichard associates the use of h and x (both of which she considers forms of aspiration) with being out of control: “Since x-speaking is related to the augmentation and exaggerated emphasis . . ., it may be that the Navaho consider those persons who exaggerate the articulation of h or x as ‘affected’ or ‘raving’” (1951:370). When a speaker overuses the velar fricative, it may suggest that the speaker is “raving” and out of control. This is another potential resonance for the use of the velar fricative in this poem.

10. Reichard (1951:141) also calls insertion of the velar fricative a form of “infixing”; that would mean that -xo- is a morpheme that is inserted within another morpheme. However, we are less convinced that this is an accurate label. Webster believes, for reasons outside the scope of this paper, that velar fricative insertion is a meaningful phonological process (like the use of t in Takeina) and that the -xo- is not a morpheme (see Woodbury 1967:735-36). As Woodbury notes, “The meaning which is treated phonologically in CAY [Central Alaskan Yupik] is pragmatic or expressive, rather than referential or truth-functional” (1987:735). A similar argument can be made for the use of the velar fricative in Navajo, because, like the examples that Woodbury describes, “these styles were not merely triggered by factors in the speech context: their use was often non-redundant, creative, and meaningful” (1987:736). Moreover, velar fricative insertion is phonetically restricted and, as is seen below, it cannot be applied to complex stops like [tx] and [lx] (see McDonough and Wood 2008; see also note 11)—its phonological slot, so to speak, has already been occupied by a nonexpressive velar fricative. The restricted occurrence of this process suggests a phonological account, not a morphological one. This is a tentative suggestion, however.

11. Reichard (1951:19) notes that there is also a regular allomorphy that velarizes and rounds the aspiration of t before a. Here, there is no pejoratives or augmentative sense to this process. McDonough and Wood (2008), based on spectrogram analysis, describe t and k as complex stops rather than simplex stops. They argue specifically that “the t and k phonemes are phonemic as well as phonetic heterorganic affricates /tx/ and /kx/’ (2008:441; see also Young and Morgan 1987:xx). The velar fricative, then, is already present in the phoneme t and is not used for expressive purposes. We thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out to us.

12. Webster is struck by the fact that Hoijer responds only to the claims of Reichard and not to the similar claims made by Robert Young and William Morgan in 1943 (a book Hoijer was aware of; see Sapir and Hoijer 1967:124). The book is based on Sapir’s data, but Hoijer is the author of much of the narrative discussion in it (Sapir and Hoijer 1967:1). Hoijer goes so far as to state that “it is probable that the contrasts Reichard notes are not regular grammatical processes but are instead the result of an emphasis in speaking by reason of emotional context” (1967:7). This statement utterly misses the
pejorative and deprecative sense that this expressive feature can have and ignores the fact that the velar fricative is quite common and regular in certain verb stems like -chay'. Hoijer's discussion of Reichard's work resonates with the dismissal of such work described above by Hymes (2003). For a discussion of some of the dynamics between Hoijer and Reichard, see Julia Falk (1999).

13. Because the poem was performed at Window Rock, the capital of the Navajo Nation, more than one Navajo suggested to Webster that the poem evoked an image not just of Navajos who do not pay attention to what they are doing to themselves, but also of Navajo politics and politicians. The irony that Jim is now vice president of the Navajo Nation is not lost on Mitchell or other Navajos that Mitchell and Webster have discussed this poem with.

14. Webster would note that the use of this expressive device in Navajo is an example of what Woodbury calls a "form-dependent expression" (1998:238). For a comparable discussion of an expressive feature found in poetry (here Gaelic) and the importance of such features to local expressive practices, see Dorian (2002).

15. Luci Tapshonso (1987:31) also uses the form nachapago 'pouting' in one of her poems. As we discuss above, the verb stem on which this form is based, -chay' 'bad, ugly, spoil, pout', which also occurs in the poetry of Jim (1998:41), normally occurs with the velar fricative. To pout is to show a lack of control.

16. For example, one can insert the velar fricative into lichif 'it is red', producing lichif I 'really dark red.' Discussing color terminology in Navajo, Herbert Landar, Susan Ervin, and Arnold Horowitz (1960:381–82) provide examples of the use of the velar fricative in relation to color terms and illness. In describing the common cold, three Navajo consultants describe the mucus as being litzo 'nasty yoo' ('yoo' is Landar, Ervin, and Horowitz's term for "yellow-orange") with the velar fricative. Later on, they provide the transcript of a medical interview between a doctor, a Navajo interpreter, and a Navajo patient. Twice the patient describes his mucus as litzo, which, again, Landar, Ervin, and Horowitz translate as "nasty yoo" (1960:382). As they note, the -zo- gives the stem -zzo augmentative-pejorative meaning, and has been rendered as 'nasty' (1960:381) (in the contemporary orthography, << is now written <t>).

17. One wonders, for example, what kinds of expressive features may be in play in the Tohono O'odham poetry of Ofelia Zepeda (1997) or in the Shoshoni poetry of Ronald Snake Edmo (2001). In contrast to the Choctaw poetry described by Marcia Haag (2011), much Navajo poetry is deeply interested in the use of sound (from ideophony to phonological iconicity) for poetic purposes (Webster 2009).

18. This claim applies equally well to poetry written in traditionally understood Indigenous languages and to poetry written in local Indigenous Englishes as well. On this point, see Webster (2010b, 2011).

References

Bahr, Donald

Bauman, Richard, and Charles Briggs

Becker, Alton

Benally, Ancita, and Denis Viri
Bolinger, Dwight

Bunte, Pamela

Byrd, Dani, and Toben H. Mintz

Cook, Rung-Do, and Keren Rice

Dorian, Nancy

Edmo, Ronald Snake

Falk, Julia S.

Faltz, Leonard M.

Farnell, Brenda M.

Friedrich, Paul

Friebie, Charlotte

Goossen, Irvy W.

Haag, Marcia

Harrison, K. David

Hill, Jane

Hill, Jane, and Osfia Zepeda

Holzer, Harry

Hymes, Dell
2003  Now I Know Only So Far: Essays in Ethnopoetics. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Jakobson, Roman

Jim, Rex Lee

Johnstone, Barbara

Kimball, Geoffrey

Kluckhohn, Clyde

Kroeber, Paul

Landier, Herbert, Susan Ervin, and Arnold Horwitz
McAlister, David

McDonough, Joyce

McDonough, Joyce, and Valerie Wood

McDowell, John

Meek, Barbra

Mitchell, Blackhorse

Mithun, Marianne

Moore, Robert

Moore, Robert, Sari Pietikäinen, and Jan Biommaert

Nettle, Daniel, and Suzannes Romaine

Neundorf, Alyse

Nevins, M. Eleanor

Nuckolls, Janis


Parnwell, E. C., Marvin Yellowhair, and Raymond Burns

Port, Robert, and Adam Leary
Reichard, Gladys

Rice, Keren

Rushforth, Scott, and James S. Chisholm

Samuels, David

Sapir, Edward

Sapir, Edward, and Harry Hoijer

Sherzer, Joel

Sherzer, Joel, and Anthony Woodbury, eds.

Sicoli, Mark

Silverstein, Michael

Spolsky, Bernard

Tapahonso, Luci
Tedlock, Dennis

Toelken, Barre, and Tacheuri Scott

Urrutia, Anselmo, and Joel Sherzer

Wall, C. Leon, and William Morgan

Webster, Anthony K.


Witherspoon, Gary

Woodbury, Anthony


Wyman, Leland, and Bernard Haile

Yazzie, Evangeline Parsons, and Margaret Speas
Young, Robert W., and William Morgan

Young, Robert W., William Morgan, and Sally Midgette

Zepeda, Ofelia