The Mouse That Sucked

On "Translating" a Navajo Poem

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Single Algonkin words are like tiny imagist poems.
Edward Sapir, Language

In the final chapter of his 1921 classic book Language, Edward Sapir makes the oft-quoted statement that serves as my epigraph. Earlier in that same chapter on language and literature, Sapir offered what I take to be a caution to erstwhile translators: "Every language is itself a collective art of expression. There is concealed in it a particular set of esthetic factors—phonetic, rhythmic, symbolic, morphological—which it does not share with any other language" (225). I take this as a caution because it implies a degree of incommensurability between languages, a position Sapir also advocated.1 More generally, Sapir's caution seems to focus our attention on what Paul Friedrich has termed "poetic indeterminacy." And Friedrich wishes to call our attention to the importance of poetic language, which he argues "is the locus of the most interesting differences between languages and should be the focus of the study of such differences" (17). This article is a brief foray into such terrain.

In this article, I present a short poem in Navajo by the Navajo poet Rex Lee Jim and an English translation that I did in consultation with Jim. The purpose is to explore the difficulties of translation, on precisely the grounds that Sapir enumerated above (e.g., phonetic, rhythmic, symbolic, morphological). I present the Navajo poem together with my English translation. My subsequent analysis of this transla-
tion enables me to demonstrate the problems involved in translating from Navajo to English. The poem is deeply embedded within Navajo semantics, sound symbolism, and phonology, and as such it offers an extreme example of the inherent incommensurability one encounters when attempting to translate across disparate languages. I then conclude by returning to issues raised throughout this article, namely, that the process of translation needs to be complimented by the use of exegesis (or critical analysis, by way of linguistic and ethnographic background knowledge). Ethnographic and linguistic knowledge are crucial components of any translation project. Ultimately, though, even with such background knowledge, when one approaches poems that are based on the poetic potentials of a specific language, such as the one I will analyze below, something will, by default, be lost in any translation. This article is, then, also a cautionary tale.

THE POEMS

The poem to be presented is from Jim’s Navajo language collection of poems titled saad, which glosses as “word, language.” The book is from the Princeton Collections of Western Americana, and the author is listed as Mazii Dinétsoi. The book is especially interesting because it is written entirely in Navajo, including its page numbers. Thus the poem to be discussed appears on page tádiin dóó bi’ąą tsost’a’d or roughly page 37.

Jim has published two other books of Navajo poetry: Áhi Ni Nikisheegíizh, also published by Princeton Collections of Western Americana, and Dúchas Tlát Kóó Diné, a trilingual book of poetry in English, Irish, and Navajo. The difference between saad and the other two books is apparent even to a non-Navajo reader. The poems in saad are short, haiku-like poems, whereas the poems in the other two books are longer and more narrative in quality. The poems in saad seem to take a certain pleasure in their brevity, their quickness.

I want to pause here and make clear that I have provided an English translation and not the English translation. I follow Ofelia Zepeda and suggest that translations are approximations of the meaningful quality,
the emotive force, the sparseness, the quickness of the Navajo (or Tohono O'odham) source language original. The following translation is similar to the versions one finds in Jim's trilingual collection, where poems in English and Navajo may differ quite a bit. Other translations may be created to highlight other features of the poem, but in so highlighting they must necessarily obscure certain parts as well. This is true, of course, of my translation. Further, I want to be clear that I do not conflate the quality of Jim's poem with my translation. Jim is an accomplished poet. I am not.

I have chosen the following poem by Jim because it evokes the use of sound and meaning to realize a sense of "quickness" and as a "thought poem." I will expand on both these points later. Here is the poem in Navajo:

na'asts'ősí
ts'ősí, ts'ős
yiits'a'go
ïïts'ööz

Here is an English translation:

mouse
suck, suck
sounding
kiss

ON QUICKNESS AND THOUGHT POEMS, OR WHY THINK ABOUT A SUCKING MOUSE?

I want to begin with sound, with phonology. What should be obvious even to non-Navajo speakers is the intense use of assonance and consonance, the repetition of the sounds /ts/ and /o/. Most of Navajo speakers who have read this poem and I have talked to have commented on the sounds of the poem. Indeed, it was one Navajo woman who, after reading the poem aloud in my presence, noted that it was the sounds of the words that were especially salient to her. She pointed out further that she liked the ways the sounds went to-
gether. At a live performance of this poem at the Navajo Nation Museum in Window Rock, Arizona, on July 16, 2001, a number of Navajos laughed during this poem. When I asked several Navajos why they had laughed, a common response was that they liked the way the sounds went together in the poem. In fact, one Navajo said that the poem evoked the humorous image of a mouse going around kissing. There is, then, an aesthetic quality to the repetition of sounds.

Beyond phonology, there is also much to say about the meaning of words. First, the word for “mouse” in Navajo means literally “the one who goes about sucking.” This is the play on words used in line 2, where the onomatopoetic word ts'pqEs is repeated. However, ts'pqEs has two connotations: One is the sound of sucking through a straw, and the other is the sound of a kiss. This is followed by the third line, which is a standard way to acknowledge that what has just been said is onomatopoetic. Yet that line is also implicated in the alliteration that tumbles through the poem. One suggested translation of this line was “that’s how it sounds”; however, Jim, in discussing the translation, recommended “sounding.” I follow his suggestion. The fourth line means something like “it kissed,” “it sucked,” or “to perform a sucking rite.” Notice that Jim is playing with the meaning of ts'pqEs and the sound /ts'/, and in doing so he is drawing on the various connotations and the semantic relations those connotations may evoke within the poem. Through the highlighting of sounds, he is making ambiguity of meaning maximally salient.

The fact that Jim’s poem contains four lines resonates with a Navajo rhetorical and ritual focus on four (see Witherspoon 22, 166; Reichard 46). In Navajo cosmology things tend to happen in fours. By employing such a framework, the poem connects, obliquely, with other Navajo rhetorical styles. Likewise, the intense use of sound is clearly a form of parallelism. Parallelism is quite common in Navajo oral poetry, especially curing ways (see Reichard 35–49; McAllester; Matthews, Night Chant 269–304; Matthews, Mountain Chant, 73–85). As has been widely discussed, Navajos have a set of curing ways, which consist of a number of complex songs, chants, and narratives. As Gary Witherspoon has pointed out, such ways ideally should be performed verbatim (see also Reichard 12, 49). A key feature of these
curing ways is the pervasive use of parallelism. As I have pointed out elsewhere, Jim connects his poetry, often explicitly but sometimes implicitly, with curing ways (Webster 76–78). For example, Jim’s long poem “saad” circles around in a chantlike fashion. His poem based on Se’ah naagháí bik’eh hózhóó has strict parallelism in both the English and Navajo versions and relates—intertextually—with various curing ways (Jim, “A Moment” 236–37). His poem “Hunting/Na’aazheeh” concludes with a line from a curing way (Jim, Dúchas Táá Kóló Diné 8). These are rhetorical and implicational devices that are always difficult to translate. It is hard to translate the poetic tradition or the implicational history across poetic traditions that are so widely disparate. One can only suggest these issues. However, an understanding or at least an appreciation of Navajo oral tradition is crucial in understanding the work of Rex Lee Jim. Jim’s literary influence is an oral literary influence.

In translating the poem from Navajo to English, I attempt to retain something of the sound quality of the poem. “Suck” and “kiss” were chosen because of the consonance of the /s/ and /k/ found in both words. Also, “kiss” reverses the order of the sounds from “suck.” Such reversals express the interweaving of sounds and meaning I feel is the hallmark of this poem. The word play between na’asts’qosí and ts’qos, however, was lost in the English translation. Indeed, the various manifestations of the stem—ts’qos—that roll through the poem cannot be replicated in the English version. This point, the inability of a truly “literal” translation, is a point Alton Becker has repeatedly made. Becker argues that all translations are both “exuberant” and “deficient” (298–99). By “exuberant” Becker means that all translations add something that is not in the original. For example, in Navajo there is no gender within the pronominal system. Anytime one translates from Navajo to English and adds a gendered pronominal, he has been exuberant, adding something not in the original. On the other hand, Navajo has a fourth person pronominal, which marks “persons” who are socially distant. Any translation from Navajo to English that uses the third person English form will be deficient because it will fail to mark the special social meaning of the fourth person pronominal in Navajo.
In the English version, I take care to approximate the sound quality of the poem—intensive use of /ts/ and /k/—but it lacks the rich, layered meanings of the Navajo version. When this translation, this stimulus translation—a translation of feeling, not words (see Werner)—was presented to an audience, the form “suck” was questioned; one Navajo speaker suggested a translation of “nuzzle.” I presented this translation outdoors at McGaffey, New Mexico, in front of a mixed audience of Navajos and non-Navajos. The audience was composed of non-Navajo academics, students from the Northwestern Ethnographic Field School, and invited Navajo guests. The Navajo woman who suggested the change to “nuzzle” also said that by translating ts’qqs as “suck,” I was implying a sexual meaning to this poem. However, I think that Jim is playing on that potential “sexual” reading of this poem. That, I believe, is one more example of the ambiguities of meaning he is drawing into relief with this poem. I respect her concern and her translation. However, I need to state again, I am not trying to give the translation, only a translation.

I should also note that at that earlier presentation of this article and translation, one Navajo person remarked that they had not heard of na’asts’qqs as anything other than “mouse”; thus, the etymology of the word “mouse” appears to be frozen. Jim is attempting to reinvigorate or revive the etymology, to get Navajo people thinking about language, semantics, and the history of meanings in Navajo. The play on words becomes productive when Navajos examine the morphology of na’asts’qqs. Jim draws the reader/listener into the etymology of the word by way of contrasting it with the onomatopoetic form. Here again we see speech play revealing key features of language (phonology, morphology, semantics, etymology), putting language up for contemplation (see Sherzer, “Play Languages” 32–35).

The frozen nature, the inscrutability of words, is neither new to Navajo people nor to speakers of any language more generally. Sapir, in an early article concerning the northern origins of the Navajos, describes in some detail the phrase bit siks’árákééh (“sleeplessness always bothers me”) and the verb stem kééh. Sapir quotes his consultant Albert Sandoval as suggesting that there was a “sliding” move-
ment to the verb, or as Sandoval says, “sleep glides (slips) away from me” (“Internal Linguistic Evidence” 231). However, Sandoval could not state explicitly what the verb form meant. Sapir, through comparison with Chiricahua Apache and Northern Athapaskan verb forms, argues that the form once meant “to travel by canoe” (233). Sandoval, to his credit, was able to tap into the underlying metaphor even if he could not state explicitly the etymology of the phrase. Again, we see a frozen or archaic form whose etymology does not reveal itself readily to Navajo speakers (nor to non-Navajo linguistic anthropologists).

As a translator and a linguistic anthropologist, I also attempted to retain the “quickness,” or economy of expression. In *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, a collection of five insightful essays on the qualities of literature, Italo Calvino argues that quickness is essential to literature. The trick then is to not overburden the translation but to retain the feel, the expressive economy of the source language version. In this respect, “kiss” was used in favor of “it kissed” (explicitly changing tense), “sounding” was chosen over “that’s how it sounds,” and “mouse” was used in favor of “the one who goes about sucking.” While this final example may be, to borrow from Sapir, a tiny imagist poem in its own right, Sapir’s caution that “we must be careful not to exaggerate a freshness of content that is at least half due to our freshness of approach” (*Language* 228) seems warranted. *Na’asts’qqisi* is the conventional way to express “mouse” in Navajo. Jim has seized on its poetic potential and then amplified it through the tight interweaving of sound and meaning found throughout this poem.

In discussing my translation with him, Jim made a number of interesting comments. He pointed out that one cannot “really translate” the onomatopoetic words into English. This raises the question of translating sound symbolic words across languages. As Janis Nuckolls has pointed out, sound symbolic forms “communicate not by referring but by simulating the most salient perceptual qualities of an action, event, process or activity” (235, emphasis in original). While it could be argued that the Navajo forms simulate the salient aspects better than the English forms, I would argue that the English forms simulate an action as an action. If I have failed to translate the
precise salient quality of the action, at the least I have "translated" an action for an action. Therefore, I retain the English translations because I feel they are a crucial piece of information in the poem. In fact, "sucking" is the linchpin of the poem.

William Hanks has written that "poetic language has a fundamental impact on the imagination of speakers" (192). In discussing this poem with me, Jim pointed out that "most of my poems are written to stimulate thoughts, and that involves thinking about semantics and etymology." In a sense, Jim's poems are "thought poems," attempts to inspire readers to imagine in complex ways. For example, the place of the mouse in "traditional" Navajo beliefs as an "omen of evil, the spirit of death," Jim noted, can be compared with the contemporary place of the mouse in Navajo society, as the bearer of the deadly Hantavirus. These complex imaginings, the ways that Navajo language evokes such connections, are lost in the process of translation. They can be recuperated, however, through exegesis.

CONCLUSION

Recently, a number of scholars in the ethnopoetic tradition have begun grappling ever more seriously with the problems of translations (see Sammons and Sherzer; Swann). And while written poetry has generally been excluded from these experiments (but see Gnepper; Friedrich 84-104), there seems no a priori reason to hold to this view. This article is an initial step in understanding Navajo poetry in its written guise. Some scholars have termed this literary guise a "hybrid" genre. I hesitate to call this a hybrid genre, because some Navajo poets I have spoken with—Jim, for example—dislike the term. On the other hand, some Navajo poets actively use the terms "hybrid" and "hybridity." Sherwin Bitsui, at a performance in Blanding, Utah, on December 8, 2000, declared that his work—his poetry—was a hybrid. He also suggested that he was a "hybrid person." However, for now I prefer to refer to Navajo written poetry as a growth out of a broader poetic tradition. I see this larger poetic tradition as akin to Sapir's "collective art of expression, a summary of thousands upon thousands of individual intuitions" (Language 231). Sapir was speaking of language when he
wrote this, but the formulations of Roman Jakobson, Dell Hymes, and Paul Friedrich remind us that language has a set of inherent poetic potentials. These potentials are actualized in both poetry and in everyday language. They are at times language specific and, as this article has attempted to illustrate, often difficult, if not impossible, to translate. I would argue that ethnopoetics as a method of analysis has much to say concerning the rhetorical-poetics of written poetry in what were putative oral cultures. Barre Toelken, in discussing Navajo rug weaving, summarizes this point well:

So the real tradition is not the artifact itself, for it is a particularized statement of traditional premises and assumptions. The tradition is that dynamic process by which these premises are shared, performed, understood, and transmitted through time and space among members of a close group. (245)

My argument concerning the persistence of poetic forms, even as the “medium” changes, resonates with this perspective concerning Navajo “tradition” as a kind of practice.

Jim’s poems are “thought poems” or, perhaps better, “experiments in the imagination.” The poems in saad rely heavily on the poetic potentials of Navajo. These potentials include phonology, sound symbolism, morphology, rhetorical structures, implicature, etymologies, and the semantic indeterminacy and overlaps found in Navajo and exploited by Jim. Joel Sherzer once wrote, “When two languages are relatively close in culture, time, and language, it is possible to maintain a degree of literalness in translation while at the same time capturing the spirit of the original. But the more distant the two texts are, the more difficult translation becomes” (“The Kuna and Columbus” 908). Sherzer argues that translators should err on the side of literalness. I agree. In this respect, my translation has meant to hint at the dynamics and poetics within the Navajo original. The full realization of Jim’s “experiments in the imagination” can only be achieved in the Navajo original. This distinction is crucial for two reasons: 1) Navajo poetry needs to be valued on its own terms (i.e., Navajo poetry is not trying to be English poetry; it is Navajo poetry); and 2) today there is a general language shift occurring on the Navajo Nation from Navajo to English (Slate;
Lee and McLaughlin; House). It is much too early for Jim to become
the Cicero of Navajo.16

Finally, there is a methodological point to this article. Jim, as a
poet, relishes in the use of references to curing ways, in the use of
archaic etymologies, to references that are both current and a part of
a larger Navajo stock of knowledge. To approach Jim’s poetry, espe-
cially poetry written in Navajo, requires, I believe, skills that linguis-
tic anthropologists bring to the field. Linguistic anthropologists need
to take seriously the literature (both oral and written) that people are
creating, and we must be willing to actively engage the authors and
critics of Native American literatures.

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ticle was done under a Navajo Nation permit. Funding was provided by
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takes that remain are my responsibility.


2. See Witherspoon 42–43 for a discussion of some of the problems in
translating this word.

3. Navajo phonology differs from English on a number of points. How-
ever, certain phonemes are roughly equivalent to English orthographic con-
ventions. In the poem that follows, these phonemes are roughly equivalent
to the English system:

Consonants:
  n as in noon
  s as in soon
The sound /ts/' does not have an equivalent in English. For our purposes the /ts/ sound is similar to the /ts/ in "hats." The glottal ejective that follows /'i/ is the release of air that forms the whole consonant. Thus, /ts'i/ is one sound based on a push of air through the sounding of the consonant. /'i/ on its own is the glottal stop. This sound is similar to the catch in the voice in the phrase "unh-hunh," represented here by a hyphen but in Navajo orthography with /'.

The other significant contrasts between Navajo and English in this poem concern the vowels. In Navajo a distinction is made between high tone and default, or low tone. High tone is marked with an acute accent /á/. To replicate this sound, raise the voice on vowels marked with high tone. Vowels with a "hook" under them are nasalized /ã/. Pronounce these vowels as if you were about to add an /n/. The quality of the vowels is similar to the quality of /a/ in "man." A final difference occurs between long and short vowels. Long vowels are marked by the duplicating of that vowel /oo/. Hold the vowel a fraction longer than normal to create a long vowel (for a more complete discussion and pronunciation guide to Navajo sounds, see Goossen; see also McDonough on Navajo phonology).

4. See Calvino on the notion of quickness.

5. All quotations from Rex Lee Jim are from an interview I conducted with him at Tsail'e, Arizona, on June 19, 2001. The interview was taped-recorded and later transcribed by me. Also, for the purposes of this article, and this article alone, I am using the phrase "Navajo poetry" in a very narrow sense. I mean by this term only poems written in Navajo. The use of English, Navajo English, and code-switching in poetry written by Navajos goes well beyond the narrow point I am trying to make in this article.


7. I have updated Sapir's orthography.

8. These comments were made at a public performance at the Edge of Cedars Visitors' Center in Blanding, Utah, on December 8, 2000. I videotaped and recorded the performance. I later transcribed the recording.
9. Two of the best works on exegesis as opposed to translation among Native American verbal art both involve personal names. Kendall’s (1980) discussion of Yuman names as text in need of exegesis is still one of the best of its kind. Whiteley’s (1998) discussion of Hopi names follows in this tradition as well.

10. This is why I would argue that an exegesis, or “translation,” of Navajo poetry warrants linguistic and ethnographic research. It also warrants ethnopoetic attention.

WORKS CITED


