A NOTE ON NAVAJO INTERLINGUAL PUNS1
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Sapir (1932) early on noted the use of intralingual puns in Navajo. This note describes six interlingual puns among Navajos. Four of the puns are from English into Navajo and two concern Navajo into English puns. Such interlingual puns are then compared to interlingual puns found in Nakota and Western Apache. It is argued that interlingual puns are one way for Native Americans to engage in subtle forms of social commentary about and critique of Euro-Americans. Such interlingual punning in Navajo dates at least to the early 1940s and has been a continual site for such critique.

[KEYWORDS: Navajo, interlingual puns, homonyms, speech play, social critique]

1. Introduction. In 1932, Sapir described in detail two Navajo puns. These puns were based on homonyms and a nonliteral use of a Navajo classificatory verb (Sapir 1932; see also Rushforth 1991:262). As Kluckhohn and Leighton (1962:260) pointed out: “Homonymous words and syllables give rise to the many puns in which the Navahos [sic] delight. For instance, ha’dit’ishka ni[l] means either ‘what is flowing?’ or ‘what clan are you?’ and The People [Navajos] tell stories with many embellishments about this question’s being asked of a man who was standing beside a river.”

Indeed, contemporary Navajo poets, like Luci Tapahonso, use such near homonyms for poetic purposes. As she describes in her most recent book, “the word for mountain, dzil, is very much like dzil, which means ‘to be strong’ or ‘to possess strength.’ Thus mountains serve as literal reminders that, like our ancestors, we can persevere in difficult situations” (Tapahonso 2008:18; see also Webster 2009). Other discussions of Native American intralingual punning can be found for the Muskogee (Creek) (Dundes 1964), Tohono O’odham (Alvarez 1965), Seneca (Chafe 1998), and Mixteco (Pike

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1 I wish to thank Blackhorse Mitchell, Esther Belin, Rex Lee Jim, and other Navajos who have kept me alert to Navajo interlingual puns and speech play and verbal art more generally. I also thank an anonymous reviewer for IAJL for a number of useful suggestions. I especially thank Ellavina Perkins for a number of extremely useful and entertaining comments concerning this paper. Perkins was especially good in reminding me that such puns are also “fun.” I agree. Research on the Navajo Nation (2000–2002, 2007, 2008, and 2009) for this paper was conducted under permits from the Navajo Nation Historic Preservation Office. I thank them. I thank Wenner-Gren, the American Philosophical Society, the University of Texas at Austin, and Southern Illinois University at Carbondale for funding various parts of this research. The debt this paper owes to Joel Sherzer should be clear. Thank you.

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pointed out that \textit{téli bilizh} was the term her mother has used for ‘beer’ and indeed she had seen the poem as a critique of things done while drinking. The use of \textit{téli bilizh} ‘donkey urine’ was a metaphorical description of ‘beer’ based on appearance. The use of \textit{téli bilizh} for ‘beer’ is a form of social. The pun of a urinating donkey for ‘television’ has had some currency. Wilson (1970:43) provides this example from his book \textit{Laughter the Navajo Way} (I have provided a minimal interlinear glossing):

(1) Ashkií \textit{yázhí létí bimásání tihí jinií:}
\hspace{1cm} 4S-to say
\hspace{1cm} ‘A small boy said to his grandmother, they say:
apyrus of maternal grandmother town-to 1S-FUT-to go
\hspace{1cm} ‘Grandmother, I am going to town.’
\hspace{1cm} television 1S-FUT-to look 3S-to say 4S-to say
\hspace{1cm} ‘I’m going to look at television,’ he said, they say’.
\hspace{1cm} ‘Yá-úh shiyáázh, ha’áíi biniyé télii alizhgo 3s-urinate
\hspace{1cm} 0-oh 1Poss-little one what reason donkey
\hspace{1cm} diniilįįį 4S-to say
\hspace{1cm} ‘Oh-oh, my boy, why do you want to look at a donkey urinating?’ she
\hspace{1cm} said, they say’.

Based on the use of the quotative \textit{jinií} ‘they say’, which is often used in traditional Navajo narratives (Webster 2006), this example has the sense of a narrative that was outside the narrator’s personal experience. It is a humorous story.

Another interlingual pun was offered by a Navajo consultant when we were discussing the previous pun. He gave this example: \textit{köq sté} ‘here are your socks’ for ‘cornflakes’. The pun is composed of \textit{köq} ‘here’ and \textit{nístlé} ‘your socks’. In this example, \textit{sté} is a reduced form that lacks the second-person possessive prefix \textit{ni-}. The phonological iconicity between \textit{köq} and ‘corn’ was particularly striking. The nasal quality of the Navajo vowel mimics the nasal stop at the end of ‘corn’ and, at least for the consultant I first learned this pun from, there is a degree of rheticization of the nasal vowel as well.

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2 There are social conventions for which people are allowed to joke with one another among Navajos. For useful discussions on these issues, see Kluckhohn and Leighton (1962) and Aberle (1961).
A third example of interlingual punning came when a Navajo consultant asked me why Anglo-Christians, especially missionaries, were overly focused on "trees." At a loss for a response, my Navajo consultant then stated that Anglo-Christians were always talking about gad 'juniper tree'. Here the interlingual pun arises from the homonymy between gad and 'god'. Not all Navajos have been overly taken with the influx of missionaries onto the Navajo Nation.

Take, finally, a fourth example. Dotted around the Navajo Nation are a number of Bashas markets, in Chinle, Arizona and Window Rock, Arizona, for example. Some Navajos that I knew in Chinle enjoyed calling 'Bashas', béézhazh 'scraped away.' Here again, Navajo consultants explained the pun as based on the similarity of sound between 'Bashas' and béézhazh. This pun can also be found on the internet. On a webpage run by "Countryboy79," a Navajo from the Lukachukai, Arizona region, there is a page concerning "Navajo Slang." Here is how Countryboy79 describes the pun:

Bashas Dîné Market
Navajo name: Béézhazh
Bashas is a grocery store chain that is spread all over the state of Arizona, in Needles, CA, & Crownpoint, NM. It is also very prominent on the Navajo reservation. The literal definition is "scraped away," mainly because it sounds very close to the words [sic] Bashas itself. It is used in sentences like, "Bichidi tóó béézhazh," which means, "his car is scraped up!"


Let me note that Bashas are not Navajo owned. Bashas, as Countryboy79 notes, are not confined to the Navajo Nation. There is a Bashas in Needles, California (not on the Navajo Nation) as well as in Phoenix, Flagstaff, and Tucson (all not on the Navajo Nation). While Navajos may not control Bashas, they are able to pun Bashas as béézhazh, asserting their own ability to name outside institutions.

3. Interlingual punning from Navajo to English. Let me now turn to puns that travel, through the creativity of individuals, from Navajo into English. My own attempts at Navajo were sometimes opened up to interlingual punning. One time when I was sitting at the kitchen table in a Navajo friend's house with Navajo poet Rex Lee Jim, we were talking about the nature of poetry, and he described poetry as hane 'story, narrative.' I repeated the form accidentally as hánii. Jim then pointed out that we were not dating and I did not have to call him 'honey'. My friend, who was at the stove, and I laughed, and I became more cautious about saying hane'. Indeed, I was often told that speaking Navajo could be "dangerous" and that I needed to be careful in how I said things.4

When I was living in Chinle, in 2000, my neighbor Jimmy (a pseudonym) and I would often sit outside our government housing duplex and talk about tourists. Chinle abuts Canyon de Chelly National Monument, which attracts both Euro-American and international tourists. In Navajo, Canyon de Chelly is known as Tse'í 'inside the rock' and many Navajos use the Navajo place-name as a challenge to the current National Park Service control of the National Monument. Canyon de Chelly [di he] is itself a corruption of Tse'í and the pronunciation of 'de Chelly' as either [di chel] or [di eli] clearly indexes a speaker as of an out-group status in reference to the Southwest. My neighbor Jimmy used to enjoy calling Tse'í 'Disney'. According to my neighbor, they "sound alike."5 Another Navajo I knew said that rather than Tse'í being 'Disney', it was instead Téé Náa' dzéélí 'the rock that (water) flows around' (see Wilson 1995:48). This place is also within the larger Tse'í.

These puns have some currency, I might add. Jimmy was not the only Navajo to pun 'Disney' and Tse'í. For example, once while a visiting professor in Idaho, I met a Navajo man and we chatted a few times about things Navajo. One time, when we were talking about Chinle, he brought up the pun and commented on the way Canyon de Chelly was turning into a tourist trap. Jimmy, I believe, was also making social commentary through punning. Like 'Disney', Tse'í has become a tourist destination for Euro-American and international tourists. And indeed, tourists tend to treat Tse'í like any other tourist destination. Navajos, Jimmy was suggesting, would not confuse Tse'í with a tourist attraction such as Disney, and the pun here suggests that Jimmy was convinced that many non-Navajo tourists see Tse'í as simply a

4 Let me add that 'honey' (i.e., sweetheart) is a common word used by many Navajos in both English and Navajo. For example, in Blackhorse Mitchell's song "American Bar," besides using the English phrase "American Bar" in the song, Mitchell also uses "Oh, honey" in a song otherwise in Navajo. It appears that 'honey' [hánii] has been incorporated by degrees into Navajo. I thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing me in this direction.

5 In her review of this paper, Ellavina Perkins noted that she and a friend did not hear the pun between Tse'í and 'Disney'. Perkins points out that Disney is known as "a dizzy place" and that Tse'í, with its tourists, is also "a dizzy place." Jimmy was clear, however, that they (Tse'í and Disney) "sound alike." One possible way to reconcile this is to look at another pun that Jimmy told me. According to Jimmy, Lok'úch'églát 'reeds extending out white' (normally written Lukachukai on maps)—another Navajo place-name—was sometimes called "Lucky-chucky." Here he played on what he said were tourists' mispronunciations of Lok'úch'églát. It is possible that the phonological iconicity comes from the way tourists mispronounce Tse'í as 'Disney'. I thank Leighton Peterson for inspiring this line of thinking. Finally, as Perkins notes in her review, puns are hard, and they are especially hard for non-Navajo speakers like me.

3 In her review of this article, Ellavina Perkins noted that this pun was rather old.
tourist attraction rather than a home to many Navajo families and an important historical and mythic place. Indeed, Jimmy still had a sheep camp in Tséyi’.

4. The social uses of interlingual punning. In the previous section, I began to sketch out the social use of Navajo interlingual punning. First, puns are aesthetically pleasing and many Navajos have spoken to me of the enjoyment they take in such puns. They are displays of individual linguistic creativity and they are often created because of novel situations. They are exemplars of an individual’s linguistic dexterity (a dexterity in two languages simultaneously). They are intimate uses of languages. In 3 above, I further suggested that my neighbor Jimmy also used the punning of ‘Tséyi’ with ‘Disney’ to critique the ways that he felt tourists treated Canyon de Chelly. Here I would like to review briefly other examples of interlingual punning and suggest that such puns can often be understood as critiques of or commentary about Euro-Americans and Euro-American practices.

Farnell (1995:136) describes a number of interlingual puns between English and Nakota (a Siouan language). That is, an English word is understood as a Nakota word. Farnell (1995:136) describes one such interlingual pun in the following manner:

Often Nakota is used in a humorous way as a buffer against the foreign nature of the Euro-American’s world. For example, one elderly Assiniboine man referred to a cafe in the nearby town of Chinook named “The Cozy Corner” as “The Friendly Cafe,” making a pun on the Nakota word for “friend” (konu) while at the same time indicating that it was a place Indian people need not feel “shamed” to go into (i.e., they were not likely to be discriminated against or made to feel out of place).

Another example she gives is the punning of the ‘Napa’ of ‘Napa Auto Parts’ as nap’a ‘beat it, run away, escape’, with the following explanation from her consultant, “they don’t want you to shop in there, they are telling you to beat it” (Farnell 1995:136). As Farnell (1995:139) notes, border towns, because of rampant racism toward Nakotas, were often places where Nakotas felt uncomfortable using Nakota.

Samuels (2001) has presented a number of Western Apache interlingual puns. For example, he (2001:291) provides this example concerning a place-name:

As the story goes, two Apaches were passing by some white men coming from the opposite direction. As they passed each other at this particular watering hole, one of the white men hailed the Apaches.

“Excuse me!” he shouted out to them. “Do you speak English?”

One Apache turned to the other and, pointing to the well, said, “Yu’etshin-lich néh’ nihii”—he says ‘did you piss into the water?’

According to Samuels (2001:291), the pun works because of the phonological similarity between ‘English’ and -lich ‘to urinate’. Another example concerns the search for an Apache etymology for the word ‘Tucson’ (widely believed to be derived from a Tohono O’odham word). Possible Apache etymologies include Tis si’an ‘a water jug sits’ and Tú nazud ‘water is far away.’ As Samuels (2001:290) argues, “Finding an Apache meaning in the English name Tucson denies white people the final right of denotation and insists that the meaning of any such name is not closed but rather contains its own response.”

Because interlingual puns sit at the edges of two languages, one dominant and one often stigmatized and devalued, they provide an important site for understanding the way speakers use languages as critiques and commentary on dominant—often externally imposed—practices. Such puns co-opt English lexical items and the concomitant institutions they metonymically relate to into Native languages, or they evaluate—as in the case of Disney—Euro-American practices toward important places through phonological iconicity that carries an attendant social critique. Euro-American tourists misunderstand Tséyi’ as being ‘Disneyland’. In the Western Apache and Nakota examples, as well as in the Navajo examples presented above, we see the use of interlingual punning as commentary on or critique about Euro-Americans and Euro-American practices. Whether it be in the place-naming practices of Euro-Americans described by Samuels (2001) for Western Apache, or the racism found in border towns evoked by the Nakota interlingual puns described by Farnell (1995), or the critique of Euro-American tourists or television, or the lack of Navajo-controlled businesses on the Navajo Nation, or high-sugar cereals, or the influx of missionaries, or the mispronunciation of Navajo by an overly eager linguistic anthropologist, the interlingual puns challenge the ways things are and posit through phonological iconicity a novel reality. Like metaphors, puns create relationships between seemingly disparate entities (see Basso 1976). In this sense, puns are phonological metaphors, and like the Western Apache metaphors described by Basso (1976), they are also social commentary and critique.

5. Conclusions. In conclusion, I want to make three points. The first point is that interlingual punning, from English into Navajo, has been occurring at least since the early 1940s (Hill 1943). It was still occurring in the 1970s (Rigsby 1970 and Wilson 1970), and it has continued into the twenty-first century. Thus, while it has sometimes been claimed that Navajos have been resistant to linguistic borrowing (see, for example, Young 1989), it should be clear that Navajos have been actively punning between English and Navajo. We need to understand the relationships between languages not merely as the borrowing or not borrowing of lexical items into one language or another, but
as the ways that the edges and boundaries of languages are played with and collapsed. Here, the literature on code-mixed Navajo and English, or Navlish as it is sometimes now called, should remind us that there is another history, a history of Navajo and English intermixing (see Holm, Holm, and Spolsky 1971; Canfield 1980; Foster et al. 1989; Schaengold 2003, Webster 2008, and Field 2009).

The second point concerns the creativity and linguistic dexterity displayed in such interlingual puns. As Sherzer (2002:9) has rightly noted, "playfully imaginative and artistically creative language constitutes the richest point of intersection between language, culture, society, and individual expression." Interlingual puns constitute the intersection of multiple languages, suggesting that the boundaries drawn between languages can always be creatively collapsed. Both English and Navajo are potentials for punning. Interlingual puns are enjoyable and aesthetically pleasing forms of speech play for many Navajos and they gain some of that aesthetic from their semantic ambiguity (see Webster 2009). Such interlingual puns should remind us of the importance of research that focuses on the linguistic individual (Johnstone 1996; see also Hymes 1981).

The third point concerns the place of interlingual puns within their wider sociocultural and intercultural contexts. Sherzer (2002:1) has long argued that speech play is "simultaneously humorous, serious, and aesthetically pleasing." He (2002:31) gives an example of an interlingual pun between Spanish and English, common among Mexican immigrants and "revealing of their painful experience in this country." The pun works based on the phonological iconicity between dólares 'dollars' and dolores 'pain, sorrow'.

(2) Me costó veinte dolores.

'It costs me twenty pains, sorrows'. (Sherzer 2002:31)

Puns, as Sherzer (2002:34) notes, are today generally devalued among Euro-Americans as "inappropriate for serious discourse." Samuels (2004:299) argues that puns challenge certain received Western views about language and meaning, claiming that "we ought also to think about how that problem [language as reference] is constituted not only in practices of using marginalized codes, but in practices that conflict with dominant ideologies of what 'language' and 'code' are in the first place" [emphasis in the original]. Samuels (2004:299) singles out puns as one site where "marginalized social and linguistic groups" challenge dominant views of language and in so doing critique those dominant groups as well. Such discussions resonate with Hill's (2003) review of the work of Pike (1945) on Mixtec puns. As Hill (2003:117) writes, "Mixtec Indians can express their ambivalence about Spanish and their dislike of Spanish ways without mounting a direct threat . . . to Spanish speak-

ers themselves." As Hill (2003:117) concludes, "the study of the fine details of linguistic usage . . . would go far to help us understand the inner workings of ethnic and linguistic conflict and confrontation at the levels at which these are reproduced, not by violence and [overt] confrontation, but with winks and nudges, jokes and puns."

In their work, Sherzer (2002), Hill (2003), and Samuels (2004) each urge, in his/her own way, for an understanding of speech play as central to an understanding of the relationships between peoples, of marginalized and dominant groups, and the critiques and commentaries that such speech play may display (see also Basso 1979). In this note, I have suggested that interlingual puns, as used by Navajos, are one such continual site of critique and commentary concerning Euro-American practices. As fewer Navajos speak Navajo, their ability to challenge dominant Euro-American practices through interlingual punning seems likely to be reduced. One ramification of language shift, then, is the loss of the play between languages. It is, then, the loss of one aesthetically pleasing form of expression, an intimate grammar of both sociability and critique. More work on the social uses of interlingual punning among Native Americans seems warranted.

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REVIEWS

LANGUAGE ENDANGERMENT AND ENDANGERED LANGUAGES: LINGUISTIC AND
ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDIES WITH SPECIAL EMPHASIS ON THE LANGUAGES
AND CULTURES OF THE ANDEAN-AMAZONIAN BORDER AREA. Edited by
Leo Wetzels. Indigenous Languages of Latin America (ILLA), vol. 5. Leiden: CNWS

Language Endangerment and Endangered Languages... is a large and heterogeneous
collection of articles resulting from two different meetings sponsored by the
Endangered Languages Research Programme of the Netherlands Organization for
Scientific Research in 2004. The 24 articles in the volume (18 in English, four in
Portuguese, and one each in Spanish and French) are organized into two parts. The
first is more generally concerned with the topic of language endangerment, with three
articles addressing research-related issues: Marianne Mithun’s and Marie-France
Patte’s contributions both focus on the advantages of careful analysis of spontaneous
text, Mithun pointing out that it can reveal exciting and relevant aspects of grammar
and culture that might be overlooked by overreliance on elicitation, and Patte
discussing issues related to standardization in situations of language loss, where synchronic
varieties may be markedly different from more conservative usage found in narra-
tives. Jerzy Koopan provides an overview and discussion of legislation related to
intellectual property rights, a topic relevant to research on endangered languages and
traditional cultures.

The two remaining articles in the introductory section address the state of endanger-
ment of specific languages or language families. Maria do Socorro Pimentel da Silva’s
discussion of the Djeromitix language and Maria S. de Aguiar’s overview of Panano
languages both point out the importance of contextual factors—including historical
processes of contact and migration as well as current land-rights legislation and more
enlightened educational programs—in situations of language loss and consider the
crucial effects these have in terms of community attitudes toward language maintenance.

Several articles from the second part of the volume share an affinity with the
general themes of the introductory section and are worth mentioning at this point.
Complementing Mithun and Patte, Willem Adelaar discusses the usefulness of studies
of local toponymy and historical documents in which such information survives as im-
portant, though frequently overlooked, sources of data in areas of intense language
loss. Similar to the Silva and Aguiar contributions, historical situations of language
contact and migration and their synchronic consequences are also the subject of
Ana Snelly Cabral’s article on the constitution of Kokama/Onagwa (also
identified as Kokama/Kokanilla; see Yopán 2004) and its possible status as a creole lan-
guage, as well as Aryan Rodrigues’s discussion of a group of Tupi languages spoken

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