The poetics and politics of Navajo ideophony in contemporary Navajo poetry

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Abstract

This article describes aspects of Navajo sound symbolism within its social and political contexts. Specifically, it focuses on the use of Navajo ideophony. Examples of Navajo ideophony are presented from a variety of verbal and written genres including song, narrative, place-names, and contemporary written poetry. It is argued that Navajo ideophony is an important poetic device in Navajo aesthetics and that its current promotion in written poetry challenges a simple view of ideophony as fragile in the face of outside contact. Navajo ideophony also challenges a received Western linguistic ideology that devalues such expressive forms.

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However much we may be disposed on general principles to assign a fundamental importance in the languages of primitive peoples to the imitation of natural sounds, the actual fact of the matter is that these languages show no particular preferences for imitative words. Among the most primitive peoples of aboriginal America, the Athabaskan tribes of the Mackenzie River speak languages in which such words seem to be nearly or entirely absent, while they are used freely enough in languages as sophisticated as English and German.

Edward Sapir, Language

1. Introduction

As we see in the above quote, Sapir (1921, p. 8) suggests that the Northern Athabaskan speaking peoples of the Mackenzie River region (Canada) did not use many onomatopoetic or “imitative” forms in their language. Sapir was challenging the belief that non-European languages, the languages of so-called “primitives”, had more sound symbolic forms than did European languages. Sapir was here attempting to discount a certain
bias towards Native American languages, but he may have also been understating the importance of sound symbolism in Athabaskan languages. For example, among the Slavey (Northern Athabaskan), who live along the Mackenzie River, they use the evocative onomatopoeia *sah, sah, sah* for “the sound of a bear walking unseen not far from camp” (O’Grady et al., 2005, p. 137). Axelrod (1993, pp. 79–81) describes the onomatopoetic (ONO) as one of the aspectual categories of the Northern Athabaskan language Koyukon. As Axelrod (1993, pp. 79–80) explains, “seventy-four roots (12 percent of the corpus) allow (or have exclusively) onomatopoetic derivatives.” Sapir also may have missed something of the differences that people assign to the use of ideophones, that is, the linguistic ideologies that informs views about sound symbolism. This is, not, however, to say that Sapir was unconcerned with sound symbolism. His work on Nootka ways of speaking and the evoking of social types (often derogatory, sometimes affectionate) through sound symbolism is an ample and noteworthy example (Sapir, 1915; see also Hymes, 1979).

In this article, I describe something of the uses and scope of ideophones in a Southern Athabaskan language. Here I will focus on Navajo and the uses of sound symbolism, onomatopoeia, and ideophony in a variety of verbal and written genres.¹ In particular, I am concerned with the use of, what have been termed, “sound imitative” expressions (Hinton et al., 1994a,b, p. 3). This class of sound symbolism attempts, as Nuckolls (2000, p. 235) notes, to “simulate” some non-linguistic activity or image in a linguistic form. They are feelingfully iconic. Following the terminology of Doke (1935), these are “ideophones.” Here is the canonical definition of ideophony by Doke (1935, p. 118):

> A vivid representation of an idea in sound. A word, often onomatopoeic, which describes a predicate, qualificative or adverb in respect to manner, colour, sound, smell, action, state or intensity.

Ideophones are a kind of sound symbolism that can be composed of onomatopoeic forms. They are affective-imagistic uses of language (following Kita, 1997).

In what follows, I discuss some recent research on ideophony that has relevance to the arguments developed throughout this article. I then provide an overview of Navajo ideophony, locating its use in a number of verbal genres as well as in place-names and nicknames. My goal here is to persuade, contra Sapir, that sound symbolism in Navajo is relatively widespread. I then turn to a discussion of the use of ideophony in contemporary poetry. Here I argue that among Navajo educators, ideophony has largely become a poetic device that is encouraged in writing classes. However, this positive view is not uniform. In the conclusion I contrast the emerging use of Navajo ideophony in written poetry with African writers’ uses of ideophony as described by Lupenga Mphande and Richard Watson.

2. Ideophony in perspective

As Tedlock (1999, p. 118) notes, “the study of ideophones has become a part of the Africanist subtradition in linguistics.” This statement is not without its own tensions, as Mphande (1992) has noted, creating various images of African languages and, concomitantly, African people. There has been much recent work on the use of ideophones among African languages, much of it building off of earlier and foundational work (see Doke, 1935; Samarin, 1970, 1971, 1991; Moshi, 1993; Childs, 1996; Hunter and Oumarou, 1998). Samarin (1991, pp. 59–60) has discussed the “delight” that Gbeya speakers take in their expressions of ideophones. Ideophones can then be considered a kind of pleasurable form of expression. Noss (2001) has reported on the use of ideophones in written Gbaya poetry. He identifies two types of uses of ideophones in Gbaya poetry. The first type concerns written poetry where ideophones intermingle with non-ideophones and intertextually link the poem

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¹ My interest in Navajo ideophones began when I was doing work on the emergence of written Navajo poetry. During that research, I began to notice that a number of poems in Navajo relied on the use of sound symbolism. In the summers of 2007 and 2008, I returned to the Navajo Nation to work with Navajos on ideophony (among other things). I discussed ideophony with Navajo poets, Navajo educators, and other Navajos (who were, to my knowledge, neither poets nor educators). I also elicited Navajo ideophones from Navajo consultants and collected poetry that used Navajo ideophony. I elicited Navajo ideophones in two ways: (1) I used the list of onomatopoeias given by Young and Morgan (1987) as a prompt and (2) I used narratives collected by earlier researchers as a prompt. In the first case, I asked Navajos if they had ever encountered such sounds and in the second case I asked them to translate such forms from the written narratives.
to other aesthetic genres (folktales). The second type finds entire poems written in ideophones. Hunter and Oumarou (1998) show that many Hausa metalinguistic terms are often in the form of ideophones. Ideophones are also “among the most magical expressions in African languages” (Hunter and Oumarou, 1998, p. 160). Childs (1996, p. 99) notes that among the urban Zulu speakers that he has worked with, ideophones are a likely indicator of “language vitality.” Thus, the decline of ideophones may suggest the relative peril a language is in. Mphande (1992) has argued that Western educational policies and Western inscriptive practices have led to a disinclination for African authors to use ideophony in contemporary written African literature. Even, as he notes, when such authors are intentionally trying to distance themselves from English literary traditions by writing in their native African languages.

Nuckolls (1992, 1996, 1999) has provided some of the more interesting work on ideophones, poetics, and sound involvement, working among the Runa (Pastaza Quechua) of lowland Ecuador. Nuckolls (2006, p. 47) also points to the contrasting views of ideophony in Runa beliefs and academic discourse:

Yet, articulating this mood [emotionally riveting and objectively factual] is critical for understanding why ideophones have suffered such neglect within linguistic anthropology, an issue that is related to their severe restrictedness in Standard Average European cultures, and related as well, to their fragility in situations of language contact.

I have argued that underlying the use of ideophones by Runa is a disposition to perform by means of linguistic sound, a sentiment of animacy that is common to humans and non-humans… By “animacy” I mean a quality of aliveness that is evident through movement, change over time, or through responsiveness or reaction to surroundings.

A lack of focus on ideophones may, then, be a result of a lack of serious recognition that “Standard Average European cultures” bring to the use of ideophones. Sound symbolism, as Silverstein (1994) has noted, was often considered “pre-linguistic” or “extralinguistic” by Euro-American researchers. There is a familiar trope in the ethnographic literature, here exemplified by Morris Opler, in which onomatopoeia were noted and then ignored. Thus, Opler (1941, p. 440) writes for Chiricahua Apache that, “it is the story-teller’s use of appropriate gestures, onomatopoeia, and asides—in short, his gifts as actor and dramatist, which lends luster to his reputation.” Opler then provides no examples of onomatopoeia. It is as if sound symbolism defied description.

Samuels (2004, p. 299) argues that one modernist version of language sees it as “a tool for clear and transparent communication.” That is language is about reference or semantics, or “naturalizing semantic content as the overwhelmingly central definition of language” (Samuels, 2004, p. 316). Doowop or punning, in the case that Samuels describes, or ideophony here, challenges such reference-centric views of language, forewarning iconicity (and the felt attachments that adhere to such forms). Samuels (2004, p. 299) links such “non-sense” forms, forms that challenge the dominant reference-centric view of language, with “marginalized social and linguistic groups.” Doowop or ideophony can then be understood as, in Scott’s (1990) terms, “acts of resistance.”

Kohn (2005) has linked ideophony with the alignment of perspective across putative species boundaries (i.e., “human” versus “non-human”), thus challenging certain naturalized views of language and knowing. He and Nuckolls have suggested the epistemic work that ideophony can do. Nuckolls suggestion that ideophones are connected to conceptions of animacy, especially as they relate to movement, resonates with the work of Witherspoon (1977) on Navajo conceptions of animacy, agency, and movement (see also Hoijer, 1951). As Witherspoon (1977, p. 140) argues, “The Navajo world is a world of motion… a world of things in motion and things at rest, but one in which even things at rest are defined by the withdrawal of motion and are classified according to their ability or potential to be moved.” Following Nuckolls, if Witherspoon is correct, then, Navajo would seem a likely place to examine the use of ideophones.

Indeed, Nuckolls (1999, p. 227) highlights the work of Witherspoon and Reichard (1950) as early examples of sensitive research on Native conceptions of language and the creative power of language. This is all tied into what Reichard (1944, p. 51) termed for Navajos, “sound power.” This is the compulsive power of language, that proper language use can change the world (Reichard, 1944; see also Witherspoon, 1977; McAllester, 1980). We should, however, take note of the corrective offered by Field and Blackhorse (2002), that for language to be efficacious it must also be aesthetically pleasing. One significant way that language becomes
aesthetically pleasing is through the use of sound symbolism (see Reichard, 1950, pp. 256–262). Here we find the delight of ideophony linked with the efficacious power of sound.

Native North American languages have received far less systematic research concerning ideophones (but see DeLisle, 1980; Mithun, 1982; Aoki, 1994; Samuels, 2004, pp. 314–316; see also Durbin (1973) and Hofling and Tesucun (2000, pp. 535–539) on Mayan). Childs (2001, p. 70), in an otherwise stimulating chapter, calls for comparative studies of ideophones, and while he singles out Chinese, Japanese, African, Meso-American, and Australian languages, he makes no mention of Native North American languages. Tedlock (1999, p. 119) provides a few Zuni examples of ideophones in his short paper on ideophones in Journal of Linguistic Anthropology (see also Tedlock, 1983). In an earlier work, Tedlock (1983, p. 44) notes that in Zuni, ideophones “are used more frequently in narrative than in everyday speech.” In what follows, I will suggest that Navajo ideophones can be found in a variety of verbal genres beyond narratives. He also argues that such forms lend “immediacy” to the narrative (Tedlock, 1983, p. 69). This is also certainly true of Navajo ideophones and of ideophones more generally (see Nuckolls, 1992). Tedlock (1999, pp. 119–120) concludes his brief description of ideophony with a discussion of the use of ideophones in written poetry. Tedlock was not discussing Native American written poetry in that piece (he was talking of Italian futurist poet Carlo Bel-loli), though I will turn to examples of ideophony in contemporary Navajo poetry in what follows. DeLisle (1980, p. 136), in an article concerned with areal features, notes that in the American Southwest, it appears that only Navajo and Zuni have consonantal symbolism, but for markedly “different purposes.” She thus rules out diffusion between Zuni and Navajo.3

Japanese linguist Aoki (1994, p. 15) notes the following comparison between Japanese and Nez Perce, a Sahaptin language, ideophones, “unlike some languages such as Japanese, whose sound-symbolic words fill 500-page dictionaries, Nez Perce phonosymbolic words are not many in number.” Aoki then goes on to list a number of Nez Perce forms. Aoki also, for example, looks at the ways that mythic characters take different diminutive symbolism, keying the audience into subtle aspects of character.

Hymes’ (1979, 1996) discussions of the poetic uses of Takelma word initial consonant symbolism and Kathlamet Chinook sound symbolism, as well as Bunte’s (2002) examination of the poetics of reduplication in Southern Paiute, stand out as exemplars in the analysis of sound symbolism in discourse. As Sherzer (2002, p. 17) argues, “sound symbolism is a potential in language, which is actualized in discourse, especially verbally artistic discourse.” It is to those potentials in Navajo that I now turn.

3. From Chuggi to Chidi: Navajo ideophones and onomatopoeia

Navajo is a Southern Athabaskan language spoken primarily (though not exclusively) in the American Southwest. It is closely related to other Apachean languages such as Western Apache and Chiricahua Apache. It is also related to Athabaskan languages spoken in Canada and Alaska (Northern Athabaskan) and Athabaskan languages spoken in Oregon and California (Pacific Coast Athabaskan). Estimates put the number of speakers of Navajo at over 100,000, though Navajo is a threatened language in the sense that children are not

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2 Tedlock takes up the issue of translating onomatopoetic forms in Zuni twice in his book The Spoken Word and the Work of Interpretation. In the earlier discussion, he argues against attempting to translate Zuni forms into English because “no clarity would be gained and the reader would not have his experience of onomatopoeia enriched by the Zuni words” (Tedlock, 1983, p. 45). In the later discussion, he argues, “In Finding the Center, I left Zuni onomatopoeia untranslated wherever I preferred its sound to that of the English alternative, but I have since come to the view that an onomatopoeic word helps give a story immediacy, an immediacy that would be lessened by the sudden intrusion of a foreign word in the translation” (Tedlock, 1983, p. 67). I have, in general, left Navajo ideophones untranslated. I have done this for several reasons. Principally, because Navajo ideophones are interwoven into the grammatical structure of the Navajo verb system, I take them as an example of a form-dependent expression (see Woodbury, 1998). The use of a Navajo ideophone often reverberates with other Navajo forms. Also, Navajos that I have worked with have often explicitly stated that Navajo onomatopoeia cannot be translated into English. There is a felt connection to the form. Ideophones also index locality and intimacy and, as such, need to be evaluated in Navajo terms and not English language terms. For those reasons, and others, I have tended not to translate Navajo ideophones into English, but have rather provided glossings (see Webster (2008b) for a fuller discussion of this issue).

3 Zuni sound symbolism has been a sometimes vexing problem for historical linguistics. Hill (2007, p. 26) gives the example of Zuni towo ‘shoot (a gun)’ or ‘make a thundering sound’ which is a sound imitative form that clearly postdates the introduction of firearms. Arguments to the contrary would be misleading.
learning the language at a rate that will ensure the persistence of the lexical–grammatical code (House, 2002; Benally and Viri, 2005).

The ethnographic literature on the Navajo has a number of suggestive discussions of onomatopoeia and their use. Reichard (1950, p. 282) comments that, “Navaho ritual contains many onomatopoeic elements, which may exist independently without ‘word content’ or may be stems, parts of words depending upon grammatical forms.” Here we see the use of ideophones in ritual, but also the way that they can be integrated into Navajo grammar (as verbs). According to Reichard (1950) the use of onomatopoeias and sound symbolism aids in making chants more aesthetically pleasing and hence more efficacious.

In the 1940s, Kluckhohn and Leighton (1946, pp. 249–250) noted that, “an automobile is called by one of two terms (chidi or chuggi) which imitate the sound of a car.” Here we see an onomatopoeia being used as a noun. Chidi is still the term for ‘automobile’ and has now been productively extended to airplanes as well (chidi naat’aa’i ‘the chidi that flies about’). However, as Benally and Viri (2005, p. 91) note, the Navajo word chidiltsooi (chidiltsxoo’i) ‘school bus, the yellow chidi’ is being replaced by young Navajos with the English lexical item ‘bus.’ Here is a case where the productivity of the onomatopoeia is potentially being curtailed by the current language shift.

Let me add, however, that the second form—chuggi—has fallen out of use (in fact, one reliable elder Navajo consultant had never heard of the form). One Navajo consultant did explain to me that chuggi had been used for slower automobiles and that chidi was used for faster automobiles. This perspective was then confirmed by other Navajo consultants when I suggested it as a possible explanation for why chuggi had fallen out of use. It is not surprising to see a front vowel /i/ associated with ‘speed, rapidity’ and a back vowel /u/ used for ‘slowness.’ This follows a general pattern of synesthetic sound symbolism, whereby front vowels tend to be associated with smallness and rapidity and back vowels tend to be associated with largeness and slowness (see Hinton et al., 1994a,b, p. 4).

Navajos that I know will sometimes use the term hodits’a ‘there is a sound’ to talk about onomatopoeia in Navajo (see also Austin-Garrison, 1991, p. 48). Hodits’a can be used to describe both onomatopoeia and echoes. Young and Morgan (1987, pp. 432–433) provide 65 onomatopoeic forms in their massive Navajo dictionary and grammar. These forms cover a wide range of actions and activities. Navajo ideophones are, in general, monosyllabic in structure (though see chidi). Some are phonotactically interesting, such as zghoz ‘swishing sound, like a whip.’ The initial consonant cluster of /zgh/ (where a voiced alveolar fricative is followed by a voiced velar fricative) is not a regular phonological combination in Navajo (it appears, then, to violate Navajo phonotactics). Here is a brief sampling of Navajo ideophones:

(1) zghoz for the swishing sound, like a whip
biib for the beeping of a car
wqa for the growling of a dog
ts’os or ts’oqs kissing and sucking
zqqz for the sound of a bumblebee in flight
tliizh for the sound of a tree crashing
woł for the gurgling of a brook or creek
chxosh for the sound of splashing or the “fizzing" of soda
k’ol also for the sound of gurgling water
ch’izh for the rustling of dry leaves

Many of these onomatopoeic forms can be used as a noun or as a verb stem, for example, –ts’oqs ‘to suck’ or –woł ‘to gurgle’. Onomatopoeias can be nominalized, as Navajo poet Laura Tohe evokes in one of her poems, through the use of the nominalizing enclitic –ii; as in gáaíi (gáagii) ‘crow’ (gáa ‘the cawing of a crow’ + -ii

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4 I note here that both automobiles and airplanes can be described using the animate object classificatory verb stem. As Witherspoon (1977, p. 121) writes, "síisí is said to refer to a living being but that does not explain why it also refers to iconic representations of animate beings [i.e., dolls] and to such things as cars, trucks, and airplanes." According to Witherspoon, cars and airplanes are classified as animate objects because of their potential for movement. I find it interesting that the noun for automobiles is an ideophone. See also Neundorf (1982) on body part terms for car parts in Navajo (see also Basso, 1967; Young, 1989).
nominalizing enclitic). Another nominalized example, as Tohe first brought to my attention, concerns the word for ‘soda’ in Navajo tódílchxoshí (tó ‘water’ di- thematic prefix relating to sound -lchxosh ‘it is splashing, fizzing’ – ı´ ‘the one’). Navajo ideophones seem most closely aligned with verbs, but they are also related or relatable to other word classes such as nouns (see Axelrod, 1993).

Landar (1985, p. 489) notes that Navajo ideophones (he calls them “interjections”) often occur in “redunductive pairs.” In many of the examples that follow, ideophones do appear in either reduplicative pairs or in pairs of reduplicative pairs. Landar also notes that some ideophones have a phonological similarity to verbs. In such cases, there appear to be two patterns. The first concerns those ideophones that are phonologically similar and have similar “meanings” (i.e., dłaad ‘rippling’ and -dłaad ‘to rip’). Sometimes these forms evoke the sound symbolism in expressions like dilch’il ‘it pops’ (di- thematic prefix relating to sound + -l classifier + -ch’il ‘to pop, crack’). These forms are reminiscent of the onomatopoeic aspectual category described for Koyukon by Axelrod (1993, pp. 79–81) (i.e., delkk’ekk ‘it is making a choking sound’ de- thematic + le- classifier + -kk’ekk ‘choke’ ONO). The second involves those that are phonologically similar but with different “meanings” (i.e., dog ‘thump’ versus –dog ‘fill (bag) till it bulges’). Landar, however, does not give examples of the discursive use of ideophones or their full range of expressive potential, intermingling in multiple poetic genres as they do.

In Navajo, often after an ideophone there is the form yits’a’go or yiists’ı which glosses as “it sounds, it sounded” (see also Young and Morgan, 1987, p. 359; Yazzie and Speas, 2007, p. 375). This device indicates that an ideophone has just been produced. It functions very much as a verb of sounding, indicating that what has preceded it was an ideophone (see Voeltz and Kilian-Hatz (2001) for cross-linguistic comparative purposes). It is, however, as examples below will attest, not an obligatory device. Below I present three examples that show the form that ideophones take with yits’a’go that I elicited from a Navajo consultant. Examples from narratives and poetry will be presented later. I have all capped the glosses of the ideophones in the following examples. The glosses were given by that consultant.

(2) k’az k’az yits’a’go
   SHEAR SHEAR it sounded

(3) dil dil yits’a’go
   HEAVY FOOT STEPS HEAVY FOOT STEPS it sounded

(4) woł woł yits’a’go
   GURGLE GURGLE it sounded

According to Young and Morgan, -ts’áaq is a verb stem that “describes the production, existence and hearing of sound” (Young et al., 1992, p. 625). This verb stem also forms the base for the Navajo verbal phrase for onomatopoeia hodìits’a ‘there is a sound’ (ho- is a locative; dìi- inceptive; and –ts’a is a verb stem related to perceiving sound). Another example offered by a Navajo consultant was:

(5) ‘ashkii abingo alizh nit’e’é’, chaazh chaazh yits’a’go siz’ı
   boy in-the-morning one-urinates then CHAAZH CHAAZH it-sounds
   one-is-standing-up
   In the morning the boy went to the “bathroom” and he went
   chaazh chaazh standing up.

Here chaazh chaazh evokes the sound of a boy (‘ashkii) urinating (alizh). The use of the classificatory verb stem -z’ı ‘one person is standing’ adds to the sense that the person urinating is a male (si- si perfective neuter prefix + -z’ı ‘one living actor is standing’). According to my consultant this is the kind of thing Navajos often say, or as he said, “in the use of Navajo language conversational wise, a lot of times we speakers use the actual sound to describe the sound of the objects.” Another Navajo consultant made a similar comment about the regular use of Navajo sound symbolism. He gave an example that code-switched from English to Navajo for the ideophone, describing a car with something metal hanging from it, he said, “That car is going k’azh, k’azh, k’azh all the way down the street.” Here k’azh, k’azh, k’azh evokes the sound of metal scraping against
the road. Here “going” replaces yiits’a’go and precedes the reduplicated form. Both consultants suggested that younger Navajos were less likely to use such forms today.

In all the examples I have looked at yiits’a’go (or its variants) follows the ideophonic form when it occurs. One can compare this with the Highland Quechua use of nina ‘to say’ which also follows the use of ideophones, i.e., colon colon nina ‘thump thump it says’ (see Nuckolls, 2001, pp. 271–272). In that case there is a verb of speaking. In the Navajo case it is a verb of sounding. Navajo consultants have stated that yiits’a’go, when it occurs, always follows the ideophone. I have encountered no counter-examples.

More recently, Navajo educator Yazzie and Speas (2007, pp. 375–376) have included a brief section in their Navajo language textbook about Navajo “sound effects”. Here they are discussing Navajo ideophony. They provide eighteen sample sentences that use ideophones in Navajo. Yazzie and Speas (2007, p. 375) go on to note that “sound effects also add humor to a conversation” and this echoes the delight that many Navajos have expressed to me about the use of Navajo ideophones. They also note that the ideophone is followed by either yiits’a’go ‘the sound that was made’ or yiits’a’go which they gloss as ‘as it is making that sound’ (Yazzie and Speas, 2007, p. 375). Below are two examples from Yazzie and Speas (2007, pp. 375–376). The glossing is mine and I have again bolded the ideophones in the example sentence.

(6) Shizeedí, “Gq̱oq̱, gq̱oq̱, gq̱oq̱.” yiits’a’go bááh bisga’ yi’aal.
my-cousin GQOZH GQOZH GQOZH it-sounds bread dry 3S-to-chew
My cousin makes the sound “GQOZH, GQOZH, GQOZH” as he chews dried bread

(7) ‘Ashiiké mal, mal, mal, mal, yiits’a’go tsφlègo ‘ifýáá’.
boy MAL MAL MAL MAL it-sounds quickly he-ate
The boy makes the sound mal, mal, mal, mal, as he quickly eats.

Yazzie and Speas (2007, pp. 375–376) gloss mal as a sound that simulates either speaking that is not understood or “eating hurriedly” and gq̱oq̱ as a sound that simulates “a crunching sound”. In the above examples we see the use of ideophones in a fourfold set or in a triplet. This pattern will also be found in the examples below. Ideophones appear in reduplicated sets, pairs of reduplicated sets (four-fold), or in triplication. Finally, when Yazzie and Speas (2007, p. 375) refer to ideophones as “sound effects” they echo the comments made by my Navajo consultants about the function of ideophones as being like “movie sound effects.” It should also be noted that in 2008 the textbook was adopted by the state of New Mexico as the official textbook for teaching Navajo language in public schools. Also note that in the popular textbook also published by Salina Bookshelf in Flagstaff, AZ, on the Navajo language by non-Navajo scholar Goossen (1995) there is no discussion of such “sound effects.”

4. Tóníil’aha’nii: evoking sound in Navajo place-names

A number of writers have noted that Athabaskan place-names are highly descriptive (see Hoijer, 1953; Basso, 1996; Kari, 1989; Jett, 2001). Keith Basso (1996, p. 89) has described the ways that Western Apache place-names allow Apaches “to picture a site from its name.” However, beyond picturing places through place-names, in Navajo the sounds of the place can sometimes be evoked as well. For example, in Navajo, the place-name for Taos, New Mexico, is Tówol. Here tó- ‘water’ is attached to the ideophone –wol ‘gurgling.’ In this example, -wol has been productively adapted as a verb stem (Young et al., 1992, p. 659). Another place-name that shows an evocative use of ideophony is Tóníil’aha’nii ‘sound of something moving in water out of sight’ (Linford, 2000, p. 274). Here the ideophone niil ‘hoofbeats’ (see Young and Morgan, 1987, p. 433) suggests the kind of animal that is moving—out of sight—through water. This is a hoofed animal, not a human being or, for that matter, a small animal. Another example of the use of a place-name with an ideophone is Tséé’dóhdoon ‘Rumbling Rock’ (see Wilson, 1995, p. 62). Both dóh ‘rumbling’ and doon ‘booming’ are listed as separate ideophones in Young and Morgan (1987, p. 432). In this place-name the ideophones are combined into a reduplicative set (where the ideophones reverberate off the sounds of each other). Take as a final example, the place name used for Albuquerque, NM, Bee’eldiil’dahsinil (bee’el-diil- ‘a ringing sound is made’ dah ‘up’ si- perfective –nil ‘plural objects sit’). Embedded within this place
name is the ideophone díl ‘ringing’. The Navajo name for Albuquerque draws attention to the ringing of bells that were used on the Rio Grande to signal boats transporting people across the river (see Wilson, 1995, p. 2). The place-names do not just describe the place rather they evoke the sounds of the place in the description (compare with Feld, 1996, p. 108). This is the precision of iconicity. I should add, that some Navajos have told me that place-names cannot be translated into English. Their precision, their iconicity, is in Navajo and not English (see Webster, 2006a).

Compare, on the other hand, a place I was taken to during fieldwork in 2007. This place is called Tsé doon ‘popping rock.’ However, in this case the place name does not evoke the sounds of the place, but rather acts as a description of what will happen if the rocks are fired. According to a Navajo consultant the rocks at Tsé doon will explode if fired.

5. Ol, Ol: evoking sound in Navajo song

In Washington Matthews’ (1994 [1897], p. 27) collection of Navajo “legends,” he provides the following “translation” of the ‘Dove Song’ which is a gambling song (I have slightly altered the orthography of the ideophone and the glossing here). Matthews, I want to note, was an Army doctor who documented Navajo language and culture in the 1880s. He was critical of those who would dismiss Navajo verbal art as “a succession of grunts” (see Matthews, 1994 [1897], p. 23). Speaking of poetic devices, Matthews (1994 [1897], p. 25) claims, “if the language were reduced to a standard spelling, we should find that the Navaho poets have as many figures of these classes as the English poets have, and perhaps more.” One such poetic device was the use of onomatopoeia.

(8) Wosh wosh picks them up
    Wosh wosh picks them up
    Glossy Locks picks them up
    Red Moccasin picks them up
    Wosh wosh picks them up

According to Matthews (1994 [1897], p. 27) the wosh wosh of the song, “is an onomatope for the dove, equivalent to our ‘coo coo’; but it is used as a noun.” Here we see an ideophone being used as a noun. The sound imitative form evokes the dove without explicitly referencing the dove by name (hásbı́dı́). Matthews does not attempt a translation of the form into English.

In another example provided by Matthews (1894, p. 191), he presents the following song:

(9) The corn grows up.
    The waters of the dark clouds ol, ol.
    The rain descends.
    The waters from the corn leaves ol, ol.
    The rain descends.
    The waters from the plants ol, ol.
    The corn crows up.
    The waters of the dark mists ol, ol.

In Matthews (1894), he translates ol, ol into “drop, drop.” I have reorganized the line structure here and replaced Matthews’ “drop, drop” for the onomatopoeic form ol, ol which he provides (this is likely k’ol ‘plop’ described by Landar (1985)). The reorganization of line structure is here a heuristic device to highlight the forms of parallelism. Not only does this song describe the rain, it also evokes the sounds of the rain through the use of the ideophone ol, ol. As Reichard (1950), McAllester (1980) and Frisbie (1980) all note, the use of sound symbolism in Navajo songs and ritual can be highly charged. These songs, it should be noted, are not meant as “childish” songs or songs only for children. There are children’s songs that also use sound symbolism in Navajo, but these songs are not of that kind.
6. Ts’os, Ts’os, Ts’os, Ts’os: evoking sound in Navajo narratives

I want to now look at examples of the use of ideophones in Navajo narratives. In the examples that follow, I will primarily look at uses of ideophony documented by early anthropological linguists like Pliny Goddard and Edward Sapir and to the work of the Catholic missionary Father Berard Haile. Thus while Sapir may have suggested that sound symbolism was uncommon in Athabaskan languages, that did not prevent him from recording such examples. I will return to the importance of their work in the conclusion. Here are two examples from narratives documented by Goddard and Sapir. In the examples below, the ideophones have been bolded and no effort at “translating” them has been made.

(10) “Dil, dil, dil,” yiists’a’ą̃.
    “Dil, dil, dil,” was heard.
    (Sapir and Hoijer, 1942, p. 42, 45)

(11) Kodeye “xawu’, xawu’, xawu’, xawu’” ists’a djin
    Then, “xawu’, xawu’, xawu’, xawu’” it sounds, they say.
    (Goddard, 1933, pp. 60–61)

Dil, dil, dil is here meant to simulate the sound of several people walking. Xawu’, xawu’, xawu’ xawu’ appears to be a sound associated with one of the Holy People (see Reichard, 1950; Frisbie, 1980).

In this next example, from a Coyote narrative told by Curly Tó Aheeldíinii and documented by Fr. Berard Haile in the 1940s, yiits’a’go follows the ideophonic expression. Also in example 12, as Toelken and Scott (1981, p. 109) have pointed out, the form hááhgóóshįį resists translation. They gloss this form as ‘!!!’. This device is used in a number of Coyote narratives and seems to mark crucial moments of a narrative (see Webster, 2006a). The device calls into relief key moments of the narrative and as such functions as a “metanarrative exhortation” (see Nuckolls, 1992, p. 74; Webster, 2006a). The following example comes from the narrative “Coyote and Skunk.” The passage is after Skunk has climbed into a tree with a number of well cooked prairie dogs and is throwing down meatless bones to Coyote. I have bolded the ideophones in the examples.

    Hááhgóóshįį, jííjíí yiits’a’go
    (Haile, 1984, p. 94)
    “This is for me,” they say.
    !!! Listen to that jííjíí sound!

Young and Morgan (1987, p. 432) describe jííjíí(h) as a “crushing-crumbling sound.” Haile, it should be noted, recorded other examples of the use of ideophony in his work on Navajo.

In looking at another version of ‘Coyote and Skunk,’ told by John Watchman to Edward Sapir, we can see the ways that ideophony was a poetic potential. In this case, Watchman uses the ideophone ts’os ‘suck, kiss’. Coyote has feigned death and various animals are celebrating his death. At one point hazéi ts’ósii ‘chipmunk’ (or sometimes glossed as ‘little chatterbox’) leaps up on Coyote’s body. I have reorganized the text to reveal something of the line structure, the ethnopoetic structuring (following Hymes, 1981), of Watchman’s narrative (on Watchman’s poetics see Webster, 2008c).

(13) Áádi ‘ìnda Hazéi ts’ósii,
    “Nisha’?
    ‘Ákóó náádílgheed!
    T’áádaats’í ‘aaní.
    Daaztsą́, “ho’doon’iid, jiní.
    ‘Áádóó ‘ákóó náádílgheed.
    Nít’éé, “t’áá’aaníl ma’iiyéé daaztsą́lą́l!”
    Yikáá’ haasghodii’ dahnahacha’.

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“ts’os, ts’os,
  ts’os, ts’os,” nôo dahnahacha’.

(Sapir and Hoijer, 1942, p. 22: edited by A.K. Webster)

And only then Chipmunk,
“What about you?
  You also run over there!
  It may really be true.
  He is dead.” It was said to him, they say.

And then he also ran over there.
Then, “It is true that Ma’ii is indeed dead!”
He got on top of his body and skipped around.
“ts’os, ts’os,
  ts’os, ts’os,” he said as he skipped around.

The image here, as it was described to me, is of Chipmunk dancing on top of Coyote kissing the air or a “high pitch chuckle.” Or as my Navajo consultant suggested, “like the way Snoopy dances.” Compare Watchman’s use of ideophony here with the Curly Tó Aheedlı’inii version, where Prairie Dogs break into song when they hear that Coyote is dead (see Haile, 1984, p. 92). Thus in one version there is a breakthrough into song and in another version there is the use of ideophones. Both examples, however, call attention to the moment and are, I would suggest, heightened affective expressions (performances on top of performances).

In the next example, told by Charlie Mitchell to Edward Sapir in 1929 at Crystal, New Mexico, we find the use of aspiration, a non-phonemic sound in Navajo, in the ideophonic expression (Sapir and Hoijer, 1942, p. 300). Reichard (1948, p. 15), however, did suggest that aspiration in Navajo was a way to “indicate an augmentative.” I would, following Woodbury (1987), who argues against any strict division between phonology and “meaning” bearing units of language, term this use of aspiration a “meaningful phonological process” where aspiration indicates “augmentative.” The example that follows comes from an “ethnological narrative” that has been titled “Naming in the War-dance and the End of the Dance” (Sapir and Hoijer, 1942, p. 297). I have updated the orthography and included the superscript [h] to indicate aspiration.

  T’áá’áko “pȟáa, pȟáa, pȟáa, pȟáa,” dajinígho.
  When he has finished the song, “Blow at (the enemy)!” he says.
  At once, “pȟáa, pȟáa, pȟáa, pȟáa,” they say.

(Sapir and Hoijer, 1942, pp. 300–301)

Hoijer, in the notes to the Navajo texts, writes this about the sound: “A heavily aspirated p plus vowel to simulate blowing” (Sapir and Hoijer, 1942, p. 470). This then is an ideophone for “blowing.” This form does not occur in the list of onomatopoeia given by Young and Morgan (1987). Through aspiration and repetition, this form attempts to simulate the sound of blowing. As we have seen, Navajo ideophony, like the stylistic use of reduplication by Southern Paiute narrators documented by Bunte (2002), is a poetic option that was variously used by Navajo narrators.

7. Deifying gravity: evoking sound in contemporary Navajo poetry

Since the late 1970s, Navajos have been publishing poetry written in both Navajo and in English with code-switching into Navajo (see Webster, 2006a). Much of this poetry is overtly influenced by poetic practices that can also be found in Navajo verbal art and many Navajo poets explicitly link their poetry with oral tradition (Webster, 2004, 2006a). I want to now turn to some examples of the uses of ideophones in contemporary Navajo written poetry. Much contemporary written Navajo poetry can also be, and is, performed orally (see Webster, 2008a).
The first example is from a poem that was written by Navajo poet Rex Lee Jim. Other examples from Jim on the use of onomatopoeia could be given (see Webster, 2004), but this poem uses a number of devices that have been discussed above for oral genres and thus suggests something of the continuum of poetic forms across mediums (see also Webster, 2006a). I present the poem in Navajo and then an English glossing that I did in consultation with Rex Lee Jim. For a fuller discussion of the glossing procedure and for a discussion of the consultation with Jim see Webster (2006b). I have again bolded the ideophones.

(15) na'asts'qqsi
    ts'qqg, ts'qqg
    yiits'a'go
    ìits'oóz

  (Jim, 1995, p. 37)
  mouse
  suck, suck
  sounding
  kiss

The word for “mouse” in Navajo can be morphologically analyzed as something akin to ‘the one who goes about sucking.’ It is built up of an ideophone that has productively become a verb –ts’qqg ‘to suck’ and has then been nominalized by the use of a nominalizing enclitic -i ‘the one.’ Jim then uses that play-on-ideophone-turned noun in line two where the onomatopoetic word ts’qqg in a reduplicated form. Ts’qqg has, as far as I know, at least two interlinking evocations, one is the sound of sucking through a straw and the other is the sound of a kiss. This is interesting because some Navajos I discussed this poem with believed that na’asts’qqsi could not be analyzed into its constituent morphology. For them na’asts’qqsi meant only ‘mouse’ and not ‘the one who goes about sucking’ (see Webster, 2006b). The third line, as described above, is the conventional way to acknowledge that what has just been said is onomatopoetic. That line is also implicated in the alliteration that tumbles through the poem /ts’/. Glosses for this line included, “that’s how it sounds,” “as it sounds”, and “it makes.” However, Rex Lee Jim in discussing the glossing suggested “sounding,” which suggests an ongoing activity. The fourth line can be glossed as something akin to “it kissed,” “it sucked,” or “to perform a sucking rite.” There is a certain amount of semantic ambiguity here that Jim is attempting to evoke (see Webster, 2006b).

Jim is playing with the meaning of ts’qqg 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. The precision of meaning comes through its pragmatic and feelingful iconicity and not through its referential or semantic content. It is the ideophone that links meaning and creates connections. It is evocative, through sound, of the connection. When I discussed this poem with Jim, he told me that one of the goals of his poetry was to make people think about language, “most of my poems are written to stimulate thoughts and that involves thinking about semantics and etymology.” Jim went on to state that one cannot “really translate” such forms from Navajo into English. Indeed, one Navajo consultant (not Jim), when I asked him to translate this poem for me, left ts’qqg, ts’qqg in Navajo. He explained to me that the sound that a mouse makes could not be translated into English. Another Navajo consultant (also not Jim) translated it as “chatters, chatters” which resonates with the translation that Zolbrod (2004, p. 687) cites from Pearl Sunrise, giving a gloss of hazéits’ôsî as “little chatterbox.” Zolbrod (2004, p. 687) goes on to note that Sunrise further stated that chipmunks normally produce “a chattering sound.” That sound, as various Navajo consultants explained to me, and as can be seen in example 13, is ts’os, ts’os. In fact chipmunk’s name is evocative of the sound it makes as well.

Jim uses ideophony in this poem to stimulate thoughts. Indeed, some Navajos that I have spoken with about Jim’s poetry have pointed to the semantic ambiguity that he evokes through his poetry as a positive aesthetic achievement. Rather than forcing a singular interpretation, they say, Jim opens up a number of competing senses that one can reflect upon. This, I might add, the not forcing of a singular interpretation, resonates with a general Navajo ethos that I have heard, t’áá bee bóholníih or in English, “it’s up to him/her to
decide” (see Lamphere (1977) for a useful discussion of this ethos). People should be allowed to make their own decisions and their own interpretations.

At a live performance of this poem by Rex Lee Jim to an audience composed primarily of Navajos, July 18, 2001, in Window Rock, AZ several Navajos in attendance smiled and laughed during this poem. One Navajo woman told me upon hearing this poem that it evoked the image of a little mouse going about kissing. When I asked another Navajo in attendance what she enjoyed about the poem, she told me she enjoyed the “way the sounds go together.” Here we see the delight that comes from the use of ideophones.

Let me add that tsqisi can also be used as a nickname. One Navajo consultant explained to me that he had a nephew that was known as Tsqisi. This was a shortened form of na’asts’qisi ‘mouse.’ When his nephew was a baby the family had taken to calling him na’asts’qisi because of a bathing incident, but this form had been shortened to Tsqisi, which was clearly recognized by the family as being both the sound of sucking or kissing as well as a shortened form of na’asts’qisi. Here again we see the productivity of ideophones in Navajo verbal expressions.

Here is another example of the use of an ideophone in Navajo poetry. The poem is by Navajo poet and educator Emerson (2003, p. 33) and is titled ‘Table Mesa, NM.’ Here is the relevant excerpt from the poem (I have again bolded the ideophone):

(16) of songprints
    of w'u, w'u,
    deht biyiin,
    of first things, first

(Emerson, 2003, p. 33)

In a footnote after the poem, Emerson (2003, p. 35) describes the sound as follows, “approximated sound of an approaching deity.” The next line glosses as déhi ‘crane’ biyiin ‘its song’ or ‘songs of cranes’ (Emerson, 2003, p. 35). As Emerson explained to me, this poem was meant as an attempt to “deify gravity” and the use of w'u, w'u was meant to be evocative of both the sound of Navajo deities, but also the sound of a crane taking flight over water. The use of the w'u, w'u in a reduplicative pair resonates with the earlier discussion of the form of Navajo ideophones. Also, the use of an ideophone to connect with a deity resonates with the discussion by Frisbie (1980) concerning one of the functions of Navajo sound symbols.

Emerson’s example connects to the use of ideophones in Navajo ceremonialism. We again see a continuity of use between oral genres and contemporary written poetry; especially in the use of intertextuality (see Webster, 2004, 2006a). This intertextuality in the use of ideophones in Navajo contemporary written poetry is reminiscent of the first type of Gbaya written poetry discussed by Noss (2001, pp. 264–267); there ideophones link written poetry with other aesthetic traditions (folktales, songs, etc.). Emerson’s use of w'u, w'u also intertextually links beyond the internal coherence of the poem to a broader set of Navajo aesthetic practices (ceremonialism, songs, narratives and place-names). The use of ideophony is not a seamless carry-over from Navajo oral tradition. Rather, it is an actively selected poetic option.

Finally, here is an example from Tohe (2005, p. 9). In a poem (rumination) on Tséyi’ titled ‘Deep in the Rock’, Tohe writes the following:

(17) Deep in the rock, crows make echoes, gâagii gâagii. Their name is pure onomatopoeia.

(Tohe, 2005, p. 9)

Here Tohe uses the Navajo term for crow as an ideophone. She is building on the onomatopoetic form within the noun gâagii and using the very name for crow as an ideophone. Note that she reduplicates the form as well, thus the second form “echoes” the first form. She is highlighting the onomatopoetic structure of the Navajo noun. She is calling attention to its sound. Her use of “echoes” resonates with the Navajo word for onomatopoeia which also describes echoes as well. Her poem is thus a meta-ideophonic rumination, highlighting the onomatopoetic form within the noun gâagii. She is thus, like Jim, drawing out the saliency of the onomatopo-
poetic form in Navajo. Like much verbal art, she is placing the linguistic form on display for contemplation, calling the form into metalinguistic awareness.

8. Navajo ideophony and literacy education

Navajo ideophony has also been encouraged in the poetry of Navajo students learning Navajo literacy on the Navajo Nation by Navajo educators. This contrasts with published poetry found in Arrow, a publication of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, which meant to highlight the creative writing of American Indians in the late 1960s and early 1970s. These students were largely not taught by Native educators. There are no examples of ideophony in any of the poetry written by Navajo high school students found in Arrow.

One Navajo educator shared with me a number of unpublished poems that her students had written that use ideophones. One example, that she showed me and read to me used k’az, k’az for the sound of shearing sheep. This reduplicated form was then followed by yits’a’go. This poem then used an ideophone in a re- duplicative set and it was followed by the form yits’a’go. This poem was written for a Navajo language class at Diné College. Its use was seen, by the teacher that shared this with me, as a display of language command (Navajo) and of creativity and, of evocation. As she said about this poem, “you can really hear it when you read it.”

In an article by Casaus (1996, p. 5) concerning the poetry being written in Navajo literacy classes, she presents a poem by Minnie Bidtah. Here is the poem and a translation (done in consultation with Blackhorse Mitchell). I have again bolded the ideophones.

(18) Nı’dii’néêh
Minnie Bidtah áyiilaa

Na’ahóóhai ání yitis’a’a’.
Háádi shí t’echha’i nahal’ín yitis’a’.
Béésh bii’ kó’i bii’ nich’ih tsiih yitis’a’.
Didooljeé’ yists’ąą’.
Ch’il, ch’il dóó hwoosh, hwoosh yitis’a’.
Nizhónígo, hazhóó’igo honiidoi.
Nił hóyé’go sinítínee, ts’éenídzíd.
Tl’óó’di dibé biyo’ ding, ding, ding, yitis’a’.
Dibé yázhí dóó tl’izí yázhí ádaání yitis’a’.
Me’č’ée, me’č’ée, dibé yázhí
bimá bich’í’ ádaání yitis’a’.
Dibé ch’énil yits’ąą’.
“Nidii nééh! Nilááhgóó dibé ch’injíjé’,” jini yits’ąą’.
Ts’ii, ts’ii, ghaz, ghaz, ghaz
Nímasii yit’ees yitis’a’.
T’ish, t’ish, tl’ish
ájílééh yitis’a’
“Nidiiidáahgo. iyąą’ dóó dibé bikíjé’ dílyeed.”
“T’óó ilzhishgo nig sodó nikéttsín gónaa dich’ézh doo.
Nítsii dah dichxosh dóó yaasts’ilí bee disxą́ąs doo.
Gház, gház, gház yitis’a’go ádích’idgo nanííá doo.”
Na’ahóóhai ání yitis’a’a’. Dibé biyo’ diits’a’.
“Nídoo nééh,” jini yitiis’a’. Nímasii yit’ees yiits’a’.
“Háala nit’fí go, ánít’fí.
T’óó la’ ájílhosh.
Niłch’i halnéé haagéés.
Ált’aą’ la’ hanáá’ aą’ájílalaa”.

Get Up!
Made by Minnie Bidtah

I hear the rooster calling
Somewhere I hear a dog barking
I hear a sound of someone adjusting fire in the stove
I hear the light of the fire
I hear ch'il, ch'il and hwoosh, hwoosh
Slowly, pleasantly it got warm
Although lying being lazy, wake up
I hear the bells of sheep ding, ding, ding outside
I hear the calls of lambs and goats
I hear the lambs calling to their mother, me'e'ee, me'e'ee
I hear the sheep exiting
I hear the sheep out at the corral, “Get up!” I heard.
“If you just sleep, your knees and ankles will become chaps.
Your hair will be bushy with glitters of nits.
You will be gház, gház, gház yourself walking around.”
I hear the rooster crowing, I hear the sheep bells jingling
I hear someone say, “Get Up!” I hear the potatoes frying.
“What’s wrong, why?
Gosh you still asleep.
Turn on the radio.
About time you’ve opened your eyes.”

Bidtah uses “ch'il, ch'il dóó hwoosh, hwoosh” (dóó glosses as ‘and’) for the sounds of the crackling and popping of a fire. Later she writes of the sound of sheep bells, “’tl'óódi dibé biyo' ding, ding, ding yítis’a’” (outside sheep bells sound ding, ding, ding). The whole poem is a series of ideophones that evokes the sounds of Navajo life. Another line concerns the “baa” of a little sheep, me'e'ee, me'e'ee, dibé yázhí (me'e'ee, me'e'ee, little sheep). Still another evokes the sounds of potatoes frying, ts'i, ts'i gház, gház nímasii yít’ees yítis’a’ (potatoes cooking soundings ts'ii, ts'ii gház, gház). Here the ideophones simulate the sound of grease crackling. Later Bidtah presents the tl'ish, tl'ish, tl'ish of someone walking about. Blackhorse Mitchell described this sound image as, “like walking in the mess of a very soft mushy kind of clay.” Compare, for example, these lines of poetry by Sorensen (1996, p. A-7) from a poem published in The Navajo Times on the coming rain on the Navajo Nation, which also uses tl'ish, tl'ish, tl'ish to evoke the sounds of walking in mud. During the mid-1990s The Navajo Times published a Navajo Language Page that meant to highlight contemporary Navajo literacy efforts. The publication of poetry written in Navajo was one common element of that effort (see Webster, 2006a). Note also the use of the ideophone again in a triplet form.

(19) Tl'ish, tl'ish, tl'ish yits’a’go,
Nihikee’ t’aágééd hashtl'ish bii’ nináánéí’né.
With the sounds of tl'ish, tl'ish, tl'ish,
We played in the mud without our shoes.

Finally, Bidtah uses the ideophone gház, gház, gház for the sound of someone scratching. Note that the ideophones are followed by the use of yítis’a’ ‘it sounds’. Throughout the poem we see patterns of reduplicated ideophones (i.e., ch'il, ch'il) or triplets of ideophones (i.e., gház, gház, gház). Casaus presents this poem, with
its use of ideophony, as a positive example of contemporary Navajo poetry. At least one Navajo consultant, upon seeing this poem, remarked that it made him hungry imagining the sound of potatoes frying.

In a collection of poetry published by the Dine’ Teacher Education Program out of Diné College, Tsaile, AZ (Begay, 1998, p. 3), Marilyn Hubbard writes a poem titled Pé’íi Laanaa ‘I want Pepsi’ (where laanaa is an optative particle) which uses k’ol, k’ol yiits’a’go to evoke the sound of drinking tódilchxoshi ‘soda pop’, which Blackhorse Mitchell poetically translated for me as “popping water”. The pun here between ‘soda pop’ and ‘popping water’ is not, I believe, incidental. Such cross language puns can frequently be found in Navajo verbal art. For example, one Navajo consultant interpreted Navajo poet Belin’s (1999, p. 61) poem titled ‘On Telly Bilizh,’ as inspired by the well-known pun on the English word ‘television’. According to the joke, older Navajos first misheard ‘tele’vision’ as télii alizhgo ‘donkey is urinating’.

Austin-Garrison (1991) has written about the five senses method of teaching Navajo creative writing. One of the senses that Austin-Garrison discusses is sound and she provides a list of 85 Navajo ideophones (Austin-Garrison, 1991, p. 48). She points out that there are many such sound words (hodiits’a’ ‘there is a sound’) in Navajo and that they can aid in the aesthetics of Navajo poetry. Austin-Garrison’s (1991) article and Casaus’s (1996) article are both written entirely in Navajo and were aimed at a literate Navajo audience (a relatively small group); an audience composed of educators. Both articles were also published in the Journal of Navajo Education, which was also aimed at an audience composed of Navajo educators. Likewise, the inclusion of Navajo “sound effects” in the recent Navajo textbook by Navajo educator Evangeline Parsons Yazzie and linguist Margaret Speas again suggests a positive view of the use of Navajo ideophones. These discussions mostly focus on the delight that such ideophonic displays evoke. The use of hodiits’a’ is something that is encouraged by these Navajo educators. Note again that the state of New Mexico has adopted the Yazzie and Speas textbook as well. Through the adoption by the state of New Mexico of this textbook, the use of “sound effects” in Navajo has been promoted.

The use of ideophones can be found in contemporary Navajo poetry, both poetry written for Navajo literacy classes and poetry written by more well-known poets such as Rex Lee Jim, Laura Tohe, and Gloria Emerson. Indeed, ideophones are a part of the five senses approach to creative writing. However, not all Navajo educators that I have spoken with felt ideophones were appropriate in written poetry. One Navajo consultant (an educator) said that such sound symbolic and ideophonic forms should not be encouraged in Navajo writing (poetry or otherwise). This consultant evaluated ideophones negatively because they were not “like English literature.” By this, the consultant then suggested that English literature, as that consultant had been taught it, “really describes.” Here my Navajo consultant echoed the view discussed by Samuels (2004) above, which sees language as primarily reference or semantics. Ideophony, here then, evokes connections and thus fails to “describe.” This consultant appears to have internalized the educational bias against ideophony that is also on display in the Arrow publications. And it is here we see the potential fragility of Navajo ideophones when they are evaluated by outside aesthetic standards and linguistic ideologies. This is the very negative evaluation of Native languages that Sapir (1921) was arguing against when he suggested that Mackenzie River Athabaskans did not use many sound imitative forms in their language.

9. Conclusions

Following Childs (2001, p. 70), I have argued that Navajo ideophones, “are quintessentially social, the mark of local identity” and, I would add, intimacy. Here the use of ideophony in Navajo place names and in Navajo poetry about home life evokes that sense of locality. The use of Navajo ideophones, because they can be negatively evaluated by non-Navajos and some Navajo educators, can also be seen as an index of intimacy. Likewise, the decision to use ideophony in contemporary Navajo poetry places it in opposition to a more prevalent Western linguistic ideology (see Samuels, 2004). Finding examples of ideophony in narratives

5 The five senses approach to creative writing is not unique to Navajos. It is one way that written poetry is often taught in the United States. From a tentative survey of some of the examples of English language five senses poetry on the internet, it appears that Navajos are more likely to use sound symbolism such as in example 18, while the English language poems describe the sounds (i.e., “the sound of a bus running along a gravel road”). Navajo poems tend to evoke the sound (i.e., “I hear the t’Fish, t’Fish, t’Fish sound of someone”). This impression needs to be confirmed.
collected by early anthropological linguists like Sapir and Goddard and by missionaries such as Haile in the early 20th century is an important point especially when such forms were often considered extra-linguistic or pre-linguistic (Silverstein, 1994, p. 40). As Mphande (1992, p. 119) notes for African ideophones, “ideophones are visibly absent from the African folk narrative texts translated under the influence of missionaries and missionary-trained scholars who were the pioneer researchers in the field of African language study.” Mphande (1992, p. 119) goes so far as to describe the erasure of ideophony from the written records of early linguists and missionaries as “textual genocide.” Likewise, the very visibility of Navajo ideophony in contemporary Navajo poetry is also noteworthy. Watson (2000, p. 401) points out that, “even a highly acclaimed African writer like Ngugi wa Thiong’o uses few, if any, ideophones because of a European based education.” There certainly were no examples of Navajo ideophony in the Bureau of Indian Affairs publication Arrow which meant to highlight Native writers (including Navajos) writing English language poetry (published in the 1960s and 1970s). Now many Navajo educators actively promote the use of “sound effects” in the creative writing of Navajo students.

Navajo ideophony is aesthetically pleasing uses of language. Many Navajos have attested to that. However, for Navajo poets, the use of ideophony also stands in opposition to a Euro-American linguistic ideology that devalues such sound symbolic forms and uses (see Nuckolls, 2006; see also Samuels, 2004). It has often been argued that the use of ideophony appears “fragile” in language contact situations (Nuckolls, 2006, p. 47; see also Childs, 1996). Certainly the examples described for urban Zulu (Childs, 1996) and for Runa speakers (Nuckolls, 2006) attest to the potential fragility of ideophones. Several Navajo consultants were quite pessimistic about the continued use of such forms among younger Navajos. It was a potential loss that they were not pleased about. On the other hand, the active use of ideophony in a variety of poems, including poetry written in Navajo language writing classes, suggests an active resistance to that Western linguistic ideology. We might then, see the use of ideophony in Navajo poetry as both an aesthetic expression and an act of resistance (Scott, 1990).

The final chapter of Sapir’s (1921, p. 221) Language is titled “Language and Literature,” and here Sapir reminds us of the importance of literature and aesthetics to the study of linguistics and the cultural. Sapir also reminds us that, “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 completely share with any other language” (Sapir, 1921, p. 225). All of that is true. However, the concealing of ideophony, as Mphande has argued, was not due to a lack of familiarity by scholars with a language, but rather in the active concealing of a poetic device that was not considered to be part of language. The use of Navajo ideophony in contemporary poetry brings new meaning to the old trope in anthropology about “poetics and politics.” The ideophony found in contemporary Navajo poetry can certainly be considered both poetic, it is aesthetically pleasing, and political, it evokes a counter view of language that challenges certain received Western assumptions (language as reference). If Euro-American poetry neglects or avoids the use of sound symbolic forms like ideophony, some Navajo poets, in contrast, actively select to incorporate the poetics of ideophony into their poetry. In this way, Navajo poets index that their poetry is not Euro-American poetry and in so doing, ideophony has become valorized as iconic of Navajo (traditional) poetics.

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