ON INTIMATE GRAMMARS
with Examples from Navajo English, Navlish, and Navajo

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This article investigates the ways that individuals engage with languages. Building on the work of Elizabeth Povinelli (2006) and Michael Herzfeld (1997), this article argues for the importance of understanding intimate grammars. Intimate grammars are an emotionally saturated use of language that runs the risk of negative evaluation by outsiders (or non-outsiders) but are deeply and expressively feelingful for individuals. Intimate grammars are investigated by way of probing the ways Navajo poets actively engage with Navajo, Navlish, and Navajo English. It is argued that intimate grammars evoke by way of iconicity. In the conclusion, it is argued that intimate grammars allow us to rethink questions of resistance, indexicality, and language shift by focusing on the felt attachment that speakers have with languages.

Then she said, “Woooshi, woooshi,” and a radiant river
of baby laughter filled the hooghan.

In this article I look at the ways individuals engage with languages. By this, I mean the ways that individuals emotionally invest linguistic forms with “feeling tones” (Sapir 1921:40). Such investing of felt attachments to linguistic forms do not occur in a vacuum, of course, and here I am specifically interested in the ways that linguistic forms come to be icons of identity—icons that are deeply felt, but that can be evaluated negatively by outsiders. Taking Elizabeth Povinelli’s (2006) provocative term “intimate grammars” as a starting point, I want to combine this with Michael Herzfeld’s (1997) concern with “cultural intimacy” and investigate how certain stigmatized ways of speaking can be expressions of an intimate grammar, an emotionally saturated use of language that runs the risk of negative evaluation by outsiders (or non-outsiders) but is deeply and expressively feelingful for individuals. As Bonnie Urciuoli (1996:178–79) notes, the languages of “non-white ‘races’” in the United States are always “objects of scrutiny.” Here, for example, one thinks of Ana Celia Zentella’s (2002, 2003) work on “Spanglish” and the pleasure that some bilingual speakers and writers take in the play across languages, including in poetry, even in the face of stigmatization and discrimination. As Zentella (2003:61) states, such uses of Spanglish, “are part of the linguistic glue that binds Latin@s from distinct communities to each other.”
The issue is that, even under such scrutiny, individuals build affective bonds with linguistic forms, with languages.

In a provocative piece on the social inequalities of languages, Dell Hymes (1996:26) argues that “in actuality language is in large part what users have made of it. Navajo is what it is partly because it is a human language, partly because it is the language of Navajo[s].” My focus in this article will be on the ways that Navajo poets make sense of language, including Navajo English, a distinctive dialect spoken and written by many Navajos on and around the Navajo Nation in the American Southwest and beyond; Navlish, a code-mixed variety spoken and written by many Navajos in the American Southwest and beyond; and Navajo, a Southern Athabaskan language also spoken and written in the American Southwest and beyond. Note that there is no strict division in actual practice between Navajo, Navajo English, and Navlish. I will engage a variety of ethnographic fragments concerning Navajo poets’ affective relations to linguistic forms and either the ways such forms are imagined as “objects of scrutiny” or the ways they are scrutinized. In each case, I argue that language is to be understood as an intimate grammar, a grammar that is potentially (if not actually) devalued by others (be they Navajo or non-Navajo). Rather than understanding language as something that is equally shared, I argue instead that individuals invest linguistic forms with felt attachments. These attachments accrue over time and make the uses of such intimate grammars iconic (see Friedrich 1979). This article is also part of a broader project, an ethnography of poetry and poetic practices (see Caton 1990).

Linguistic and language insecurities are a complex issue for many minority groups, and this is certainly true of Native Americans in general and specifically of Navajos (see Field 2009; Schaengold 2003; see also Kroskrity and Field 2009). Young Navajos (and older Navajos) are often negatively evaluated for their English language skills or for their Navajo language skills. These negative evaluations can come from dominant outside institutions or from other Navajos. Navajos are well aware that their speech can and often is negatively evaluated as deficient. There is history here. Many Navajos are quite aware that the Navajo language has been the object of scorn by the dominant society and that it was also targeted for suppression and/or eradication. Older Navajos still tell of their boarding school experiences where speaking Navajo was either forbidden or devalued. Some Navajos have internalized Western educational notions of “correct” and “incorrect” grammar (see Platero 2001). Younger Navajos have experienced criticism for their use of Navajo, Navlish, or Navajo English, either by other Navajos or by outsiders. As Clay Slate, Martha Jackson, and Tony Goldtooth (1989:12) note, “language shame is a problem for Navajo adolescents, many of whom will deny even understanding the language in most settings” (see also Field 2009; Lee 2007). Speaking for many Navajos is a tension-filled site because it is an “object of scrutiny,” where they may always run the risk of negative evaluation for their choices and uses of linguistic forms.

Navajo poets face similar issues when they choose a language in which to write or perform. That is, Navajo poets also run the risk of negative evaluations for the languages they use. These negative evaluations can again come from
outside dominant “standard language ideologies” (Milroy 2000) or from Navajos who have internalized certain “standard language ideologies” (Field 2009). Yet, in spite of such risks, Navajo poets write and perform poetry in a variety of languages and linguistic forms. These poets are often quite aware of the risks such poetry represents, that it can and will be stereotyped as “Indian” or as deficient or, as one Navajo consultant explained to me, “wrong.” As Esther Belin once explained to me, concerning her then-new book of poetry (1999), her book was evidence not just that she could write English, but that she could succeed at writing poetry in English. On the other hand, I have heard non-Navajos negatively evaluate the use of Navajo English, a stylistic device, in the poetry of Luci Tapahonso.

Many Navajo poets are also aware that some non-Navajos have expectations of what should and should not be written by Navajo poets. Minimal displays of Navajo are acceptable indexes of ethnic identity, but code-mixed forms such as Navlish or Navajo English violate a predominant standard language ideology (where linguistic difference is understood as linguistic deficit; see Lippi-Green 1997; Milroy 2000). While the use of Navajo in Navajo poetry is a relatively secured domain (see Woodbury 1998; Webster 2006), outside of such demarcated, ethnically appropriate and “safe” domains, Navajo is still a language that is often devalued or stigmatized by many non-Navajos. This is especially true in border towns along the Navajo Nation boundaries. Certainly, following Urciuoli (1996), poetry is a nontthreatening domain where the Navajo language might be deemed “aesthetically” pleasing and “nonthreatening” by a non-Navajo dominant society that seems reactionary against language use in “the workplace.” Indeed, conflicts do arise when Navajo is used in “the workplace” (see Zachary 2005). Such dominant views of subordinate expressive forms as mere ethnic markers trivializes linguistic practices (see Zentella 2002:323 on the “chiquita-fection” of Spanish). As Urciuoli (1996:35) has noted, many displays of ethnic difference (including languages other than English) revolve around dominant attempts at “ethnification” where difference is sanctioned by making it “cultural, neat, and safe.” But even in such “safe” moments, can’t an emotional bond between languages and language users perdure?

### CULTURAL INTIMACY AND INTIMATE GRAMMARS

A number of linguistic anthropologists have critiqued the nineteenth-century Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure’s view of the arbitrariness of the sign (see Becker 1995; Farnell 1995; Feld 1988; Friedrich 1979, 1986; Nuckolls 1996; Samuels 2004). Following Peirce (1956), they have argued for an understanding of expressive forms as engaging in iconicity. Briefly, Peirce’s trichotomy of signs involves *symbols*, the relatively arbitrary signs that represent something to someone; *indexes*, those signs that “point” to social personas, places, contexts, etc.; and *icons*, those signs that bear some “resemblance” to what they represent. All signs are to various degrees symbolic, indexical, and iconic simultaneously. As Brenda Farnell (1995) points out, there has been a Western bias against iconicity because it has been naively understood as more “primitive” or “basic.” Both Roman Jakobson (1960) and Hymes (1960) have argued for the intertwining of
sound and meaning (especially in poetry) and against any naive view of language or reference as “arbitrary.” Paul Friedrich (1979), Steven Feld (1988), and David Samuels (2004) have begun to sketch out something of the emotional or felt connection to linguistic and expressive forms. Such emotional or felt connections are saturated with iconicity because such forms feel as if they resemble what they are expressing (see Webster 2006).

Edward Sapir (1921, 1925, 1929), as Friedrich (1979:39) notes, was less taken with the “convention” equals “arbitrariness” than a number of his contemporaries. Sapir (1929) was concerned with expressive symbolism—symbolism that was psychologically salient and felt. For Sapir (1921:39–41), words had “feeling tones.” These feeling tones were built up by individuals over time through uses, both their own and others’. Such feelings, I would argue, are the iconicity of language, the felt attachments to language and linguistic forms that makes the use of such forms feel “consubstantial” and non-arbitrary (Friedrich 1979:40). As Sapir noted, in the wake of World War I, “would we be so ready to die for ‘liberty,’ to struggle for ‘ideals,’ if the words themselves were not ringing within us?” (1921:17). This is what Samuels (2004:11) dubs “feelingful iconicity” or “an emotional attachment to aesthetic forms,” or as Feld (1988:132) describes, echoing Friedrich (1986), “the emotionally satisfying dimensions” of aesthetic forms.

Given that linguistic forms gain felt attachments that make such uses feel non-arbitrary and consubstantial, that individuals invest linguistic forms with feelings, we might term such feelingful aspects of language, following to a degree Elizabeth Povinelli (2006), “intimate grammars.” Povinelli (2006:193) is, more generally, arguing for an “intimate pragmatics,” and here she wishes to combine metapragmatics with a more “psychoanalytically inspired account of subjectivity and desire.” My goal is less ambitious. Where I find resonance with Povinelli’s (2006:194) work is in the ways that gender deictics—“he” or “she”—can be evaluated as violating normative expectations. As Povinelli (2006:195) argues:

Conservative language critics of feminist language projects sense but misdiagnose this metapragmatic function of grammar when they accuse feminists or queer activists of incoherency or worse. . . . In English the refusal to abide by normative rules of pronominal usage only seems to render the semantics of an average conversation, well, queer—ill-informed, dysfunctional insofar as it is contra-normative, if not anti-normative.

Yet, and here is my point, speakers are aware of such negative evaluations, and in spite of such potential evaluations, they persist in their use of such “contra-normative” linguistic forms. Such uses, which run the risk of external critique, are displays of intimate grammars.

Here I find resonance with Michael Herzfeld’s (1997) concern with “cultural intimacy.” By “cultural intimacy,” Herzfeld (1997:3) means the “aspects of cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality.” A part of this cultural intimacy is iconicity. As Herzfeld (1997:27) notes, “iconicity seems natural and is therefore an effective way of creating self-evidence.” Intimate
grammars are a kind of cultural intimacy. By using linguistic forms that are felt to be iconic, but which are known to be externally devalued or sanctioned, individuals display a sense of intimate grammar. As Judith Irvine and Susan Gal (2000:37) argue, “linguistic features that index social groups or activities appear to be iconic representations of them, as if a linguistic feature somehow depicted or displayed a social group’s inherent nature or essence.” Such linguistic forms do not just index identity, they are feelingfully iconic of identity—an identity that is often positioned in contrast to “significant others” (Sutton 2008:85). Here I follow David Sutton’s (2008) work on Kalymnian ways of imagining themselves in relation to outsiders, European or Athenian, Turk or American. The term “significant others” should remind us of the intimacy that is often evoked in the processes of othering. In this case, the significant others for many Navajos are mainstream Anglo-American society, or what some Navajos refer to as “white society.”

For example, a familiar critique of various uses of Navajo English is the use of the regular plural marking [-s] on “sheep,”—that is, “sheeps” (see Allen 1967:xii; see also Bartelt 2001:94). This, of course, violates mainstream language standards and can and is understood as a mistake, a lack of understanding of the English language. This was the position that Allen took in her introduction to Blackhorse Mitchell’s semiautobiographical book Miracle Hill (1967, also see 2004). Yet, in a number of conversations I have had with him over the years, Mitchell has explicitly stated that “sheeps” is not a mistake. Let me stress, as Mitchell has to me, that he also does not consider “sheep” to be a mistake. Instead, he prefers “sheeps” for aesthetic and practical reasons. He has a felt attachment to the form. It both sounds “better” and “makes more sense” to him than using “sheep” for the plural. Mitchell is also quite aware that his use of “sheeps” will be negatively evaluated as a mistake by external, Anglo-American mainstream language standards. For Mitchell, then, plural marking on “sheep” is an intimate grammar.

NAVAJOS AND NAVAJO POETRY

The Navajo Nation, covering parts of Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah, is roughly the size of West Virginia. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, nearly 300,000 people identify as Navajo. 178,014 people identified themselves as speakers of Navajo, with roughly 120,000 of those identifying themselves as speakers of Navajo and as residents of the Navajo Nation. Rough numbers, then, give an impression that the Navajo language is widely spoken (in fact, it is spoken in every state in the U.S.) by a significant number of speakers. However, as Navajo scholars such as Tiffany Lee (2007) and AnCita Benally (Benally and Viri 2005) point out, the Navajo language is a threatened language. It is threatened in the sense that young Navajos are not learning the language at a rate that will insure the continued use of the language. Also, despite a number of efforts over the years, literacy in Navajo is still rather limited (see McLaughlin 1992; Spolsky 2002). Both Navlish and Navajo English (both to be discussed below) are also spoken on and around the Navajo Nation.
In 1933 a short, eight-line poem was published in *Indians at Work*, a U.S. government publication (Hirschfelder and Singer 1992). The poem was composed by a collection of Navajo students at Tohatchi School, New Mexico (on the Navajo Nation). This poem, “If I Were a Pony,” is one of the first published poems by Navajos, and it concerned the desire the students had of being free of the school (like the aforementioned pony). The poem was written in English. Other poetry in English would follow. Much of this poetry would be written in boarding schools and about the boarding school experience. In the early 1960s, for example, Blackhorse Mitchell would write poetry that expressed his frustrations with the boarding school and his desire to be free from the boarding school. For Mitchell, poetry was one way to find a voice in the boarding school environment. Much of the critique of the boarding school would go unnoticed by Mitchell’s teachers. Indeed, the BIA schools would encourage the writing of poetry by young Navajos as a way to teach them English. Gloria Emerson (1971, 1972) would publish politically engaged poetry in English in the overtly political *The Indian Historian*. During the 1970s more and more Navajos would begin to write poetry. In 1977, Nia Francisco (1977) would publish a poem in Navajo in the journal *College English*. In the 1980s and 1990s even more poetry would be published by Navajos; the poetry would appear in major literary journals as well as through university presses. By the mid to late 1980s individually authored books of Navajo poetry were appearing.

Today there are a number of recognized Navajo poets, including Luci Tapahonso, Rex Lee Jim, Gloria Emerson, Blackhorse Mitchell, Esther Belin, Sherwin Bitsui, Hershman John, Orlando White, Venaya Yazzie, and Laura Tohe. Many of these poets have had their poetry published by major university presses. For example, Tohe’s (2005) most recent book of poetry and prose was published by the University of Arizona Press. *No Parole Today* (Tohe 1999) was published by West End Press in Albuquerque but was distributed by the University of New Mexico Press. Tohe’s (2005) most recent book of poetry was available for purchase in the summers of 2007 and 2008 at ‘ahwééh/gohwééh (coffee/coffee), a coffeeshop run by Gloria Emerson in Shiprock, New Mexico (on the Navajo Nation), which sold a number of books of poetry by Navajo authors and also sponsored poetry readings and the like. Many Navajo poets perform their poetry for Navajo audiences on the Navajo Nation (Webster 2009). A recent trend has been for Navajo poets to self-publish chapbooks of poetry. More than one Navajo poet has told me about a poetry manuscript that was rejected for not being “Navajo” enough. Navajo poets write and perform in a variety of languages. Predominately they write in English, but Navajo poets also write in such stigmatized languages as Navajo English, Navlish, and, indeed, Navajo.

**BLACKHORSE MITCHELL AND NAVAJO ENGLISH**

I want to begin by taking a closer look at the work of Navajo poet (among other things) Blackhorse Mitchell and his use of Navajo English. First, I should say something about Navajo English. Navajo English is a distinctive dialect of English that varies from an imagined “standard English” in a myriad of ways (see
Leap 1993; Bartelt 1981, 1983, 2001). These differences include phonological,
syntactic, morphological, semantic, and discourse distinctions. As I noted
above, plural marking on some mass nouns, such as “sheep,” occurs. There is
no gender distinction on pronouns in Navajo English. Pronouns that mainstream
English speakers would understand as marking “male” or “female” are used
interchangeably, for, as far as I have been able to discern, no rhetorical effect.
On the other hand, Navajo English speakers often use what are considered tense
markings as aspect markers. As Guillermo Bartelt (1981:382) notes, “much of the
idiosyncratic tense usage found in Navajo English is a result of the use of English
tenses as a vehicle for the expression of Navajo aspects and modes. Specifically,
the English present tense seems to be used for the transfer of the Navajo usitative
[habitual] mode, imperfective mode, and continuative aspect.” Some of the
distinctiveness of Navajo English is thus likely a transfer from Navajo, while
other features, such as plural markings on irregular nouns, are likely the process
of regularization (see Bartelt 1981, 2001).

Like other non-mainstream uses of English, Navajo English is often negatively
evaluated as mistakes or errors in using English (Leap 1993; Lippi-Green 1997;
Platero 2001). The use of Navajo English is often seen, by external standards, as
many reservations, where Indian English is the dominant linguistic code, it carries
a sense of tribal identity with it that was once associated with the native language.
That is, there is a positive social reinforcement with the Indian community for
speaking English in a tribally specific way.” Navajo English is sometimes linked
with the boarding school experience and thus lends an emotional resonance to
such expressive forms (see Harvey 1974). Indeed, AnCita Benally and Denis Viri
(2005:104) go so far as to claim:

Although the presence of Navajo English—especially in schools—carries
a certain stigma in contrast to Standard English, Navajo English enjoys
considerable celebration in the expressive arts, particularly in the literary
works of such accomplished Navajo writers as Laura Tohe, [Nia] Francisco,

Yet, even a well-known poet like Luci Tapahonso, who self-consciously uses
Navajo English to develop characterological images of, for example, her uncle,
rungs the risk of being negatively evaluated by “mainstream” English speakers. I
have heard non-Navajos negatively evaluate the Navajo English that Tapahonso
(1997:97–99) uses in “Hills Brothers Coffee.” When Tapahonso performs this
poem before audiences, or on the CD that is included in her most recent collection
of poetry (2008), this stretch of quoted speech, of quoting her uncle, is often
opened up to negative outside evaluation:

1. Oh, that’s the coffee with the man in a dress
   like a church man.
   Ah-h, that’s the one that does it for me.
   Very good coffee (Tapahonso 1997:98).
In a number of performances of this poem that I have recorded, performances before largely Navajo audiences, Tapahonso has explained that this poem is an expected part of her program for Navajo audiences. She makes this point, for example, at a performance I recorded in Window Rock, Arizona, July 18, 2001. Lines have been organized based on pause structuring (see Evers and Molina 1998), and audience response has been provided in brackets (and the “:” denotes lengthening the sound).

2. I’m going read  
Uhm a number of some poems  
That you’ve probably heard before  
And that I’ve learned over the years  
That I have to read or  
Somebody’s gonna sco:ld me [laughter]  
So I’ll start with Hills Brothers Coffee

In an interview with LineBreak in 1995, Tapahonso has also explained the complicated syntax of the quotations of her uncle in this poem as an attempt to “keep the syntax the same” from Navajo into English. Thus Tapahonso explains that she has attempted to transfer Navajo syntax into English. Tapahonso’s decision to use such a form is an attempt to evoke a felt connection with the patterned ways of speaking of her uncle (who was monolingual in Navajo) in English. She is attempting to translate the syntax of her uncle into English because that syntax is affectively feelingful for her. This poem is a fan favorite for some Navajos. Yet this very stretch of poetry has been characterized by some non-Navajos with whom I have spoken as substandard English or deficient in some way.

Perhaps more telling than the Tapahonso example concerns Blackhorse Mitchell’s work. In 1967, the University of Oklahoma Press published Blackhorse Mitchell’s Miracle Hill. The cover claims that the book was written by both Mitchell and T. D. Allen. Allen was Mitchell’s teacher at the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA) in Santa Fe, New Mexico. She provides an introduction that apologizes for the putative language problems of the book and urges readers to “read loose” (Allen 1967:vii). In the introduction, Allen (1967:xi) claims that Mitchell uses “confused tenses and genders” and that “the thing you, the reader, and . . . Blackhorse . . . Mitchell don’t have in common is grammar. He has made the effort to meet you halfway. He has learned your vocabulary (with some fascinating use variations) and he has learned some bits and pieces of your linguistic patterns” (Allen 1967:vii). In each case, Allen claims that Mitchell’s work, because it does not align with an imagined standard, is a failure or a mistake. In each case, Mitchell’s language skills are negatively evaluated.

Included in the introduction by Allen is a poem that Mitchell (1967:xiv–xv) wrote. According to Mitchell, it is the first poem he ever wrote. In the published version, tense markings are consistent with mainstream expectations. Here is a fragment of a conversation that I had with Mitchell at his home in the summer of 2008. We had been discussing his poetry, why he wrote poems, and how he
got started writing them. We had discussed this before, and his performing the
poem during our conversation was not unusual. As above, the transcript has been
organized into lines based on pause structuring (see Evers and Molina 1998). I
organize the transcript into lines not to argue that Mitchell is speaking poetry, but
rather to highlight something of the cadence, rhythm, and discourse structuring of
Mitchell’s talk. A space between lines indicates a longer pause. Capitalization (with
the exception of “I”) signals loudness and emphasis. The use of a colon indicates
lengthening (either of vowels or consonants). Brackets provide information
not on the digital recording. The use of parentheses indicates an aside made by
Mitchell. I begin the transcript at line 44, which occurs around 29 minutes into our
conversation. (BM = Blackhorse Mitchell; AW = Anthony Webster)

3. BM and a:h I think the first first ah
[BM gets up, walks across room and gets Miracle Hill]
first ah poem that I was working on
there was no chances
[BM comes back and sits]
to ASK question
even though the instructor say, “you need to ask question”

AW a:h

BM And so hunh
if you’re
if we’re FREE to ask questions
in my
it may be different
but in this case
there was none

and after writing this
the first poem
that I ever came up with
she thought this was great

she didn’t see what I’m trying to s:
STILL she didn’t see what I was trying to say
as a student
so I wrote
because I saw this
cotton
somehow it came past the window into the classroom
and it was just
I was watching it
and then I thought, “wo:w”
so this is what I did
Much could be said about this transcript. Here I want to highlight Mitchell’s use of aspect marking in his performing of this poem. During our conversation, Mitchell had retrieved his copy of *Miracle Hill* and opened to the poem. Yet, I would argue that he did not so much read the poem as perform it (see Bauman 1984; Hymes 1981). Mitchell begins the poem at line 74. According to Mitchell, Allen saw this poem as a display of the ability to use English tense. Note that in lines 78, 82, 85, 86, 91, and 92 Mitchell does not use the past tense marker -ed,

In line 78, the use of “thrill” indicates a momentaneous aspect in the imperfective mode. Its use brings immediacy to the moment of excitement. This immediacy is replicated again in line 82 with the use of “land” (again, I would argue, in the momentaneous aspect in the imperfective mode). In line 85, the use of “untame” and “untouch” evokes the usitative mode, suggesting that, unlike Mitchell, the floating cotton is always untamed and untouched. “Walk” in line 86 appears to be in the continuative aspect in the imperfective mode, as do “prance” in line 91 and “circle” in line 92. The use of the Navajo English imperfective adds immediacy to these events. It is interesting that the oral performance of this poem contrasts in its use of tense marking with the written version, the very grammatical feature that Allen was concerned about Mitchell learning. Mitchell also changes “forth” in the published version to the more informal “out” (line 88). In these and other ways, Mitchell asserts his authorship over this poem. These are his lines and his words to manipulate.

When Mitchell uses the Navajo English aspect marking in his performance of this poem, I would argue that he is expressing his intimate association with a potentially negatively evaluated grammatical feature. Mitchell’s frustration with Allen and her inability to “see” what he was writing about—freedom from the boarding school—is best exemplified in line 63 (and repeated in line 107). In fact, as Mitchell notes, Allen thought this poem showed his understanding of tense marking, but when Mitchell performs the poem today he challenges Allen’s understanding of this poem, and asserts his own intimate grammar.

**NAVLISH IN NAVAJO POETRY**

Since at least the early 1900s, Navajo speakers have been combining Navajo affixes and clitics with English lexical items (see Bodo 1998:82; see also Holm, Holm, and Spolsky 1971:6). Today this way of speaking is sometimes called “talking bilingual” and sometimes “Navlish” (see Field 2009; Schaengold 2003; Webster 2008). However, as Charlotte Schaengold (2003:249) notes, younger Navajos tend not to use Navlish with older speakers, “for fear of being publicly corrected and shamed.” This has to do with a general “elder purism” among some older Navajos (Field 2009:45). Indeed, the use of Navlish in contemporary Navajo poetry is relatively limited (Webster 2008). However, Navlish can be found on signs on and around the Navajo Nation; it can be found on notes, on flyers, in hymnals; and it can be heard in a variety of settings on and around the Navajo Nation (see McLaughlin 1992; Schaengold 2003; Webster 2008). The use of Navlish can and does create a degree of intimacy between speakers. Sometimes this social intimacy is misplaced. One Navajo consultant complained that another Navajo had addressed him in an email as *shibuddy*, “my buddy” (here the Navajo first person possessive is attached to the English noun “buddy”). My consultant’s
complaint was not with the use of Navlish, but rather with the social intimacy it suggested between him and his correspondent. *Shibuddy* was too informal for the relationship he felt they had.

Given that the use of Navlish can index social intimacy, but that it can also be critiqued as a nonstandard language by both Navajos and non-Navajos, the use of Navlish in poetry can be seen as a display of an intimate grammar. When Rutherford Ashley (2001:350), Esther Belin (2002:8), or Norla Chee (2001:6) use Navlish in their poetry they run the risk of being negatively evaluated both by Navajo purists and by mainstream non-Navajos who see any form of code-mixing between English and any other language as an affront to English (see Haviland 2003; Hill 2008; Lippi-Green 1997; Zentella 2003). And indeed, contemporary Navajo written poetry is not a particularly conducive site for locating examples of Navlish (Webster 2008). Unlike the poetry described by Zentella (2003), where Spanglish is often used, in a survey of more than twenty Navajo books of poetry I found only three examples of Navlish (Webster 2008).

On the other hand, the use of *shiheart* (my heart, my love) by Navajo comedian Vincent Craig is a well-known affective display that many Navajos use themselves. *Shiheart* is found on roadside safety billboards on and around the Navajo Nation, and Belin uses part of a newspaper headline with *Shi Heart* written on it in a recent painting titled “Oh, Shi Heart.” Craig’s comedy is particularly adept at tapping into the linguistic anxiety that many Navajos have. Indeed, Craig’s (1998) album title *Yer’ Jus’ Somehow* plays on a widely recognized non-mainstream use of “somehow.” Navajos that I know recognize that “somehow,” as used in much Navajo English discourse, is an example of non-mainstream English, and they enjoy playing with its use, creating a “common sociality” (Herzfeld 1997:3), an intimate grammar. Craig is also known for his use of Navlish. Below is a well-known example which comes from a long comedic ballad titled “Old Chi’zee” that was “recorded live at San Juan College,” Farmington, New Mexico (Craig 1998). The lines below come after Old Chi’zee (a Navajo rapscallion) makes his entrance at the rodeo and has impressed “the ladies” (the transcription is mine and is again based on pause structure; italics indicate analysis and glossing):

4. And he tipped his hat
   he winked his eyes
   and the ladies said
   “ooh *shihāt*” [laughter]
   1stPOSS heart
   *my heart*

Some Navajos with whom I have spoken enjoy and appreciate using *shiheart*, just as they enjoy using *shibuddy* and *shilove*. That Norla Chee (2001:6) uses *shibuddy* and Rutherford Ashley (2001:350) uses *shī’love* (this is how Ashley writes the form) in a poem are displays of the felt connection that Navajos have to such intimate grammars. Indeed, Navajos I have known enjoy “Navlishing” English lexical items by adding Navajo possessive prefixes to them; *shiheart* evokes
shipant, which evokes shihat (see Webster 2008:526). While Navajo English and Navajo (see below) have found expression in contemporary Navajo poetry, the use of Navlish in Navajo poetry is still a relatively rare and risky assertion of an intimate grammar in contemporary Navajo poetry (Webster 2008).

**NAVAJO AND INTIMATE GRAMMARS**

Many Navajos with whom I have spoken over the years have pointed out that Navajo is a language under assault by the dominant society. This was often framed in terms of the boarding schools, where Navajos were sometimes punished for using the Navajo language. For many Navajos an affective bond between Navajos and Navajo was fostered in Navajo student resistance to the stultifying language policies of the boarding schools (see Tohe 1999). During my fieldwork on the Navajo Nation in 2000–2001, two incidents confirmed for many Navajo consultants that their language was still under assault. The first concerned Arizona Proposition 203, which was meant to severely limit bilingual education (see House 2002). A number of community meetings took place during the fall of 2000, and homemade signs protesting the proposition in Navajo, Navlish, and English appeared throughout the Navajo Nation. The proposition eventually passed. The second concerned a legal case in Page, Arizona, involving the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) and the banning of the use of Navajo by employees at a local restaurant (see Zachary 2005). This also sparked discussion on the Navajo Nation. Navajos with whom I spoke saw this as an affront to the Navajo language and concomitantly to Navajos.

Over the years, a number of Navajo poets have told me about Navajo words of which they are particularly fond. Not all these poets were fluent in Navajo, but each had a felt attachment to specific Navajo lexical items. Four such examples are na'asts'gósi (mouse), tsé'áwózí (pebble), she’awéé’ (my baby), and nihik’ínizidiláád (luminescence is all around). In the first two cases, the fondness came from the sound of the words. Na’asts’gósi and tsé’áwózí are aesthetically pleasing to the two poets who described their fondness for these words. For one Navajo, the sound of na’asts’gósi called up the image of a mouse going about kissing. Ts’gó is an ideophone for both “kissing” and “sucking” (Webster 2009). Gloria Emerson enjoys using tsé’áwózí as a clan name in the formulaic clan introductions that Navajos often give at public events (see House 2002; also discussed in Webster 2009). Tsé’áwózí is not a Navajo clan name, but Emerson delights in the sound of the word. In the third word, the fondness came from the social relationship that was expressed by she’awéé’ (my baby). For that poet, it was the fact that this is how you speak to a baby in Navajo that was important. In fact, I have heard other Navajos besides poets express a fondness for this expression. The final example is from Laura Tohe. Here is how she explained her “love” of the word nihik’ínizidiláád to a predominantly non-Navajo audience in an auditorium on the campus of Southern Illinois University at Carbondale on October 9, 2006. For ease of reference I have begun the line numbering at 1. The quote actually comes toward the end of her poetry performance that night (Webster 2009).
5. the Navajo language is very poetic 1
when I first started writing 2
I used to think about poems in Navajo 3
and then write 4
turn them into English 5
and I guess maybe in some ways I still do that 6
because like I said the language is very poetic 7
the way it looks at the world 8
the world in terms of dualities 9
and even that 10
there’s this line in that poem about female rain 11
about how the luminescence is all around 12
it took a long time to try 13
to find an equivalent in English 14
because the word itself a:h 15
there’s that one word 16
I love that word in Navajo 17
nihik’inizidláád which 18
it’s an action 19
you know in Navajo it’s verb based 20
and so nihik’inizidláád means you know 21
this light 22
just 23
poured over us 24
or among us 25
and there’s this relationship you have with the light 26
but in the English it seems a little flat 27
when you say luminescence all around 28
it’s just like a reporting about what happened 29
and there’s none of that 30
personal connection 31
to light 32

The word *nihik’inizidláád* can be morphologically analyzed as follows:

6. nihi-  cessative or termative prefix
-k’i-  straight
-niz-  faraway
-di-  extending along a line
-dláád  shine a light

Tohe poetically glosses this as “luminescence is all around.” But note that Tohe considers this glossing to be incomplete. It misses something. It “seems
a little flat." Rather than evoking the moment, it is merely a report of what has happened. The relationship between language use and language form is missing in the English gloss. This relationship, as Tohe notes, is a “personal connection to light” that is evoked by *nihik'inizdiláád*. Part of that personal connection may arise from the homonymy—that is, words that sound the same but differ in meaning—between *nihi-* , the cessative or termative prefix, and the first person possessive plural prefix *nihi-* , “our” (e.g., *nihizaad*, “our language”). Structurally the two do not align (the termative prefix is attached to verbs, the possessive prefix attaches to nouns). However, because it is potentially evocative, the homonymy adds another layer of resonance.

In the homonymy between *nihi-* and *nihi-* , the two senses reverberate off of each other, something that other Navajos and Navajo poets often commented on. For example, in her most recent book, *a radiant curve*, Luci Tapahonso (2008:18) notes that “the word for mountain, *dzil*, is very much like *dziil*, 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.” Such felt echoes motivate poetic expressions in Navajo. Indeed, many Navajo consultants with whom I have worked have enjoyed speculating on various homonyms and near-homonyms, attempting to find semantic links between iconic forms. As Clyde Kluckhohn and Dorothea Leighton (1962:260) noted, “homonymous words and syllables gives rise to the many puns in which the Navahos delight. For instance, *ha'át'ís hé níł?* 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” (see also Sapir 1932; Webster n.d.).

Navajos are, however, quite aware that their use of Navajo off the Navajo Nation can be and often is negatively evaluated. I know Navajos who speak Navajo freely on the Navajo Nation but are sometimes reluctant to speak Navajo in border towns such as Gallup or Farmington, New Mexico. In Farmington, for example, I have heard condescending remarks by non-Navajos about Navajo as being “primitive” (among other things). Indeed, a recent headline in the *Navajo Times*, tracking the work of the Navajo Nation Human Rights Commission investigation of Farmington, stated that “Navajo men say they’re not allowed to speak Native languages at work” (Yurth 2009: A-1). This is not only an issue for Navajos, as Brenda Farnell (1995:139) describes: “I soon learned that to speak Nakota in town was not acceptable. . . . I began to realize that for many people at Fort Belknap, the places where as an Indian one can feel comfortable exist as a series of islands.” The use of Navajo or Nakota (or almost any indigenous language) then becomes an intimate grammar because the very use of the language is often met with animosity or devaluing. This is certainly one of the legacies of the boarding school experience for many Native Americans.

Concern for critique is not always externally based (see Field 2009; Lee 2007). One Navajo poet [arbitrarily identified here as female—Editor] who used Navajo lexical items in her poetry was reluctant to read that poetry before a Navajo audience. This poet, who considered herself non-fluent in Navajo, was concerned with a possible negative evaluation from a Navajo audience. Yet, and
this is crucial, this poet also expressed a deep appreciation and fondness for the Navajo she used in her poetry, especially in the way those words reminded her of her maternal grandmother (who had spoken Navajo to her as a child). Here the felt connection is based on the relationship—the feelingful iconicity—that a Navajo has to his or her grandparents. Other Navajo poets also expressed a felt attachment to Navajo words they associated with their grandparents or other elders. As Bakhtin (1986) reminds us, our words are always also the words of others, and part of the felt connection to linguistic form is a tying of words to people.

For many Navajos, though certainly not all, there is a pleasure in the use of the Navajo language. Navajos have told me that they “love” various Navajo words or they enjoy the sounds of Navajo. This is not just confined to the four words mentioned above, it can also be seen in the pleasure that some Navajos have in using ideophones, as the opening epigraph by Luci Tapahonso suggests, or in the use of Navajo placenames (Webster 2009; see Basso 1996). Finally, both fluent and non-fluent Navajos have told me of their love for certain Navajo words and their enjoyment in hearing the Navajo language.

CONCLUSION

“Intimate grammars,” as I have developed that term here, is meant to remind us that language is not purely an abstract system (see also Hymes 1996; Sherzer 1990; Tedlock 1983). There has been a trend in some circles to see language as wholly a window into the workings of the mind, grammar as “a realm of the mind” (Harrison 2007:236), language as only interesting in terms of what it refers to, or language choices as merely the expression of various calculi to index social personas. Here I echo Keith Basso’s (1990:74) chastisement of those who would reduce languages and grammars “to a rigidly literalist view of language.” Such views neglect the reality that people build felt attachments to language, that there can be an emotional attachment between individuals and their languages. For a discipline such as linguistics, which bases its notion of grammaticality on the intuitive judgments, the feelings, of speakers, this seems a curious oversight (see Hymes 1996). When Blackhorse Mitchell uses “sheeps” he is well aware that such a usage will be negatively evaluated by external criteria. Adding the plural marking to “sheep” is not just the applying of a regularized rule (though that is a part of it). It is both the asserting of a voice and the taking pleasure in language use. When Gloria Emerson says tsé’áwózí, one senses the pleasure she takes in the sounds of the word, and the way that word captures the feeling of expression. “Pebble” (the English gloss) misses the felt attachment, the iconicity of sound and meaning, that tsé’áwózí captures for her. Vincent Craig’s shiheart is an aesthetically pleasing use of language for a number of Navajos. Yet in each case, the use of Navajo or Navajo English or Navlish can, and often is, negatively evaluated by external criteria or ideologies of “standard languages” (Milroy 2000). Or, in the case of Navajo, it can be trivialized as a “safe” display of ethnic difference (see Urciuoli 1996; Webster 2009).

One could argue that intimate grammars are forms of resistance, à la James Scott (1990), and there is something to be said for that view. However, by focusing
only or exclusively on resistance we miss the felt attachments to aesthetic forms, we miss the pleasure of “sheeps.” Likewise, a focus on indexicality is a partial truth. It misses the individual uses of languages for expressive and aesthetic satisfaction. People build attachments to languages. A focus solely on the calculi of indexicality misses the deep and perduring delight that speakers take in using languages, the smile my Navajo consultant had as she said na’asts’í, or the laughter evoked by shipant.

There has been much recent concern about “endangered languages” and the ways they have been described (see Harrison 2007; Hill 2002; Muehlmann 2008; Nettle and Romaine 2000; Woodbury 1998). While it may seem old hat for linguistic anthropologists to consider language as a form of social action, a prevalent trend in much literature on endangered languages has been to lament the loss of the ways that endangered languages encode words for things (see especially Nettle and Romaine 2000 and Harrison 2007). Daniel Nettle and Suzanne Romaine (2000) title one of their chapters “Lost Words/Lost Worlds,” and David Harrison’s (2007) book is replete with examples concerning the loss of language as the loss of ecological knowledge. Such works strip language and grammar of the emotional attachments that speakers have to the uses of their languages and grammars. Such positions replicate a view that sees human emotions and aesthetics as not nearly as important as the science of encoding ecological knowledge. It sees languages as primarily about reference. It forgets the delight that speakers take in language form. As linguistic anthropologists we do a disservice to the speakers of languages if we neglect the feelings they have toward their languages.

Michelle Rosaldo (1972) long ago warned against any straightforward link between plant terms and plants among the Illongot, of taking an overly literalist view of language. More recently, Anthony Woodbury (1998) has argued for understanding the aesthetic uses of language and the ways such uses are interwoven into a larger set of expressive activities, from storytelling to kin terms. Basso’s (1996) work on Western Apache placenames, David Samuels’s (2004) work on Western Apache puns, Brenda Farnell’s (1995) work on Nakota and Plains sign talk, and Janis Nuckolls’s (1996) work on ideophony among the Runa all remind us of the pleasure that language users take in using their languages. Jane Hill (2002) and Shaylih Muehlmann (2008:34) remind us that discourses about endangered languages are often based on a view of language as a “closed system.” That is, a concern with endangered languages sometimes reifies identities and languages as fixed (Muehlmann 2008; Woodbury 1998), arguing, in essence, that “authentic” Navajos speak “authentic” Navajo. Interlingual puns, of the kind described by Samuels (2004) for Western Apache, Farnell (1995:136) for Nakota, and Wallace Chafe (1998:189) for Seneca, but early noted by W. W. Hill (1943:18) for Navajos, and found today in télii alizhgo (urinating donkey) used for “television,” remind us that, in the mouths of speakers, languages reverberate off each other, and in such reverberations one finds the delight in languages, that there is pleasure in the play across languages (see also Basso 1979; Webster n.d.). Consider, for example, the story that a Navajo woman told me about when she and her fellow boarding school classmates punned “and justice” in the pledge of
allegiance into 'ajáádts’in (leg bone) during the morning recitation of the pledge. As we talked about the pun, she repeated it several times and clearly took pleasure in saying “'ajáádts in for all, 'ajáádts’ in for all.” As she said, such group punning “probably helped our survival in boarding school.” Such interlingual punning can create the “common sociality” (Herzfeld 1997:3) of intimate grammars.

Hymes (1996) has argued—contra a widely held mantra of linguistics—that all languages are not equal because speakers of languages are not politically, socially, or economically equal. A concern with intimate grammars is a concern with people and the varieties of linguistic forms they use and build attachments to, even in the face of stigmatization or negative evaluations. In this article, I have looked not just at Navajo, but also Navlish and Navajo English. Navajo poets have built felt attachments not just to Navajo, but also to Navlish and to Navajo English. As linguistic anthropologists, we should be concerned not just with named languages like Navajo, but with Navlish and Navajo English, and the still other ways in which Navajos, for example, express themselves (see Davis and Supalla 1995). I have not been overly concerned with the traditional ecological knowledge encoded in “sheeps” or tsé'áwózí, but rather with the aesthetic pleasure that Navajos take in the use of such intimate grammars. Language is more than mere reference. It is more than a communicative tool. It is also a set of poetic, aesthetic, and expressive utterances to and through which individual speakers build felt attachments. Language is pleasurable and sensuous. This is because individuals create language through use, and such uses create felt attachments to linguistic forms.

However, for many minority populations, the use of their languages, in a fully multifaceted sense, are often devalued and stigmatized (see Hill 2008; Meek 2006; Zentella 2002, 2003). When such intimate grammars are saturated with emotional attachments, they are iconic of identity and of expression. “Sheeps” is no longer merely a word for things, rather it is used for emotional and aesthetic reasons. It becomes iconic in that sense. One of the ramifications of language shift is not just that words for things are lost (the referentialist fear), but that ways of being intimate with others and the world are lost (this is the iconism of language). If reference is meaningful, then iconicity is certainly feelingful. Grammars are not merely an abstract system. They are intimately and deeply felt expressions of voice, the “intuitive basis that underlies all linguistic expression” (Sapir 1921:224).

NOTES

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1. One reviewer [David Brugge, who gave permission to be identified—Editor] noted that he had encountered examples of code-mixing between Navajo and English during the 1950s and 1960s. He gave, as but one example, grandcheii (grandfather). Further research into this issue inspired by this comment suggested that the combining of Navajo and English was even older. Fr. Murray Bodo (1998:82), in transcribing the reminiscences of Fr. Berard Haile from his work on the Navajo Reservation in the early 1900s, presents the form “Charlotso” (Big Charley: one of Navajo consultant Charley Mitchell’s names). Here we see combined an English lexical item (Charley) and a Navajo adjectival enclitic (-tsoh, “big”).

2. Navlish, for example, is used by some Navajo poets, but it is not used by other Navajo poets. Yet the phenomenon—code-mixing between English and Navajo—is readily recognized by most Navajos with whom I have spoken about this matter.

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