‘To give an imagination to the listeners’: The neglected poetics of Navajo ideophony*

ANTHONY K. WEBSTER

Abstract

Ideophony is a neglected aspect of investigations of world poetic traditions. This article looks at the use of ideophony in a variety of Navajo poetic genres. Examples are given from Navajo place-names, narratives, and songs. A final example involves the use of ideophony in contemporary written Navajo poetry. Using the work of Woodbury, Friedrich, and Becker it is argued that ideophones are an example of form-dependent expression, poetic indeterminacy, and the inherent exuberances and deficiencies of translation and thus strongly resists translation. This fact becomes more relevant when understood in light of the current language shift from Navajo to English.

Keywords: Navajo; ideophones; translation; poetics; language shift; poetry.

1. Introduction: On ideophones

In this article, I wish to describe an underappreciated poetic feature found in both Navajo oral tradition and the emerging genre of written Navajo poetry (see Webster 2004). That feature is the use of sound symbolism, onomatopoeia, and ideophony. In particular, I am concerned with the use of ‘sound imitative’ expressions (Hinton et al. 1994: 3). This class of sound symbolism attempts to ‘simulate’ some non-linguistic activity or image in a linguistic form (Nuckolls 2000: 235). These are, following the terminology of Clement Doke (1935) and Janis Nuckolls (2006), ‘ideophones’ (see also Tedlock 1999). Doke defines ideophones as follows:

A vivid representation of an idea in sound. A word, often onomatopoeic, which describes a predicate, qualificative or adverb in respect to manner, color, sound, smell, action, state or intensity. (Doke 1935: 118)
Ideophones are then a kind of sound symbolism that can be composed of onomatopoetic forms. As Nuckolls (2006) has pointed out, ideophones are a neglected aspect of understanding world poetics. This paper is an attempt to highlight and document a relatively productive poetic form found in Navajo verbal and written art and to rectify the ‘neglected poetics of ideophony’ by providing Navajo examples.

Nuckolls (1992, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2004, 2006) has provided some of the most interesting work on ideophones, poetics, and involvement, working among the Runa (Pastaza Quechua) of lowland Ecuador (see also Kohn 2005). She has specifically shown how ideophones can be used in narratives to create a sense of ‘sound symbolic involvement’ (Nuckolls 2000). As Nuckolls writes, ‘ideophonic performances are distinctive from what is typically understood as performance, however. They exist as fleeting moments of performance within discourse which may itself be minimally or maximally performative’ (2006: 41). They are performances on top of performances. If a performance calls attention to the form over the content of the utterance (Bauman 1986), an ideophonic performance calls further attention to that form. Ideophonic performances are then ‘heightened affective expressions’ within performances (Webster forthcoming).

There has also been some recent work on the use of ideophones among African languages, much of it building on of earlier and foundational work (see Samarin 1970, 1971, 1991; Moshi 1993; Childs 1996; Hunter and Oumarou 1998; see also Doke 1935). In fact Doke’s seminal work on ideophones cited earlier concerned Bantu (see also Samarin 1971). Ideophones have long been an established topic of inquiry among Africanist. As Dennis Tedlock notes, ‘the study of ideophones has become a part of the Africanist subtradition in linguistics’ (1999: 118). William Samarin (1991: 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. 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: 160). G. Tucker Childs notes that among the urban Zulu speakers that he has worked with, ideophones are a likely indicator of ‘language vitality’ (1996: 99). Thus the decline of ideophones may suggest the relative peril a language is in.

Gérard Diffloth’s (1976) early work on the Austroasiatic language Semai reveals an elaborate use of ‘expressives’ (ideophones), many of which are built on reduplication. Diffloth (1972: 262) concludes by suggesting that, ‘what is important here is perhaps not so much the acoustic quality, but the sensations produced in the vocal tract by the articulation
of the sound. This may explain the so-called morphology described above: /i/ “feels” smaller than /a/, /l/ “feels” continuous and homogeneous, while /r/ “feels” interrupted and plural.’ What Diffloth is describing is the ideophonic iconicity of producing these sounds.

Native American languages have received far less systematic research concerning ideophones (but see Mithun 1982; Aoki 1994; Samuels 2004a: 314–316; see also Durbin 1973 and Hoftling and Tesucun 2000: 535–539 on Mayan). Tedlock (1999: 119) provides a few Zuni examples of ideophones. Tedlock (1999: 119–120) also suggests the use of ideophones in poetry. Tedlock is not discussing Native American written poetry in that piece, though I will turn to examples of ideophony in contemporary Navajo poetry in what follows (but see Doke 1948 on Bantu ideophones and literature and Noss 2001 on Gbaya written poetry). Haruo Aoki notes the following comparison between Japanese and Nez Perce ideophones, ‘unlike some languages such as Japanese, whose sound-symbolic words fill five-hundred-page dictionaries, Nez Perce phonosymbolic words are not many in number’ (1994: 15). Aoki then goes on to list a number of Nez Perce forms. What Aoki does not do is describe the ways that such ideophones were used among Nez Perce speakers.

In Language, Edward Sapir (1921: 8) suggests that the Athabaskan speaking peoples of the MacKenzie River region did not use many onomatopoetic forms. Sapir’s point here was to challenge the belief that non-European languages, the languages of so-called ‘primitives,’ had more sound symbolic forms than did European languages. While attempting to discount a certain bias towards Native American languages, Sapir may have been underestimating the importance of ideophones in Athabaskan languages. He also may have missed something of the differences that people assign to the use of ideophones. As Nuckolls argues concerning 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 nonhumans . . . By ‘animacy’ I mean a quality of aliveness that is evident through movement, change over time, or through responsiveness or reaction to surroundings. (Nuckolls 2006: 47)

A lack of focus on ideophones may be a result of a lack of seriousness that ‘Standard Average European cultures’ bring to the use of ideophones.
Nuckolls suggestion that ideophones are connected to conceptions of animacy, especially as they relate to movement, resonates with the work of Gary Witherspoon (1977) on Navajo conceptions of animacy, agency, and movement. Many of Witherspoon’s examples come from the relationship between movement, classificatory verbs, and the Subject Object Inversion (see also Hale 1973; Hoijer 1951). As Witherspoon 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’ (1977: 140). The emphasis on movement in Navajo linguistic forms was also noted early on by Harry Hoijer (1951). Following Nuckolls, if Witherspoon and Hoijer are correct, then, Navajo would seem a likely place to examine the use of ideophones.

Indeed, Nuckolls (1999: 227) highlights the work of Witherspoon and Gladys Reichard (1950) as early examples of sensitive research on Native conceptions of language and the creative power of language — what Reichard calls for Navajos, ‘sound power’ (1944: 51). This is the compulsive power of language, that proper language use can change the world (Reichard 1944; see also Witherspoon 1977; McAllester 1980). However, following Field and Blackhorse (2002), we should also note that for language to be efficacious it must also be aesthetically pleasing. One way that language becomes aesthetically pleasing is through the use of sound symbolism (see Reichard 1950: 256–262).

In what follows, I briefly describe ideophones and onomatopoeia in Navajo. I then provide examples of the use of ideophones in Navajo place-names, narratives (hane’), and songs (sin). I then turn to a discussion of the use of ideophones and onomatopoeia in contemporary written Navajo poetry. This is done through an analysis of the poetry by Navajo poets Rex Lee Jim and Gloria Emerson. I conclude by suggesting something of the ramifications of the poetics of ideophones to the larger issues of poetic indeterminacy, form-dependent expressions, and translation and how these may relate to language shift and aesthetic loss.

2. Ideophones and onomatopoeia in Navajo

Navajo is a Southern Athabaskan language spoken primarily 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
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 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. Gladys Reichard 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’ (1950: 282). Here we see the use of ideophones in ritual, but also the way that they can be integrated into Navajo grammar (as verbs). As discussed above, according to Reichard (1950) the use of onomatopoeias and sound symbolism aided in making chants more aesthetically pleasing and hence more efficacious. Clyde Kluckhohn and Dorothea Leighton noted that, ‘an automobile is called by one of two terms (chidi or chuggi) which imitate the sound of a car’ (1946: 249–250). 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’a’i ‘the chidi that flies about’). However, as AnCita Benally and Denis Viri note, the Navajo word chidiłtssooi (chidiltsxooi) ‘school bus, the yellow chidi’ is being replaced by young Navajos with the English lexical item ‘bus’ (2005: 91). Here is a case where the productivity of the onomatopoeia is being curtailed by the current language shift.

Robert Young and William Morgan (1987: 432–433) provide sixty-five onomatopoeic forms in their massive Navajo dictionary and grammar. These forms cover a wide range of activities. Navajo ideophones are, in general, monosyllabic in structure (though see chidi). A brief sampling includes, forms for mechanical sounds such as biib for the beeping of a car, animal sounds such as wa¿a¿ for the growling of a dog, human and animal sounds like kissing and sucking such as ts’os or ts’o¿s (here there is some variation [see Samarin 1991]), sounds that animals make through motion such as zo¿o¿z for the sound of a bumblebee in flight, sounds made by natural objects in motion such as tliizh for the sound of a tree crashing, sounds made by water such as wol for the gurgling of a brook or creek, and other natural sounds such as 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’o¿s ‘to suck’ or -wol ‘to gurgle.’ (I will return to the productivity of these two forms below.) Onomatopoeias, for example, can be nominalized through the use of the nominalizing enclitic -ii; as in gáaïi ‘crow’ (gía ‘the cawing of a crow’ + -ii nominalizing enclitic) (see Landar 1985: 489).
Herbert Landar (1985: 489) notes that ideophones (he calls them ‘inter-
jections’) often occur in ‘reduplicative pairs.’ In many of the examples
that follow, ideophones do appear in either reduplicative pairs (examples
3, 5, 7, and 8) or in pairs of reduplicative pairs (examples 1, 4, and 6).
Landar, however, does not give examples of the discursive use of ideo-
phones or their full range of expressive potential, intermingling in multi-
ple poetic genres as they do.

Charlotte Frisbie (1980: 355–363) offers the most detailed discussion
of the uses of sound symbols as vocables in Navajo songs and myths.
Frisbie notes that many (but not all) deities have sounds or calls asso-
ciated with them. This use of ideophones will carry over into contem-
porary Navajo poetry as well (see below). Frisbie goes on to outline a
number of uses of animal onomatopoeia or sound symbols in Navajo
songs and ceremonialism. She divides these examples into four groups:
1) Deities’ calls (such as xawu’ for Mirage Talking God in example 1);
2) other sounds of Deities (such as p'hú, p'hú, p'hú, p'hú which Coyote
uses to heal himself [see Goddard 1933: 35]); 3) animal sounds (ooohwu
made by Beaver [see Goddard 1933: 133]); and 4) bird sounds (the
wosh, wosh of a dove in example 6) (see Frisbie 1980: 355–363). Frisbie’s
detailed discussion gives a range of the associated sounds with their ani-
mators or what they are attempting to imitate. Frisbie (1980: 355) also
considers sound symbols to be a subcategory of vocables. Likewise, it ap-
ppears that Frisbie (1980: 371) considers there to be a distinction between
‘sound symbols’ and ‘poetic devices’ (I take Frisbie to be describing a
structuring sense of poetics). I would argue that ideophones (sound
symbols) are also a kind of expressive poetic device (see below) (though
Frisbie also seems to suggests the twin poetic functions of sound symbols,
pers.comm. 2007).

Navajo is a verb-based language (Young 2000; Neundorf 2006). A sin-
gle verb can be an entire sentence. Navajo is a pronominal argument lan-
guage and as such nouns are adjuncts (optional) to the clause (Willie and
Jelinek 2000). The verb can take a series of prefixes that include mode,
subject prefix, and object prefix. It has been widely remarked that the
Navajo language is ‘precise’ (see Kluckhohn 1960: 81). This precision
has often been expressed in terms of referential content of verbs. How-
ever, as Kluckhohn states:

The Navaho are interested in words insofar as they categorize events with
some precision. They are not interested in words just as expression of belief.
The words of a chant myth must be just right because they prescribe a course
of behavior that must be followed with minute exactness. (Kluckhohn 1960:
81)
As one of my Navajo consultants explained, ‘By now you should understand that Navajo language is a very descriptive! It’s not like using Whiteman language. Single word may have many different meaning in Navajo.’ Elsewhere, I have stated that the precision of Navajo comes not from ‘referential’ content, but rather from felt pragmatic iconicity (Webster 2006c; see also Samuels 2004b). A word ‘fits’ the moment and is made understandable in relationship to that moment. They are iconic, in that they are felt to bear a natural fit or resemblance with the event being evoked (see Taylor 2006).\(^4\) Ideophones are one such example of the pragmatic or feelingful iconic precision of Navajo. As that Navajo consultant went on to explain concerning onomatopoeia, ‘the storyteller is making or trying to make a sound . . . to give an imagination to the listeners.’ And earlier in our discussion, ‘it’s a descriptive word that shows a lot of imagination.’ Onomatopoeia can, then, be used to ‘give an imagination.’ They are a poetic and aesthetic device that involves the listener in the narrative; what Nuckolls (1992) has termed ‘sound symbolic involvement.’

The comments above had come in a discussion of the use of onomatopoeia in a Navajo Coyote narrative. Coyote stories, also known as *Mq’ii jooldloshı́ hane’* ‘stories of the trotting Coyote,’ are a well-known genre of oral literature on the Navajo Nation (see Toelken and Scott 1981; Webster 2004). From a comparison of the collections of Coyote stories transcribed by Edward Sapir from John Watchman (Sapir and Hoijer 1942) and by Father Berard Haile from Curly Tó Aheedlı́inii (Haile 1984), it seems that Curly Tó Aheedlı́inii used ideophones more often than did Watchman (both used ideophones). This may be due to different individual styles for telling these stories (see Webster 2006a). Such stylistic differences are not uncommon. For example, some Navajo narrators use the quotative *jni* ‘one says’ (fourth person + verb of speaking) at the end of every clause in a Coyote narrative. Others use it only at the beginning and ending of the narrative. Still others may use it more frequently in descriptive sections and less so in sections of dialogue (see Toelken and Scott 1981; Webster 2006a). Ideophones, like other Navajo poetic devices, are poetic potentials, allowing for individual creativity.

I should also add that Coyote’s Navajo name *mq’ii* is phonologically distinctive. Nouns that begin with the phoneme /m/ are relatively rare in Navajo. This phonological distinctiveness calls attention to Coyote when he is explicitly named. Here we see phonotactics (the distribution of phonemes) increasing the saliency of Coyote’s name. Many narrators also use a nasalized voice when quoting Coyote as well (Toelken and Scott 1981: 83). Thus Coyote is recognizable through the sounds of his words and the distinctive sound of his name. Such phonic devices, while
not ideophonic, work to increase the sound involvement of listeners, that is they engage the listener in the narrative moment.

3. Ideophony in Navajo place-names

I want to now turn to a variety of examples of ideophony in Navajo discourse. My first example of the use of ideophones comes from Navajo place-names. A number of writers have noted that Athabaskan place-names are highly descriptive (see Basso 1996; Jett 2001). Harry Hoijer (1953: 557), for example, noted that the Chiricahua Apache named their ethnogeographical environment with ‘care and precision.’ Keith Basso has described the ways that Western Apache place-names allow Apaches ‘to picture a site from its name’ (1996: 89). 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 -woł ‘gurgling.’ In this example, -woł has been productively adapted as a verb stem (Young et al. 1992: 659). Another example of the use of a place-name with an ideophone is Tséé’dóhdoon ‘Rumbling Rock’ (see Wilson 1995: 62). Both dóh ‘rumbling’ and doon ‘booming’ are listed as separate ideophones in Young and Morgan (1987: 432). In this place-name the ideophones are combined into a reduplicative set (where the ideophones reverberate off the sounds of each other). Such place-names use ideophones for poetic purposes. The place-names do not just describe the place rather they evoke the sounds of the place in the description (compare with Feld 1996: 108). This is, again, 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).

4. Ideophony in Navajo narratives

In Navajo, often after an ideophone there is the form yits’a’go or yiits’a’gq, which glosses as ‘it sounds.’ This device indicates that an ideophone has just been produced. It functions very much like a verb of sounding (a quasi-verb dicendi?), indicating that what has preceded it was an ideophone (see Voeltz and Kilian-Hatz 2001 for cross-linguistic comparative purposes). According to Young and Morgan, -ts’a’gq is a verb stem that ‘describes the production, existence and hearing of sound’ (Young et al. 1992: 625). In all the examples I have looked at yits’a’go
Navajo ideophony

(or its variants) follows the ideophonic form when it occurs. Here are two examples:

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

2. “Dil, dil, dil,” yiists’a’å’.  
   ”Dil, dil, dil,” was heard.  
   (Sapir and Hoijer 1942: 42, 45)

*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). *Djin* is Goddard’s way of writing *jin*, which is a phonologically reduced form of *jini* ‘they say’ (see Toelken and Scott 1981; Webster forthcoming).

In the following example, from a Coyote narrative told by Curly Tó Aheedlíinii, *yiits’ago* follows the ideophonic expression. Also in example (3), as Toelken and Scott (1981: 109) have pointed out, the form *haáhgoóshii* 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: 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 italicized the ideophones in the examples.

3. ‘Díí shoókgééléé, jinií.  
   Hááhgoóshii, jiíz jiíz yiits’a’go  
   ‘This is for me,’ one says.  
   !!! Listen to that jiíz jiíz sound!  
   (Haile 1984: 94)

Young and Morgan (1987: 432) describe *jiíz*(h) as a ‘crushing-crumbling sound.’ When I asked Blackhorse Mitchell to translate this narrative for me, he glossed the line as ‘he cracked the bone “jizh, jizh” as he chewed.’ Here Mitchell made explicit the scene for me by explaining that the form was the sound of cracking bone while chewing.

In another version of ‘Coyote and Skunk,’ told by John Watchman to Edward Sapir, Watchman uses the ideophone *ts’os* ‘suck, kiss.’ In example (4), Coyote has feigned death and various animals are celebrating his death. At one point *hazéits’ósii* ‘chipmunk’ (or sometimes glossed as ‘little chatterbox’)⁵ leaps up on Coyote’s body:
Here Mitchell added the commentary ‘he chuckled’ to explain his translation of these lines for me. The image here is of Chipmunk dancing on top of Coyote kissing the air or a ‘high pitch chuckle.’ I should note that in the Curly Tó Aheedlíinii version, Prairie Dogs break into song when they hear that Coyote is dead (see Haile 1984: 92; see also Webster 2004). 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). Ideophones are a poetic option.

In the following 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: 300). Reichard (1948: 15), however, did suggest that aspiration in Navajo was a way to ‘indicate an augmentative.’ I would, following Anthony Woodbury (1987), term this use of aspiration a meaningful phonological process. Thus a meaningful phonological process creates ‘special expressive or other pragmatic meaning’ (Woodbury 1987: 686), in this case ‘augmentative.’ The example comes from an ‘ethnological narrative’ that has been titled ‘Naming in the War-dance and the End of the Dance’ (Sapir and Hoijer 1942: 297). In example (5), I have updated the orthography and included the superscript [h] to indicate aspiration.

T’aa’ako “p̣báa, p̣báa, p̣báa,” dajiníigo.
When he has finished the song, ‘Blow at (the enemy)’ he says.
At once, ‘p̣báa, p̣báa, p̣báa,’ they say.
(Sapir and Hoijer 1942: 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: 470). This then is the ideophone for ‘blowing.’ Unlike the previous example, however, this form does not occur in the list of onomatopoeia given by Young and Morgan (1987). In its rhythmic repetition it seems reminiscent of the ideophones described for Runa speakers by Janis Nuckolls (1992, 2006). Again, through aspiration and repetition, this form attempts to simulate the sound of blowing. Other examples of
ideophones in narratives could be presented. However, I want to now turn to an example from a Navajo song.

5. Ideophony in Navajo song

In Washington Matthews’ (1994 [1897]: 27) collection of Navajo ‘legends,’ he provides the following ‘translation’ of the ‘Dove Song’ (I have slightly altered the orthography of the ideophone and the glossing here):

(6)  \( \text{Wosh wosh} \) picks them up

\( \text{Wosh wosh} \) picks them up

Glossy Locks picks them up

Red Moccasin picks them up

\( \text{Wosh wosh} \) picks them up

According to Matthews the \( \text{wosh wosh} \) of the song, ‘is an onomatope for the dove, equivalent to our “coo coo”; but it is used as a noun’ (1994 [1897]: 27). Here we see an ideophone being used as a noun. The sound imitative form evokes the dove without explicitly referencing the dove by name (\( \text{hásbí́dí́} \)). Note that Matthews does not attempt a translation into English within the song text. David McAllester notes that in the Dawn Songs (songs associated with the Shootingway) onomatopoeia \( \text{ya'ó} \), ‘is prolonged by the singer, on the high notes, to sound like a coyote’ (1980: 20). Here again we see an onomatopoeia used in song (for comparative purposes see Briggs 1996: 208–211). As Frisbie writes, ‘amidst the overwhelming symbolism in Navajo ceremonialism is that based on sound’ (1980: 355), as discussed above, these include onomatopoeias. Sound symbolism is pervasive in Navajo songs (see again Frisbie 1980; Reichard 1950; McAllester 1980).

6. Ideophony in contemporary Navajo written poetry

I want to now turn to two examples of the use of an ideophone in contemporary Navajo written poetry. 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 continuity of poetic forms across mediums (see also Webster 2006a). Below 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 italicized the ideophones.

(7) na’asts’qosi
   ts’qos, ts’qos
   yiits’a’go
   iits’q’oz
   (Jim 1995: 37)
   mouse
   suck, suck
   sounding
   kiss
   (Webster 2006b: 39)

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 onomatopoeia that has productively become a verb -ts’qos ‘to suck’ and has then been nominalized by the use of a nominalizing enclitic -ı’ ‘the one.’ Jim then uses that play-on-ideophone-turned noun in line two where the onomatopoetic word ts’qos is repeated twice. Ts’qos has 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 particularly interesting because a number of Navajos I discussed this poem with believed that na’asts’qosi could not be analyzed into its constituent morphology. For them na’asts’qosi meant only ‘mouse’ and not ‘the one who goes about sucking’ (see Webster 2006b). The third line is again the standard way to acknowledge that what has just been said is onomatopoetic. That line — I should add — is also implicated in the alliteration that tumbles through the poem /ts’/. One gloss for this line suggested was ‘that’s how it sounds,’ however Rex Lee Jim in discussing the glossing suggested ‘sounding,’ I follow his suggestion. The fourth line means something like ‘it kissed,’ ‘it sucked,’ or ‘to perform a sucking rite.’

Notice that Jim is playing with the meaning of ts’qos 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. He is making ambiguity of meaning, through the highlighting of sounds, maximally salient. 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. 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 uses ideophony in this poem to stimulate thoughts.

Before turning to a discussion of the relationship between language, poetic expression and translation, I want to conclude this section with another example of the use of an ideophone in Navajo poetry. The poem is by Gloria Emerson (2003: 33) and is titled ‘Table Mesa, NM.’ Here is the relevant excerpt from the poem (I have again italicized the ideophone):

(8) of songprints  
     of w’u, w’u,
     déli biyiin,
     of first things, first
(Emerson 2003: 33)

In a footnote after the poem, Emerson (2003: 35) describes the sound as follows, ‘approximated sound of an approaching deity.’ The next line glosses as déli ‘crane’ biyiin ‘its song’ or ‘songs of cranes’ (Emerson 2003: 35). 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 connects with the discussion by Frisbie (1980) concerning one of the functions of Navajo sound symbols. Thus, here we see another example of a Navajo ideophone in contemporary poetry. This example connects to the use of ideophones in Navajo ceremonialism. Likewise 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 Gbaya written poetry discussed by Philip Noss (2001: 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 placenames).

7. On the translation of ideophones

In this section I want to explore something of the implications and ramifications of Navajo ideophones with relation to recent theories concerning translation, the relationship between language and poetic expression, and concerns with aesthetic loss. Here it is important to note that Navajo is a threatened language (House 2002; Benally and Viri 2005). The language shift from Navajo to English may have implications for Navajo ideophones (see Childs 1996 on Zulu). Recall the example from Benally and
Viri (2005) concerning the shift from *chidiltsooi* ‘school bus, the yellow chidi’ to ‘bus’ by young Navajos.

I have tried to show that ideophones can be found in a variety of genres among the Navajo. Ideophones can be used in place-names, narratives, song, and contemporary poetry. Thus ideophones are not restricted to any single genre. Ideophones are thus integrated into a variety of aesthetic genres. Following Childs (2001: 70), I would argue that Navajo ideophones, ‘are quintessentially social, the mark of local identity’ and, I would add, intimacy. As Woodbury (1998) has suggested, there are a number of poetic devices that are dependent upon both the lexico-grammatical form of the language and the received conventions or traditions of use of those forms in concert (form-dependent expressions). That is use and code cannot be adequately separated (e.g., the connection of certain onomatopoetic forms with ritual or deities [see Frisbie 1980: 355]). This is an example of what Paul Friedrich (2006) has termed ‘linguaculture,’ the collapsing of the distinction between language and culture. Woodbury’s perspective also builds on Friedrich’s (1986) concern with ‘poetic indeterminacy.’ As Friedrich states, ‘poetic language is the locus of the most interesting differences between languages and should be studied together with the poetic imagination of the individual’ (1986: 53).

We can combine further the notions of poetic indeterminacy and form-dependent expressions with Alton Becker’s (1995) suggestion that all translations are both exuberant and deficient. That is, each act of translation adds too much and leaves out too much. The uses of ideophony that I have presented above give a number of examples. Such exuberances and deficiencies were noted by Harry Hoijer:

A simple illustration is found when we try to translate the English phrases *his horse* and *his horses* into Navaho, which not only lacks a plural category for nouns (Navaho entiful translates equally as *horse* or *horses*) but lacks as well the English distinction between *his, her, its, and their* (Navaho itlement may be translated, according to context, *his horse or horses, her horse or horses, and their horse or horses*). These Navajo forms itlement, itlement make difficulties in English also because Navajo makes a distinction between a third person (the bi- in itlement) psychologically close to the speaker (e.g., *his* [that is, a Navaho’s *horse*) as opposed to a third person (the ha- of itlement) psychologically remote (e.g., *his* [that is, a non-Navaho’s *horse*). (Hoijer 1954: 95)

The third person remote is also known as the fourth person (as in the above ji- ‘fourth person’ + -nì ‘to say’ ‘one says’) (see Webster 2006a). I should also add that in English pronouns are independent (free) morphemes and in Navajo possessive pronominals are bound prefixes to the
noun (though there are also independent pronouns as well in Navajo see Young and Morgan 1987). What Hoijer is describing, I believe, is the exuberances and deficiencies of translating from English to Navajo and from Navajo to English. A translation from a Navajo pronoun to an English pronoun will add a gender distinction and will lose the psychologically near and remote distinction. It will also become unbound.

Note that Hoijer also calls attention to the importance of ‘context’ in the understanding of Navajo phrases. This echoes what a Navajo consultant told me about the distinction between English and Navajo, when I had asked about the acceptability of a given phrase in Navajo:

It all depends how the words are used in the language. To say one word like in English language has a word for everything, but in Diné bizaad [Navajo language], that is why it’s been said that Navajo language is very descriptive.

It is this context dependent sense of meaning that I have been calling feelingful pragmatic iconicity. This is what Charles Taylor (2006) has called the constitutive or naturalness of fit between what is expressed and the form of that expression and the moment of that expression.

One clear example of this feelingful pragmatic iconicity is ideophones. As Nuckolls has pointed out, sound symbolic forms ‘communicate not by referring but by simulating the most salient perceptual qualities of an action, event, process or activity’ (2000: 235). Thus in the examples above, the ideophones are used poetically to evoke an image or an action. In the case of the place-name for Taos it is wol, which I gloss as ‘gurgling’ and in the place-name for ‘Rumbling Rock’ it is the combination of dóh ‘rumbling’ and doon ‘booming,’ in the case of the narrative examples it was pʰáa, pʰáa, pʰáa ‘blowing’, ts’os, ts’os, ts’os ‘chuckling or kissing’, and jii̍jii̍ ‘crushing or crumbling,’ in the song it was wosh wosh ‘coo coo’ that stood in as a noun, and in the poem by Jim it was na’aast’sqsí ‘the one who goes about sucking,’ iits’óóz ‘kiss, suck, sucking rite,’ and ts’qos ‘sucking.’ This final example shows how a Navajo ideophone can be used productively as a verb and then nominalized as well. Indeed the poem is based on the poetic potentials of the ideophone and its productivity in Navajo (the implicational connections). Jim is creatively drawing connections between lexical items through the use of the ideophone. This use of ideophones creates a sense of iconic fit among words and the images they simulate. At a live performance of this poem July 18, 2001, in Window Rock, Arizona 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. Here we see the delight that comes from the use of ideophones.
The underlying concept of language qua languages behind Woodbury’s (1998) notion of form-dependent expressions, Friedrich’s concern with ‘poetic indeterminacy,’ and Becker’s (1995) understanding of translation as both exuberant and deficient, is that certain forms cannot or at least very strongly resist being translated across languages. The form matters. Languages, poetic languages, are incommensurate. Ideophones seem to be one crucial place — especially when they can be productively integrated into the grammar as verbs and nouns — to investigate the incommensurability between codes. It seems impossible to ‘translate’ the compounds implicating — through sound — of -ts’oös in Jim’s poem. As Edward Sapir notes, ‘implication bears ninety percent of the work of language’ (1993: 108; see also Bakhtin 1986). That implication is the felt pragmatic iconicity, the naturalness of ‘fit,’ the precision of Navajo poetics. This, I would add, is one reason that Navajos often told me that one could not translate from Navajo into English. It was not a matter of ‘reference,’ but of iconicity (the felt naturalness of it). Jim explicitly stated that he did not believe that one could ‘really translate’ onomatopoeias from Navajo into English (Webster 2006b: 43). Note further, that when Mitchell attempted to ‘translate’ ideophonic forms for me, he mostly explained the forms and what they were doing. Thus Navajo ideophones seem to inspire exegesis (see Webster 2006b).

The view that certain poetic forms, poetic potentials, cannot be translated across codes gains added import when it is considered in light of the language shift that is occurring from Navajo to English. Navajo is a threatened language (House 2002). The poetic potentials of Navajo, the poeticizations of grammar (see Sherzer 1990), are thus threatened as well. William Hanks has written, echoing Friedrich, that, ‘poetic language has a fundamental impact on the imagination of speakers’ (1996: 192). Ideophones, as my Navajo consultant attempted to explain to me, are attempts to ‘give an imagination.’ I take this to mean an attempt to give an image or sensation of the world as it might be. If that is the case, then ideophones are a crucial locus for understanding the imagination and for understanding the ways that Navajos imagine their world through and by Navajo. Such an aesthetic loss would then be the loss of a way of imagining the world. That strikes me as an unacceptable loss.

8. The neglected poetics of Navajo ideophony

I want to conclude by noting a number of important ways that research on Navajo ideophones articulate with current thinking in linguistic anthropology. 1) Poetic uses of Navajo ideophones are, I believe, a clear
example of form-dependent expression, where the language and the social and individual use are intimately interwoven (Woodbury 1998). It should be clear that I consider form dependent expressions to be examples of linguaculture (Friedrich 2006). Documenting such form-dependent expression is of vital importance because Navajo is shifting to English and the use of ideophones appears ‘fragile’ in language contact situations (Nuckolls 2006: 47; see also Childs 1996). 2) Navajo ideophones are aesthetically pleasing uses of language and as such are entangled in all that such aesthetically pleasing forms of language entail in Navajo concerns with ‘sound power’ (Reichard 1944; Witherspoon 1977; McAllester 1980; Frisbie 1980; Field and Blackhorse 2002). As Reichard (1950) notes, onomatopoeia is often associated with Navajo chants and ritual. McAllester points out that, ‘the imitation of sounds and actions in the Shootingway myth recreate the powers they are associated with here and now in the performance of the ceremony’ (1980: 20). This is the power of ideophones. 3) When ideophones are used in Navajo place-names they reveal another way of inhabiting and evoking place in Athabaskan languages. As Basso (1996) has noted, Western Apache place-names evoke mental images of the places they describe. The use of ideophones in place-names evokes not just a mental image of the place, but the sounds of that place as well. This strikes me as an important addition to the work of Basso and to other work concerning place-names (see Hunn 1996; Feld 1996). 4) When ideophones are performed in narratives they occupy a heightened form of performance, a performance on top of a performance (Bau- man 1986; Nuckolls 2006). They further draw attention to the form over the content, and involve the listener in the narrative (Nuckolls 1992). They are exceptional ethnopoetic devices.6 Navajo ideophones, because they are entangled in a variety of genres, may yet be a site where feeligful connections to sound perdure and delight as long as the Navajo language perdures and delights.

Ideophones have been a neglected topic both for linguistic anthropolo- gists in general and for Native North American linguistic anthropology in particular. In this article, I hope to have suggested something of the range of poetic uses for ideophones in Navajo oral and written literature. Navajo ideophones are not restricted to any single verbal or written genre, they move from the everyday forms of place-names to the poetically and sonically intense written poetry of Rex Lee Jim. Following, Nuckolls (2006), I would argue that there is a great deal of research to be done on the poetics of ideophony in both the Americas and beyond. The uses of ideophones may suggest different ways of imagining oneself within the sphere of meaningful semiotic worlds, that is the perceptual worlds that people inhabit and are inhabited by. As the examples from Rex Lee Jim
and Gloria Emerson suggests, the use of ideophones is still a salient poetic feature for at least some Navajo poets. It is still good to think about. The danger lies in the language shift that is occurring from Navajo to English and the potential loss of such form-dependent expressions. More research needs to be done on the place of ideophones among the indigenous language groups of North America.

Notes

* I want to thank Rex Lee Jim, Martha Austin Garrison, and especially Blackhorse Mitchell for a number of comments concerning onomatopoeia in Navajo. My interest in ideophones and sound symbolism arose from my dissertation fieldwork concerning the emergence of written Navajo poetry. While doing fieldwork I began to notice that some of the poetry I was working with employed ideophones. Because of this I began to inquire about such matters to various Navajo consultants. I was also interested in the connections between written poetry and the oral tradition and began to note the use of ideophones in a variety of oral genres. Later, as I began to research issues concerning translation, I began corresponding with Blackhorse Mitchell about matters of translation and ideophones. This article is an attempt to put together the various strands of research on Navajo ideophones that I have been engaging in for the last seven years. I thank the Navajo Nation for granting me a permit to do fieldwork on the emergence of Navajo poetry on the Navajo Nation. I also thank Wenner-Gren and the University of Texas at Austin for funding earlier stages of this research. I also thank Southern Illinois University at Carbondale (Department of Anthropology and the College of Liberal Arts) for sponsoring a talk by Janis Nuckolls on things ideophonic. I want to thank Charlotte Frisbie, Andy Hofling, Janis Nuckolls, Joel Sherzer and Tony Woodbury for comments on earlier drafts of this paper. Mistakes that remain, remain my responsibility.

1. For example, the recent compendium on ideophones by Voeltz and Kilian-Hatz (2001) has no separate chapter on the ideophones of Native North America. Indeed, Childs (2001: 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.

2. I note here that both automobiles and airplanes can be described using the animate object classificatory verb stem. As Witherspoon writes, ‘Sizí 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’ (1977: 121). 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 Alyse Neundorf (1982) on body part terms for car parts in Navajo (see also Basso 1967; Young 1989).

3. The list in Young and Morgan is probably not exhaustive. Note that pháa (blowing) and ya'a (the call of a coyote) are not found in Young and Morgan, for example (see also Frisbie 1980).

4. Compare with James Faris who argues for the Nightway that,

Any concrete circumstance may demand and involve more or less of the specific learned practices: excessive snowfall or insufficient rainfall, or the medical history
and gender of the afflicted person . . . the specific time of year, the number of previous Nightway in the specific season . . . all contribute to determinations of specific concatenations of Nightway practices. None of these versions are or can be wrong; none are or can be incomplete, since context is bounding and framing, and there is no possible deviation. But context is contingency, and contingency bears on the infinite ever-changing details of ordinary life, for which any given Nightway is designed. (Faris 1994: 184)

I take this as a clear statement concerning the felt pragmatic iconicity of Navajo chantways. Navajo forms gain meaning from the felt connection to what is being done and the moment that it is being done. This is again the precision of iconicity, an utterance bears a naturalness of fit to that moment and the moment that it evokes.

5. Paul Zolbrod cites Pearl Sunrise giving a gloss of hazéits’ósii as ‘little chatterbox’ (2004: 687). Zolbrod goes on to note that Sunrise further stated that chipmunks normally produce ‘a chattering sound’ (2004: 687). It is likely that the ts’os, ts’os, ts’os, ts’os in example (4), is precisely that chattering sound. Note also that while Zolbrod glosses ts’ósí as ‘little,’ the form reverberates with the ideophone used in example (4). Thus Chipmunk produces a sound linked to its very name. This is the interweaving of ideophones. See the example concerning na’asts’ipósi ‘mouse’ later in this article (see also Webster 2006b).

6. Formally, then, ideophones in Navajo can function like either nouns or verbs and they are often monosyllabic, though they often occur in reduplicative pairs or pairs of reduplicative pairs. Further, they are often followed by a verb of sounding yits’a’go (or its variants). In these, and other ways, they connect typologically with ideophones in other languages (see Voeltz and Kilian-Hatz 2001). The point of this article has been to document some of the ways that ideophones are discursively and ethnopoetically used in Navajo verbal and written art.

References


Navajo ideophony 363


Anthony K. Webster (b. 1969) is an assistant professor at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale (awebster@siu.edu). His research interests include Navajo poetry and poetics, Southern Athabaskan ethnohistories of communication, and the relationship between orality and literacy. His publications include: ‘‘Álk’idąą́’’ Mą’ii Jooldlosh, Jini: Poetic Devices in Navajo Oral and Written Poetry’ (2006); ‘‘[v] and [b] in Lipan Apache: An ethnohistorical approach to a phonological variation’’ (2007); and ‘‘To all the former cats and stumps of the Navajo Nation’’: Performance, the individual, and cultural poetic traditions’ (2008).