(Ethno)Poetics and Perspectivism: On the Hieroglyphic Beauty of Ambiguity

This essay honors the work of Joel Sherzer by using his discourse-centered approach to language and culture as a way to investigate the place of speech play and verbal art in concerns with interpretative frameworks. An ethnographic and linguistic analysis of a brief poem by Navajo poet Rex Lee Jim is then presented as an example of such an approach. Sherzer’s concern with ambiguity is highlighted as a way to contrast a discourse-centered approach with Perspectivism. [Navajo, discourse-centered approach, ethnopoetics, ambiguity, poetry]

The possibility of joy in the world’s tangled and hieroglyphic beauty

Introduction

Let me begin by placing, briefly, Joel Sherzer’s work in a particular context. There is, or at least it is my impression, something deeply Sapirian in Sherzer’s view of languages. My invocation of Edward Sapir should not be surprising—anyone who ever took a class with Sherzer knows that he was often keen to quote Sapir. More than that, Sapir is ever present in much of Sherzer’s work. One finds hints of it in Sapir’s (1924) concern with the “creative individual” and Sherzer’s (1987a:302) concern with the “language-culture-society-individual nexus.” The relationship between Sherzer’s (1987a) vision of a discourse-centered approach to language and culture and Sapir’s concern with the role of “literature” in the study of language is also particularly relevant. The kinship between Sherzer’s perspective and a Sapirian perspective is a highlighting of the importance of linguistic form in verbal art (but also in languages more generally). So Sapir (1921:225) could write:

Every language is itself a collective art of expression. There is concealed in it a particular set of esthetic factors—phonetic, rhythmic, symbolic, morphological—which it does not completely share with any other language.

Sherzer writes in his 1987 piece:

It is discourse which creates, recreates, modifies, and fine tunes both culture and language and their intersection, and it is especially in verbally artistic discourse such as poetry, magic, verbal dueling, and political rhetoric that the potentials and resources provided by grammar, as well as cultural meanings and symbols, are exploited to the fullest and the essence of language-culture relationship becomes salient. (1987a:296)
This then was a view of language and culture that stressed the importance of speech play and verbal art. It is also a view that attempted to eschew certain kinds of reifications of both language and culture—that meant as well to establish a “purposely vague” understanding of discourse (Sherzer 1987a: 296). For Sherzer, then, discourse is an elusive area, an imprecise and constantly emerging and emergent interface between language and culture, created by actual instances of language in use and best defined specifically in terms of such instances. (1987a:296)

It isn’t enough to know that Kuna have a set of positional suffixes or a particular verb structure, but rather to understand them within their contexts of use (see also Sherzer 1989). The ways that the positional suffixes, for example, can be creatively deployed in magical chants. To understand, that is, the poetics of such uses in context—that Sherzer (1990:18) calls “the poeticization of grammar.” Indeed, this is Sherzer’s critique of a naive linguistic relativism—that one might find “isomorphisms between grammar and culture” (Sherzer 1987a:296), rather than looking at how linguistic forms are used within contexts—within, specifically, verbally artistic contexts. For Sherzer, verbal art is not a marginal pursuit of linguistics or anthropology, but rather central to that pursuit (see, most recently, Sherzer and Webster 2015). And, of course, this understanding, this discourse-centered approach, requires skills of both the linguist and the anthropologist—the two inform each other, they cannot be separated. But also an appreciation for the role of speech play and verbal art in that project, to paraphrase W. H. Auden, of making us more aware of ourselves and the world around us.

A Masterpiece

And so, like many of Sherzer’s students, I went off to do research on a bit of verbally artistic discourse—in my case, I went to investigate contemporary Navajo poetry—poetry that was often written, but (much of it) meant to be performed orally (see Webster 2009). So, as a kind of ethnographic and linguistic example—perhaps an ethnopoetic example—I want to turn to an evening in October of 2000 while I was doing fieldwork on the Navajo Nation.1 Navajo poet and Princeton graduate Rex Lee Jim and I were standing out at Tsegi overlook at Canyon de Chelly National Monument. Jim and I were standing under a starry sky—within our visible field was the Big Dipper. We were, not surprisingly, talking about poetry. It was not the first time we had talked about his poetry, it would not be the last (the most recent time we chatted about his poetry was June 2017). Jim calls the poem he recites a “masterpiece.” That’s not a display of hubris, but rather a show of respect. Indeed, many of Jim’s poems are not “masterpieces” at all. It’s a “masterpiece,” according to Jim, in that it seems likely that it was a message from nitch’i’älts’ísí or “Little Wind.” Little Winds, according to some Navajos, are messengers/messages from the Holy People to Navajos, usually from one of the sacred mountains, which guides Navajos towards proper moral ways of behaving and thinking (see McNeley 1981). The messages are “absolutely faultless” and so cannot be improved. That, I might add, is why Jim says that some of his poems are “masterpieces.” They came to him, he thinks, from Little Winds as fully formed poems that resist any attempts at reworkings. He told me he was unsure if he should take credit for such poems. Here is the poem in Navajo he told me that night:

náhookos
nidi
náhookos

Jim actually recited the poem several times that night, but what he did not do that night is provide a translation (see Webster 2018 for the transcript of the performances
of the poem and more about Jim). Here is an exuberant translation—a particular kind of entextualizing uptake—that I did recently (informed, I should add, by years of thinking about Jim’s poetry):

Let me just say a couple of things about the Navajo version, and that might be a way to say something about my translation (which is, simultaneously, an interpretation). *Nałookǫs* can be translated any number of ways. First, as to the morphology: *náhi-* seriative, “one after another” + *-kǫs* (this is the verb stem “slender stiff or thin rigid object, falling or flying through air” or a “slender solid object revolves”). It is conventionally translated into English as “north,” “turn,” “big dipper,” or the geometric shape of what we call the swastika. Jim and I translated its use in another poem as “gyre” (influenced, as we were, by a poem by Yeats—*The Second Coming*—that we had been talking about). *Nidi* can be translated as the contradictory “even” or “but”—though I have a sense (and a fair amount of circumstantial evidence) that it can also be heard as *ni’di* “on earth.” Everything in the poem is ambiguous in that respect.

North, like many things in Navajo philosophy, is polyvalent. On the one hand, the north is routinely associated with death. On the other hand, there is also a view that north is associated with old age and with reflection (see Aronilth 1991; Werito 2014). With the ability to recognize what you have done in life. North in this way of thinking is associated with moral judgment, the ability to recognize good and evil. And then, of course, the whole thing repeats. You take what you’ve learned and begin again. The poem’s three lines do seem to suggest, as well, a sense of incompleteness, a still in process (four lines would suggest completeness).

Here’s what Jim said on the meaning of some of his poems the night he first told me this poem (lines have been organized according to pausing to give a sense of the cadence and rhythm of Jim’s statement):

RLJ 

There’s always
the poem presents and identifies a problem
I shouldn’t say always
many of the poems
identifies a problem and at the same time offers a solution of something
and I will not tell you all about that [laughter]
you have to come to that yourself [laughter]

That seems a fair point—so I don’t want to say too much. But let me say a couple of things about interpretative frameworks. First, much is often made of the use of classificatory verbs in Navajo—that somehow they persuade Navajos to attend to shape over other features of an object. In this poem, the classificatory verb works in evoking the rotation of the Big Dipper in a particular context, but it also evokes a host of other associations—it is ambiguous with regards to its reference. This is a feature of Navajo that Navajos have pointed out to me, that Navajo is both descriptive and, simultaneously, ambiguous (see Peterson and Webster 2013). Here, of course, is where punning comes into play. *Saad aheelt’égé dīils’a*, “words that resemble each other through sound” or punning is an important feature of Jim’s poetry—indeed, in the discussion that night in October, Jim talked of the importance of punning to his poetry—the ways that it attempted to convoke various connections (see also Webster 2018). Similarities—resemblances (iconicities)—are not to be resolved, but contemplated. The
use of punning also resonates with a Navajo ethos of ʼtāʼi bī bee bōholnīth, “it’s up to her/him to decide” (see Rushforth and Chisholm 1991). This is the much noted preference for individual autonomy among Navajos. People should be allowed to make their own decisions, their own interpretations. Puns, to invoke a local idiom, are not bossy. Rather, they respect the imaginative capacities of others and do not force a singular interpretation (see also Friedrich 2006; Basso 1996). Puns are, or can be, moral.

A Discourse-Centered Approach Meets Structuralism Meets Perspectivism

A discourse-centered approach to language and culture arose, in large part, as a response to Lévi-Strauss and Structuralism. Greg Urban (1991) is perhaps most articulate on this point. “The challenge,” Urban (1991:2) notes, “is to see myth not as a mental object, but rather as concrete, unfolding discourse.” Sherzer (1987b:193) makes a similar point when he notes that, “since the hot pepper story was recorded and analyzed in the context of performance, it is difficult if not impossible to compare it with the myths which form the basis of Lévi-Strauss’s study.” Earlier in that piece, Sherzer stresses the role of ambiguity in his analysis and informed by Kuna perspectives, “they do not, however, reduce the text to a single, unambiguous interpretation; rather, they make the various possibilities for interpretation more interesting and intriguing, denser and richer” (Sherzer 1987b:188). As Sherzer (1987b:192) notes, within the context of performance, “this story, as recorded here, has a narrative development and especially a moral that is completely different from the interpretations given by Lévi-Strauss. The story has to do essentially not with the raw and the cooked and nature and culture, but rather how to treat people, especially babies, at birth.” And, of course, since Mastayans is a good chief, the moral is left ambiguous. Rather, the narrative encourages the listeners to contemplate such moral issues (following Kenneth Burke, Sherzer [1987b:193] calls such narratives, “equipment for living”).

If as Terence Turner (2009), among others, has suggested, Perspectivism is Structuralism in slightly different garb, then we might find in it, as well, a reluctance to deal with the contexts of performance and an uneasiness with existing in what the English Romantic poet John Keats called “negative capability” (a capacity to live in “uncertainties, mysteries, doubts”) (cited in Adams 2007:156). In a series of works outlining the contours of Perspectivism, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1998, 2004, 2012), for all his talk of translation, for all his talk of equivocation, for all his talk of mythic narratives, does not deal with actual tellings of mythic narratives. He does not, that is, deal with discourse in context(s). I, for one, have never found it strange that Viveiros de Castro (2004) takes to task the work of Greg Urban (1996)—in fact, the thrust of Viveiros de Castro’s piece is a rejection of the sensuousness of discourse, the poetics of language in use. Viveiros de Castro (2004:13–14) seems aghast that Urban would describe certain forms as “metaphors.” Indeed, Viveiros de Castro (2004:16) seems to reject the use of metaphor; metaphor is false or unreal, what we need is more literalism (whatever that might mean).

Ambiguity, for all the talk of equivocation, is, as well, distrusted. In reviewing the work of Graham Townsley (1993), for example, Viveiros de Castro rejects an appeal to ambiguity in shamanic song traditions (Townsley is arguing against a kind of structural analysis that assumes a priori forms and rather positing that the songs—through ambiguity—are ways of knowing), “he [Townsley] is probably right about ambiguity and paradox, but I would like to try a bit harder before resigning myself to this conclusion” (2012:134). The idea that one needs to “try a bit harder before resigning myself to this conclusion” speaks to the low regard of ambiguity in Viveiros de Castro’s project. This is not a perspective that seems comfortable within that negative capability that Keats described. Indeed, there is more than a bit of a modernist referentialist language ideology lurking in the work of Viveiros de Castro—a distrust of metaphor and of ambiguity. Such ways of speaking are for Viveiros de Castro, to invoke John Locke, “cheat and abuse” (Bauman and Briggs 2003:36).
There is, then, a decidedly anti-poetic language, an anti-poetry view embedded within Viveiros de Castro’s work. It is, in many ways, all that a discourse-centered approach to language and culture is not. Speech play and verbal art are to be discarded and/or ignored, their offensiveness, to invoke Hazard Adams’s (2007) discussion of poetry, expunged as we engage in a “literally perspectivist” (Viveiros de Castro 2004:16) set of interpretations (based on banal and prosaic prose, no doubt). In Viveiros de Castro’s work it seems ambiguities are to be resolved—to be solved, as it were (misunderstandings between languages, but not within languages in use, not as an inherent feature of languages [see Webster 2018]). There is, to invoke again that Navajo idiom, something rather bossy about his way of doing things—an imposition of order, to be sure, but also a refusal to acknowledge the imaginative capacity of others, that languages are always multifunctional (Jakobson 1960), that metaphors can be both true and false, real and unreal simultaneously (this is the offense of metaphor) (see Basso 1976; Rosaldo 1975; Adams 2007), and that literalism is an ideological project (with a rather long history in the West) (see Bauman and Briggs 2003; Samuels 2004).

Anselmo Urrutia and Sherzer (1997:367) eloquently write that “too much anthropology describes people who don’t speak; too much linguistics describes languages without speakers.” A discourse-centered approach is precisely about recognizing people who speak languages, who can and do engage in creative acts in and through language, through discourse (see also Ramos 2012:483). In Vivieros de Castro’s work we find few people who actually speak, little sense of the actual languages spoken, little engagement with the particularities of languages-in-use, little sense of the creativity of human beings in and of the world. The contrasts between a discourse-centered approach and Perspectivism are stark. Just as a discourse-centered approach was a much needed corrective to Structuralism, it is a much needed corrective to the exuberances of Perspectivism as well.

Acts of Generosity

In what I have said about Jim’s poem, I tried to honor the moral work of punning, but also to flesh out something of a “framework of meaning and moral responsibility” (Rushforth and Chisholm 1991:4) that informs the poem (this was my particular, though still ambiguous, entextualized uptake). The work was informed by both linguistics and anthropology—it was discourse-centered. That Jim told me the poem, but did not translate it that night, was, I think, an invitation for me to think through the poem, to “come to it” myself. It was an act of generosity. This essay honors another act of generosity—I have always felt lucky to have had Joel—and here I will momentarily breakthrough the staid academic register—as my adviser—and to suggest that there is still value—intellectual value—in attending to a discourse-centered approach to language and culture. Here is the enduring legacy and current urgency of Sherzer’s discourse-centered approach to language and culture: We—as anthropologists and linguists—marginalize concerns with speech play and verbal art at our own risk—a risk of missing the possibility of joy, of delight, in and through the uses of languages, a risk of missing, that is, the creativity, the shared humanity, of those we work with. I, for one, am not willing to take such an unnecessary risk.

Notes

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1. For a history of ethnopoetics and a discourse-centered approach, see Epps, Webster, and Woodbury (2017).

2. For a discussion of classificatory verbs in Southern Athabaskan languages (such as Navajo), see Hoijer (1945).

3. Given space considerations, my discussion of Perspectivism is admittedly brief and focuses exclusively on the work of Viveiros de Castro. For other useful discussions concerning Perspectivism, see Ramos (2012) and Hill and Castrillon (2017).

4. The intertextual reference is to Weinreich (1972:18), who once observed that “whether there is any point to semantic theories which are accountable only for special cases of speech—namely humorless, prosaic, banal prose—is highly doubtful.”

5. In a later work, Sherzer (2002:113) notes that “metaphor is the basis of all language use in that we use concrete sounds to express idealized meanings.” To reify “literalism,” is then, to miss a basic and inherent feature of languages. “Literal” meanings would, then, be a particular kind of metaphorical use of languages.

6. Underlying this point, I should add, is a methodological issue raised by Sherzer (1987b:192): “That is not to say that an outside analyst should simply record and repeat Kuna-performed interpretations; but further and deeper analysis should relate in principled ways to Kuna performers who themselves are involved in the analytical process.” My own entextualized uptake, I hope, follows in principled ways from Navajo interpretive frameworks (see, for example, Mitchell and Webster 2011).

References


