# In Favor of Sound:
# Linguistic Relativity and Navajo Poetry[1]

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> The fact of the matter is that the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group. No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached.
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> The understanding of a simple poem, for instance, involves not merely an understanding of the single words in their average significance, but a full comprehension of the whole life of the community as it is mirrored in the words, or as it is suggested by their overtones.
>
> Edward Sapir (1929a), "The Status of Linguistics as a Science"

## 1. Introduction

It is familiar enough now, I think, to recognize that in the seminal passage by Edward Sapir that goes on to license a view of linguistic relativity—repeated by Whorf (1956) and Hoijer (1954) (among others)—the discussion of a "simple poem" is often excluded when the serious business of postulating a testable hypothesis is formulated (see Friedrich 1979, Leavitt 2011). In so excluding a consideration of poetry, proponents of a certain brand of linguistic relativity, reproduce a particular referentialist language ideology (Silverstein

1979; Hill 2008); that is, they fall into a semantico-referentialist groove. They reproduce a bias against poetic language; that sees poetic language, to invoke John Locke's famous phrase, as a "cheat and abuse" (see Bauman and Briggs 2003: 36-37) and not of import in the serious business of understanding the role that language (that is, semantico-referential uses of language) has on thought (whatever that might be). Taken to its absurdist extremes in the "mentalese" found in Steven Pinker's (1994: 45) *The Language Instinct* where words and sounds are reduced to mere garments.

My goal in this paper is to take Sapir's observation about poetry as an example of, what we now term, linguistic relativity, seriously. To heed, then, the call by Joel Sherzer (1987) and Paul Friedrich (1979) of taking poetic language as vital in thinking about linguistic relativities. Over the last several years, I have been working on translating and attuning myself to the poetry written in Navajo by Navajo poet Rex Lee Jim. In this work, I have benefitted immensely from many conversations with Navajo poets and non-poets alike about Jim's poetry. In what follows, I am concerned with the imaginative potentials that the poems, in Navajo, evoke for Navajo consultants that I have worked with.

I have no hypothesis to test here. I simply talked with Navajos about poetry. I understand poetry as social, cultural, and linguistic practice. Navajos that I have worked with sometimes call poetry *hane'* 'story, narrative'—one essential feature of stories among Navajos is that they are meant to be shared (Webster 2009). I understand, too, the imaginative acts of working through a poem to also be social, cultural, and linguistic practices. Navajos sometimes say that a particular poet "gives an imagination to the listener" (Webster 2009). Poetry reminds us of the fiction of a view that sees, with apologies to Stephen Jay Gould, a *non-overlapping magisteria* between "language" and "culture." A useful term for situating poetry might be to call it, following Friedrich (2006), linguaculture. Poetry, it seems to me, is an example, par excellence, of linguaculture. These are all imaginative acts, and not to reformulate, but merely to note that, one way of thinking about linguistic relativity is in the ways that languages eventuate imaginative potentials. Such imaginative potentials, of course, will run the gamut of syntax, semantics, morphology, phonology, etc. Here we might recall with Sapir (1921: 225) that, "every language is itself a collective art of expression. There is concealed in it a particular set of esthetic factors—phonetic, rhythmic, symbolic, morphological—which it does not share with any other language." The key feature of intensification of form, following Roman Jakobson (1960), to be discussed in the examples that follow will revolve around sound affinities within poems and to resonances outside the poems as well. To quote Alexander Pope, quoted by Jakobson (1960: 372), "the sound must seem an echo of the sense." One way of thinking about poetry, then, is to echo James Wright (1986—cited in Friedrich 1996: 38) and Friedrich (1996: 38) and listen for the forefronting of "the phonic shape of the message." This certainly seems to be the case in much, but not all, of the poetry of Rex Lee Jim. We will hear echoes of this in the work of other Navajo poets as well.

Spoken languages are full of sounds. Sounds that resonate. Sounds that echo. We must acknowledge, with Marx (2000: 102), that languages are sensuous and a part of that sensuousness, I would suggest, concerns the sounds of a language. "Poets," Sapir (1985: 541) tells us, "know this in their own intuitive way." Wendell Berry (2010: 88), after noting that poetry is a "complex reminding," goes on to say that poetry is "original, then, not in somehow escaping its history, but in causing its history to resound and sing around it" (Berry 2010: 92).

## 2. In Favor of Sound

Periodically, anthropologists and linguists become enamored with sound. Ellen Basso's (1985) magisterial *A Musical View of the Universe* stands as a testament to the role of sound in society. So too, I might add, does Janis Nuckolls's (1996) *Sounds Like Life* which explores the uses of ideophony in Runa Quechua discourse. Paul Stoller (1989) in his *The Taste of Ethnographic Things* argues for the importance of attending to sound in ethnography. Steven Feld (1996) has repeatedly argued for the importance of sound and *acoustemology* in ethnographic research. There has, of late, been a burgeoning line of inquiry in an ethnomusicologically inflected linguistic anthropology concerned with sound and soundscapes (see Feld et al 2004; Samuels et al 2010; Faudree 2012). Here one thinks, for example, of the richly sonic work of a David Samuels (2004a) or Alan Rumsey's (2001) comparison of the verbal and sonic aesthetics of "lift up over sounding" among the Kaluli with the "overwhelming" among the Ku Waru (see also Gell 1995).

Investigating the sounds of words, of course, has a venerable—and that is to say Sapirian—lineage as well (see O'Neill 2008 for a review). From Sapir's (1915) now classic *Abnormal Types of Speech Among the Nootka* to Marshall Durbin's (1973) tentative presentation of a consideration on the phonological-semantic networks found in Mayan languages to Dell Hymes's (1979) "How to Talk Like a Bear in Takelma" to Tony Woodbury's (1987) concern with "meaningful phonological processes." Other more recent works on phonetic and phonological gestures—from the indexing of social intimacy among women through pulmonic ingressives among the O'odham (Hill and Zepeda 1999) to voice registers in Mesoamerica (Sicoli 2010, Stross 2013) to the influence of ejectives and sound associations on language change in Quechua (Mannheim 1988) to fricative gestures of intensity in Korean (Harkness 2011)—speak to the role of sound and the production of sound and their ideological salience as important components of linguistic and ethnographic analysis. Returning to Navajo, Gladys Reichard's (1948) "The Significance of Aspiration in Navajo" stands as an important contribution on the social importance of sounds within Navajo words. Where, what Reichard calls "aspiration"—more accurately the insertion of the velar fricative after a coronal fricative or affricate stem initial consonant—expressed a pejorative, augmentative, and/or depreciative attitude (*nizeedi* 'your opposite sex cousin', *nizgheedi* 'your opposite sex cousin you are engaging in inappropriate sexual relations with'). Indeed, overuse of the velar fricative can be heard as the speaker "raving" or lacking of control (Reichard 1951: 370; Mitchell and Webster 2011). Expressives and phonesthemes remind us, as well, that we should not limit our attention to only a narrow view of the phonology of a language (see Firth 1930; Bolinger 1949; Hymes 2003).

And while I see my work as in concert with many of their concerns, few of these works seek to understand the importance of the role of sound within a conception of linguistic relativity. Does it matter what the sounds are of a language? What the sounds of various words or morphemes are in a language? How such sounds resonate within a language? How such sounds convoke? As John Leavitt (2011: 210) describes in his review of the history of attending to *linguistic relativities,* the Boasians—Boas, Sapir, and Whorf here—did consider sound to be of importance. It mattered to Sapir (1929b) and so too to Whorf (1956: 266-268); concerned, as they were, with expressive devices and phonetic symbolism. Franz Boas (1889) famously noted that the sounds of a language might presuppose one to hear the sounds of an unfamiliar language not on the terms of the unfamiliar language, but rather in terms of the language most familiar. Interlingual puns, I might add, play on just such a tendency. To hear, that is, *television* as *telii alizhgo*

'urinating donkey.' But to bring up punning in a discussion of linguistic relativities might seem too much! Such a view is conditioned, as our modernist conceits so well described by Bauman and Briggs (2003) and Samuels (2004b) suggests, on the low standing of puns in the serious work of language. But punning is, after all, and to borrow the term from Samuels (2001), a form of *phonological iconicity*. Words resemble other words through sound.

A number of years ago Dwight Bolinger (1940: 61) observed "that certain words naturally go together, and being encountered drag each other along a train of thought like the barbed atoms of Democritus."  They are natural only insofar as we feel such resemblances as socialized language users. He went on to list such sound associative practices as alliteration, rhyme, homonyms and puns. He called such sound associations "word affinities." In arguing that words were not arbitrary—a point to be taken up again by Paul Friedrich (1979)—he noted that languages were *systematic*. Such a view, of course, recognizes Sapirian leakage and the fact that while *systematic*, languages are not discretely bounded billiard balls, they are not self-contained *a priori* systems. Languages hang together and come together through and in use (see Hopper 1996). "No generation," Raymond Williams (1977: 131) reminds us, "speaks quite the same language as its predecessors." In a later article, Bolinger (1949: 55) argued that, "when we speak of sound-suggestiveness, then, we speak of the entire language, not just of a few imitative or self-sufficient forms."  Stated more poetically, Bolinger (1949: 56) suggests that, "the phonetic elements of a language are like the keys of a piano. They have been played so often and in so many combinations that even a random cord, struck by an object accidentally falling on them, will have some vague semblance of meaning."  This, then, is the *fire* that lurks in *sapphire* for Bolinger (1940).  This is the *relatively non-arbitrary* nature of the symbol that Friedrich (1979) describes. To quote Dell Hymes (1960: 112), finally, "if we are to understand a fair part of linguistic change, comprehend the use of language in speech and verbal art, take account of all the varied speech play in which a competent speaker may indulge, and to which he can respond, we must study his real and lively sense of appropriate connections between sound and meaning."

It seems to me that just such sound suggestiveness via phonological iconicity and the ways they evoke and orient our imaginations are a crucial locus for thinking through linguistic relativities (here, really, the positive vision of the ways that languages provide possibilities to us to orient and imagine [see here Friedrich 2009: 219]). Though, of course, such sound associations have been largely absent from discussions concerning the putative "Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis" or other reformulations of linguistic relativity (see, for example, Gumperz and Levinson 1996; Lucy 1992a, 1992b; Sidnell and Enfield 2012). Color terminology research, for example, isolated color terms from the whole life of a language. We become focused on *tátł'id* 'green, algae, stinky water' in isolation from its sound symbolic evocation of farting (*tł'id, tł'id*). Harry Hoijer's (1951) discussion of Navajo and linguistic relativity was focused on semantic categories. Sound was absent. It is time, then, to attune ourselves to sounds and their suggestiveness.

## 3. The Pleasure of Saying

I cannot, of course, do this work on Navajo alone. My sound sensibilities about Navajo are limited. The analysis that follows is based on conversations with Navajo consultants about the sound associations that are evoked in a variety of poems. Many Navajos that I worked with were quick to point out resonances between and among words

and morphemes and consonant clusters. Will such sound associations—such phonological iconicities—align among all Navajo speakers? No. Speakers, through use, build felt attachments to linguistic forms. No two speakers build exactly the same felt attachments to linguistic forms—though there are social and ideological processes that tend to direct certain kinds of associations (see Webster 2010a, 2010b; see also Meek 2010; Cavanaugh 2009). To borrow Navajo poet Orlando White's apt metaphor, languages are companions and we come to know them over time; we do not know them equally, nor completely.

Recalling Keith Basso's (1996:45-46) discussion of the pleasure of saying Western Apache placenames, let me note that for some Navajos there can be a pleasure in the saying of familiar words, of an abiding joy and delight in the saying of words (see also Cavanaugh 2009). Many Navajos that I have spoken with over the years have talked about words in Navajo that they "love." Often such a consideration was based not solely on the meaning of the word, but also the pleasure of the sounds of the words and the pleasure of saying the word. Laura Tohe, for example, in discussing one of her poems in Navajo, noted that she loved the word *nihik'inizdidláád* (see Webster 2009). Tohe poetically glosses this as "luminescence is all around." Tohe considers this translation to be incomplete. It misses something. In her words, it "seems a little flat." Rather than evoking the moment, it is rather 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'inizdidláád*. Part of that personal connection arises from the homophony or phonological iconicity between *nihi*- the cessative or termative prefix and the first person possessive plural prefix *nihi*-'our' (e.g., *nihizaad* 'our language'). Structurally, while both are prefixes, the termative *nihi*- and *nihi*- 'our' do not align because the termative prefix is attached to verbs, the possessive prefix attaches to nouns. However, as potentially evocative, the phonological iconicity here allows for, like the striking of the piano cord, a resonance—an imaginative possibility—of *nihi*- and *nihi*- . Another Navajo poet, in explaining a poem that used the sound symbolic *w'u w'u*, described how it was both the sound of an approaching deity and the sound of a crane taking flight over water. As she said *w'u w'u* she flapped her arms as if they were the wings of a crane; a smile on her face. This is the pleasure of saying and saying aloud. Some Navajos have told me that Navajo is a more beautiful sounding language (with all that entails—see McAllester 1954) than English. As Blackhorse Mitchell explained to me as we talked about the work of some linguists on Navajo, "the validity of Navajo is in its sounds, not in the neat things it does."

## 4. Sound in Three Poems by Rex Lee Jim

### 4.1. K'ee

I want to now turn to some of the poetry that Rex Lee Jim has written in Navajo. The three poems that I will look at by Jim come from his all Navajo book of poetry *saad*. I have heard all of these poems preformed multiple times and I have discussed these poems at length with Jim and a variety of Navajos. The translations are based on conversations with several Navajo. For the first poem, I have relied most heavily on discussions with Navajo poet Blackhorse Mitchell and another Navajo consultant who wishes to remain anonymous.

(1) *ak'eego*
    *hook'eegi*

> *aałk'eedgo*
> *ajik'eed*
>> (Jim 1995: 42)
>
> in the fall
> at the deserted home
> full of joy
> one fucks

When we look at this poem, we see that Jim focuses in on the homophonous noun stems –*k'eed* 'fall, autumn' (Young and Morgan 1992: 347), –*k'eh* 'place of residence, home place' (Young and Morgan 1992: 345) and the verb stem –*k'eed* 'to copulate, to fuck' (Young and Morgan 1992: 347; my consultants provided the second sense). In the first line, we have the conventional word for 'fall, autumn' (often written *'aak'ee(d)*) and the enclitic –*go* 'during, in.' In the second line, Jim switches to the noun stem –*k'ee*. This line is composed of the prefix *hoo*- indicating space or area plus the noun stem and a locative enclitic –*gi* 'at' (indicating relative proximity in space). The use of *hoo*- here seems to evoke a sense of "empty" or "deserted." The third line is a bit more difficult to analyze definitively. It is either based on the noun stem –*k'eed* 'place of residence, home place' or the verb stem –*k'eed* 'to copulate, to fuck.' My consultants translated this line as "with the company of a guest," "a time of plentiness" (here associated with the fall being the time of harvest) or "full of joy" (this form suggestive of the act of copulating). In one analysis we have the reciprocal prefix *ał*-, the verb stem –*k'eed* 'to copulate', and the relative enclitic –*go* 'as.' The other way of segmenting this form would again have the reciprocal prefix *ał*-, the noun stem –*k'eed* 'home place' and the subordinating enclitic –*go* 'at.' There is a pun-like ambiguity in this line and one can sense that from the performance of this poem that Jim did in Window Rock, AZ on July 18th, 2001.

When Jim performed this poem in Window Rock there was a pause after the first line. The next two lines were said together without a significant pause between them. Then there was a pause between the third line and the fourth line and it was only after the fourth line that Navajos laughed. With other poems, like the first poem that Jim read from *saad* that night about pouting about a penis (based on the phonological iconicity between –*chxǫ'* 'penis' and –*chxǫ'* 'to pout'), Navajos laughed after the introduction of *achxǫ'* 'someone's penis' which did not occur at the end of the poem. In this poem, Navajos laughed only after the final line was revealed. Having run line two and three together, a sense of continuity of noun stem form was established. It was after the fourth line that the third line could be reinterpreted not as "with a guest," but rather as "full of joy." The current translation attempts to maintain the power of the final line by translating the third line as "full of joy."

The final line includes the prefix *a*- 'thus', the fourth person subject prefix *ji*-, and the verb stem –*k'eed* 'to copulate, to fuck.' The consultants that I worked with all translated this final line with some form of the English verb 'fuck.' I suggested to one consultant alternative translations such as 'having sex' or 'making love', but he rejected both of them and preferred 'fucking.' In Navajo there are four persons (first, second, third, and fourth). The fourth person pronominal, as Hoijer (1945: 197-98) describes it, is used for "persons or beings psychologically remote from the speaker, such as, for example, an in-law or sibling of the opposite sex with whom a respect or partial avoidance relationship must be maintained." Conventionally, the fourth person is often translated into English as 'one' and, indeed, one of my consultants translated the final line as "one is fucking."

As in many of the poems in *saad*, Jim creates a dense sonic texture through the intensification of form through the repetition of sound. These sounds are often associated in *saad* with noun and verb stems (see Webster 2006; Mitchell and Webster 2011). Indeed, in working through many of the poems in *saad*, Navajo consultants commented on the word affinities created through the repetition of sound. That is, the repetition of the key sound on the verb or noun stem often evoked other words that had a similar sound. This poetic principle used by Jim is connected with a Navajo aesthetic informed by *saad aheełt'éégo diits'a'* 'words that resemble each other through sound' or, what we might call, punning (see Webster 2013). The poetic work of the use of punning in Jim's poetry was best encapsulated by a Navajo who had been listening to Jim read his poetry in December 2000 and remarked, "when you think about it [the sounds in the poem], the whole meaning changes."

Indeed, in a conversation with Jim in February, 2001, he noted that, "One of the good things about poetry is that you can disguise it in many ways" and that his poetry was, "sorta sneaky." He saw this as the "preferred" way of doing it though because he felt that if a poem was said too "directly" it could be ignored. When a poem was disguised it allowed for "self-exploration" and became both "more meaningful" and "more convincing" to the reader or hearer. As Jim stated, the "sneaky" way was a "much more forceful approach in many ways because the person ends up talking about it and discovering for him or herself rather than saying it directly." The ambiguity of the poems allowed for "self-exploration" which is the beginning of a process of awareness about one's place in the world (see Mitchell and Webster 2011).

Given this penchant by Jim to use the repetition of sounds to evoke phonological iconicity with homophonous forms in Navajo, how might we go about thinking about the use of *–k'ee*? As it turns out, one of my consultants made the connection as we were talking about the poem. He noted that this poem—with its dense use of [k'ee]—seemed a play on *k'é* 'friendship, peace, affection, generosity, solidarity' and *-k'éí* 'relatives.' Gary Witherspoon (1977: 81-120) discusses the importance of these two concepts in detail as they relate to a set of active affective behavioral ways of interacting (see also Lamphere 1977). *K'é* is a set of moral ways of interacting with others and puts a premium on solidarity, affection, generosity, and friendship. Relatives either through blood and/or clan are *–k'éí* (Navajos have a set of matrilineal clans [see Aberle 1961; Witherspoon 1977]). Like most kin terms in Navajo, this form is inalienable and needs a possessive prefix (e.g., *shik'éí* 'my relatives' or *nihik'éí* 'our relatives'). While, as my consultant noted, words with *–k'eed* tend to be about "male sexuality" (see also Young and Morgan 1987: 854-855) (another Navajo consultant suggested that *–k'eed* now has a generalized sense of "sexuality").  For this consultant, the poem highlighted the relationship between male sexuality and kinship responsibilities and, more broadly, issues of moral responsibility as expressed through *k'é*. The use of the fourth person in the final line—linked as it is with politeness towards relatives of the opposite sex—seems to reinforce that connection.

The fall, according to some Navajos, is the beginning of the year. It is the time of harvest and of plenty. It is when the summer (*shį́*) and winter (*hai*) meet or join. I have heard the fall referred to as "the joining season." Sheep (among other animals)—important in Navajo beliefs and values—mate in the fall and are an important component of *k'é* (see Witherspoon 1977). It is possible that the noun stem *–k'eed* (*aak'eed* 'fall, autumn') and the verb stem *–k'eed* share an historical relationship (see Young and Morgan 1992: 347). And this—this thinking about the etymology of these words—is an explicit goal of Jim in

his poetry in *saad* or as he explained it to me, "most of my poems are written to stimulate thoughts, and that involves thinking about semantics and etymology" (see Webster 2006:44). These, then, would be other resonances for this poem.

### 4.2. Nániichxaad

The next poem that I want to engage with also comes from Jim's all-Navajo collection of poetry *saad.* Here I first present the poem and then a translation done in consultation with Mitchell.

(2) *na'ashchxiidí*
*bíchxį́į́h*
*ní'deeshchxidgo*
*ni'iihchxį̜į̜h*
*chxą̜ą̜' bee*
*nániichxaad*

                        (Jim 1995: 38)

the badger's
nose
stretched round
shitting
with shit
is full

The first thing to note about the poem by Jim is that each line includes the sound *-chx-* which can be described as a voiceless palatal affricate (here written <ch>) and a velar fricative (here written <x>). This is a form of consonantal rhyme. Here the rhyme is based on the "consonant cluster" at the beginning of the verb or noun stem. I should also note that the consonant cluster stem initial of *chx-* in this poem is an optional consonant cluster (both in spoken and written discourse). All of the forms in this poem that have this consonant cluster can also appear without the velar fricative [x]. As noted earlier, the insertion of the velar fricative indicates an affective stance of pejoration, depreciation, and/or augmentation.

In discussing his poetry, Jim told me that "sounds were very important." Why, possibly, this consonant cluster? I would suggest, based on conversations with Navajo consultants, that the expressive use of *-x-* in this poem resonates or echoes with the *-x-* that is normally found in expressions like *nichxǫ́'í* 'it is ugly, disorderly, out of control' or *hóchxǫ'* 'ugly, out of control, disorderly.' Such things that lack control, according to some Navajos, are things that need to be returned to order or control or beauty or *hózhǫ́*. Briefly, among some Navajos there is an important moral distinction between *hózhǫ́* 'beauty, order, harmony, control' and *hóchxǫ'* 'ugly, disorderly, lacking control' (see Reichard 1963; Witherspoon 1977). Much ritual in Navajo is concerned with returning things that are *hóchxǫ'* to a status of *hózhǫ́*. In this poem, Jim not only repeats the sound *-x-* throughout, but in fact creates a consonantal rhyme by way of the repetition of the consonant cluster *-chx-*. This is the very consonant cluster found in the verb stem *–chxǫ'* 'ugly.' The velar fricative resonates across a number of lexical items, some that are more prototypically found with the velar fricative like *hóchxǫ'*. Jim highlights this sound affinity or phonological iconicity even more by repeating the consonant cluster *-chx-* throughout the poem. Jim's use of the velar fricative is a richly layered and textured poetic

accomplishment in Navajo. To make this point, let us go through the poem informed by comments that Mitchell made about the various forms. This will be supplemented by comments from other Navajos about this poem. I rely on Mitchell's discussion for a number of reasons. First, like Jim, Mitchell is also a poet. Second, like Jim, Mitchell is also a medicine man (though they do not do the same curing ceremony). Third, like Jim, Mitchell has spent a fair amount of time thinking about the Navajo language. Fourth, Jim and Mitchell have known each other for many years. Fifth, Mitchell and I have discussed this poem over several years. It is a poem that he and I often come back to talking about. It resonates with our lives.

The introduction of *na'ashchxiidí* 'badger' with the velar fricative indicates a pejorative affective stance towards this character. As Mitchell noted, without the *-x-* this might be a 'badger' from a storybook or Disney DVD, "these animal characters in those movies, there is no ugliness, it's nice and clean movies." But with the *-x-* there is a pejorative sense and, also, a sense of 'badger' being out of place, ugly and uncontrolled. First, the verb stem here is *–chid* 'to move hands and arms in a non-controlled manner'. In Navajo, there is a contrast between some verb stems indicating doing things in a controlled manner (*-níih* 'to move hands and arms in a controlled manner') and indicating that the actor does things in a non-controlled—but not uncontrolled—manner (*-chid* 'to move hands and arms in a non-controlled manner'). Second, the addition of the *-x-* in conjunction with *-ch-* suggests, because it evokes the *-chx-* sound in *hóchxǫ'*, that not only are the hands, arms, or paws moving in a non-controlled manner, but they are moving in an "uncontrolled" manner. 'Badger' lacks control. Behaving (including speaking) in a controlled manner, as has been widely noted in the literature, is a basic tenet of Navajo philosophy (Reichard 1963; Witherspoon 1977; see also Rushforth and Chisholm 1991:146-148).

Let us turn to the second line, *bichxį́į́h* 'its nose'. In conversations with Mitchell he has variously tried to explain the expressive work done by *-x-* through lexicalizing it into English. Mitchell has used terms like "big nose," "fat nose," "dried and cracked," and "ugly nose" to describe the expressive quality of the line *bichxį́į́h*. Another Navajo that I worked with on this poem suggested "protrusion." The velar fricative expresses a pejorative stance towards 'badger's' nose, while the consonant cluster *-chx-* evokes— through phonological iconicity with the verb stem *-chxǫ'*—an out of controlness or ugliness as well. The character *na'ashchxiidí* is both uncontrolled in behavior, but also uncontrolled in appearance as well.

The third line of *ní'deeshchxidgo* which Mitchell translated as "stretched round" was described by Mitchell in the following manner, "its nose is widened out," "its nostrils, horrible looking," "the rim of its nose is open wide", and "its expanding its nose, getting big." I would suggest, based on conversations with Navajo consultants, that *na'ashchxiidí*'s nostrils are flaring in a "horrible" and, hence, uncontrolled manner. That is, 'badger' is behaving in an uncontrolled manner here as well. The *-x-* in combination with *-ch-* evokes again that the actions of 'badger' are actions that are done in a manner lacking control. They are done in an "ugly" (that is, *hochxǫ'*) manner.

The next line—*ni'iihchxį́į́h*—suggests that 'badger' is taking a "nasty shit." It is a "shit" that "smells awful." It might be the case that 'badger' has lost control of his bowel movement and has become incontinent. This seems suggested, anyway, in Mitchell commenting that the form had a sense of "shitting around" and another Navajo suggesting "shits all over." In either case, it is a vile shit that 'badger' is taking. This is, of course,

affirmed in the fifth line. Here we find *chxąą' bee* and as noted above the use of the *-x-* here indicates that 'badger's' defecation is "too much," "like you filled up the toilet bowl," "dirty," "nasty," and "smells awful."

This brings us to the final line: *nániichxaad* 'to become full (bulge or swell) with food' or as Mitchell translates it 'is full.' Mitchell has described the use of the *-x-* here as indicating that 'badger' "over ate," "ate till it was too full," "its belly became too round," "ate till they became ugly with a round belly hanging out," and "it ate more than it needs." As Mitchell further noted, "we shouldn't over eat, we shouldn't have a round stomach." The velar fricative here suggests an affective stance of both augmentative and pejorative. Thus, the use of the *-x-* in conjunction with *-ch-* seems to indicate that 'badger' ate in an uncontrolled manner; that it ate too much, much more than it needed. The repeated use of the consonantal rhyme of *-chx-* in each line forefronts that sound and suggests—through phonological iconicity—a felt connection with the verb stem *–chxǫ'*. Note finally that the vowel that follows the velar fricative in this poem moves from a high front vowel /i/ (*na'ashchxiidí*) to a low central vowel /a/ (*nániichxaad*). In producing this vowel, the mouth physically gets more open/larger and rounder as one reads down the poem. The mouth thus replicates—iconically—the very fullness of *nániichxaad*.

While Mitchell stressed to me that each listener of this poem would get "a different image, a different picture" from this poem and that Jim was "creating a descriptive picture" and "playing around with words" in this poem, Mitchell did note that, for him, the poem suggested that "we don't think about what we are doing, we don't know what we become." *Na'ashchxiidí* is not behaving in a proper manner and according to Mitchell the *-x-* seems to add to the view that 'badger' does not "think about what it is doing." 'Badger' is not paying attention to what it is doing to itself. 'Badger' is out of control: eating too much and eating its own vile shit. It is, quite literally, "full of shit." For Mitchell and now for me, this poem seems to suggest that some people are not paying attention to what they are doing to themselves.

### 4.3. Na'asts'ǫǫsí

Let me now look briefly at another poem by Jim that I have spent the better part of a decade thinking about and talking to Navajos about (see Webster 2006). In this poem, from the same collection as the earlier poems, the first word of the poem can be heard multiple ways and thus creates a complex understanding of the poem:

(3) *na'asts'ǫǫsí*
*ts'ǫǫs, ts'ǫǫs*
*yiits'a'go*
*ííts'ǫ́ǫ́z*
            (Jim 1995: 37)

mouse
suck, suck
sounding
kiss

The first line *na'asts'ǫǫsí* is the conventional term in Navajo for 'mouse', but it can be morphologically analyzed as 'the one who goes about sucking.' It is based on the ideophonic (sound symbolic) verb stem *–ts'ǫǫs* 'to suck, to kiss.' The independent

ideophone—or what Navajos sometimes call *hodiits'a'* 'onomatopoeia, echoes'—is then used in reduplicated form in line two of the poem. The third line is the verb of sounding used in conjunction with ideophones in Navajo. The last line is semantically ambiguous and can mean something akin to 'to kiss,' 'to suck,' or 'to perform a sucking ceremony.' The sucking ceremony is a curative ritual in traditional Navajo beliefs where a Navajo medicine man ritually sucks out an object that is causing harm to a patient. Now the first line—*na'asts'ǫǫsí*—is also homophonous with *náá'ásts'ǫǫs* 'to perform a sucking ceremony again'(with the semeliterative *náá-* 'again' + *'asts'ǫǫs* 'to suck, to kiss, to perform a sucking ceremony'). Given, as Jim explained to me in June, 2001, that the mouse is an "omen of evil, the spirit of death" in "traditional" Navajo beliefs and now associated with the deadly Hantavirus, the poem—through the initial homophony—takes on a rather ominous reading. Another way to translate the above poem, then, might be:

(4)  sucking again [the one who again sucks]
     suck, suck
     sounding
     a sucking ceremony is performed

The punning here allows for multiple imaginative possibilities—including a third reading that resulted in one Navajo teacher deciding against using this poem in classes because of what parents and grandparents might say. A fourth way of imagining this poem would be to hear *na'asts'ǫǫsí* not as 'mouse,' but rather as 'the one who goes about kissing/sucking' or 'baby.' Indeed, this interpretation was suggested to me by Jim as well.


**5. Ná. For you.**

Jim is not the only poet to engage in such uses of punning in their poetry. Here we can look briefly at the work of Luci Tapahonso, the first and current Poet Laureate of the Navajo Nation. For example, Tapahonso (2008: 18), in her book *a radiant curve*, notes that, "the word for mountain, *dził*, 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, as we have seen, motivate poetic expressions and interpretations among Navajos.  In the final stanza of Tapahonso's (2008: 70) poem *Náneeskaadí* 'tortilla, the one that was patted into a circle' there is a rumination that plays on the phonological iconicity and semantic linking of the prefixes and independent forms *ná*(-) and *na'* (here). *Ná* as an independent form has a sense of 'for you'. Here is the final stanza.

(5)  "Na'. Here." As in "Na' k'ad yiłwoł. Here, now go run along."
     "Ná. For you."
     "Díí na'iishłaa. I made this for you."
     "Na', díí ná iishłaa. Here, I made this for you."
     "Ná 'ahéésh kad. I slapped this dough into shape for you."
     "Díí nániínsííł kaad. This warm circle of dough is spread out for you."
     "K'ad la'. There. Łikanish? Is it good?"
                    (Tapahonso 2008: 70)

*Ná-* as a prefix can mean, among other things, 'around in a circle,' 'up,' and something to do with 'smoke.' Though in *náneeskaadí* the prefix appears to be *náni-* 'into a circle' or 'repeatedly do' and becomes *nánee-* + the *si-* perfective here reduced to *-s-* + the very

productive verb stem –*kaad* 'to slap, to pat, to extend, to spread out, flatness, space' and the nominalizing enclitic -*í*. In the poem, Tapahonso evokes the sense of *ná* 'for you' within *náneeskaadí* through the phonological iconitiy between *ná* and *ná-*. Indeed, *na*—whether it be *na'* 'here' or *ná* 'for you' or *ná-* as a circular prefix—echoes throughout this section of the poem. This overwhelming sense of *na* it was suggested to me makes one abundantly cognizant that one makes *náneeskaadí for someone* (in the poem, the narrator's husband).

## 6. Conclusions

It goes without saying that the sounds of a poem are lost in translation. In our exuberances and deficiencies of translating from one language to another the sounds of a poem should loom large and loudly (see Becker 1995). This point has often been made and then quickly relegated to the status of miscellany: Something to be noted and then ignored. After all, what we are after, so we are told, is to translate the meaning of words (some imagined referential fidelity). We may, as Leavitt (2006) usefully surveys, exoticize or domesticate those translations. Shall we have a brawling Homer or an Agatha Christie Homer? But what if we pause here and reflect—and reflect seriously—on what it means to lose the sounds of a poem? To lose, that is, the imaginative resonances between and across and within words. Not just to hear *k'é* in a poem which repeats the sound [k'ee], but to mishear, as puns often are keen on, *na'ats'ǫǫsi* as *naa'ats'ǫǫsi*? To be led by the sound of *na'* to imagine *ná*? How do you translate the sound of the velar fricative into English and its potential association with *hochxǫ'*? And, to recall a point made by Diffloth (1976) years ago on the pronouncing of expressives, how does it feel to say *náníichxaad*? They are not mere garments for something else, they are something quite evocative. The imaginative possibilities evoked, provoked, and convoked through sound in Navajo language poetry are lost in the English language translations.

Leavitt (2011: 210) has called for a Neo-Boasian linguistics—or, perhaps, a Neo-Boasian linguistic anthropology and here I would certainly place my work in that category—that tries to understand—among other things—"the motivating phenomena of language love…and delight in language(s)"—what I have elsewhere investigated under the terms *intimate grammars* and *mischievous grammars* (see Webster 2010b; Peterson and Webster 2013). As one way of pursuing a Neo-Boasian linguistic anthropology concerned with linguistic relativity, Leavitt (2011: 210) goes on to note that, "sound patterning certainly has effects on feelings, if not directly ideation, effects that are heightened and valorized in poetic language." Have I proven, in some sense, a reformulated version of linguistic relativity in this paper? The most obvious and self-congratulatory answer is: yes. More realistic, and more humbly, I hope to have suggested the value of attending to phonological iconicity (or sound affinities) in research on the question of linguistic relativities. This line of research is, of course, eminently empirical and combines skills of both the ethnographer and the linguist. In many ways, such phonological iconicities are examples of what Woodbury (1993, 1998) has called *form-dependent expressions*—the forms here are the sounds of words and their suggestiveness, their interwovenness.

Now two caveats: First such sound suggestiveness and phonological iconicity can echo across languages. If form-dependent expressions are, following Woodbury (1998: 257), based "on a perception of non-arbitrariness in the relationship between form and function" and if iconicity and indexicality are the most obvious examples of this, then

*intralingual punning* is an example of language-internal form-dependent expression. But note, however, that *interlingual puns* are also linguistic forms that are deeply implicated in the felt expressive repertoire of local groupness—but with a twist, because they are interwoven *across languages* through phonological iconicity. Here it is well to simply acknowledge: 1) with Sapir (1921: 38) that "all grammars leak" and 2) we have always lived within such multilingual and heteroglossic worlds (see Haas 1951; Bakhtin 1986, Hill 1993, Woolard 1998; O'Neill 2008). If linguistic relativity or relativities is to mean anything it must take such lived realities into account.

Second, I have discussed exclusively the sounds of spoken languages. I do this with the knowledge that sign language poets also make use of various forms of iconic associations and affinities—rhyming, punning, alliteration and the like are also found in sign languages (see Bauman, Nelson, and Rose 2006 and Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2012). These are, as I understand it, overwhelmingly visual rhymes and puns (repetitions of visual forms or resemblances of visual forms). In principle it seems likely—and I simply do not know—that there are visual affinities analogous to the sound affinities and associations that I've discussed here. Linguistic anthropologists and others have neglected sign languages at our own intellectual peril.

All of this has a particular pressing urgency given the threatened status of many languages around the world. What gets lost in language shift? One important thing that gets lost is sounds. And these are sounds that resonate. Sounds that reverberate. Sounds that echo. Sounds that, after all, can and do inspire acts of imagination.

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