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The poetics and politics of Navajo ideophony in contemporary Navajo poetry

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Abstract

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

Keywords: Navajo; Ideophony; Poetics; Language ideology; Contemporary poetry

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

1. Introduction

As we see in the above quote, Sapir (1921, p. 8) suggests that the Northern Athabaskan speaking peoples of the Mackenzie River region (Canada) did not use many onomatopoetic or "imitative" forms in their language. Sapir was challenging the belief that non-European languages, the languages of so-called "primitives", had more sound symbolic forms than did European languages. Sapir was here attempting to discount a certain

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bias towards Native American languages, but he may have also been understating the importance of sound symbolism in Athabaskan languages. For example, among the Slavey (Northern Athabaskan), who live along the Mackenzie River, they use the evocative onomatopoeia *sah, sah, sah* for "the sound of a bear walking unseen not far from camp" (O'Grady et al, 2005, p. 137). Axelrod (1993, pp. 79–81) describes the onomatopoetic (ONO) as one of the aspectual categories of the Northern Athabaskan language Koyukon. As Axelrod (1993, pp. 79–80) explains, "seventy-four roots (12 percent of the corpus) allow (or have exclusively) onomatopoetic derivatives." Sapir also may have missed something of the differences that people assign to the use of ideophones, that is, the linguistic ideologies that informs views about sound symbolism. This is, not, however, to say that Sapir was unconcerned with sound symbolism. His work on Nootka ways of speaking and the evoking of social types (often derogatory, sometimes affectionate) through sound symbolism is an ample and noteworthy example (Sapir, 1915; see also Hymes, 1979).

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

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

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

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

2. Ideophony in perspective

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

[1] My interest in Navajo ideophones began when I was doing work on the emergence of written Navajo poetry. During that research, I began to notice that a number of poems in Navajo relied on the use of sound symbolism. In the summers of 2007 and 2008, I returned to the Navajo Nation to work with Navajos on ideophony (among other things). I discussed ideophony with Navajo poets, Navajo educators, and other Navajos (who were, to my knowledge, neither poets nor educators). I also elicited Navajo ideophones from Navajo consultants and collected poetry that used Navajo ideophony. I elicited Navajo ideophones in two ways: (1) I used the list of onomatopoeias given by Young and Morgan (1987) as a prompt and (2) I used narratives collected by earlier researchers as a prompt. In the first case, I asked Navajos if they had ever encountered such sounds and in the second case I asked them to translate such forms from the written narratives.