

“So it’s got three meanings dil dil:” *Seductive ideophony and the sounds of Navajo poetry*

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Abstract

This article engages questions about translation, phonological iconicity, and seductive ideophony. I begin by discussing the work of Paul Friedrich as it relates to questions of linguistic relativity and poetics and the qualities of music and myth that constitute poetry. I then present a poem written in Navajo by Rex Lee Jim and four translations of the poem. Three are from Navajo consultants and one of those translations will be, from a certain perspective, rather surprising. Namely, why does one consultant translate this poem as if it is composed of ideophones? The fourth translation is mine. I then work through the morphology of the poem in Navajo, saying something more about the translators and the process of translation. I then provide a transcript of a conversation I had with Blackhorse Mitchell about this poem. I use this to take up questions of phonological iconicity (punning) and the seductive quality of ideophony (the pole of music). I also place this poem within a context of the stick game in Navajo philosophy (the pole of myth). This leads, in the conclusion, to reflections about linguistic relativity, misunderstandings, sound, and poetics.

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Keywords: ideophony, Navajo, poetry, iconicity, linguistic relativity, punning

Résumé

Cet article soulève des questions sur la traduction, sur l'iconicité phonologique et sur la séduction de l'idéophonie. Je discute d'abord du travail de Paul Friedrich (1979, 1986 sur les questions de relativité linguistique et de poétique, et les qualités de la musique et du mythe qui constituent la poésie. Je présente ensuite un poème écrit en Navajo par Rex Lee Jim, et quatre traductions du poème, dont trois faites par des consultants navajo. L'une de ces trois sera, d'un certain point de vue, assez surprenante : pourquoi le consultant a-t-il traduit le poème comme s'il était composé d'idéophones? La quatrième traduction est de moi. J'analyse la morphologie du poème en Navajo, avec des commentaires au sujet des traducteurs et du processus de traduction. Je fournis ensuite la transcription d'une conversation que j'ai eue au sujet de ce poème avec Blackhorse Mitchell. Cette conversation me permet d'aborder des questions d'iconicité phonologique (calembours) et de la séduction qu'exerce l'idéophonie (le pôle de la musique). Je situe le poème dans le contexte du jeu de bâton dans la philosophie navajo (le pôle du mythe). Cela mène, en conclusion, à des réflexions sur la relativité linguistique, les malentendus, le son et la poétique.

Mots clés: idéophonie, Navajo, poésie, iconicité, relativité linguistique, jeux de mots

1. INTRODUCTION

Language is rough drafts for poetry
Friedrich (1986: 35)

Over the last several years, I've tried to think through – from an ethnographic and linguistically informed perspective – what it means to translate various poems written in Navajo by Rex Lee Jim (see Webster 2006, 2013, 2014a, 2015a, 2015b; Mitchell and Webster 2011).¹ Much of this thinking through has been founded on uneasiness with literal translations of the poems (see Mitchell and Webster 2011). Part of what I have discovered, in talking with Navajos about such work, is that many of the poems are predicated on punning (or what Navajos sometimes call *saad aheelt'éégo diits'a'*) (Webster 2013, 2015b). Jim, to his credit, years ago told me that “sounds were very important” in his poetry (see Webster 2006). He also told me that his poetry was “sorta sneaky” (see Webster 2014b). Jim also noted that, “most of my poems are written to stimulate thoughts, and that involves thinking about semantics and etymology” (Webster 2006: 44). Over time I've come to appreciate these points more and more.

In this article, I want to consider some questions about translation, literalism, phonological iconicity, and what I will call *seductive ideophony*. This will lead, in the end, to a discussion of the value of misunderstanding. In other words, I take seriously the notion of translation as social practice. In what follows, I begin by discussing the work of Paul Friedrich (1979, 1986) as it relates to linguistic relativity,

¹Abbreviations used: CAUS: causative; DIST: distributive; EMPH: emphatic particularizer; INTRJ: interjection; SG: singular

poetics, and the qualities of music and myth that constitute poetry. I then turn to a poem written in Navajo by Rex Lee Jim (1995) from his collection of poetry entitled *saad* ('word, language'). After that, I present four translations of the poem. Three are from Navajo consultants. One of the translations presents the poem as if it is an ideophone poem. The fourth translation is mine, based on conversations with Navajos about the poem and my own sense of what's going on in the poem and how that might – partially – be conveyed in English. In order to understand how this poem might be translated as a poem composed of ideophones, I work through the morphology of the poem in Navajo (which, compared to other poems by Jim, is not terribly complicated) and say something more about the translators and the process of translation. At that point, I yield the floor a bit and provide the transcript of a conversation I had with Blackhorse Mitchell about this poem. After that, I take up the questions of phonological iconicity (punning) and the seductive quality of ideophony (this is the pole of music). I also place this poem within a context of the stick game in Navajo philosophy (this is the pole of myth for Friedrich 1986). In conclusion, I take up broader questions about linguistic relativity, poetics, and the value of *mondegreens*.

2. MYTH AND MUSIC IN LINGUISTIC RELATIVITY

Over the years, Friedrich (1979, 1986, 2006) has attempted to reformulate linguistic relativity with an emphasis on poetic language (see also Hymes 1981, Sherzer 1987, Becker 1995; for a review see Leavitt 2011). As Friedrich (1986: 43) has noted, "poetic language is the locus of the most interesting differences between languages and should be studied together with the poetic imagination of the individual." Friedrich takes inspiration from this famous quote from Edward Sapir (1929a: 209):

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.

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.

Sapir (1929a)

Elsewhere Sapir (1921: 225) notes that "every language is 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." This means that the dialogue between languages can create particularities of aesthetic features of sound and rhythm, symbol and morphology.

Such concerns with poetry can also be found in the work of Franz Boas (1966: 58):

When the question arises, for instance, of investigating the poetry of the Indians, no translation can possibly be considered as an adequate substitute for the original. The form of rhythm, the treatment of language, the adjustment of text to music, the imagery, the use of metaphors, and all the numerous problems involved in any thorough investigation of

the style of poetry, can be interpreted only by the investigator who has equal command of the ethnographical traits of the tribe and of their language. Boas (1966)

For Friedrich (1986: 35), the question of linguistic relativity hinges on the relationship between myth and the music of language or, as he describes it:

The sounds of human language in general and of the poet's language in particular, that is, the vast network of associations that ranges from subtle phonetic nuance to features of associations that discriminate basic meanings ('sack' versus 'shack'), matters of order and hierarchy, many levels of intonation, and, of course, the interweaving of all this with the grammatical, semantic, and sociocultural universe. Friedrich (1986)

The music of language is then intertwined with what Friedrich (1986: 37) calls myth. For Friedrich, myths are our "ideas and theories" that underlie our imagination, as well as what are conventionally considered myths in anthropology, and our own "myths of the unique individual" (Friedrich 1986: 38). Friedrich's definition of myth is meant as a heuristic that captures the complex interplay of ideas and feelings about and of the world.

In this article, I will be most concerned with the music (or sound) of this poem and how that influences the ways that it is heard. This work builds on the theoretical scaffolding developed in Webster (2014b). As John Leavitt (2011: 202) has noted, "phonetics and phonology represent unavoidable sound-worlds." It is here, I would argue, that "the specificity of language is most intensely" felt (Leavitt 2011: 202). 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 perceive such resemblances as socialized language users. Bolinger 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 Friedrich (1979) – he noted that languages are *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 1987, 1996).

In a later article, Bolinger (1949: 55) argues 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 chord, 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. As Dell Hymes (1960: 112) makes clear, "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.” Hymes here should remind us that we cannot ignore myth because it cannot be completely separated from the music of language.

The questions that inform this article, then, revolve around the following: Does it matter what the sounds of a language are? What the sounds of various words or morphemes are in a language? How such sounds resonate within a language? How such sounds convoke (that is, call together words and the sounds of words)? As 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 (see also Urban 1986). It mattered to Sapir (1929b) and also to Whorf (1956: 266–268), concerned, as they were, with expressive devices and phonetic symbolism. Boas (1889) famously noted that the sounds of a language might predispose 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, *god* as *gad* ‘juniper tree.’ 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 (2004) suggest, 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 (they are bivalent, in Woolard’s 1998 terminology). We will see this concern with punning to be an important aesthetic in the poetry of Jim. Much of the current debates about linguistic relativity – informed by modernist visions of what a language is or should be – take a narrow semantico-referentialist view of language (Bauman and Briggs 2003, Samuels 2004), imagining that (spoken) languages lack phonetic substance (Webster 2015c). It seems to me that we should attend to sound suggestiveness via phonological iconicity and the ways sounds evoke and orient our imaginations as a crucial locus for thinking through linguistic relativities. To be clear, by linguistic relativity I mean a positive vision of the ways in which languages *facilitate* possibilities to orient and imagine (see Friedrich 2009: 219).

3. THE POEM AND ITS TRANSLATIONS

The poem that forms the core of this article comes from Rex Lee Jim’s (1995) all-Navajo collection *saad*. The volume was published by Jim’s alma mater, Princeton University, through its Princeton Collections of Western Americana. I have discussed this book and translations of other poems from it elsewhere (Webster 2006, 2013, 2015a; Mitchell and Webster 2011); here I note that the book is written almost entirely in Navajo (including page numbers and introductory materials). I should also note that most Navajos, given the general lack of literacy in Navajo, come to this poem as an oral text and not as a written text (Mitchell and Webster 2011). The consultants that I have worked with on this poem for this article are all literate in Navajo. Here is the poem by Jim (1995: *dízdiiin dóó bi’aa tseebíi*):

éh

tsidit ga’

DIST thematic prefix for elongated object CAUS slender object moves
 yii- -ts'a'
 thematic prefix for sounds existing to sound

The first line consists of the interjection or exclamation *éh*, glossed into English by my consultants as “wow,” “oh,” “what do you know,” and “yes” (this last form was given in conversation about the translation). From this perspective, there are no ideophones in this poem.

Many of Jim’s poems create an intensification of form through the repetition of a key sound in that poem (in this poem, that sound is *-dił-*) (Webster 2013, 2015a; on intensification of form, see Jakobson 1960). The second line introduces that key sound: *tsidit ga’* can be analyzed as *tsin* ‘wood’ + *-dił* ‘jar, shake by concussion’ (-*déél* ‘jar, shake by concussion, play stick dice’ Young and Morgan 1992: 134, 135). This form is often translated as “stick dice” (Aberle 1942: 144, Young and Morgan 1987: 25, Wall and Morgan 1994: 152). The Franciscan Fathers (1910: 482) translate the form as ‘stick rebounds’. In my own translation, I have taken my cue from the Franciscan Fathers here in translating line 3. *ga’* is an emphatic particle that particularizes nouns (Young and Morgan 1987: 22). Given its low salience on the cline of metalinguistic awareness, it often was not translated by consultants (see Silverstein 2001).

As for the third line *da’diłdił*; *da’* seems like the distributive prefix here or perhaps also the interrogative *da’* ‘is it’; *di-* + *-dił* ‘to cause them to move independently’ (see, for example, ‘*adishdił* ‘to play stick dice’ (Young and Morgan 1987: 25)). Young and Morgan (1987: 25) go on to explain that “*di-*, Pos. VIa, generic classifier relating to an elongated object? + **dił*: to cause it or them to move independently – a slender flexible object, as a rope or pair of objects, as shoes, stick dice.” Blackhorse Mitchell, in a conversation about this form, said, “*da’diłdił* is like throwing the stick repeatedly.” The sense of repetition suggested by Mitchell is possibly a result of the distributive *da’* prefix. Reichard (1951: 135) notes that this form “may denote a repetitive idea.”

The final line, *yiiits’a’*, can be analyzed as *yii-* ‘3SG’ + *-ts’a’* ‘having to do with sound’ (Young and Morgan 1992: 625). This form, as I have noted elsewhere (Webster 2009), is often used as a verb of sounding following an ideophone.

With this background, let us look at the translations again. All four translations recognize the exclamatory or interjectional quality of *éh*. Mitchell translates the form as *wow*, while Translator 2 and I go with *oh*. Translator 3 essentially lexicalizes the exclamation as “what do you know.” All indicate a sense of surprise here. The translations begin to diverge in line 2. Mitchell, Translator 2 and I all remain faithful to the four-line structure of the poem and attempt to translate line by line. Translator 3, on the other hand, gives the gist of the poem in line 2. Mitchell, Translator 3 and I recognize the form *tsidit* as “stick dice” or “stick game.” I will discuss the stick dice in more detail in Section 6; for now, it is important to note that the stick dice game is a traditional Navajo practice and that it is played by way of throwing long sticks against a rock. Translator 3, seeing *tsidit* as an important component of Navajo culture, decides against translating the form into English (this is a not uncommon strategy – see Webster

2009). Mitchell attempts to capture the particularizing function of *ga'* with *the*, while I use *these*. On the other hand, Translator 2 does not translate this form as “stick dice” or “stick game,” but rather as the sound symbolic *bang*. What’s going on here?

Before we can answer that question, let me say something about the process of translation for each of our translators. For Mitchell, I mailed him a typed version of *saad* and he then went about translating the poem from Navajo into English based on his knowledge of the poem. He read the poem aloud numerous times and thought long about the poem before engaging in a translation. Then, in the summer of 2008, I stayed with Mitchell at his home while we worked on a number of translation projects. I audio-recorded our work together (see Interlude). He is literate in Navajo and has taught Navajo at both the high school and college level. He also has written his own poetry in Navajo. Mitchell clearly saw his task as translating poetry into poetry. Translator 3 is also literate in Navajo and he translated the poem after I texted it to him in the middle of a conversation we were having about poetry. This was the first time I had had him translate a poem for me, and he did not translate it line by line; rather he translated the gist of the poem. He was also reluctant to translate *tsidil* into English – both because it is, for him, an important part of Navajo culture and because he assumed (rightly) that I knew what the form meant. Translator 2, on the other hand, had not worked with me previously, though we had met before. I had heard about his facility with translation from another anthropologist and so sought him out. We met at a local coffee shop in a border town. I had brought two typed copies of Jim’s *saad* with me (one for him to write on and one for me to make notes on). I also audio-recorded our work that day (it took us a little over two and a half hours to translate *saad*). His process in translating the poems was to read the poem aloud several times and then give an English translation. I would then ask him various questions about the translation. He often wanted to explain the poetic work being done in Navajo to me, but seemed less concerned about translating poetry into poetry.

Translator 2 read line 2 both as *ts'idil* and as *tsidil*. He settled on reading it as the first form. That form is analyzable as *ts'i-* a thematic prefix having to do with sounds (Young and Morgan 1987: 359; Young and Morgan 1992: xiii) and the ideophone *dil* ‘rumble, stomp, bang.’ The differences between the two readings of line 2 are an ejective alveolar affricate /ts'/ versus a plain alveolar affricate /ts/ at the beginning of the word, and a voiceless lateral (“barred l”) /l/ versus a voiced lateral /l/ at the end. The corresponding semantic difference is between the stick game and a banging sound.

In line 3, Mitchell – with *stomping* – and I – with *rebounding* – attempt to evoke something of the sound of the game being played. I also attempt to capture something of the repeated nature of the sound as suggested by Mitchell in conversation and in the use of the *da'* prefix here by reduplicating *rebounding*. Translator 3 leaves this largely untranslated. Translator 2, however, translates this line as *bang, bang*. In listening to the audio recording, it seems clear that he has settled on hearing this form as *da' dil dil*. In conversation he translates *da'* as the interrogative “you mean?” but leaves that form out of his final translation. He translates *dil dil* as ‘bang, bang’ – again treating this as the sound symbolic form *dil* and here reduplicated (a

common practice in Navajo ideophony – see Webster 2009). Translator 2 described this sound as “like an automobile with a rickety back with stuff banging around.”

In line 4, all four translators attempt to get at the soundedness of what has occurred. Mitchell translates it from the first-person perspective as *I hear*, while the other three translate the form as *it sounds*.

5. INTERLUDE: A CONVERSATION WITH BLACKHORSE MITCHELL

The response of a reader or an audience to a powerful poem reflects and brings to the surface the potential intimacy that links together all the native or at least fluent speakers of *a* language.

Friedrich (1986: 155)

Before moving to a discussion of the seduction of ideophony, I will first present an example of how the work of translation is done. Below is the transcript of a conversation that Mitchell and I had about the translation of this poem on July 18, 2008. We were seated in the dining room of Mitchell’s home outside of Shiprock, NM on the Navajo Nation. Mitchell had translated the poems for me prior to my arrival on the reservation earlier that month and we were now working through his translations. I would ask for clarifications and the like about his translation. We would then talk through his translations. It was not the only time we talked about this poem, but this example was our first run through the poem together and suggests how the work of translation proceeds. I should also note that I had not translated this poem with Translator 2 or 3 yet. Lines have been organized according to breath pause, and attempt to reveal the cadence of our conversation, with a colon (:) used to indicate phonetic lengthening. Brackets indicate contextual information. Lines have been numbered for ease of reference.

7-18-2008. Mr. Mitchell’s home [begins 20:50]

BM:	this one says éh	1
	tsidił it’s the stick game	2
	you know those stick thing you use	3
	that’s called tsidił	4
AW:	mhm	5
BM:	it says tsidił ga’	6
	it says the stick game	7
	was or is	8
AW:	ga’	9
BM:	ga’	10
AW:	was	11
BM:	ga’ something like that	12
	it says da’diłdił	13

da'diɬ	14
diɬ	15
says da'diɬdiɬ	16
AW: da'diɬdiɬ	17
BM: da'diɬdiɬ	18
diɬdiɬ is like you're, you're, you're, you're repeating like you're just	19
it's like the stick game is itself	20
going like	21
[hand gestures of throwing or bouncing of stick dice]	
AW: mm	22
BM: that's what diɬdiɬ is	23
AW: and that's the sound it's making	24
BM: no	25
AW: no	26
BM: I would, I would	27
yeah da'diɬ diɬdiɬ yiits'a'	28
if you say dil dil yiits'a' would be like somebody	29
[stomps feet repeatedly]	
AW: mhm	30
BM: that's making dil dil dil dil yiits'a'	31
not diɬdiɬ	32
he's making it similar too here	33
da'diɬdiɬ would be:	34
the stick game itself is playing the game	35
AW: but that doesn't evoke the sound	36
BM: that would be dil yiits'a'	37
AW: what does da'diɬdiɬ mean	38
BM: da'diɬdiɬ is like throwing the stick repeatedly	39
AW: throwing the stick repeatedly	40
BM: yiits'a' is its sound	41
[5 sec pause]	
AW: but then yiits'a' doesn't change that into the sound it's making	42
BM: it could be both	43
it could be dil dil	44
or da'diɬdiɬ	45
AW: okay	46

BM: see dildil	47
dil by itself is blood	48
you could say blood, blood	49
AW: right	50
BM: but in this case it's not blood, blood	51
AW: right	52
BM: it's a:	53
da'dildil would be just like leaping or prancing higher than the leap	
that would be dildil	54
so it's got three meanings dil dil	55
it could be the sound	56
it could be the leaping motion whatever that is	57
yiyits'a' makes it its sound	58
AW: mhm	59
[ends 23:30]	

I will have more to say below about this fragment of conversation, but I have reproduced it here to give a sense of the progression of our conversation about this poem.

6. SEDUCED BY IDEOPHONY

To begin to think about Translator 2's translation of this poem, I turn briefly to recent work on ideophony. Specifically, Mark Dingemans (2011, 2012) has suggested that there can be a certain coercive power to iconicity (following Charles Sanders Peirce, a resemblance of something to someone – see Silverstein 1976, Samuels 2004, Webster 2009). Dingemans (2012), for example, points to the ways that some can see all Chinese characters as pictorial or all ideophones as equally imitative (iconic), even though not all Chinese characters are pictorial, nor are all ideophones equally imitative (iconic). While we tend to assume that ideophones are inherently iconic, Dingemans (2011: 51) suggests that “the depictive nature of the ideophone coerces us into treating the word as an adequate rendition of the depicted event.” In a later piece, Dingemans (2012) goes on to argue that:

we know that all ideophone systems at least have a core of simple sound-imitative ideophones (onomatopoeia), and that beyond that, there is often another relatively concrete set of sound+movement ideophones... For the remainder – for instance ideophones for colour, smell, or cognitive states – the transparency of the iconic mappings trails off quickly. Still, people are coerced into treating them as good depictions, because they are framed as such. Dingemans (2012)

Almost all Navajo ideophones are, in fact, onomatopoeic (Webster 2009). So the question here is not whether or not a peripheral set of ideophones are being understood as sound-imitative or iconic. Instead, what I find most useful in this discussion

is the question of framing and how that might “coerce” one into hearing an ideophone. It should also be clear, given what I’ve described about Navajo ideophony (Webster 2009, 2014a) and what Janis Nuckolls (1996, 2010, 2014) has described for ideophony in Runa, that there is nothing particularly “simple” about sound-imitative ideophones when looked at from the perspective of poetics and their place within cultural frameworks of meaning and moral responsibility, though it should be clear those frameworks of meaning and moral responsibility as expressed by and through sound-imitative ideophony are not identical among Navajos and Runa.

It should also be clear that we are dealing with a *felt iconicity* (Webster 2009, 2014a; see also Sicoli 2014), the ways that forms are felt to resemble something, and such felt iconicities are often language particular or, in the case of interlingual puns, interlanguage particular (Webster 2010, 2013). All forms in a language, it seems to me, have the potential to be felt as iconic of something (see Bolinger 1940, 1949). Take, for example, what is not a form that is conventionally understood as ideophonic or iconic in Navajo (*tó* ‘water’), but can be used – especially by a good poet – as an ideophone for the sound of water dropping. Sherwin Bitsui, for example, in a poetry performance in Edwardsville, IL on November 17, 2009, begins a selection from his book *Flood Song* (2009) in the following manner (lines are organized by breath pause):

- (2) *tó*
tó
tó
tó
tó
tó

The repetition of *tó* ‘water’ in such a rhythmic manner evoked the sound of water dropping on the ground. This was, indeed, as he explained to me later, part of the aesthetic that he was after in his performance. In use, then, the repetition of *tó* created a felt iconicity to the dripping of water.

As I have described elsewhere, Navajo ideophonic expressions (what Navajos sometimes call *hodiits’a* ‘there is a sound’) are often followed by a verb of sounding based on the verb stem *-ts’áá’* (and its suppletive neuter stem form *-ts’a’*) (see Young and Morgan 1992: 625, Webster 2009). Below is an example from a narrative told by Curly Tó Aheedlínii to Father Berard Haile concerning Porcupine and Elk (1984: 104). Porcupine is trying to discern whether or not Elk – who has ferried Porcupine across a river inside its stomach – has reached dry land. I give this example to show how the verb of sounding works and to give an example of the ideophone *dil dil* (bolded below) in use (the Navajo is from Haile 1984; the English translations were done in consultation with Mitchell).

- (3) *Nikináázdeestat, ńt’ée’ **dil, dil**, yiists’ áá’ jini’*
 She stamped her feet again, then, dil, dil, it sounded, they say.
T’áadoo tó diists’ áá’ da jini’
 There was no sound of water, they say.

Haile (1984: 104)

The context of translating a number of poems by Jim also matters. In an earlier poem in *saad*, Jim does use the verb of sounding (*yiits 'a' + the subordinating enclitic -go*) after a reduplicated ideophone (*ts'qqs, ts'qqs*). I have discussed this poem at length elsewhere (Webster 2006, 2014a), so here merely give the Navajo and an English version. The ideophones are shown in boldface.

(4) <i>na'asts'qqs</i>	mouse
<i>ts'qqs, ts'qqs</i>	suck, suck
<i>yiits'a'go</i>	sounding
<i>íits'qóz</i>	kiss
(Jim 1995: 37)	(Webster 2006: 39)

My point is that Translator 2 was, in a sense, open to hear ideophones in Jim's poetry because he had previously encountered such forms.

More than that, however, I think the verb of sounding *yiits'a'* seduced Translator 2 into hearing the poem as a poem composed of ideophones. Here I differ with Dingemans (2012) and do not see this framing so much as a form of coercion (which seems predicated on a kind of force; you *must* do this), but rather as seduction (which seems more about enticing and charming; you *want* to do this). When Translator 2 first read the poem aloud he pronounced the key forms as follows: *tsidit ga'* and *da'didit*. However, after he read the final line, he went back and pronounced those forms as *ts'idil* and *da' dil dil*. I think the reason that Translator 2 went back and reread these forms the way he did was because he had been seduced by *yiits'a'* into hearing this poem as full of ideophones. The verb of sounding *yiits'a'* reframed this poem as an ideophone poem for Translator 2. In this respect, it became an ideophone poem similar to the ones described by Philip Noss for Gbaya (2001: 266–267; see also Barrett 2014 on Mayan ideophone poems). There are, I might add, also song traditions that are overwhelmingly composed of either vocables or ideophones among Navajos (see Matthews 1889, Frisbie 1980).

Mitchell too, I might add, in the conversation reproduced above, recognizes the seductive power of the verb of sounding, to rehear the poem as full of ideophones. After first disagreeing with my question about whether or not the form evokes the sound of the stick dice game being played (lines 24–26), Mitchell then begins to work through the implications of the form in the following excerpt:

BM: I would, I would	27
yeah da'dit dildit yiits'a'	28
if you say dil dil yiits'a' would be like somebody	29
[stomps feet repeatedly]	
AW: mhm	30
BM: that's making dil dil dil dil yiits'a'	31
not dildit	32
he's making it similar too here	33
da'didit would be:	34
the stick game itself is playing the game	35

Having worked through a number of Jim's poems and recognized a poetic device, Mitchell, in line 33, notes that "he's making it similar too here." The poetic device that Mitchell has recognized is what is sometimes called *saad aheet'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, it was Mitchell's insight that the consonant cluster *-chx-* used in one poem in *saad* evoked a concern with *hochxq'* 'disorder, ugliness, lack of control' that led us to co-author an article together (Mitchell and Webster 2011). Nor is this practice unique to Jim or to poets; Barre Toelken and Tacheeni Scott (1981: 84–85) describe the over-abundant use of *qq* in words at key moments in a Coyote narrative told by Yellowman. As they note, as a standalone form *qq* is an affirmation interjection and thus its use adds a certain ironic texture to the key moments in the narrative that are not as they appear to the characters involved.

The seductiveness of this poem becomes most apparent in the next excerpt:

AW:	what does da'diidil mean	38
BM:	da'diidil is like throwing the stick repeatedly	39
AW:	throwing the stick repeatedly	40
BM:	yiits'a' is its sound	41
	[5 sec pause]	
AW:	but then yiits'a' doesn't change that into the sound it's making	42
BM:	it could be both	43
	it could be dil dil	44
	or da'diidil	45
AW:	okay	46
BM:	see diidil	47
	diil by itself is blood	48
	you could say blood, blood	49
AW:	right	50
BM:	but in this case it's not blood, blood	51
AW:	right	52
BM:	it's a:	53
	da'diidil would be just like leaping or prancing higher than the leap	
	that would be diidil	54
	so it's got three meanings dil dil	55
	it could be the sound	56
	it could be the leaping motion whatever that is	57
	yiits'a' makes it its sound	58

In line 41, Mitchell states that “*yiits’a*’ is its sound”, and then there is a five-second pause. My distinct impression is that Mitchell was beginning to enjoy the realization that there was something going on in this poem. In line 42, I then make a statement – not a question here – that the verb of sounding does not change the meaning (my intonation contour is flat for this statement). Mitchell then indirectly corrects me with, “it could be both.” Indeed, after finding two possible ways to think about this line, Mitchell then adds a third way of thinking about it (“you could say blood, blood”). However, he quickly discards that view (“but in this case it’s not blood, blood”). Yet in line 55, he then uses the resultative “so” and states, “so it’s got three meanings *dil dil*” (interestingly enough, he pronounces the form with the voiced lateral and not the voiceless lateral). My understanding from the conversation was that the three meanings were: 1) “the sound” of the dice, 2) “the leaping motion” of the dice, and 3) “blood.” Finally, Mitchell’s translation of the third line of the poem as “are stomping” suggests his own sensitivity to the sound evoked by this form (whether or not it is an ideophone or just sounds like one).

My point here is that *ts’idil* and *tsidil* and *da’diddil* and *da’ dil dil* are potential puns in Navajo and that the final line (*yiits’a*’) encourages or seduces the listener or reader to hear or understand the poem as either composed of ideophones or that such ideophones – as evoked through the potential puns – might resonate around the poem (creating, that is, a layer of soundedness that envelopes the poem). To borrow Sylvia Wright’s (1954) term, the *mondegreens* (the mishearing of the words of poem or song) here are motivated by phonological iconicity or homophony (words resembling other words through sound). *Mondegreens* become, in this view, one crucial window on the ways that languages facilitate imaginative acts (both within and across languages).

7. STICK DICE RESONANCES: BLOOD, LIGHTNING AND THUNDER

Having laid out something of the music of this poem and the seduction of ideophony, I now want to add some context (myth, in Friedrich’s terms) about the stick game and suggest how this context might inform the resonances in this poem. David Aberle (1942) has discussed the stick game and its associated mythology at length. Here is how Aberle (1942: 144) describes the game:

Stick-dice, *tsidil*, is played with three pieces of cottonwood, about six inches long, an inch and a quarter wide, and half an inch thick, rounded on one side, flat on the other, and slightly rounded on the ends. The rounded side is left uncolored and is called ‘white.’ The flat side is blackened. The playing ground consists of a circle of forty small stones in four groups of ten, with four spaces, ‘rivers’, separating the groups. The circle is about two feet across. Players sit close together around the circle. In the center is a rock about the size of a man’s hand. The sticks are bounced on the center rock and fall to the ground. Aberle (1942)

Aberle then goes on to make a number of important points. First, as is often the case with Navajos, Aberle documents a number of origin stories for the stick game. Aberle (1942: 153) notes that these are “equally” viable though different origin narratives. In

my experience, attempts to ascertain from Navajo consultants the “correct” version of something were often met with the response of “it depends” (Webster 2009: 208). Such issues often depend on context. Likewise, Aberle (1942) noted that not all Navajos were willing to share information concerning the origins of the stick game with him. Aberle (1942: 145) gives this revealing account, even if he is also dismissive of it:

Mythological material was reluctantly communicated. All informants resisted telling the story behind the game because it was dangerous to do so: it might bring the dangers of lightning or snakes on the teller, his family, or his stock. (This, the ordinary summer taboo against telling stories, was accidentally reinforced: the third week of August, 1940, produced fearful storms and thundershowers. According to DS, interpreter, every one said that it was because JT and others had been talking about games and telling coyote and ghost stories to the Field School students. The majority of these myths were recorded after this event.)

Aberle (1942)

Other reasons were also given:

There were other types of objections. TW and YS said the whites were recording the stories and carrying them away. DS, YS, and JA pointed out that the Navaho themselves had to pay large sums for this type of information.

Aberle (1942: 145)

I, too, worked during the summer with Mitchell and Translator 2 (paying them both for such work), but did not inquire too deeply about the stick game at that time (though some information was provided to me then and later).²

In a passage reminiscent of the work of Barre Toelken (1987) concerning Navajo Coyote stories, Aberle (1942: 146) notes the following:

According to DS it is not so dangerous to talk about stick-dice, seven-card, hoop and pole, and racing, all summer games, in the summer, as about moccasin game, a winter game. A person must not get in too deep, however, even in telling about summer games. Some parts, he stated, are more dangerous than others, particularly if you learned the material formally and did not just pick it up. The more you know, the greater the danger, but if you know all about it, you have a song to ‘correct the danger’.

Aberle (1942)

Taking such comments seriously, in what follows I merely want to note a certain resonance between the forms in Jim’s poem, the ways they were variously translated, and some features of the stick game. I leave it up to others to comment on the “meaning” of this poem.

²This raises the very real possibility that Translator 2 translated the poem the way he did because he wanted to avoid discussing the topic. While we did discuss a number of sensitive topics as we worked through Jim’s poetry, it remains a possibility. That said, even if the translation was a form of avoidance, it was motivated by the potential puns within the poem. This suggests a delightful creativity on the part of Translator 2 – taking advantage of the ambiguity in the poem to avoid discussing a topic suggested by the poem. Note as well the dismissive tone in Aberle about having “accidentally reinforced” the taboo. In point of fact, the thunderstorms did not accidentally reinforce the taboo, but rather reinforced it.

The stick game is largely thought of as a women's game, though both men and women can play it. The association with women is related to an origin story that recognizes women as the first players of the game (Aberle 1942: 152) and/or that the important mythic figure Changing Woman took a hand in creating the game (Aberle 1942: 146–147). Young females at the time of their first period go through a rite of passage called *Kinaaldá* where they embody Changing Woman; this is one of the major rituals in Navajo society (see Frisbie 1993, Schwarz 1997a). That's point one.

Aberle (1942) notes at numerous points that Navajos associate the stick game with lightning, rainbows and rain. For example, Aberle (1942: 154) writes that “throwing stick-dice is called ‘like lightning,’ or ‘means a rainbow.’” Earlier, Aberle (1942: 148) notes that “DS identifies the sticks with a different natural force: that of lightning.” This contrasted with “WH identifies the game with the world, and the sticks with rain” (Aberle 1942: 147). Finally, Aberle (1942: 154) notes Navajos in the community of Ramah suggested “that playing the old games will bring rain and good crops.” That's point two.

Let me now reintroduce the three meanings that Mitchell suggested: 1) the sound of the dice (*dil, dil*); 2) “the leaping motion” of the dice; 3) “blood.” Working backwards, there is a resonance between the *-dil* in *da'dildil* and *tsidil* and the lexical item *dil* ‘blood.’ That resonance between forms also resonates with the role of Changing Woman in the creation of the stick dice game and its association with women (especially as it relates to the *Kinaaldá*). Maureen Schwarz (1997a, 1997b, 2003) has discussed in detail the importance of blood (menstrual and other) in Navajo philosophy. Suffice it to say that the resonance of blood here is not a trivial matter.

As for the form *da'dildil*, while it appears to have a reduplicated form here, that form is analyzable as *di-*, a classifier that Young and Morgan (1987: 25) suggest is associated with an “elongated object”, and *-ldil* “to cause it or them to move independently – a slender flexible object, as a rope or pair of objects, as shoes, stick dice” (Young and Morgan 1987: 25). This is the verb stem *-déél* which Young and Morgan (1987: 129, 134) separate into two forms (though they leave open the possibility that the forms are related): *-déél₁* ‘abrupt movement of a ropelike object’ and *-déél₂* ‘jar, shake by concussion.’ The *-t-* is a transitivity marker (causative-transitive). Young and Morgan (1992: 135) consider *tsidil* a noun derivative of *-déél₂*; though, at other times (see Young and Morgan 1987: 25), they seem to link it with *-déél₁*. In thinking about the throwing of stick dice (long objects thrown against a rock), they do seem to partake of both senses of *-déél*. In fact, following Margaret Field (2009), one is tempted to see these forms as polysemous and not homophonous (see also Young and Morgan 1987: 134). In looking at the many ways that *-déél₁* is used, I note the following two examples from Young and Morgan (1992: 131):

- (5) *Atsinilt'ish P-it dah yizdéél*
P was transported by lightning
- (6) *Nááts'ílid P-it dah yizdéel*
P was transported by a rainbow

The verb stem is potentially evocative of the movement of lightning and of rainbows (both of which the stick game is likened to). The “leaping motion,” as described by Mitchell, of the dice can evoke the movement of lightning and rainbows.

The ideophone *dil*, as we have seen from discussions by Mitchell and Translator 2, seems to suggest a rumbling, stomping or banging (clanging) sound. This ideophone is likely related to the more commonly attested form *diiil* ‘deep rumbling sound, as that produced by the peal of thunder’ (Young and Morgan 1987: 432; see also Landar 1985: 490, Young and Morgan 1992: 138). That the stick dice game is associated with lightning and that *da’diddit* in the poem evoked for both Mitchell and Translator 2 a sound reminiscent of thunder is not, I think, too surprising. Indeed, ‘*adiddiil* ‘rumble of thunder’ and ‘*adiddit* ‘stick dice player’ are, according to some Navajo consultants, a potential pun. *Da’diddit*, then, not only describes the movement of the dice (reminiscent of lightning), but also evokes the sound of thunder. The sounds the dice make, then, are evocative of the sound of thunder. Lightning and thunder are then intertwined here.

8. SEDUCTION AND MISUNDERSTANDING

Dingemans (2012) begins his piece on the coercive power of iconicity by noting that “humans are iconophiles: we love to connect form and meaning, and do so even when it doesn’t seem warranted.” My goal in this article has been to look at the motivations behind the seductive power of iconicity and ideophony; that is, to show how, in this case, it *is* warranted. Jim’s poetry often works because of the sounds that it evokes and convokes – that is, the way that key sounds in a poem evoke and convoke other words (Mitchell and Webster 2011; Webster 2013, 2015a). Certainly, Mitchell’s working through of the multiple resonances of *da’diddit* is a case in point. It isn’t just the literal meaning of this form that matters, but rather that through phonological iconicity (words resembling each other through sound) one can hear – and that’s the verb to use – both *dil* ‘blood’ and *da’ dil dil* ‘rumble, rumble.’ The former can evoke Changing Woman and the latter the sound of the game being played and, also, thunder (which links back with lightning). Thus, the music of the poem can conjure complex mythic relations. The resonances work in Navajo. The language-particular sounds of this poem matter. A literal translation’s deficiency is precisely in losing the sounds of Navajo; of other ways of hearing and hence imagining this poem.

Saad aheelt’éeigo diits’a’, or punning, is an important feature of Jim’s poetry, but it is also an important component of Navajo verbal life more generally (see Sapir 1932; Kluckhohn and Leighton 1962; Webster 2010, 2013). Punning can be found in curing chants (McAllester 1954: 80) and in everyday conversations (Webster 2010). It is part of a broader aesthetic that seems predicated on an appreciation of both the precision of Navajo and on its ambiguity. To echo words of consultants, it both really describes something and, simultaneously, potentially sounds like something else (see also Peterson and Webster 2013). Navajo speakers of Navajo that I have discussed this with find the description of Navajo as both precise and

simultaneously ambiguous an apt characterization. Though Mitchell once shortened that description to noting that Navajo is a “tricky language.” Jim’s poems seem to work that way too.

Translator 2 takes this point a bit further. It appears that the *yiits’a’* at the end of the poem seduced him into hearing the poem as full of ideophones. Mitchell too saw the use of *yiits’a’* as encouraging one to hear line three as potentially ideophonic. But the reading of this poem by Translator 2 is absolutely intelligible based on potential puns in Navajo. *Ts’idil* does sound like *tsidil* and, as I noted above, *da’ dil dil* does sound like *da’didil*. Both puns were certainly available in Navajo. Because in Navajo, at least, such sound-imitative ideophones resonate with a variety of forms through punning and *mondegreens*, I am hard pressed to hear these forms as in any way simpler than other forms of ideophones. They are, or can be, deeply interwoven throughout and across languages (see Woodbury 1998 on interwoven-ness).

The example of a *mondegreen*, where the lines of a poem – the very words – are understood as not one thing, but another, also raises questions about the role of misunderstanding or not-understanding in a concern with linguistic relativity. To get at that discussion, I want to begin with Johannes Fabian’s (1995) work on the value of misunderstanding in language-centered ethnography. Fabian (1995) argues for attending to misunderstanding and not-understanding, not as things to be explained away (solved, as it were), but for the ongoing dialectic nature of misunderstanding and not-understanding. He is concerned with forms of misunderstanding and not-understanding that range from phonology to morphology to semantics to syntax and pragmatics. In the example he discusses concerning sounds and phonology, he describes how he and later a language consultant transcribed the repeated refrain of a song from a play as *tutabawina* ‘we shall beat them.’ They identified the language as Shaba/Katanga Swahili and the genre of song as a “fighting-song,” perhaps associated with soccer matches (Fabian 1995: 42). Later, when Fabian inquired to the theater group that had performed the song, they replied with a letter which had the line as *Tuta Mawila* ‘march on’. The language was not Shaba/Katanga Swahili, but rather Kizela, and the song genre was a marching song, not a fighting song. It seems that *tutabawina* and *Tuta Mawila* are bivalent forms, sufficiently similar to be recognized as “the same.” This is, of course, a *mondegreen* (the *mondegreen* here is across languages and is very much like an interlingual pun). The context, a play largely in Swahili, seduced Fabian and his language consultant into hearing the song lyrics in the play as Swahili. Saying now that we have corrected that “misunderstanding” reduces the rightness of the bivalency – the simultaneity of the bivalency – to an either/or proposition. We have reduced misunderstandings to the “conceptual aura of mistake, error, failure, and falsity” (Fabian 1995: 48).

Such a practice – the explaining away of misunderstandings as mistakes or failures – denies the creative accomplishments of those that might hear *Tuta Mawila* as *tutabawina* or *tsidil* as *ts’idil* – the ways that misunderstandings are generative of understanding or generative of some kind of knowing or knowledge. For Fabian misunderstandings are not aberrant to languages in use, but rather deeply intertwined with it. Here Fabian quotes Wilhelm von Humboldt:

Nobody means by a word precisely and exactly what his neighbor does, and the difference, be it ever so small, vibrates, like a ripple in water, throughout the entire language. Thus all understanding is always at the same time a not-understanding.”

von Humboldt, quoted in Fabian (1995: 48)

“Solving” the misunderstanding and treating it as a mistake; that is, telling you what was “really” meant, artificially attempts to halt the vibrations, ripples, or echoes of difference – the very stuff of language. Languages and their users are, to use an old phrase from Anthony Wallace (1961: 28), “organizations of diversity” (see also Sherzer 1970). A part of a “thick translation” of verbal art, then, should include annotations and exegeses on the ways that various forms are, in practice and when possible, misunderstood (on “thick translations” see Leavitt 2006, Woodbury 2007).

Given that many of Jim’s poems seem predicated on uncertainty and ambiguity, they highlight the multiple ways that a given utterance can be heard and understood. To say that Translator 2 made a mistake in his interpretation assumes there was a singular interpretation to be made in the first place – and that seems rather presumptuous. Navajos that I have worked with have evaluated ambiguity in Jim’s poetry as a key component of what makes these “strong poems.” Strong poems are poems that provoke on-going contemplation and that do not force a singular interpretation. Echoing a general Navajo ethos that *t’áá bí bee bóholníłh* ‘it’s up to him/her to decide’, Jim’s poems are invitations to imaginative acts (see Webster 2015b). Translator 2’s translation, and then my later discussions with Mitchell based on that translation, allowed me to begin to think about how one might say that the stick game, as locally recognized traditional Navajos sometimes do say, is “like lightning,” in the ways that *tsidil* can be heard as *ts’idil* – the sound of thunder. There is something deeply “right” about his translation in that respect. Solving the “mistake” or “misunderstanding” ignores then both the potential pun and the knowledge that comes from thinking through that pun. There, in a nutshell, is a positive vision of linguistic relativity, the Boas, Sapir, Friedrich, and Sherzer vision: that particular languages, exemplified in and through poetry, facilitate ways of imagining. The sounds of the poem suggest resonances, but as Translator 3 shows, they do not determine them; they merely create potentials and possibilities for imaginative acts. *Mondegreens*, this mishearing of the sounds of poetry, are examples of the ways that languages can facilitate imaginative acts and suggest the creative possibilities of such imaginative acts.

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