

Code-Switching in Navajo Orthographic Poetry: On Places, the Mythic, and Mythic Places

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1. Introduction:

This paper concerns code-switching in Navajo orthographic poetry.¹ This is a topic of some interest, because there is a general language shift from Navajo to English occurring and it is important to understand the places where Navajo persists (see House 2002; Lee and McLaughlin 2001; Spolsky 2002; Webster 2006a). It is also important to understand what of Navajo is persisting. This paper attempts to outline those places in which Navajo perdures. Expanding on Philip Deloria's (1998) call for studying Native Americans in "unexpected places", I would call for understanding Native American languages in "unexpected places." In this respect, I look at the sites of code-switching in Navajo written poetry. In keeping with the theme from Deloria, these cluster around places, the mythic, and mythic places. I conclude by suggesting that the written form of the language may be unexpected, but not the potential for feelingful iconicity (Samuels 2004). I use the term code-switching in a rather broad sense, namely that any instance of a switch from one lexical-grammatical code to another (be they syntactic clauses or lexical items) is an example of code-switching. I believe the concern with identity displays as examples of code-switching and as displays of language as an object will validate this position. I follow Eva Mendieta-Lombrado and Zaida Citron (1995: 565) and their argument concerning the use of code switching in poetry:

By *code switching* (CS) we understand any combination of English and Spanish words or phrases or, in our case, a poem. This broad definition encompasses segments that are usually considered *borrowing* in the linguistic analysis of everyday speech. However, the particular situation of written poetry, with its characteristic literary intentionality, along with the non-applicability of some criteria used to distinguish between borrowing and CS, make this definition preferable.

This is true also for Navajo and I therefore adopt the broad definition they have developed.

¹ I want to dedicate this paper to Alyse Neundorf and Mary Purpuri. Alyse Neundorf taught me a great deal about Navajo poetry and about the orthography discussion occurring on the Navajo Nation. She was a talented linguist and a talented poet. I spoke with my Aunt Mary a number of times on the phone during fieldwork (at the gas station outside Chinle, AZ on 191 heading south towards Ganado, AZ), and her good humor provided inspiration. Both will be missed.

Robert Moore (1988) has argued that certain nominal forms become templates and exemplars of indigenous identity. That is, while syntactic knowledge may be lost, the knowledge of certain emblematic lexical items may become the tokens of a language. Language then becomes reduced to “words.” This is, I believe, what Michael Silverstein (2003) means by “emblematic identity displays.” Language becomes objects—words—that can be put on display to index a certain identity. And in writing, such objects become icons of standard versus folk orthographies. These linguistic objects, imbued with the felt connections to language as emblems of identity, then become linguistic heirlooms; heirlooms that can call forth memories of the “ancestors.” What orthographies should not be are constraints.

2. On Incommensurability:

The purpose of this paper is to point out a number of similarities in the use of Navajo in English dominant poems by Navajo poets (see also Webster 2004, 2006a). I am concerned with the idea, not unheard of among Navajos, that there is incommensurability between Navajo and English, namely, that certain ideas, emotions, and objects cannot be translated into English adequately. This is a position that Navajo poets have written about in their work. Below I provide two examples of this metalinguistic commentary:

- (1) “What is it? She asks. “What’s wrong?”
There are no English words to describe this feeling.
“T’áá ‘iighisíí biniina shil hóyéé,” I say.
(Taphonso 1993: 14)

- (2) Hataalii sings over the patient
Someone whispers, in English

“Diné bizaad bee yádaalti”
This is an EnemyWay.
(Chee 2001: 25)

In the first example, we see an explicit statement that certain emotions cannot be articulated in English. Hóyéé, this emotion that entails surrounding, according to Luci Taphonso cannot be translated into English. The second example, by Norla Chee, suggests a linguistic ideology concerning what Paul Kroskrity (1992) has called “strict compartmentalization.” This linguistic ideology concerns the idea that there are certain circumscribed domains where Navajo is not only preferable but also more efficacious. One speaks Navajo at an Enemyway ceremony. As Gary Witherspoon (1977), among others, has pointed out, there is a general Navajo linguistic ideology that language makes things happen. Rex Lee Jim, a Navajo poet, for example has described to me his belief that his poems that evoke thought, will, in so doing, create proper thought (which is the inward quality of speech). Language is not epiphenomenal, it is something (i.e., they are both noumena and phenomena). Curing ways are evocative and efficacious because they—the chantways—are in Navajo, and the chants, ideally, are verbatim quotes of earlier chants.

Code-switching then takes on a greater import given the linguistic ideology that values language not just about the world but as a creative force in the world. But what do Navajo poets feel can best be expressed in Navajo? As Mikhail Bakhtin (1986) noted, all utterances are quotations of ancestors. We do not say something new, rather we insert ourselves into the implicated and entangled history of our language. The use of Navajo is thus both evocative and efficacious. The poetics of language, because it is implicated in the ongoing accruing nature of language in use and language as used, becomes especially salient points for felt incommensurability. This is the iconicity of poetic feelingfulness

(Samuels 2004). Placenames, as we will discuss below, become exemplars of this feelingful iconicity (they are understood as the words of the ancestors and from a specific perspective [Basso 1996]).

During my fieldwork (June 2000-August 2001), I often asked Navajo poets why they wrote in English or Navajo. Sometimes the answer was practical: They simply did not know how to write in Navajo. This is quite common. Many Navajos speak Navajo but do not know how to write Navajo. Literacy is emerging. On the other hand, those poets who could or would (the two are not the same) write in Navajo often stated that they wrote in Navajo because it was in some feelingful way “better” or “more accurate.” One Navajo told me that he will not write in Navajo until an orthography is created that does not look like the English orthography.

3. Placenames as sites of incommensurability:

One of the more common examples of code-switching into English dominant poems concerned placenames. As Keith Basso (1996) has discussed for Western Apaches (a related Southern Athabaskan language), placenames are fundamental in creating a moral landscape, in fact, to use a placename is to quote the ancestors. Julie Cruikshank (1990), working with Northern Athabaskan languages, has shown how Tagish and Tutchone people speaking in English will code-switch into their native language when discussing placenames. Stephen Jett (2001) has remarked about the import of Navajo placenames as well. To know the name of a place is more than simple geography, it is to know the events and ancestors who gave the place cultural meaning. Using placenames is a form of quotation. It creates an indexical link to the ancestors who first named the place. It is not surprising, then, to find many Navajo poems code-switching into Navajo when discussing place. In what follows, I provide two examples of placenaming in Navajo poetry. The crucial element here is that these were poems written in Navajo and then translated into English, yet the placenames remain in Navajo.

(3)	Sis naajiní	Blanca Peak
	Tsoodzil	Mount Taylor
	Dook'o'oolííid	San Francisco Peak
	Dibé Nitsaa	Hesperus Peak
	Dzil Ná'oodihii	Huerfano Mountain
	Ch'óol'í'í	Gobernador Knob
		(Blueeyes 1995: 9)

(4)	Niléi éi Ch'óol'í'í' jó 'éi bikáá'gi awéé lá, ákodei haayá, ákodei tí'
	It was on top of Ch'óol'í'í he found the baby, up there, let's go.
	(Neundorf 1999: 2)

Both of these poems reference Ch'óol'í'í, which is one of the sacred mountains for many Navajo. Indeed, Blueeyes lists the sacred mountains of the Navajo, from the formulaic and traditional east to south to west to north direction. In the Blueeyes poem *Sacred Mountains* both the Navajo and English placenames are given. They are not translations, rather they are different names in different languages for different socially realized places. For example, Dibé Nitsaa glosses in English as “Big Sheep” and not Hesperus Peak (dibé glosses as ‘sheep’ and nitsaa ‘it is big’). Likewise, Alyse Neundorf makes no effort to translate Ch'óol'í'í into English, nor does she provide the English placename. You either know where Ch'óol'í'í is or you do not. I should add that in Alan Wilson's (1995) excellent discussion of Navajo placenames he leaves this placename untranslated. This use of Navajo placenames argues for a prior placement (a “here” first placement). These are not “English” places, they are Navajo places.

Another use of placenames in Navajo poetry concerns the opposition between *Hwééldi* and *Dinétah*. A little background may help at this point. *Hwééldi* is the Navajo term for Bosque Redondo or Fort Sumner. This was the place that the Navajos lived for four years (1864-1868) after the horrific Long Walk which claimed the lives of many Navajos. It was a time of “great hardship” to quote Laura Tohe. It is perhaps the single most salient moment in the collective memory of Navajos. It is a time of suffering and also a time of pride. The Navajos eventually did negotiate their return to *Dinétah*, the traditional Navajo homeland. And that is the contrast: *Hwééldi* is about removal and *Dinétah* is about home. *Dinétah* gains meaning and feeling in opposition to *Hwééldi*. I would suggest that this sense meaning is the classic Saussurian code internal binary opposition. Note that this binary opposition is built on the accruing implications of the discursive uses of the placenames (this a diachronic approach to the Saussurian question). Many poets have written about the Long Walk and the internment at *Hwééldi* and they have written about the return to *Dinétah*. What is important in relation to code-switching is that *Hwééldi* and *Dinétah* are the terms that they use. Below I provide two examples. One from Laura Tohe, *Within Dinétah the People’s Spirit is Strong*, and one from Luci Tapahonso, *In 1864*.

- (5) We called this place *Hwééldi*
 this place of starvation,
 this place of near death
 this place of extreme hardship
 (Tohe 2002: 103)

And later in the poem:

- (6) We returned to our land after four years.
 Our spirits ragged and weary.
 And vowed that we never be seperated from *Dinétah*;
 the earth is our strength
 We have grown strong.
 (Tohe 2002: 103)

And this example from Tapahonso’s poem *In 1864*:

- (7) We didn’t know how far it was or even where we were going.
 All that was certain was that we were leaving *Dinétah*, our home.
 (Tapahonso 1993: 9)

And contrasted with:

- (8) There were many who died on the way to *Hwééldi*. All the way we told each other, “we will be strong as long as we are together.” I think that was what kept us alive.
 (Tapahonso 1993: 10)

Let me conclude this section with a brief example of the use of *Dinétah* in a poem that seems to act as a counterbalance to English and some of the associated domains of use for English (in this case organized church). Venaya Yazzie (2006) titles a recent poem *Dinétah*. In that poem *Dinétah* acts as a foil to an urban landscape.

- (9) *Dinétah* earth
 Settles
 in loud creases

of urban lingo
sounds like Navajo some days
but like English on Sundays

(Yazzie 2006: 30)

English and Navajo thus sit in an uneasy relationship. English is a presence in Diné'tah, but it seems connected with Sundays and the organized "church" (this is English as the language of certain institutions). Diné'tah is home.

4. On the mythic Mą'ii (Coyote):

Another kind of code-switching occurs with the lexical item *mą'ii* which glosses as "Coyote." Coyote is an especially salient and important mythic figure in Navajo verbal art (Webster 2004). Not only are there a number of stories about the trickster Coyote, there are also songs and a curing way that have Coyote as the central figure (see Haile 1984; Luckert 1979; and McAllester 1980). To give a sense of the importance of Coyote, I quote comments made by Navajo poet Rex Lee Jim to me:

Coyote is out there. . . killing your. . . sheep and goats. You can hear them howling in canyons during the morning, the evening, the middle of the day, way late at night. You're surrounded by it. . . Coyote is every part of your life.

(Webster 2004: 75)

Below I present four examples of code-switching from English to Navajo to reference *mą'ii*. The first example, from 1971, is one of the first examples of English to Navajo code-switching that I have found.

- (10) He'd make us laugh with the stories of the hated
Ma'i.

(David 1971: 9)

- (11) That which we can only guess to be
Like voiceless vacant villages of old
Coyote, Mą'ii, was always there to see
What the rest of us are only told.

(Begay 1995: 40)

- (12) Beyond the fire *ma'ii* sheds his coyote skin
and appears as the moral of our story.

(Chee 2001: 36)

- (13) mą'ii názdá! want to go to town tomorrow?

(Tapahonso 1987: 31)

Note that *mą'ii* can either stand alone or there can be an attempt at translation. One should also note that mą'ii is spelled three different ways and only the final form is spelled the same way as the standard mą'ii. I will return to this point below. Note, however, that while Coyote is a common trickster figure among Native Americans in the west, by using mą'ii the poets demarcate him as not just any Coyote but as the Navajo Coyote. This is an emblematic identity display. Even Navajos who do not speak Navajo can and do recognize the lexical item mą'ii. It is a salient form. Note, also, that /m/ word initial is rather uncommon in Navajo lexical items. In a survey of the Wall and Morgan (1994: 109) Navajo/English dictionary there were only nineteen entries under the heading M. Eight of

those words began with *maq'ii* (e.g., *maq'iidáá* 'coyote's food' or *maq'iitsoh* 'wolf, big coyote'). Most of the others were loan words such as *magi* 'monkey,' *mósi* 'cat' and *miil* 'one thousand.'

Coyote can also be used metaphorically. While most of the above examples reference Coyote (*Ma'ii*) the trickster, the following example of code-switching references the trickster as Coyote. That is a Pueblo man behaves like a Coyote (a trickster). This example also shows how the use of code-switching draws the listener into the humor of the poem. The example is from a performance by Laura Tohe at the Native American Music Festival in Tsaile, AZ at Diné College in June of 2001. The poem was performed a little after 10:00pm before a mixed crowd of largely middle-aged and young Navajos. The poem is titled "Sometimes those Pueblo Men can sure be Coyotes." The poem describes the narrator—a teenage girl—and her friend—also a teenage girl—being driven home by a handsome Pueblo man. The girls make a number of comments concerning the man in Navajo, assuming the man does not know Navajo.

- (14) we had just pulled onto Central
when one of us said
Éi hastiin ayóo baa dzólni' this man is very handsome
Éi laa' I agree

(Tohe 1999: 16)

The important point here—but not terribly surprising—is that the audience—made up mostly of Navajo—began laughing prior to the translations. The use of English was clearly secondary for many Navajo and their enjoyment came—in part—from the use of Navajo. The largest laugh comes when Tohe concludes the poem with the Pueblo man responding in Navajo:

- (15) *A'héhee' at'ééke* he said thank you, girls
(Tohe 1999: 17)

In this example code-switching is used to create a connection, unintended, but a connection nonetheless.

5. On Writing:

While the previous example is from an oral performance, the code-switching also occurs in the written version by Tohe. Indeed, it is the code-switching that is the linchpin to the poem, it is what gives it its humor. But writing in Navajo is a relatively new phenomenon. Robert Young and William Morgan (1987) have done a great service to the Navajo (Morgan was Navajo) by creating an orthography and dictionaries of Navajo. Their orthography has become the standard. Writing does things. One thing that it does is create a standard. This is both empowering and limiting. It is empowering because of a Western linguistic ideology that sees language standards as the mark of "real" languages. This is the common conflation of language with writing. It is limiting because it devalues the "folk" orthographies of many non-standard writers. It should not be surprising, for example, to find that Alyse Neundorf was not just a poet, but also a linguist who wrote articles on Navajo and even wrote a children's Navajo dictionary (1983). But all Navajos do not have such training. Neundorf knew the standard and wrote in it. As we will see below, Rutherford Ashley does not know the standard, but refuses to be limited by orthographic conventions. Feelingful iconicity can override such constraints (for now).

When Vee Browne (2000) writes a limerick in Navajo about the Navajo language, using her "folk orthography," we should first pause and respect the feelingful iconic connection that Browne is articulating about her language, through her use of a "folk

orthography.” An orthography that is wholly interpretable. Such folk orthographies are locally controlled expressions of language loyalty (Webster 2006b). We should regard folk orthographies as expressions of locally controlled language in use, as opportunities and not constraints.

Code-switching in speech is in some ways less problematic than code-switching in writing, and specifically in poetry. Many non-fluent Navajo speakers will introduce themselves at poetry performances in Navajo and by clan. This is a formulaic opening that many Navajo poets learn (Webster 2004). Most poets that I have seen perform will introduce themselves by their clans and in Navajo (Webster 2004). On the other hand, I know many Navajos who speak Navajo and code-switch between English and Navajo all the time. But, they do not know how to write the standard Navajo. Laura Tohe (2005), for example, fluent in oral Navajo has taken classes to learn to write Navajo and now she writes poetry in both English and Navajo. Many of those poems concern place, and specifically *Tséyi*’ or its Spanishified form Canyon de Chelly (Tohe 2005).

6. Mythic places:

Code-switching is dangerous when writing. A number of Navajos I spoke with criticized poets who code-switched into Navajo for not spelling the Navajo words “correctly.” I want to give a final example, not because it is particularly egregious, but because the code-switching is indicative of another theme that Navajo poets use when code-switching. Not only do Navajos code-switch concerning place and code-switch concerning mythic figures, they also code-switch concerning mythic places. Here is the example from Rutherford (Ford) Ashley’s *Heart Vision 2000* (Ashley 2000: 14):

- (16) As from the rood of “*Hajinei*” his people had emerged
and that emergence,
that “*Hajinei*,”
can take many forms,

A little of the stock of knowledge that a Navajo might be expected to bring to bear here may help. *Hajínái* is the place of emergence, it is the hole the Navajos emerged from into this “glittering world.” Ashley, I believe, is arguing that one’s own emergence can take many forms. When I first read this poem, I knew two things immediately about the form *Hajinei*. First, I knew that it was the place of emergence. Second, I knew that it did not conform to “the standard” orthography. But, I think, the first realization was far more important than the second. Ashley is also quite aware that his idiosyncratic way of writing Navajo does not conform to “the standard.” He was very clear about this to me. Rather it is more important to make the indexical linkage and create the feelingful iconicity between mythic place and the Navajo language.

7. Conclusion:

There may come a day when the standard so overwhelms folk orthographies in Navajo, that poets like Ford Ashley or Richard David may feel constrained from code-switching in their poetry, because they write in some putative way “incorrectly.” That will be a shame. Code-switching in Navajo poetry is about incommensurability, the incommensurability of place, the mythic, and mythic places. Code-switching is also about identity, about emblematic identity displays—code-switching is about indexing Navajoness, no matter what orthography is used. It is also about the iconicity of feeling between the Navajo place name, for example, and the words of the ancestors. When we think of incommensurability as kinds of indexical linkages and feelingful iconicity, we may begin to realize how important the options of forms (orthographic here) may be for

individuals. To lose that option is to be constrained by “standards.” It is to lose potential and creativity. It is to constrain “genuine cultures” (Sapir 1924). Genuine cultures, which allow us:

To relate *our* lives, *our* intuitions, *our* passing moods to forms of expression that carry conviction to others and make us live again in these others is the highest spiritual satisfaction we know of, the highest welding of one’s individuality with the spirit of his civilization. (Sapir 1924: 425 emphasis in original)

Or as Ford Ashley says, “‘*Hajinei*,’ can take many forms.”

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