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## Metaphor, Mythology, and a Navajo Verb: The Role of Cultural Constructs in the Lexicography of Endangered Languages

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**Abstract.** This article focuses on multiple lexical entries for one Navajo classificatory verb, arguing that many of its subentries are polysemous, rather than unrelated homophones. It is suggested that the connection between them is based on metaphor and conventionalized cultural knowledge (mythology and cosmology). The documentation of such metaphorical connections is crucial not only for making sense of the uses of this verb stem but also for what it tells us about Navajo culture.

**1. Introduction.** Over the past two decades, awareness of the state of endangered languages has greatly increased (Robins and Uhlenbeck 1991; Hale et al. 1992; Grenoble and Whaley 1998), and along with this awareness has come an increase in efforts to document such languages (Frawley, Hill, and Munro 2002; Gippert, Himmelmann, and Mosel 2006). Lexical documentation, or the creation of dictionaries, has been a large part of ongoing efforts by linguists and other researchers in this area. This article addresses one aspect of lexical documentation with reference to the Navajo language, and in particular the Athabaskan grammatical category of classificatory verbs. It focuses on some of the entries for one classificatory verb in Young and Morgan's analytical lexicon (1992) from the viewpoint of how that verb is used metaphorically, and offers an explanation based on Navajo cultural knowledge for these meanings. This explanation also entails that some of the subentries for this verb represent polysemy, rather than being unrelated homophones. As discussed by Evans (1997), an argument for polysemy rather than homophony for lexemes with apparently different meanings may be made through evidence of a connection between them that is based on conventionalized cultural knowledge, such as mythology and cosmology. Evans also cites Keesing, who argues for explicitly linking semantic analysis to ethnography and to cultural assumptions about such things as the cosmos, causality, time, etc., in order to "capture the creative powers of language in metaphor and symbolism" (1979:27). The present article takes the same approach. Documenting such metaphorical connections, which are grounded in Navajo oral tradition, is crucial not only for making sense of the many lexical entries under each verb stem (as native speakers no doubt understand), but—perhaps more importantly—for documenting Navajo culture as it exists in the form of prior texts<sup>1</sup> and of cultural constructs embedded and reflected in the Navajo language.

**2. ‘Ropelike’ as a spatial category.** The verb considered here is a classificatory verb<sup>2</sup> that deals with the spatial category ‘cylindrical and flexible’, or ‘ropelike’. Athabaskan classificatory verbs are similar to many other Native American languages in that they typically lexicalize MOVEMENT or LOCATION of a referent, together with its FIGURE (shape, size, or dimension).<sup>3</sup> As Talmy (1985) points out, this lexicalization pattern differs from most Indo-European languages, whose verbs typically conflate MANNER or CAUSE of movement along with MOTION. Previous studies of Athabaskan classificatory verbs (see n. 2) demonstrate clearly that Navajo grammar provides a choice of various verbs appropriate to the FIGURE of specific referents.

The verb under consideration here, whose perfective form is *-déeł*, prototypically conflates RAPID MOVEMENT or PROPULSION along with a ropelike FIGURE. Depending on its aspect and associated morphology, the verb *-déeł* refers (literally) to ropelike things (switches, quirts, ropes, etc.) moving rapidly, falling, or being thrown. Like other classificatory verbs, it may also be extended metaphorically to refer to abstract referents (nonphysical concepts), such as, in this case, ‘an emergency’, ‘a clan or tribe (i.e., people who are connected in some way)’, or ‘conception (the start of life)’, among other things. In such cases, it is argued here, the focus of classificatory verbs is on the MANNER rather than the FIGURE of the entity involved (see Willie [2000] for extended discussion).

**3. Sunbeams, rainbows, and lightning.** The verb stem *-déeł* is also used in a large number of expressions involving metaphorical extension of the literal meaning of extremely rapid movement of a ropelike object.<sup>4</sup> It is argued here that this metaphorical use is based on a well-known cultural concept seen repeatedly throughout Navajo mythology: sunbeams, rainbows, and lightning bolts, which are the traditional conveyances of the deities, are conceived of as ropelike objects that allow extremely rapid movement—literally, “at the speed of light.” For example, the word for ‘sunbeam’, *shá bitlóól*, translates literally as ‘rope of sun’. As Reichard explains, this speed in travel is what allows Navajo deities to appear to be in more than one place at the same time: “A deity who can move on a sunbeam, rainbow, or streak of lightning may as easily be in four places at one time” (1950:54).

A literal use of the verb *-déeł* to refer to this kind of movement is shown in (1).

- (1) *Dził bilátaḥji shił dah yizdéeł.*  
 mountain 3.POSS-top-to 1-with up 3.move.rapidly.ropelike.OBJ.PERF  
 ‘I traveled in a flash to the mountaintop.’ (Young and Morgan 1992)

Careful attention to the gloss in (1) clarifies that the Navajo subject is in the third person, not the first, and that it includes a postposition *shił* ‘with me’. The traveler is treated as the subject of the verb, rather than as the object of the

postposition. This tells us that the subject of the rapid movement was actually something else left out of Young and Morgan's free translation: a mythical means of transportation such as a sunbeam or rainbow. In modern Navajo, speakers use this verb to talk about rapid action by self and others without this postposition (see (5) below). In other words, people, animals, and abstract referents now travel like sunbeams or rainbows, not just with them. In these cases, it is the MANNER of movement, not the FIGURE 'ropelike' that is the focus of the classificatory verb. Willie (2000) discusses the productive, creative usage of classificatory verbs in this way. It is suggested here that some of these creative uses of the verb *-déeł* have become lexicalized over time such that this classificatory verb now has some meanings that are no longer interpretable in terms of the literal FIGURE associated with them.<sup>5</sup>

Some examples of this kind of metaphorical extension for the verb *-déeł* include rushing, attacking, or embracing, as in (2).

- (2) *Ahił*                    *'iideet.*  
 together-with 1PL-move.rapidly.ropelike.IMPERF  
 'We embrace each other.' (Young and Morgan 1992:129)

Young and Morgan explain the above example literally as "to throw the arms around each other (lit., to move in a flexing, ropelike manner in company with each other)" (1992:129). However, this example also has the meaning 'to rush or lunge at each other in concerted motion' (and not necessarily out of joy); this meaning is perhaps better explained with reference to the underlying metaphor of 'instantaneous movement' rather than literal interpretation as 'flexible and cylindrical entities'. Insistence on a literal interpretation ignores a pattern that links multiple examples of this verb that are much more difficult to interpret literally—for instance, the meaning 'attack', as in (3).

- (3) *téechaa'í bich'í*      *dah yizdéeł.*  
 dog            3.towards up 3.move.rapidly.ropelike.PERF  
 'The dog attacked her.' (Young and Morgan 1992:131)

Examples (4)–(6) are similar in that the verbs are better understood as metaphors for rapid movement than as literal statements of "ropelike" movement.

- (4) *Jooł yił*            *dishdeet.*  
 ball 3-with INCEPT.1.move.rapid.ropelike.IMPERF  
 'I catch the ball.' (Young and Morgan 1992:130)

- (5) *Dah yishdeet.*  
 off 1-moves.rapidly.ropelike.IMPERF  
 'I'm in a rush.' (Young and Morgan 1992:131)

(6) *Nisihwiinidéél.*

TERMIN-THEMAT-DEICTIC-3-ropelike.moves.rapidly.PERF

'An emergency arises.' (Young and Morgan 1992:133)

These examples all have in common a cultural metaphor, growing out of a well-known prior text (see n. 1): that of a extremely rapid movement, as of the lightning, rainbows, and sunbeams (all ropelike in FIGURE) that deities move around on. This explanation accounts both for seemingly anomalous examples ('to attack', 'to rush', 'an emergency'), as well as those that could be interpreted literally as movement in ropelike manner ('to embrace', 'to catch a ball').

#### 4. Mediated extensions of a metaphor: life begins, pollen is life-giving.

Although the above examples are relatively easy to explain in terms of an obvious underlying cultural metaphor, so much so that polysemy of the verb stem is easy to argue for, another related meaning is far less apparent: this verb also refers to conception or "the start of life" either in the womb or in reference to creation of the world and its inhabitants (Young and Morgan 1992). This connection may also be explained with reference to cultural constructs embedded in traditional mythology: the association of sunlight and warmth with generation, vivification, and the continuity of life and safety (Reichard 1950). This verb is also used ritually to refer to the placing of pollen, which according to Reichard represents (in fact, is a metaphor for) these same qualities. Pollen is a symbol of the "sheen" or animacy of entities. Light and pollen provide the power of motion and life (Reichard 1950:250–51). As Reichard further explains, "Throughout Navajo mythology an attempt to protect girls from being struck by sunlight is stressed" (1950:30). These two meanings of the verb *-déél* are linked a complicated semantic field, explained through reference to the mythological powers of sunlight. The link is more complex than simply A (ropelike figure) being a metaphor for B (light or sunbeams); rather, B (light, sunbeams) mediates a link between A (ropelike figure) and C (conception, the start of life). The same kind of mediated connection also explains yet another meaning of this verb, 'to apply pollen'—as pollen is another metaphor for light and its life-giving quality. This type of metonymical connection is what Evans (1997) terms a culturally-mediated metonymy, based on a cultural practice that groups things in a way "that appears, to Western eyes, at least, to be independent of observable associations in the 'real world'" (1997:147). Such associations are no doubt found across many other Navajo verbs as well, especially those used in ritual language and ceremony.

**5. Conclusion.** This article argues that many of the meanings attributed to the Navajo classificatory verb *-déél* (the literal meaning of which is 'ropelike entity moves quickly') in Young and Morgan's extremely thorough dictionaries (1987, 1992) may be better understood as metaphorical (rather than literal), involving conflation of MOVEMENT and speedy MANNER, rather than ropelike

FIGURE. Willie (2000) discusses how classificatory verbs are used productively in this way, resulting in humorous or pejorative connotations. Here it is argued that metaphorical extensions based on mythological ropelike entities and their associated powers have become lexicalized over time such that they are no longer productive. The semantic connections between all of the meanings in the lexicon for this verb are not immediately apparent to native speakers (at least not to the three consultants for this article); however, as is seen above, those meanings can be explained through evidence of a connection between them based on conventionalized cultural knowledge. Further, secondary mediated extensions of meaning are also argued for, connecting the life-giving quality of light, especially sunbeams, as is well established in Navajo myth, to the verb *-deél*. This extension of the semantic network explains the meanings 'to conceive (for life to start)' as well as 'to administer pollen' (as pollen is a symbol of light's life-giving power).

An understanding of the role of metaphor, especially metaphor based on salient cultural metaphors such as 'movement on rainbow or sunbeam'—directly traceable to origin mythology, rather than to literal interpretation—is extremely useful to linguists and students of any language, not only Navajo. It is an important aspect of language documentation, reflecting the fact that ethnography is an important component of the process, as culture permeates lexicons, and cultural traditions are sometimes inseparable from linguistic form (Woodbury 1993; Basso 1996; Evans 1997).

### Notes

*Abbreviations.* The following grammatical abbreviations are used: IMPERF = imperfective; INCEPT = inceptive; PERF = perfective; PL = plural; POSS = possessive; TERMIN = terminative; THEMAT = thematic.

1. I use the term "prior text" in the sense intended by A. L. Becker (1995) to refer to the work speakers are doing by "shaping old texts into new contexts" (1995:5), or by drawing on "particular memories of particular instances of languaging" (1995:15). This description of language use is very similar to Bakhtin's (1981) notion of "dialogicality" or the idea that all words have histories of usage.

2. Like other Athabaskan languages, the Navajo language has a classificatory verb system that is especially exuberant, with verbs for the handling, movement, or location of objects of different shapes, textures, and number, as well as other properties, such as whether the object referred to is within a container. The majority of previous work on Athabaskan classificatory verbs has focused on their use in referring to material objects (Davidson, Elford, and Hoijer 1963; Witherspoon 1971; Carter 1976; Cook 1986; Basso 1990), but see Young (n.d.).

3. Small capital letters are utilized to represent semantic domains.

4. It also has a few other meanings that are not addressed here, most notably (like other classificatory verbs that refer to 'ropelike' as a spatial category) reference to pairs of objects and to eating small objects one after another (as in a series). The semantic connections involved in these two meanings seem to be more obvious, having to do with the notions of series or sets rather than with mythological explanation.

5. The role of metaphor in the process of semantic change and lexicalization has been well documented elsewhere (Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Bybee and Pagliuca 1985; Claudi

and Heine 1986; Talmy 1988; Langdon and Hinton 1989; Sweetser 1990; Heine, Claudi, and Hünemeyer 1991; Hopper and Traugott 1993). See also Hill (1972) and Moore (1988) for discussions of lexicalization and language change (not involving metaphor) in other American Indian languages.

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