Nisenan Coyote speech: Implications for document-based language revitalization

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Introduction: In Native oral traditions across western North America, Coyote and other animal characters often use characteristic sound substitutions and affixes that identify them as the speaker (e.g. Aoki 1971; Frachtenberg 1920; Hymes 1954, 1981; Langdon 1978; Sapir 1915, 1922). For example, Coyote and Mountain Lion regularly insert $l^{(y)}$ and *r*, respectively, into their speech when speaking Cocopa (Langdon 1978:13). In one Wishram narrative, Coyote misapplies transitive markers, demonstrating his misunderstanding of the nature of reciprocity (Hymes 1984). However, comparable examples of the use of divergent morpho-syntactic structures seem to be uncommon.

Here, I describe morpho-syntactic constructions that are used by the mythic trickster figure Coyote in speaking the Southern Hill dialect of Nisenan, a Maiduan language that is spoken in California's Central Valley and the western foothills of the Sierra Nevada, that differ from normal, non-Coyote speech. Analyzing examples of Coyote's speech in a corpus of oral narratives that were produced by William Joseph (a.k.a. Bill Joe) in the 1930s (Uldall and Shipley 1966), I show that Coyote repeatedly uses language structures that are inappropriately marked for plurality when he is addressing his daughter-in-law, whom he intends to deceive. Rather than being a form of "Coyote speech" per se, I hypothesize that Coyote is actually exploiting his knowledge of Nisenan grammar to present himself, via linguistic means, as incompetent and so hide his sinister intentions.

Data: In addressing his daughter-in-law, with whom he is alone, Coyote consistently uses morphemes that refer to her in the plural, including plural forms of the imperative suffix (1, 3), the second-person optative suffix (1), and second-person nominative and genitive pronouns (2-3):

(1) ..."hapaytook'óybeem nik k'aawá," hát'omatoy.[1]
   hapaytook'oy-**beem**   nik   k'aa-**wa**   ha-t'omatoy
   pack.on.back-**2PL.OPT**   1SG.ACC   do-**PL.IMP**   say-PST
   '"You will have to pack me on your back, please do!" (he) said.' (ibid:54-55)

(2) ..."yaníbe meem," hát'omatoy...
   yan-ibe   **meem**   ha-t'omatoy
   pick-Q   **2PL.NOM** say-PST
   '(He) said, "Are you picking?"' (ibid:54-55)

(3) ..."mimée hoyim mə́c'əwi láayi hellə́mtiwa," hát'omatoy.
   mimee   hoyim_məc'əw-i   laay-i   helləm-ti-**wa**   ha-t'omatoy
   2PL.GEN   butt.cheek-ACC   little-ACC   move-CAUS-**PL.IMP**   say-PST
   '(He) said, "Move the cheek of your buttock over a little!"' (ibid:56-57)

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[1] I present Nisenan language data using the orthography adopted by the Shingle Springs Rancheria Language Program, with the addition of stress. Glosses: 1 = 'first person', 2 = 'second person', ACC = 'accusative', ATTR = 'attributive', CAUS = 'causative', DS = 'different subject', FUT = 'future', GEN = 'genitive', IMP = 'imperative', LOC = 'locative', NEG = 'negative', NOM = 'nominative', OPT = 'optative', PL = 'plural', PST = 'past', Q = 'question', SG = 'singular'.

Coyote uses forms that are appropriately marked as singular when addressing individuals in other stories, including singular imperative (4-5), optative (5), pronominal (6), and interrogative forms (7). That is, Coyote only uses the inappropriate forms when he is addressing his daughter-in-law:

(4) "Solmén hatíp mɨyé," hát'omatoy 'olém.

sol-men-$\emptyset$[2]	hati-**p**	mɨye	ha-t'omatoy	'ole-m
sing-NEG-**SG.IMP**	stop-**SG.IMP**	that.ACC	say-PST	coyote-NOM

'"Don't sing! Stop that!" said Coyote [addressing Buckeye Ball].' (ibid:34-35)

(5) ...'olém "yulúybene k'aap..." hát'omatoy.

'ole-m	yuluy-**bene**	k'aa-**p**	ha-t'omatoy
coyote-NOM	pound-**2SG.OPT**	do-**SG.IMP**	say-PST

'Coyote said, "You must pound (acorn)..." [addressing Beaver].' (ibid:44-45)

(6) ..."k'úynowes ni min beydím hatimenménc'é," hát'omatoy.

k'uyno-wes	ni	**min**	beydim	hati-men-menc'e	ha-t'omatoy
swallow-FUT	1SG.NOM	**2SG.ACC**	right.now	stop-NEG-2.DS	say-PST

'"I will swallow you right now if you don't stop," said (Coyote) [addressing Field Mouse].' (ibid:18-19)

(7) ..."homáatín 'ɨdíkkani mɨydí kɨlém nee," hát'omatoy.

homaatin	'ɨdik-**kani**	mɨy-di	kɨle-m	nee	ha-t'omatoy
how	arrive-**Q.2SG**	there-LOC	woman-ATTR	old	say-PST

'He said, "How did you get over there, old woman?" [addressing Beaver].' (ibid:48-49)

Analysis: In Bill Joe's oral narratives, Coyote misapplies plural morphology only when speaking to his daughter-in-law, whom he was planning to harm since the start of the narrative. Coyote appears to be "playing dumb", presenting himself linguistically as incompetent to make his daughter-in-law lower her guard. Thus, this is not an example of "Coyote speech" per se, but of Coyote actively exploiting his knowledge of the grammar to advance his sinister intentions.

Implications: Bill Joe's narratives represent an invaluable resource for Nisenan language revitalization efforts, such as those ongoing at the Shingle Springs Rancheria, which are primarily document-based. However, my findings highlight the need for us to carefully consider the narrative context when drawing data from such resources, in that some examples of language data are not fit for us humans to model our language on as we learn to speak Nisenan. Here, Bill Joe, a fluent speaker and a talented storyteller, intentionally subverted the normal language pattern to present Coyote as cunning and manipulative. On the other hand, my findings reveal a narrative device that modern storytellers too can use in creating their own stories about Coyote and his machinations.

Word count: 500 words (excluding title, examples, and references)

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[2] In Nisenan, the singular imperative *-p* is null on consonant-final stems for phonotactic reasons (e.g. Eatough 1999:4).

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