

# Nisenan Coyote speech

Implications for document-based language revitalization

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# Introduction

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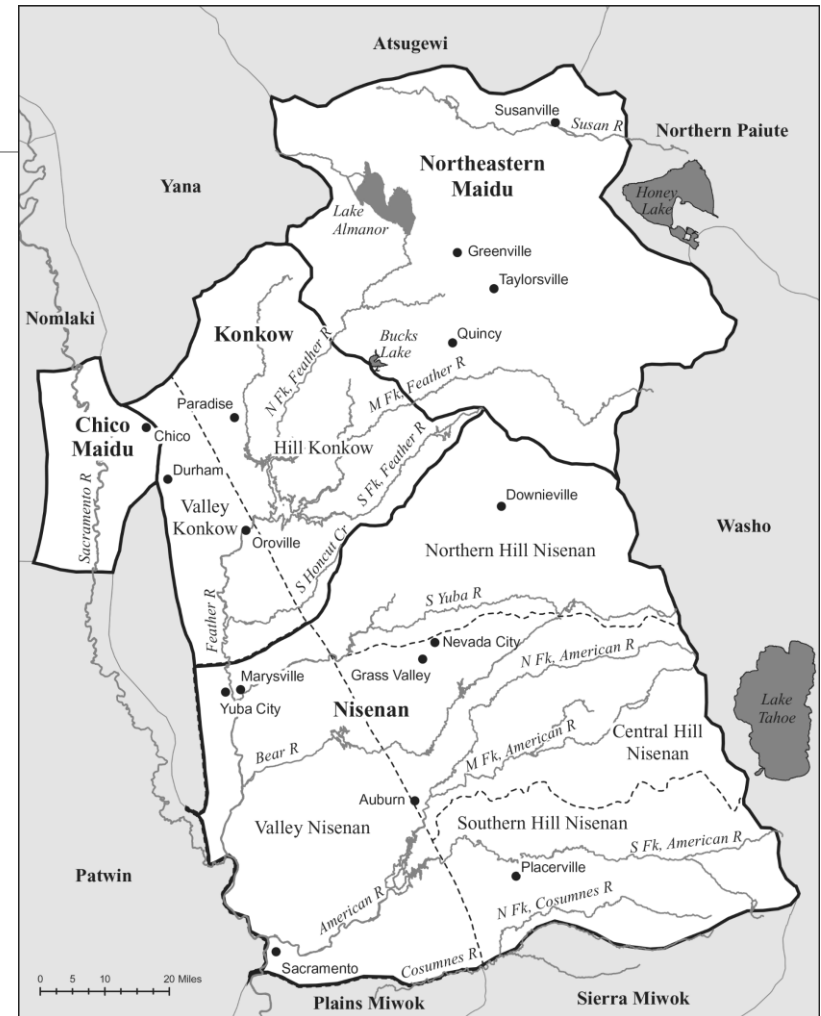
- I describe morpho-syntactic constructions that the mythic trickster Coyote uses in speaking the **Southern Hill dialect of Nisenan**, as exemplified in a pair of oral narratives from the 1930s, that **differ from normal, non-Coyote speech**.
  - Coyote uses inappropriate **plural morphology** to address his daughter-in-law, but he uses appropriate singular morphology when addressing other individuals.
- Rather than simply marking “Coyote speech”, I hypothesize that Coyote’s use of inappropriate plural morphology represents an intentional manipulation of the grammar to **subvert his daughter-in-law’s/the audience’s expectations**.
- Nisenan language revitalization efforts are primarily document-based: We must consider the **narrative context** when pulling language data from oral narratives.
  - Some data is not fit for us to model our language on as we learn to speak Nisenan.

# Background on Nisenan

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# Nisenan

- **Nisenan** is a Maiduan language, spoken in CA's Central Valley + western Sierra Nevada foothills.
- Nisenan comprises 4 dialects (Golla 2011:138-139):
  - Valley Nisenan
  - Northern Hill Nisenan
  - Central Hill Nisenan
  - **Southern Hill Nisenan**
- Revitalization efforts are ongoing at the Shingle Springs Band of Miwok Indians, where we focus primarily on **Valley and Southern Hill Nisenan**.



Map of Maiduan languages (Golla 2011:137)

# Studying Nisenan through oral narratives

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- There has been little published Nisenan grammatical analysis (cf. Eatough 1999), and there are only two corpora of connected speech (Central and Southern Hill).
- My colleagues and I study **Southern Hill Nisenan** speech through a collection of 71 oral narratives that **William Joseph** (a.k.a. **Bill Joe**) shared in 1930-1932.
  - Bill Joe's oral narratives were published, unanalyzed, in Uldall and Shipley (1966).
  - Bill Joe was a renowned storyteller, and his narratives span a range of genres from stories from Creation Time to his personal recollections.
- I segmented and glossed each of Bill Joe's oral narratives in order to produce a ~21,000-word text-based database that is searchable by morpheme.
  - Bill Joe's oral narratives are linguistically rich; this database has proven invaluable for linguistic research purposes (Anderson and Geary 2023, Geary 2023).

# Nisenan in the oral narratives of Bill Joe

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- Bill Joe's oral narratives exemplify a complex, consistent linguistic system.
- Bill Joe uses a variety of linguistic structures to tell **colorful, engaging stories**.
  - For example, Bill Joe often uses reduplication to encode pluractionality. Moreover, he uses different patterns of reduplication (CV- versus full-) to encode different types of pluractionality (event-external versus event-internal; Anderson and Geary 2023).
- The scope of the corpus is such that we can identify some structures as being **atypical of his grammar**, and often assess **why** he uses those structures.
  - For example, Bill Joe occasionally uses length + redundant pronominal morphology for emphasis (e.g. *nii daak'am ni!* 'I want (to marry him)!'; Uldall and Shipley 1966:28-29).
- When speaking as **Coyote**, Bill Joe's speech also deviates from his norm.....

# Nisenan Coyote speech

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# Coyote's speech in the oral narratives of Bill Joe

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- When **speaking as Coyote** in two versions of the same oral narrative, Bill Joe's speech differs systematically from his normal language patterns.
  - In this narrative, Coyote wants to go away to gather food with his daughter-in-law.
  - Coyote refuses to allow his other daughters or sons accompany them, insisting that his daughter-in-law is the only who is any good at gathering clover/acorn.
  - While alone with his daughter-in-law, Coyote feigns injury and tricks her into trying to pick him up in order to engage in sexual intercourse with her.
  - Both versions include several exchanges between Coyote and his daughter-in-law.
- In addressing his daughter-in-law, with whom he is alone, Coyote consistently uses morpho-syntactic structures that **refer to her in the plural**.....



# Coyote's speech in the oral narratives of Bill Joe

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- Coyote addresses his daughter-in-law using **second-person plural pronouns**:

1. ...“yaníbe meem?” hát'omatoy.

yan-ibe **meem** ha-t'omatoy

pick-Q **2PL.NOM** say-PST

'He said, “Are you picking?”” (Uldall and Shipley 1966:54-55)

2. ...“mimée hoyim məc'əwi láayi helləmtiwa,” hát'omatoy.

**mimée** 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)

- Only human nouns are marked for plurality, hence *mimée hoyim məc'əwi* is felicitous.

# Coyote's speech in the oral narratives of Bill Joe

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- Coyote commands his daughter-in-law using **the plural imperative suffix -wa** (rather than the singular imperative suffix -p):

3. “hapaytook’óybeem nik k’aawá,” hát’omatoy.

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)

4. ...“meebéebeem nik k’áawa,” hát’omatoy.

meebee-beem              nik              k’aa-**wa**      ha-t’omatoy  
pack.on.back-2PL.OPT 1SG.ACC      do-**PL.IMP**      say-PST

‘...he said, “You must try to pack me on your back, please do!”’ (ibid:56-57)

# Coyote's speech in the oral narratives of Bill Joe

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- Coyote commands his daughter-in-law using **the plural imperative suffix -wa** (rather than the singular imperative suffix -p):

5. ...“laayí k’awyakkatíwá,” hát’omatoy.

laay-i      k’awyakka-ti-**wa**      ha-t’omatoy  
little-ACC   be.low-CAUS-**PL.IMP**      say-PST

“Make [the pack net] a little lower!” he said.’ (ibid:54-55)

6. ...“laayí sewyakkatíwá,” hát’omatoy.

laay-i      sewyakka-ti-**wa**      ha-t’omatoy  
little-ACC   be.low-CAUS-**PL.IMP**      say-PST

‘...“Lower [the pack net] a little!” he said.’ (ibid:54-55)

# Coyote's speech in the oral narratives of Bill Joe

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- Coyote commands his daughter-in-law using **the plural imperative suffix -wa** (rather than the singular imperative suffix -p):

7. “séwyakkatiwa ník 'aa'áy,” hát'omatoy.

sewyakka-ti- <b>wa</b>	nik	'aa'áy	ha-t'omatoy
be.low-CAUS- <b>PL.IMP</b>	1SG.ACC	'aa'áy	say-PST

“Lower me! 'aa'áy,” he said.’ (ibid:56-57)

8. séwyakkatiwa nik kanno 'áa,” hát'omatoy.

sewyakka-ti- <b>wa</b>	nik	kanno	'aa	ha-t'omatoy
be.low-CAUS- <b>PL.IMP</b>	1SG.ACC	more	'aa	say-PST

'...he said, “Lower me more! 'aa.”’ (ibid:56-57)

# Coyote's speech in the oral narratives of Bill Joe

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- Coyote commands his daughter-in-law using **the plural imperative suffix -wa** (rather than the singular imperative suffix -p):

9. ...“mimée hoyim məc’əwi láayi helləm-tiwa,” hát’omatoy.

mimée 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)

10. ...“k’ənkitwa muk’tik’éepayín,” hát’omatoy.

k’ənkit-wa muk’ti-k’ee-pay-in ha-t’omatoy  
stoop.down-PL.IMP do.greatly-very-SS say-PST

‘...he said, “Stoop low down!”’ (ibid:56-57)

# Coyote's speech in the oral narratives of Bill Joe

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- And Coyote implores his daughter-in-law to pick him up using **the second-person plural optative suffix -beem** (rather than singular *-bene*):

11. “hapaytook’óybeem nik k’aawá,” hát’omatoy.

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)

12. ...“meebéebeem nik k’áawa,” hát’omatoy.

meebee-**beem**              nik              k’aa-wa      ha-t’omatoy  
pack.on.back-**2PL.OPT** 1SG.ACC      do-PL.IMP      say-PST

‘...he said, “You must try to pack me on your back, please do!”’ (ibid:56-57)

# Coyote's speech in the oral narratives of Bill Joe

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- Coyote addresses his singular daughter-in-law using **plural morphology**.
- Coyote refers to himself using **singular morphology**, and when speaking to others he refers to his daughter-in-law using **singular morphology**.

13. ...“hesimáan woonóm kilém hedeedí,” hát’omatoy.

hesimaa-n      woono-m      **kile-m**      hedee-di      ha-t’omatoy  
be.wrong-SS      die-REAL      **woman-NOM**      this-LOC      say-PST

“‘There is something the matter with the woman, she is dying here!’ he said.’ (ibid:54-55)

14. ...“míim kile tóok’oywá weneyawóonós...” hát’omatoy.

míi-m      **kile**      took’oy-wa      weneya-woono-s...      ha-t’omatoy  
that-ATTR      **woman.ACC**      take-PL.IMP      make.medicine-go.get-1SG.OPT      say-PST

‘He said, “Take that woman along... I am going to make medicine on the way.”’ (ibid:56-57)

- So why does Coyote do this?.....

# Explaining Coyote's speech pattern

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# Coyote/Animal speech in Native oral traditions

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- One possibility is that this is a marker of **Coyote speech**, i.e. a distinct pattern of speech that is associated with Coyote in Nisenan oral traditions.
- In Native oral traditions, Coyote and other characters often use **characteristic sound substitutions and affixes** that identify them as the speaker. For example:
  - In Cocopa and Quechan, Coyote, Mountain Lion, and Rabbit insert  $l^{(y)}$ ,  $r$ , and  $f$ , respectively, into their speech (Langdon 1978:13-14).
  - In Coeur d'Alene and Nez Perce, Coyote palatalizes  $s$  to  $\check{s}$  (Aoki 1971:190).
  - In Shoshoni, Coyote and Jay attach  $-pai$  and  $-sai$ , respectively (Miller 1972:26).
- Elsewhere, Coyote does not misapply plural morphology. Rather, Coyote uses **singular morphology** to address **individuals** in other Nisenan narratives.....

# Revisiting Bill Joe's "Coyote speech"

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- For example, Coyote can appropriately use **second-person singular pronouns**:

15. ...“homáan nii solí solíbe mi,” hát’omatoy ’olém.

homaan nii sol-i sol-ibe **mi** ha-t’omatoy ’ole-m  
why 1SG.GEN song-ACC sing-Q **2SG.NOM** say-PST coyote-NOM

‘...“Why are you singing my song?” said Coyote [to Buckeye Ball].’

(Uldall and Shipley 1966:34-35)

16. ...“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 [to Field Mouse].’ (ibid:18-19)

# Revisiting Bill Joe's "Coyote speech"

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- And, Coyote can appropriately use **the singular imperative suffix -p (or -∅)**:

17. "Solmén hatíp miyé," hát'omatoy 'olém.

sol-men-∅            hati-p            miye            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 [to Buckeye Ball].’ (ibid:34-35)

18. ...“osím miim hiiweymén...” hát'omatoy.

'os-im            miim-m            hiiwey-men-∅...            ha-t'omatoy  
bad-NOM    that-NOM    talk.bad-NEG-SG.IMP    say-PST

'Then Coyote said [to Lizard], “That is bad, don't talk bad...”’ (ibid:48-49)

- The singular imperative -p is null on consonant-final stems for phonotactic reasons.

# Revisiting Bill Joe's "Coyote speech"

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- And, Coyote can appropriately use **the second-person singular optative -bene**:

19. ...'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 [to Beaver], "You must pound (acorn)..." (ibid:44-45)

20. ..."nii c'olí 'istíbene miyaanotín," hát'omatoy.

nii            c'ol-i            'is-ti-**bene**            miyaano-ti-n            ha-t'omatoy

1SG.GEN    head-ACC    stay-CAUS-**2SG.OPT**    be.thus-CAUS-SS    say-PST

'Coyote said [to Eagle], "Leave my head as it is." (ibid:34-35)

# Revisiting Bill Joe's "Coyote speech"

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- And, Coyote can appropriately use **other singular morpho-syntactic structures**, such as second-person singular interrogative suffix *-kani*:

21. ...“homáatín ’idíkkani miydí kilém nee,” hát’omatoy.

homaatin ’idik-**kani** miy-di kile-m nee ha-t’omatoy  
how arrive-**Q.2SG** there-LOC woman-ATTR old.VOC say-PST

‘He said [to Beaver], “How did you get over there, old woman?”’ (ibid:48-49)

- So Coyote can use singular morphology appropriately when speaking Nisenan, so his use of inappropriate plural morphology is not simply a marker of Coyote’s Nisenan speech patterns. That is, **this is not “Coyote speech”**.
- So why else would Coyote do this?.....

# Coyote/Animal speech in Native oral traditions

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- Native storytellers may also employ atypical language patterns in the speech of animal characters **for discursive effect** (e.g. Hymes 1981, 1984).
  - Sapir (1909:118, 1922:8) identifies *t-* as a “meaningless” affix that is “freely prefixed” to any word spoken by Grizzly Bear in Takelma. However, Hymes (1981) shows that *t-* occurs at important points in Grizzly Bears’ speech to highlight the **intensification** of the narrative events. Further, the use of *t-* **emphasizes the distance** between Grizzly Bear and the narrator/audience (compared to an alternative prefix *s-*).
  - In one Wishram narrative, Coyote’s misuse of transitive markers demonstrates his misunderstanding of the nature of reciprocity (Hymes 1984).
- In fact, I believe that Coyote’s misuse of plural morphology in Nisenan **must be serving some discursive effect** in this particular narrative.....

# Coyote's speech as a subversive tactic

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- Coyote misuses plural morphology **only when speaking to his daughter-in-law**.
  - Coyote has been planning to harm his daughter-in-law since the beginning of the narrative.
  - In this narrative, Coyote is portrayed as being **competently cunning and malicious**, and he ultimately **succeeds** in harming his daughter-in-law as he planned.
  - In other narratives, Coyote is portrayed as less competent, weaker than his interlocutors. Coyote's efforts usually result in him failing, suffering some harm, and often dying.
- I hypothesize that Bill Joe, speaking as Coyote, is **exploiting his knowledge of the grammar** in order to **“play dumb”/subvert the audience's expectations**.
  - Coyote is presenting himself linguistically as incompetent in order to make his daughter-in-law/the audience lower their guard, and thus advance his sinister intentions.
  - This is not Coyote speech, but an active discursive manipulation of Nisenan grammar.

# Implications for document-based language revitalization efforts

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# Implications for document-based revitalization efforts

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- Bill Joe’s oral narratives represent an **invaluable resource** for Nisenan language revitalization efforts, which are primarily document-based.
  - This is one of only two corpora of connected speech in Nisenan, and so one of the few sources of information on sentence-level and discourse-level constructions like switch-reference and discourse particles (e.g. Anderson and Geary 2023, Geary 2023).
- We need to **carefully consider the narrative context** when drawing data from such resources: Some examples of language data **are not fit for learners**.
  - Bill Joe has intentionally subverted the normal language pattern here, and learners should not blindly model their language on this data as we learn to speak Nisenan.
  - We must remember these stories for what they are – “stories – and not simply a tool or set of smaller sentences meant to teach only syntax or morphology” (Reviewer 1).

# Implications for document-based revitalization efforts

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- Nonetheless, my findings reveal a **narrative device** that Nisenan storytellers can use to tell engaging stories that **subvert their audience's expectations**.
  - Bill Joe was a talented storyteller who employed a range of linguistic structures to tell colorful, engaging stories (Anderson and Geary 2023, Uldall and Shipley 1966).
  - In this narrative, Bill Joe has intentionally subverted normal language patterns in order to present Coyote as cunning and manipulative.
- My colleagues and I at the Shingle Springs Band of Miwok Indians are working to repackage some of Bill Joe's narratives, as well as to create our own stories.
  - My findings reveal a linguistic device that we too can use in creating our own stories (which otherwise may have seemed like a mistake/speech error!).

# Summary

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- In one set of Bill Joe's Southern Hill Nisenan narratives, Coyote inappropriately uses **plural morpho-syntactic structures** when addressing his daughter-in-law.
  - Coyote uses appropriate singular structures elsewhere, so **this is not "Coyote speech" per se.**
- I hypothesize that Bill Joe/Coyote is really exploiting his knowledge of Nisenan grammar **to present himself as incompetent** and so hide his true intentions.
  - That is, this is a narrative device that Bill Joe/Coyote uses to subvert expectations.
- For language revitalization purposes, such as at the SSBMI, **we need to consider the narrative context** when drawing language data from oral narratives.
  - Some language data is not appropriate for us to emulate in everyday Nisenan speech.
  - Nonetheless, this is a real narrative device that storytellers can use in creating new stories.

# Nii honi kii̱petim meem!

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I also wish to thank Bill Joe and Hans J. Uldall for creating this important linguistic and cultural resource.

# Pebaabeem nik beyi.

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(You all should ask me questions now.)

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