

# A Karok Myth in “Measured Verse”: the Translation of a Performance

WILLIAM BRIGHT

THE recent popularity of American Indian topics has brought with it many attempts to translate the traditional literature of Native America, and thus to render it more generally accessible to the English-reading public. However, such attempts raise serious problems. Translation is difficult enough between languages like English and German, which have close historical connections. What guidelines, then, can serve us in translating a language like Cahuilla into English? Of course, the literal translations of anthropological linguists have great value; but for non-specialists, they are difficult to read, and most of them do little to convey the esthetic characteristics of the originals. At the other extreme, “literary” translations in the manner of *Hiawatha* usually do little justice to linguistic, ethnographic, or esthetic facts; they simply force the Native American materials into totally foreign molds.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, much recent work (such as that anthologized by Rothenberg [1972]), has been carried out by Anglo writers who lack any acquaintance with the source languages; they have simply seized on the published translations of anthropological linguists and forced this material into the style of mid-twentieth century English-language poetry. The poet who adapts Native American literature in this way may produce work that appeals to contemporary readers, but in the longer view may be seen as just another throwback to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

However, two present-day anthropological linguists have suggested new approaches which will bring the English-speaking reader closer to traditional American Indian literature. I refer to the work of Dennis Tedlock (1972, 1978a, 1978b) on “narrative performance,” and to that of Dell Hymes (1976, 1977) on “measured verse.” In this article, I hope to demonstrate how both these approaches can be used—and, indeed, how they support each other—in the translation of a myth from the Karok of Northwestern California: a previously unpublished version of “Coyote Steals Fire,” as told by the late Mrs. Julia Starritt.<sup>2</sup>

## TEDLOCK’S “NARRATIVE PERFORMANCE”

Most of the American Indian narrative literature that has been put into writing, whether in the native languages or in translation, has attempted only to convey “the words” of the original. Except as sporadically indicated by the impressionistic use of punctuation marks, most of the expressive features of pitch, loudness, silence, rhythm, and timbre—the “paralinguistic” features which, when used by a skilled story-teller, can have such dramatic effect—were simply ignored. Tedlock’s presentations of tape-recorded Zuni literature, however, have shown that it is possible to present “detailed scores for oral narrative performance, complete with the original

pauses, shouts, whispers, chants, and changing tones of voice" (Tedlock 1978a:xi). The result, printed in such a way that the ends of lines correspond to briefer pauses, and the ends of "strophes" or "stanzas" to longer pauses, meets our typographical expectations for poetry; and indeed, in Tedlock's sensitive English renderings, it is clear that these narratives *are* poetry, in modern understandings of the term. Part of my effort in this article, then, is to do for one Karok myth what Tedlock has done with his Zuni materials.

### HYMES' "MEASURED VERSE"

The work of Hymes has focused not on the "paralinguistic" features of live performance, but rather on patterns that can be observed in the published native-language texts—namely, the way in which vocabulary, word-formation, syntax, and semantics are used to create literary structures. Specifically, Hymes shows that Chinookan texts can be divided into *verses*—not on the basis of rhythm or rhyme, as in traditional European poetry—but on the basis of their structural features, in particular the occurrence of *sentence-initial particles*, translatable into English as "and," "so," "then," "but," "you see," etc. This concept of the verse enables us to recognize other units, both smaller and larger. In another Karok text which I have analyzed in this way (Bright 1979), each verse is seen to contain one or more *lines*, where each line normally corresponds to a potential predication, i.e., either an independent or dependent clause. On levels above that of the verse, Karok narratives allow us to identify *scenes*, corresponding to changes in the characters who participate in the narrative, and often also to the use of specific particles or suffixes. A still higher level, that of the *act*, is definable as corresponding to major changes in the locale of action, marked formally by verbs of motion.

The result of Hymes' approach is, again, typographically like poetry; and it presents the

material in a way which points up the poetic character of the original. A natural question, then, is: Do Tedlock's "strophes" and "lines" correspond in any way to Hymes' "verses" and "lines"? Is it possible to analyze and translate a narrative with regard both for the paralinguistic features of performance and for the more conventionally-linguistic features of sentence structure? I believe that the answer is yes, and that the combination of approaches in my translation of "Coyote Steals Fire," given below, gives a fuller representation of the original narrative than could be provided by either approach used alone.

### ANALYZING THE KAROK TEXT

Most of my Karok data were transcribed directly from dictation in 1949 and 1950, when reliable magnetic recorders were hard to obtain. The resulting texts, published in Bright (1957), give a minimum of paralinguistic information, and cannot profitably be reworked with Tedlock's approach at this time. However, at the end of my fieldwork, it was possible to tape-record a few texts, and to make a preliminary transcription of them.

I transcribed "Coyote Steals Fire" from Julia Starritt on two occasions. The first version, taken down from dictation, has been published in Karok with English translation (Bright 1957:194-7, 1977:3-9); the second, which was tape-recorded, is the one that appears here (in translation only). A comparison of the two versions shows differences in detail, but not in plot or overall structure.

Carefully re-listening to Mrs. Starritt's taped narration, along with analysis of the type proposed by Hymes, permits identification of the following features of structure:

(a) *Verses*, to use Hymes' term, are marked syntactically by the presence of "sentence-initial particles" at the beginning, and phonologically by a falling pitch and audible pause at the end. (These correspond to Tedlock's "strophes.")

(b) *Lines*, one or more in each verse, correspond well to those defined by both Tedlock and Hymes. They are marked syntactically by the occurrence of predications. Note here that, in Karok, a single noun phrase may constitute a predication ("Mountain" = "[It's a] mountain"); when such a noun phrase occurs after its verb, departing from normal subject-object-verb order, it is treated as a predication and thus as a line. Phonologically, most lines are marked by a final falling pitch without audible pause. However, lines containing verbs of saying may end in a final mid or high pitch, with or without pause before a following quotation.

(c) *Shifts in volume*, as noted by Tedlock in Zuni.<sup>3</sup>

(d) *Scenes*, in Hymes' sense, contain several verses; they are marked in each case (except the very first scene) by the use of the particle *ta'ittam* 'so', combined with a verb form containing the pluperfect tense suffix *-he.n*. In other contexts, this could appropriately be translated with the English pluperfect "had done"; in narratives, however, I translate with the ordinary English past-tense.

(e) *Acts*, again in Hymes' sense, contain one or more scenes, and are marked by changes in the locale of action. The present text is divided into Act I, with scenes 1-2; Act II, with a single scene; and Act III, with scenes 1-2.

To me, the valuable thing about the combination of Tedlock's and Hymes' approaches in this Karok text is that they coincide 90% of the time in their identification of basic units—the verse (Tedlock's strophe) and the line. Because of this, occasional ambiguities in the application of one approach can be resolved by reference to the other. For instance, when a Karok noun phrase occurs with a preceding *pa-*, this may be a definite article, and thus form part of the noun phrase; or it may be a subordinating particle, indicating that what

follows is a dependent clause—and hence a line. In such a case, phenomena of pitch and pause can identify lines for us. Conversely, when accidental hesitations in speech obscure the pause phenomena that define verses and lines, features of sentence structure clarify the pattern.

### TYPOGRAPHIC CONVENTIONS

The following conventions are used in the translation given below:

(a) Each verse begins at the right-hand margin; lines within a verse are successively indented.

(b) Lines with final high or mid pitch (i.e., those introducing a quotation) end with a colon.

(c) Other lines in a verse, other than the last, end with a comma—or occasionally a dash, when it improves the clarity of the English.

(d) The last or only line of a verse ends in a period.

(e) When a quotation extends through more than one verse, left-hand quote marks appear at the beginning of each verse, but right-hand quote marks appear only at the end of the entire quotation.

(f) Extra-loud material is in capital letters.

(g) Extra-soft material is in italic letters (following Tedlock 1978b).

(h) Acts and scenes are indicated by headings. Like the title of the text as a whole, these have been provided by the translator, not by the narrator.



**THE TEXT: "COYOTE STEALS FIRE"**

[Act I. Place: The center of the world.]

[Scene 1. Participant: Coyote.]

Coyote went upriver long ago to bring back fire.

They had stolen it,

the northern people had.<sup>4</sup>

And people were all just freezing here,

for lack of the fire.

And Coyote said:

"Let me bring it back,

the fire.

*"I know how, I'll bring it back."*

[Scene 2. Participants: Coyote and the runners.]

And so then he arranged them

the people,

he arranged all the swiftest people.

And he told them:

"You sit a little ways upriver,

and you other one, sit like that a little farther upstream"—

eventually they reached upriver,

they reached the northern people's country.

And to the first one, Frog, he said:

"Sit on the river bank."

And up on the mountain top, he said:

"Turtle, sit here."

[Act II. Place: Upriver.]

[Participants: Coyote and the children.]

**SO THEN THAT'S HOW THEY WENT UPRIVER.**

And Coyote arrived upriver.

And he saw it was empty.

And in the mountains he saw there were fires,

*there were forest fires,*

*up in the mountain country.*

And he went in a house.

And he saw only children were there.

And he said:

"Where have they gone?

"Where have the men gone?"

And the children said:

"They're hunting in the mountains."

And he said:

"I'm lying down right here,  
     I'm tired."  
 And he said to the children:  
     "I'll paint your faces!  
 "Let me paint your faces.  
 "You'll look pretty that way."  
 And the children said:  
     "*Maybe he's Coyote.*"  
*They were saying that to each other.*  
 And they said to him,  
     to Coyote:  
     "Maybe you're Coyote,  
*And he said: "No.*  
*"I don't even know*  
     *where that Coyote is.*  
*"I don't hear,*  
     *I don't know,*  
     *the place where he is."*  
 And he said:  
     "Let me paint your faces!"  
 And when he painted all the children's faces,  
     then he said:  
         "SEE, I'VE SET WATER DOWN RIGHT HERE,  
         SO YOU CAN LOOK INTO IT.  
 "Your faces will look pretty!"  
 "BUT I'M LYING DOWN RIGHT HERE,  
     I'M TIRED."  
 In fact, he had stuck fir bark into his toes.  
 And then he stuck his foot in the fire.  
 And then finally it caught fire well,  
     it became a coal,  
         it turned into a coal.  
 And then he jumped up again.  
 And he jumped out of the house.  
*And he ran back downriver.*  
 And when he got tired,  
     then he gave the fire to the next person.  
*And he too started running.*  
 And in the mountain country,  
     where there had been fires,  
         then they all were extinguished.  
 And then people said,  
     "Why, they've taken it back from us,  
     our fire!"

[Act III. Place: Returning to the center of the world.]

[Scene 1. Participants: The runners.]

And so they [the northern people] ran back downhill.  
And they [Coyote's people] ran back down from upriver.  
One gave it to another.  
He gave it to the next.  
Anytime a person got tired,  
    he gave it to another one.  
Finally they ran back down here from upriver.  
And they ran back down here behind them,  
    the upriver people did.  
And so where Turtle sat, the last one in the mountains,  
    then they gave him the fire.

[Scene 2. Participants: Turtle and Frog.]

And so he started to roll,  
    he rolled downhill to the river,  
        he rolled to a stop on the shore.  
And there where Frog sat,  
    then he gave her the fire.  
*And when Frog put it in her mouth,*  
    *the fire,*  
        *then she dived in the water.*  
*So they had run downhill just above her,*  
    *the northern people.*  
And then, where did she go?—  
    they couldn't see Frog at all—  
        where had she run to?—  
            in fact, she had dived into the water.  
And suddenly, when she got acrossriver,  
    then smoke appeared,<sup>5</sup>  
        suddenly the dogs all barked.  
*There Humans had come into existence,*  
    *the dogs were howling.*



## CONCLUSION

The above discussion and translation is not meant to suggest that all Native American narratives must be analyzable in similar terms. I do not even wish to claim that the Zuni line (as defined by Tedlock) or the Chinookan verse (as defined by Hymes) have their exact counterparts in Karok: indeed, the definitions offered above for Karok lines and verses differ in a number of ways from the definitions given by Tedlock and by Hymes. Nevertheless, it seems clear that Karok narrative, like that of the Zuni and the Chinookan peoples, has a detailed structure which can be expressed in terms of lines and verses. If English-speaking readers are to have the chance to enjoy, in translation, the richness of Native American traditional literature, then it is the translator's duty to respect such structures.

*University of California, Los Angeles*

## NOTES

1. For a discussion of these problems, see Tedlock (1971).

2. My earlier publications on Karok language and culture include Bright (1957, 1977, 1978, and 1979). A large and important collection of previously unpublished Karok texts in English translation, collected by A. L. Kroeber and E. W. Gifford, is soon to be published by the University of California Press.

3. Chanted pitch-lines and prolongations of sounds, recorded by Tedlock in Zuni, do not occur in the Karok myth studied here.

4. Literally, "upriver people." According to Mrs. Starritt's earlier telling, fire had not been stolen, but lost in gambling.

5. Frog spat out the fire into the roots of a willow grove; thus willow wood is used in the fire-drill or "Indian matches."

## REFERENCES

- Bright, William  
 1957 The Karok Language. University of California Publications in Linguistics 13.  
 1977 Coyote Steals Fire. In: Northern California Texts, Victor Golla and Shirley Silver, eds., pp. 3-9. International Journal of American Linguistics, Native American Texts Series 2(2).  
 1978 Karok. In: Handbook of North American Indians, Vol. 8: California, Robert F. Heizer, ed., pp. 180-189. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution.  
 1979 Coyote gives Salmon and Acorns to Humans. In: Coyote Stories II, Martha Kendall, ed. International Journal of American Linguistics, Native American Texts Series, Monographs, in press.
- Hymes, Dell  
 1976 Louis Simpson's 'The deserted boy.' Poetics 5:119-155.  
 1977 Discovering Oral Performance and Measured Verse in American Indian Narrative. New Literary History 8:431-457.
- Rothenberg, Jerome, ed.  
 1972 Shaking the Pumpkin: Traditional Poetry of the Indian North Americans. Garden City, New York: Doubleday.
- Tedlock, Dennis  
 1971 On the Translation of Style in Oral Narrative. Journal of American Folklore 84:114-133.  
 1972 Finding the Center: Narrative Poetry of the Zuni Indians. New York: Dial Press.  
 1978a Finding the Center. 2nd edition. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.  
 1978b Coyote and Junco. In: Coyote Stories, William Bright, ed., pp. 171-177. International Journal of American Linguistics, Native American Texts Series, Monograph No. 1.

