



THE RESTRICTED CODE OF *HOUSE MADE OF DAWN*

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Abstract:

Ethnosemantic fields appealing to the semiotics of local knowledge by circumventing translations and explanations obvious to cultural insiders created a restricted code and an ethnic boundary in N. Scott Momaday's novel *House Made of Dawn*.

Keywords: American Indian literature, ethnosemantics, restricted code, ethnic boundary

1. Introduction

The lexis of a literary text, which is derived from the author's mental lexicon, embodies a distinctive set of experiential relations. For mapping that ideation, the lexicon makes available networks of interlocking semiotic options (Halliday 1994, xiv). Among these are underlexicalization, which suppresses meanings, and overlexicalization, which proliferates synonyms, including code-switches to different registers and languages (Halliday, 1979, 164-182). In addition to evoking esoteric, or insider, knowledge, such manipulations of semantic fields may reveal an unusual preoccupation with a culture's salient constructs. Such is the case in *House Made of Dawn*, a novel well known for its enigmas and seeming obfuscations. However, when considered that the entire novel was framed by the Towa formulaic oral discourse markers "*Dypaloh*" (arrowhead lake) and "*Qtsedaba*," (stop), Momaday's appeal for his narrative to be elevated to mythic textual status has been inferred (Parsons 1925, 136; Scarberry-Garcia 1990, 8). Hence, for certain aspects of native culture, he infused a level of lexification that resulted in a quasi-restricted code designed to satisfy primarily the semiotics of shared local knowledge and thus to circumvent explanations of the obvious to native insiders. Fortunately, a great deal of Southwest American Indian traditional knowledge was recorded in the older ethnographic literature of the early to mid-twentieth century, which Momaday himself consulted extensively in writing his novel (Scarberry-Garcia 1990, 6). It is the purpose of this paper to explore that ethnographic record, which happens to predate, or to roughly coincide with, the period covered in the novel, the 1940s and 50s, in order to interpret the ethnosemantics of seemingly enigmatic lexical items occurring in Momaday's narrative. The attempted interpretations draw on the arsenal of stylolinguistics, which makes

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available to the interpretation of literary texts the resources of general linguistics, including such subfields as linguistic anthropology, with its focus on native cognitive systems (Fowler 1996).

2. Sacred Ground

It was also in the 1940s and 50s, according to his memoir, *The Names*, that Momaday spent his adolescence in Jemez, referred to in his novel by its Towa name, *Walatowa* (Bear Village), a town, or Pueblo, of about a thousand Tanoan tribesmen, who struck him as

"a very close, integrated community, concentrated upon the plaza . . . Their sacred ceremonies are performed in the plaza, and in the kiva." (Momaday 1976, 122; Hodge 1907, 638)

Even though the intention of his memoir was, in part, to decode for outsiders some of the seemingly opaque native cultural contexts that had informed the writing of his novel, Momaday only provided the vague meaning for "*kiva*," cited above. Moreover, in the novel, this lexeme only specified the place where dancers donned their regalia (Momaday 1968, 14).

Yet, much more than an underground ceremonial chamber shrouded in secrecy, the kiva symbolized the mythic emergence from the underworld, where the tribe had previously dwelled in darkness. And just as the mythic ancestors had climbed from Mother Earth's womb to her surface, the dancers of the novel recapitulated that legendary journey when they "*appear[ed] on the top of the kiva, coming out upon the sky in their rich ceremonial dress,*" and "*descend[ed] the high ladder to the earth . . .*" (Momaday 1968, 77; Parsons 1939). The "*ladder*" was metaphorized further as a canyon on which "*[m]an came down . . . to the plain a long time ago,*" in intimating the tribe's mythic history (Momaday 1968, 57, 55).

While the secret ritual preparations inside the kiva were restricted to the dancers and shamans, it was the central plaza, properly called the "*Middle*" and appropriately capitalized in the novel as well as in ethnographic reports, which constituted the Pueblo's main public ceremonial space (Momaday 1968, 14; Parsons 1925, 10). In his memoir, Momaday observed "*that the pueblo people move ever towards the center*" (Momaday 1976, 122). Thus, it was in the "*Middle*" where the public face of sacred rituals was unveiled and the sleepy Pueblo came alive with the smells of "*food and fires of the feast,*" which provided "*posole*" (stew), "*pinones*" (nuts), "*sotobalau*" (wheat bread) and "*piki*" (corn bread) (Momaday 1968, 6, 14, 75, 76). It was also where Francisco completed his victorious ceremonial foot race, after he had "*held his stride all the way to the Middle*" (Momaday 1968, 8). And it was in the "*Middle*" where the rooster pulls, the centerpiece of a fertility ritual, took place (Momaday 1968, 39, 40, 43). The entire space is best captured by the Towa lexeme "*ketha'ahme,*" which "*bears critical connotations of belonging*" (Momaday 1968, 195; 1997, 51).

3. The Cloud People

In the arid Southwest, much of the native ceremonialism was dedicated to imploring the Cloud People, or "*katchinas*," for rain (Parsons 1939, 116). Ritual dancing and singing, either alone or in communal ceremonies, the latter referred to in the novel as "*sings*," were considered forms of praying (Momaday 1968, 7, 146). Regarded as alive, the accompanying "*drum*" possessed a voice that imitated the sound of "*thunder*" (Momaday 1968, 146; Parsons 1939, 382). That appeal to sympathetic magic was captured in the novel with the simile, "*the drum held sway in the valley, like the breaking of thunder far away*" (Momaday 1968, 41).

Also dedicated to rain-making, the ceremonial races depicted in the novel involved the "*old men*," imitating the Cloud People by running "*as the water runs . . . deep in the channel, in the way of least resistance*" (Momaday 1968, 103; Parsons 1925, 77). At Jemez, according to ethnographic reports, four such ceremonial races were held in February, which agrees with the dates of Abel's participation in the race at the beginning and closing of the novel (Parsons 1925, 77, Momaday 1968, 193, 209).

Pleasing the Cloud People extended even to the runners' long "*hair*," which should flow to "*carry the rain clouds*" (Parsons 1939, 394). The narrative voice of the novel alluded to this ritual practice:

"There had been no rain in the valley for a long time, and the dust was deep in the streets. By one of the houses a thin old man tended his long hair. . . He was bent forward and his hair reached nearly to the ground . . . He brushed slowly . . . with a bunch of quills." (Momaday 1968, 40).

The hair's religious signification revealed itself in the old man's use of traditional quills instead of an inappropriate white man's comb. A "*Longhair*," the title of the novel's first chapter in reference to Abel, rather than his grandfather, was a term current among Indians of the 1940s and 50s, which signified any conservative native man who had refused to yield to the pressures of acculturation, regardless of hairstyle (Momaday 1968, 148).

4. Running Against Evil

In addition to weather control, the races were also deployed in defense against the ever-present evil of a "*sawish*" (witch) (Momaday 1968, 195; Parsons 1925, 49, 139). The "*old men running after evil . . . full of tranquility, certitude*" ultimately shot or beat to death the malevolence represented by a rag doll (Momaday 1968, 103, Parsons 1939, 728). As a result, the actual suspected sorcerer was expected to die shortly of a mysterious illness. As a prophylaxis against evil, a runner rubbed himself with "*ashes*," making him appear as a "*black man . . . hombre negro*" (Parsons 1927, 109; Momaday 1968, 2, 7, 8, 195, 210).

Sorcery among Native peoples of the American Southwest of the mid-twentieth century can best be understood as a system of native logic which allayed anxiety by

providing acceptable rationalizations for disturbing events, such as illness, death and the destruction of property, which would otherwise have gone unexplained (Kluckhohn 1944). This anxiety was best expressed by Abel's Navajo friend, Ben Benally:

"Then you remember something that happened the week before, something wasn't right. You heard an owl, maybe, or you saw a funny kind of whirlwind; somebody looked at you sideways and a moment too long. And you know. Maybe your aunt or your grandmother was a witch." (Momaday 1968, 150).

The hooting of an owl always caused great trepidation, since witches had the ability to metamorphose into animals, such as owls and coyotes, by donning the creature's feathers or skins. Witches also caused damage to crops by preventing rain and causing "wind," especially a "whirlwind" (Parsons 1939, 136). For Abel, "the moan of the wind . . . filled him with dread . . ." and "would be for him the particular sound of anguish" (Momaday 1968, 12). And the presence of the evil-eye belief among native peoples of the Southwest should not be surprising, since it has been reported by ethnographers for most non-industrial cultures.

An ancient source of witchcraft at Jemez Pueblo was the bloodline from "Bahkyula/Bakyush" (nominal/adjectival), better known as Pecos Pueblo (Momaday 1968, 12, 15, 19). The abandonment of that Pueblo about 1840 "has been cast into a tradition of feud plus witchcraft" (Parsons 1925, 3; 1939, 15). According to a folktale, Pecos Pueblo concealed in one of its kivas a giant snake god with a voracious appetite, to whom infants were fed to appease him (Roberts 1932). That evil snake spirit inhabited the witch "Nicolas teah-whau" and the albino sorcerer, "diablo blanco," of the novel.

5. Animal Power

One of the more potent cures for individuals as well as for whole communities afflicted with witchcraft involved the harnessing of "bear" power for the ritualistic hunt, capture, and destruction of witches. Dressing in the skins of bears and arming themselves with bear claws, shamans metamorphosed into the actual bruin, "pawing and clawing the patient like a wild animal" (Parsons 1939, 135). Human-to-bear transformation was salient in mythic texts such as "Esdza shash nadle" (Changing Bear Maiden) (Momaday 1968, 188). Acquiring "bear" power required the slaying of the actual animal, blessing its spirit with corn "pollen," and eating of its "liver" (Momaday 1968, 203). Announcing his return to the Pueblo with a war shout, the hunter gave each man who came out to greet him a piece of the "bear's flesh," which they wrapped around the barrels of their rifles (Momaday 1968, 204). The women, armed with pokers, struck the bear's carcass much like the body of a slain enemy combatant (Parson 1925, 62; Momaday 1968, 204).

Human-to-animal transformations as good-luck charms for successful hunts were also performed in allegorical dances. Thus, the narrative voice, in asserting "[t]hat the deer and the antelope had already gone out into the hills, and the crows were dressing in the kiva," assumed the dancers not to be humans in regalia but sacred animals whose abundance

nourished and blessed the Pueblo (Momaday 1968, 14). Another blessing was the sight of an “*eagle*” carrying a “*snake*,” the two powerful deities who symbolized sky and earth (Momaday 1968, 18; Parsons 1939, 99, 185). Both spirits were impersonated by curing societies and live specimens were captured and kept in pits and cages at the Pueblo (Parsons 1939, 28, 670).

Equally powerful was Spider Woman as “*a possessor of inexhaustible things*,” who, in mythic times, gave people morsels of food which turned magically into large mouthfuls (Parsons 1939, 94). Thus, her presence anywhere was always respected, as conveyed in the novel when Ben recalls telling Milly, Abel’s cleanliness-driven white girlfriend, “[*t*hat spider was our roommate, we said, and she didn’t have any right to come around all the time, trying to evict it” (Momaday 1968, 178).

6. Turquoise

The repetition of a term for related concepts, so that the ideas they symbolize become foregrounded, is also a form overlexicalization (Yun 2017, 149). In the novel the culturally symbolic color “*blue*” occurs thirteen times in adjectival position. In traditional Pueblo religion, of the cardinal directions, “*blue*” signified West (Parsons 1939, 99). It was also associated with the supernatural Turquoise Man and maleness in general, while his companion, Yellow Woman, stood for the North and femaleness (Parsons 1939, 102). Thus, in the novel, Abel was “*tinged with a pale blue light*” and Angela, his sexual partner, had “*skin*” that “*was kind of golden*” (Momaday 1968, 64, 177).

Yet, in Navajo mythology turquoise was not associated with maleness but with the mythic “*Turquoise Woman*,” who created the original four clans of humans (Momaday 1968, 170; Mathews 2002, 34). Hence, in the novel, a “*blue*” velveteen blouse was worn by a Navajo girl at a squaw dance, the public portion of a summer curing ceremony (Momaday 1968, 172, 145). In the “*War God’s Horse Song*,” the son of “*Turquoise Woman*” prayed for his supernatural horse to bring him wealth in the form of more horses (Momaday 1968, 170, Scarberry-Garcia 1990, 93). The most prized domestic animal, the horse, was therefore also associated in the novel with “*blue*” and “*dark blue velvet*,” (Momaday 1968, 1, 114, 173). Finally, the Pueblo’s “*valley*” was perceived as “*blue-green*,” and the earthen Pueblo houses were trimmed with “*blue*” window frames to guard their inhabitants against evil (Momaday 1968, 17, 41).

Turquoise was also the most prized gemstone for silver jewelry, for which the Navajo, referred to in the novel by their endonym, “*Dine*” (people), were especially esteemed (Momaday 1968, 69, 76). “*The Dine of all people knew how to be beautiful*” and make beautiful things such as a “*ketoh*” (wristlet) shaped in a spiderweb and a “*najahe*,” a crescent shaped “*like the moon and one perfect powder-blue stone*” (Momaday 1968, 69, 76, 166, 167, 166, 172; Franciscan Fathers 1910, 283).

7. Go Well

The code switch to “Ayempah” is more difficult to pin down (Momaday 1969, 195). Although this Towa lexeme was not explained explicitly in the novel nor in any other of Momaday's writings, several critics have been convinced that the Jemez conventional formula of greeting and leave-taking was indicated. One of Momaday's well known critics, Robert Nelson (1989; 2006) has claimed that

“[t]he most authoritative textual reference that comes to mind is Momaday's reference to the word in his early essay “The Morality of Indian Hating,” where he translates the interrogative version of it “Where are you going?”; Larry Evers, who knew that, nevertheless translates it “What are you doing?” in his seminal essay “Words and Place: A Reading of House Made of Dawn.” My own paraphrase in that post (“go well”) is pretty loose, and based on the imperative version of the word; according to an explanation of the word given to me by a resident of Jemez some years ago, as a question it comes close to “how are you going” or “how/why/to what end do you move?”; and like Hawaii's “aloha” it may be used both as a greeting (phrased as a question) and as a good-by blessing, in which case it means something like “[may you] continue to move in that way/to that end.”
(e-mail to author)

Nelson's take on the term certainly supports the notion that a code switch would be triggered by the context of final leave-taking in native terms. Interestingly enough, however, in the essay cited by Nelson, Momaday did not actually mention the term but only provided his translation:

“Where are you going? That is the conventional formula of greeting at the eastern pueblo of Jemez, where I lived for almost twenty years.” (Momaday 1997, 74)

Nor was the term used when the narrative voice explored Abel's inability to engage in the simple local greeting convention as a symptom of his psychological breakdown:

“Had he been able to say it, anything—even the commonplace formula of greeting ‘Where are you going’—which had no being beyond sound, no visible substance;” (Momaday 1968, 58)

Also curious is the total absence of the term in Parsons' thoroughly documented ethnography, in which she only mentioned the Spanish “bueno” and “buena dia” as the greetings she encountered at Jemez (Parsons 1925, 6). As an outsider, she may have been excluded from native conventions of courtesy; nevertheless, it seems odd for her to have been unaware of a common native greeting. Unobservant she certainly was not, since she managed to wring out of her informants a great deal of secret religious information, a violation of trust still resented by the Jemez community (Sando 1982, 216).

8. Ethnosemantic Fields

In the encoding of a native ideology, Momaday employed underlexicalization for selected English terms and overlexicalization in the form of code-switches to Towa, Navajo, and Spanish, a lingua franca among the Pueblo tribes of the mid-twentieth century. Instead of indicating a lack of lexical access, the intentional application of underlexicalization in the novel can be regarded as the suppression of meanings already understood by native insiders. Though overlexicalization has generally been interpreted as a marker of powerlessness, the motivation for lexical code-switching in the novel seems to have been the drawing of an ethnic boundary (Teo 2000; Guang 2015).

Thus, in the world of the novel, the lexemes "*kiva*," "*ladder*," and "*Middle*" formed part of a larger semantic field which encompassed the Pueblo's sacred ground. Also included were "*Walatowa*" and "*Ketha-ahme*" in signifying its axis mundi.

In attempting to solicit the Cloud People for rain, a semantic field of prayer covered "*dancers*," "*sings*," "*drums*," "*thunder*," "*running*," and "*hair*." However, the ambiguous nature of magic as both good and evil revealed "*running*" as a homonym which, therefore, also belonged to the semantic field of "*Sawish*." Included in that latter construct were "*ashes*," "*black man*," "*hombre negro*," "*owl*," "*wind*," "*looked sideways*," and the witches of "*Bakyula*," such as "*Nicolas teah-whau*," and the albino or "*diablo blanco*."

A semantic field of curing embraced the acquisition of power derived from animals with mythic quasi-human ancestors. "*Bear*" Medicine and "*Esdza shash nadle*," are connected to the administration of "*pollen*," to the eating of the bear's "*liver*," and to the ritual distribution of the "*bear's flesh*." Furthermore, the "*deer*," "*antelope*," and "*crows*" blessed the community as well as the "*eagle*," "*snake*," and "*spider*."

Turquoise, the most wide-spread and seemingly contradictory ethnosemantic field throughout the novel, must be appraised as a composite of both Puebloan and Navajo meanings. Thus, "*blue*" and "*blue-green*" appeared to foreground both maleness and femaleness, derived from the Puebloan Turquoise Man and the Navajo "*Turquoise Woman*." In addition, the "*valley*," "*horses*" and the "*window frames*" received hues of the same color. Lastly, it was iconic turquoise jewelry, such as the "*ketoh*" and "*najahe*," which rounded out this network of native meanings.

A final untranslated ethnosemantic field accounted for the Jemez conventional greeting "*Ayempah*" and the pair of formulaic mythic discourse markers "*Dypaloh*" and "*Qtsedaba*." While the former opened and closed a conversation, or, at least, acknowledged the presence of a native interlocutor, the latter framed a mythic spoken text and thus acknowledged a native audience.

9. Conclusion

Without a translation or a context within which to understand the Towa words in the novel, according to Holly Martin (2005), the reader shares the protagonist's frustration and psychological fragmentation. However, the seemingly enigmatic overlexicalized code-switches and the underlexicalized English terms turn out to be not deliberate

obfuscation but Momaday's conscious decision to offer a multiple perspective and an enhanced ability to present a native perspective. By reviewing the ethnographic literature which informed his writing of "House Made of Dawn," this paper has attempted to suggest ethnosemantic fields which aspired to satisfy primarily the semiotics of shared local knowledge. By circumventing translations or explanations of the obvious to native insiders, such preferences created a quasi-restricted code and an ethnic boundary.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interests.

About the Author

Guillermo Bartelt is a sociolinguist and an emeritus at California State University, Northridge. Most of his research has focused on the English varieties of American Indians at the spoken as well as written levels.

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