

Trro Lamu Krr a Terìran Nantang: A Coyote Tale in Na'vi

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May 2010*

The translation into Na'vi of rock songs necessarily involves a large cultural impedance, so I thought I'd try something a little more likely to be understood by the Na'vi: a Navajo Coyote tale.

Coyote tales appear in the stories of Native American groups from the plains, the southwest and the northwest. His significance differs from tribe to tribe. For the Hopi he's more purely the buffoon, but for the Navajo he has a more significant, and sometimes more dangerous, role. There's a large literature devoted to Coyote, so I will recommend the curious spend some quality time with their favorite search engine. There is much to read.

This tale comes from the 1949 book "Coyote Tales," by William Morgan, Hildegard Thompson and Andy Tsihnahjinnie.

In this document I've forced some odd page breaks to keep the English original on the same page as its Na'vi translation.

Finally, many thanks to Karyu Pawl, who looked at a draft of this translation, and gave style hints and a few words and idioms. Any remaining infelicities and blunders are of course my own.

Navajo Coyote tales tend to have a stylized opening sentence meaning something like, "long ago Coyote was trotting along, it is said." The word *jiní*, "it is said," is almost an evidential, but we don't have indirect evidentials in Na'vi.¹ For the Navajo, Coyote tales are only told in the night during winter. It might also make sense for the Na'vi translation to have a ceremonial marker. I have done neither in my translation below, but it's something to consider.

*Version 1.4

¹See the appendix for an alternate opening suggested by Frommer.

*Once Coyote was out walking.
He was walking in the forest.
He met a deer. She had her baby with her.*

Trro lamu krr a terìran Nantang.
Terìran mì na'ring.
Ultraxolun pol Yerikit. Poehu lu prnen.

Since we don't have "once" in the sense of "once upon a time," I just use the word **trr** "day" with the indefinite suffix, **-o**, with a **krr a** "when" clause, "there was some day when..."

Notice that I have made use of the the gender-marked pronoun, **poe**, for Deer throughout this story. It is convenient to be able to distinguish the two characters without repeating their names constantly

*Coyote said, "Hello, my cousin.
What pretty stars your baby has on his back.
I wish my children had pretty stars."*

Nantang plltxe san Kaltxì, ma tsmuke.
Mì tal ngeyã prnenã a sanhì lor nìtxan lu nang!
Nìrangal lirvu oeyã frnenur lora sanhì sikh.

In this tale the "stars" are the spots on the fawn. A *yerik* is striped along its body. Though there are some spots on the face cowl, this is still a bit of a stretch for the story.²

Because the time of the tale has already been established, I'm using aspect markers much more than any tense marker, except in some direct quotes. Once a time has been established, it's not necessary to keep bringing it up. Even formal aspect marking can be dropped unless you need to mark a change.

The adverb **nìrangal** is used to introduce wishes that cannot be realized — at least, which the speaker considers unattainable. With the imperfective subjunctive, **kirvu**, it represents an unattainable wish in the present, "If only my children..."

Finally, notice that I'm using just **san... sikh** for quotation in Na'vi, generally without additional punctuation.

²And a *nantang* may not be the best match for Coyote, but it's not the worst possible match, either.

*Deer said, “Your babies can have stars.
I will tell you.
This is what I do.*

Yerik plltxe san sanhì tsun livu frnenu ngeyã.
Pìsyeng oel ngar.
Kem si fifya.

Here we’ve got the s-future in **pìsyeng**, indicating Deer’s determined intention to tell Coyote what he wants to know.

We use a **si**-construction with **kem** “act, deed,” for the general idea of “to do.” Notice also that I’ve left out the subject pronoun in the last sentence here. It is normal Na’vi style to leave out subject pronouns until the subject changes. I drop subject pronouns throughout this tale.

*When my babies are very little, I build a big fire.
The sparks from the fire make the stars.
You can do that for your babies.
Then they will have pretty stars, too.”*

Frnen hì’i lu nìtxan a krr, apxa txepit txula oel.
Tepvil sanhiti ngop.
Tsakem sivi nga tsun fpi frnen ngeyã.
Tsakrr lora sanhì layu kop for sìk.

Since **apxa** ends in **-a** already, the attributive adjective marker **a** disappears. The verb **txula** “construct, build” is the verb for making a fire.

Because the word for “spark,” **txepvi**, is derived from the word for “fire,” **txep**, I leave “fire” out of the translation in the phrase “the sparks from the fire.”

Because the adposition **fpi** causes lenition, there is a bit of number vagueness by using the short plural in the phrase **fpi frnen**. Since it’s already established that Coyote has several babies, this ambiguity isn’t really a worry here.

*Coyote was happy.
Now he knew what to do.
He wanted his babies to have pretty stars.
He gathered wood.
He made a big fire.*

'Efu Nantang nitram.
Zene sivi a kemit olomum.
New livu lora sanhì frnenur peyä.
Ayvulit zamolunge 'awsiteng.
Txepit apxa txolula.

The second line of the translation is a bit condensed – where English requires repetition of the subject pronoun, Na'vi doesn't need it at all. The **kem** in the **si**-construction has been lifted out and attached to **si** with the relative marker **a**. So, **zene sivi a kem** is “the act he must perform.”

For “gather” in the fourth line is **zamunge 'awsiteng** “bring together.”

*He put all his children in the fire.
The sparks flew.
“Now they will have pretty stars,” said Coyote.*

Evengit nìwotx yem nemfa txep.
Tepvi tswayon.
San lìyu for lora sanhì sikh plltxe.

The adverb **nìwotx** is used for the English phrase “all of (them).”
Here I've avoided “now” in the translation since we have the benefit of the proximal future in Na'vi, **kìyü**.

*He danced around the fire.
Soon he said to Deer,
“Have they been in the fire long enough?
Will they have pretty stars now?”*

Po pxaw txep srew.
Krrromaw plltxe Yerikur san
Krr a fol txepit tok lu txan nìtam srak?
Lu set for lora sanhì srak? sikh.

Instead of just “soon” here is “after some time,” **krr-o-maw**.

The verb **tok**, “be (in a place), occupy,” is transitive so there’s no need for an adposition here. Note that the word **tok** here ends the attributive phrase attached to **krr**. Of time, “long” is rendered with **txan**, “much.”

“Yes,” said Deer.

She ran away laughing.

Srane sîk plltxe Poe.

Tolul neto tengkrr herangham.

We can express simultaneous action, “while,” with **tengkrr** with a verb having the imperfective **<er>**.

Coyote took his children from the fire.

They were burned. They were dead.

Coyote was angry. He chased Deer.

Coyote still chases Deer, but he never catches her.

Evengit ta txep molunge Nantangîl.

Foti nolekx txepîl. Fo lu kerusey.

Po steri. Yerikit folewi.

Nantangîl vay set ferewi Yerikit, slâ ke stâ'nî kawkrr.

Na’vi does have a passive participle, but participles can only be used attributively, as in “his burnt children.” So, we have to say what burned Coyote’s children here.

Now, a pack of coyotes is quite capable of catching a deer. But Coyote usually works alone, and very often comes to a bad end.

Appendix: Frommer's Comments

Since Karyu Pawl offered several options for some situations in this translation, it seems valuable to include some of his comments here. Regarding the formalized opening of Navajo Coyote tales,

Another element of "Once upon a time..." in Na'vi that would fit into the cultural context might be: "Ayfizayu plltxuye san..." (pizayu 'ancestor' + honorific infix; they're still felt to be present and contactable, so not poltxuye). So the whole traditional story opening could be: Ayfizayu plltxuye san trro lamu krr a... (or Plltxuye ayfizayu...). Take whatever parts you like.

After asking if I needed a **sik** way at the end of the tale if I used this opening formula,

If you wanted a closing formula, however, it could be "Fifya plltxuye ayfizayu." (I should add 'thus' as a possible gloss of "fifya" in the vocab.)

Concerning not using tense markers once a temporal context has been established,

I've been using aspect markers much more myself, for the same reason. But in narrative, if verbs in sequence bear the same aspect, you can mark aspect on the first and then omit it, using only the root, until the aspect changes.