

Prolegomena to the Study of Na'vi Poetics*

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August 2149

The RDA is famously stingy with their ansible. Getting Na'vi linguistic data back from Pandora makes the usual academic printing cycle seem speedy. One need only see the time it takes for Dr. Grace Augustine's works to appear to get the smallest taste of the problem. Nonetheless, between the pittance of ansible time Augustine's team has been able to manage along with the hardcopy data sent back on RDA cargo ship return voyages — with a nearly six year delay — Na'vi linguistics is slowly finding itself with data upon which to base sound research.

It was remarkable enough to find that aliens not only use vocal language, but that the grammar of their language appears to be largely constructed of parts recognizable in Human languages. It is hardly obvious that alien languages will have verbal aspect, for example, or that it would serve the same function for them that it does for humans. Further parallels abound, from the details of material culture, to social organization, to practices of personal adornment. I will leave this matter to the lucubrations of philosophers, and instead add to the list of parallels: in poetry, too, Na'vi and Human have much in common.

The Songs

It is unfortunate that the RDA did not permit sound data to accompany the text of the two song texts that have come to use from Augustine's team. Their refusal to accomodate a professional musicologist on Pandora is also to be deplored. Understanding the relationship between words and musical rhythm could help clarify some matters we will shortly encounter. We have, nonetheless, enough data to begin serious study.

*Originally submitted to the *Journal of Pandoran Linguistics* in February 2147. That fine body rejected this brief note, being preoccupied with such questions as how to render "limited liability corporation" in Na'vi. Since financial and political instability in the EU has caused *Studia Pandoraica* to cease publication indefinitely, I have decided to make my preliminary results available informally.

Work songs are ubiquitous in Human cultures. The Na’vi have them, too. Here is the Weaving Song¹ —

<p>Tompayä kato, tsawkeyä kato, ⁵⁺⁵ Trrä sì txonä ⁵ S(i) ayzìsitä kato, ⁶ Sì ’ekong te’lanä ⁶ 4 Te’lanä le-Na’vi ⁶ Oeru teya si, ⁶ Oeru teya si. ⁶</p>	<p>1 Rhythm of rain, rhythm of sun, Of day and of night, And rhythm of the years, And beat of the hearts, Hearts of the People Fills me, Fills me.</p>
<p>Katot täftxu oel ⁶ 8 Nìean nìrim ⁵ Ayzìsitä kato, ⁶ ’ìheyu sìreyä ⁶ ’ìheyu sìreyä ⁶ 12 Sìreyä le-Na’vi, ⁶ Oeru teya si, ⁶ Oeru teya si. ⁶</p>	<p>I weave the rhythm In blue, in yellow, Rhythm of the years, Spiral of the lives, Spiral of the lives, Lives of the people, Fills me, Fills me.</p>

While these verses do not involve *strict* syllable counting, the phrases of this song are broken into units of five or six syllables. Note in particular the elision in line 3, which prevents the line from extending to seven syllables. More puzzling is the asyndeton in line 9, *nìean nìrim* “in blue (and) in yellow,” which restricts the line to five syllables. This limit may be imposed by the music, though perhaps it is to be taken in strophic respension to line 2.

For phonetic figuration, no rhyme scheme is evident, nor is assonance. In a coronal-rich language such as Na’vi alliteration could hardly be avoided, but our corpus of natural Na’vi use is so limited that we can not yet produce reliable statistics to determine if a given poem is using more or fewer of particular consonant sounds.

Na’vi verse, then, is not much like English formal verse. In its word use, however, it has much in common with the strophic forms of several Human poetic cultures. This Weaving Song has several instances of the technique the old Irish bards called *conachlonn*, the repetition of the word at the end of one line at the beginning of another (lines 4 to 5, and 12 to 13). Similar repetition, and repetition with variation, is evident in the Hunt Song —

¹The superscript number at the end of each Na’vi line is the syllable count. I have not, *pace* Jean Benoit-Chandracharyam (*JPL*, vol.9, 2145), considered the dubious data regarding syllable weight. It’ll take a sturdier spade than Na’vi to dig Optimality Theory out of its grave.

Terìran <u>ayoe ayngane</u> ⁹ 1	We are walking your way
Zera'u ³	We are coming
Rerol <u>ayoe ayngane</u> ⁸	We are singing your way
Ha <u>ftxey</u> ²	So choose
'Awpot set <u>ftxey</u> ayngal a l(u) ayngakip ¹⁰	Choose one among you
'Awpot a Na'viru yomtiyìng. ⁹	Who will feed the People.
(Chorus)	(Chorus)
Oeyä swizaw nìngay tivakuk ¹⁰⁼⁵⁺⁵ 7	Let my arrow strike true
Oeyä tukrul txe'lanit tivakuk ¹¹⁼⁵⁺⁶	Let my spear strike the heart
Oeri tingayìl txe'lanit tivakuk ¹²⁼⁶⁺⁶	Let the truth strike my heart
Oeyä txe'lan livu ngay. ⁸⁼⁵⁺³	Let my heart be true.
Lu nga win sì txur ⁵ 11	You are fast and strong
Lu nga txantslusam ⁵	You are wise
Livu win sì txur oe zene ⁹	I must be fast and strong
Ha n(i)'aw ²	So only
Pxan livu txo nì'aw oe ngari ¹⁰	Only if I am worthy of you
Tsakrr nga Na'viru yomtiyìng ⁹	Will you feed the People

The organizational structure of the syllables is less clear here, though note that lines 14–16 are in syllabic responsion with lines 4–6, which is assured by the elisions in line 14, *ha n(i)'aw*, and in line 5, *l(u) ayngakip*. But there are other parallels between the two strophes, which have been marked in the text. The first and third line of each strophe have a repeating phrase; the final word of the fourth line is repeated in the fifth; all first and second person pronouns are in the plural in the first strophe and singular in the second; and both strophes' final line ends with the same phrase, *Na'viru yomtiyìng*.

In lines 1, 3 and 15 there is an iconic placement of the first and second person pronouns immediately next to each other, regardless of grammatical role. This doubtless reflects spiritual concerns in the relationship between the Na'vi and the animals they hunt.

The chorus has both anaphora and, excepting the last line, epistrophe. The anaphora is based on the root, *oe*, rather than a specific grammatical form, allowing the word to be repeated in several syntactic roles. This same pattern of using the same root in multiple forms is found in the three separate forms of *ngay*, as adjective, noun and adverb. Finally, the word *txe'lan* is used in three of the four lines.

Based on the text of these two songs, it is manifestly the case that Roman Jakoson's rather oracular pronouncement on (Human) poetic form, that "equivalence is promoted to the constitutive device of the sequence," applies also to Na'vi poetic technique. It is not syllable weight or rhyme or stress accent that is

promoted to equivalence, but syllables — by a scheme we do not yet fully understand — and word roots. Just as all features so far discovered in the Na'vi language have parallels in Human language, so also do we find Human parallels for Na'vi poetic technique. Simple repetition of lines is found in the poetry of all cultures. The linking of lines by a single word repetition is found in Irish verse. Repeating a word in different grammatical forms from line to line is found in several Indo-European languages, from Sanskrit to Greek to Old Irish. Regulating the syllable count — with varying degrees of strictness — is found in verse from China and Japan, to the Troubadors in Occitania.

We have, then, two songs — one for work, one for the somewhat ritualized approach to the hunt. Within even this small sample we have the display of a refined poetic culture. It is my hope that the researchers on Pandora will think to ask a few more questions of the Na'vi, such as, can any Na'vi be visited by the poetic impulse, or are there particular individuals who have this job? What other contexts demand poetry? Is all verse sung, or may it be recited? Are the authors of poems remembered for their works? Finally, we are starting to see outlines of register differences in Na'vi. It will be interesting to see if poetic language has its own register.