

Some aesthetic features in a Coast Tsimshian text fragment

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1. Introduction. For the non-specialist ear the most salient characteristic of the authentic oral performance of Coast Tsimshian texts, after the exotic phonology, is their poetry. This paper explores some of the aesthetic dimensions of a text fragment from the William Beynon manuscript (1980).¹ One of the points of departure for this project is an oral performance interpretation based (1) on analogy to other texts for which there are aural records, and (2) on an interpretation of William Beynon's text diacritics.

Tsimshian tellers of stories work from memorized text models. Some rely heavily on these rote versions; others are able to be more spontaneous and creative in their elaboration of their memorized treasures. Certain parts of texts are intrinsically more important than others; certain parts of texts are especially significant to the personal experience of the individual story teller. For both these reasons particular story tellers have carefully elaborated and fashioned precise wordings for their focal passages. They have passed on their own poetic finishing to their successors. As a result of countless generations of poetic tradition and refinement, some parts of texts now exhibit the most remarkable and sophisticated aesthetic properties. This paper is about one such text fragment.

2. The text fragment. This section presents the text passage under discussion. It is from the text *Myth of the People of the Torch Lights* as told by Issac Tens of Hazelton and Mathew Sheppard of Port Simpson, recorded by William Beynon (1980, volume 1, number 6).

¹ The Beynon Manuscript contains of a number of glossed and interlinearly translated Coast Tsimshian texts that William Beynon collected in the 1920's and 1930's. Franz Boas trained William Beynon as a linguistic field worker. William Beynon was a native speaker of the Coast Tsimshian language. He sent the texts to Boas as he collected them. During World War II, the library at Columbia University received this collection of texts. In subsequent years it remained in the library archives, for the most part, unnoticed and forgotten. Michael Krauss rediscovered the manuscript in the late 1970's and convinced Columbia University to microfilm it. The 1980 date refers to the University of Columbia's microfilm copyright. The manuscript consists of more than 10,000 hand-written pages and contains some 250 different texts.

following stichometric interpretation of the text fragment conforms to the basic principles of ethnopoetic interpretation set out by Hymes (1976). Each line is a content-unit centering on a principal verb/predicate.

ᓂᓐ ᓂᓗᓗᓗ. ᓂᓗ-ᓐ ᓂᓗᓂᓗᓗᓗ ᓂᓗᓗ ᓗᓗ ᓗᓗᓗᓗ,
very hard how lived people at this time

ᓗᓗᓗᓗ ᓂᓗ-ᓗᓗ ᓂᓗᓂᓗ ᓂᓗ-ᓗᓗ ᓗᓗᓗ ᓂᓗᓗ
never knew will how spear salmon

ᓂᓗᓗ ᓗᓗ ᓂᓗᓗ ᓂᓗᓗ
altho plenty salmon

ᓗᓗᓗᓗ ᓗᓗ-ᓗᓗᓗᓗ ᓂᓗᓂᓗ ᓂᓗᓗᓗᓗ
but [can't do it] will catch

ᓗᓗ-ᓗ ᓗᓗ-ᓂᓗ ᓂᓗᓗᓗᓗ ᓗᓗᓗᓗ ᓂᓗᓗ ᓂᓗᓗ ᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗᓗ.
and very close to die for starvation

The fragment constitutes a stanza in terms of content; it is set apart from the adjoining parts of the text. It is an insert into the description of the initial situation, an aside that describes the plight of humanity in the mythic time before the present salmon-food order:

It was at the headwaters of the Skeena:
here is where a people once lived,
a great chief and all his family.

The people of this time lived in great hardship
for they had never known how to spear salmon
and although there was salmon in abundance
yet they did not know how to catch it
and they were very close to starvation

The chief had a daughter
and he watched her closely
as to how she would marry . . .

This five line stanza has the line tag structure

...
...
...
ada
ada.³

It exhibits a rigidly symmetrical content parallelism with one enveloping structure nested in another:

A The people of this time lived in great hardship
 B for they had never known how to spear salmon
 -B',-A' and though there was salmon in abundance
 B yet they did not know how to catch it
 A' and they were very close to starvation

There is also a rigidly symmetrical thematic role/grammatical relation parallelism:⁴

	agent subject (< D-structure object)	people
agent object + patient subject		people + salmon
	theme subject	salmon
agent object + patient subject		people + salmon
	agent subject (< D-structure object)	people.

4. Preliminaries to a strophometric interpretation. Let the term *strophometrics* refer to the study of those ethnopoetic features that only an aural record captures. Then the strophometric properties of Coast Tsimshian poetry include (1) hyper-prosodic (dramatic) lengthening of selected syllables, (2) pause, and (3) minor third cadence (Dunn 1986). Lines tend to have a constant, patterned, number of dramatically lengthened syllables, i.e., Coast Tsimshian poetry has stress prosody in which the syllable with dramatic length defines the metrical foot. Students of poetry have referred to this type of rhythm as accentual verse, skeltonic verse, or tumbling verse (Deutsch 1974:91). This is the metrical structure of Anglo-Saxon verse;

³See Dunn (1985) for a discussion of Coast Tsimshian line tags.

⁴ See section 4.1 of this paper for a discussion of these syntactic assumptions.

Modern English poets, including Scott and Coleridge, have also made use of accentual verse.

A performance interpretation or reconstruction of the Beynon manuscript text fragment, which is the leitmotif for this paper, must rest in an application of these strophometric properties as prototype. The dramatic lengthenings which define the metrical feet build on the ordinary prosodic, metrical phonological, structures of the language. The interpreter of this text fragment must therefore infer the presence of dramatic length in some principled way, building on ordinary phonological structure. But the metrical phonological structure itself must derive from syntactic structure, also in a principled way. As preliminaries, then, to the reconstruction of the performance of this text fragment, section 4.1 presents a set of provisional assumptions about the syntactic structure of the Beynon fragment, and section 4.2, building in a principled way on 4.1, presents a set of provisional assumptions about the fragment's ordinary metrical phonological structure.

Finally, the Beynon manuscript contains diacritic marks that are surely performance elements. Beynon marked some consonants as long where consonant length is not predictable; these probably indicate dramatic lengthening. He also used commas and periods in the phonetic orthography; these probably indicate pauses.

4.1 Syntactic characterization of the fragment. These assumptions inform the following GB⁵ syntactic characterization of the text fragment: (1) X-bar structures assign grammatical relations without reference to thematic or semantic roles: objects are complements to verbs, subjects are specifiers to INFL; (2) lexical structures assign thematic relations without reference to X-bar structures: the verb "spear" requires an agentive argument, etc.; (3) a particular language might canonically associate a particular grammatical relation with a particular thematic role: the Tsimshianic languages canonically associate theta-agent with the direct object; (4) Coast Tsimshian verbs c-select or subcategorize only for direct objects, not for oblique arguments; (5) Coast Tsimshian verbs s-select or assign thematic roles to oblique arguments in the same way that they s-select for subjects; i.e., oblique arguments are indirect subjects; (6) the prototypic X-bar structure for Coast Tsimshian is

[CP[IP [I' tense [VP verb [NP object]]][NP subject][CP indirect subject]].⁶

⁵ After Chomsky 1986.

⁶ See Dunn (1987;1988).

[_{IP}ᵛᵃᵐ ᵈᵗᵗᵗᵗ. [_{CP}ᵛᵃᵗ-ᵗ [_{IP}[_{VP}ᵈᵗᵗᵗᵗᵗᵗᵗᵗ ᵗ₁] ḡᵗᵗ₁]]]
 very hard how lived people
with great difficulty is how the people lived

[_{IP}ᵛᵗᵗ ḡᵗᵗᵗᵗ. [_{CP}[_{IP}ᵛᵗᵗᵗᵗᵗ ᵛᵗᵗ-ᵗᵗᵗ ᵖᵗᵗ₁ [_{CP}ᵈᵗᵗᵗᵗ
 at this time never knew will

[_{IP}ᵛᵗᵗ-ᵗᵗ₂ [_{IP}[_{VP}[_Vḡᵗᵗᵗ ᵗᵗᵗ] ᵗ₁] ᵖᵗᵗ₁ ᵗ₂]]]]]
 how spear salmon
it was at this time that they did not know how to spear salmon

[_{CP}ᵈᵗᵗᵗ ᵗᵗ [_{IP}[_I-ᵈᵗᵗᵗ] ᵗᵗᵗ]]
 altho plenty salmon
altho there was plenty of salmon

[_{CP}ᵗᵗᵗᵗᵗ [_{IP}ᵗᵗᵗᵗᵗᵗᵗᵗ ᵖᵗᵗ₁ [_{CP}ᵈᵗᵗᵗᵗ [_{VP}ᵗᵗᵗᵗᵗ ᵖᵗᵗ₁ | ᵖᵗᵗ₁]]]]]
 but can't do it will catch
but they did not know how to catch them

[_{CP}ᵗᵗᵗ-ᵗ [_{IP}[_I-ᵗᵗᵗᵗᵗ ᵈᵗᵗᵗᵗᵗ] ᵖᵗᵗ₁
 and very close

[_{CP}ᵗᵗᵗᵗᵗ ᵈᵗᵗ [_{IP}[_{VP}[_Vᵗᵗᵗᵗᵗ ᵗᵗᵗᵗᵗ.]] ᵖᵗᵗ₁]]]]]
 to die-of-starvation
and they were now of the verge of starvation

4.2 A metrical grid characterization of the fragment. Coast Tsimshian is a stress-timed language. Minimal, demi-beat prominence, with a value of 0 in the grid, attaches to all syllables. Syllables with prominence values greater than 0 mark the isochronic timing units. The leftmost basal syllable in each noun, verb, or adjective takes word stress or lexical prominence, 2 in the grid. In a phrasal grouping the rightmost syllable with lexical prominence takes the phrasal stress, 3 in the grid. Non-lexical words, i.e.,

COMP,INFL, or adverbial clitic elements, take beat level, minimal isochronic unit prominence, 1 in the grid, in such a way as to insure that no more than two consecutive syllables have 0 prominence.

3		*					*
2		*				*	*
1		*		*		*	*
0	*	*	*	**	*	**	*

[_{IP}səṃ ʈəχ ʔkə. [_{CP}wə-l-a [_{IP}[_{VP}ʈʌʌ ʈʌʌʑə t₁] gət₁]]]

very hard how lived people

3			*		*
2			*		*
1	*		*	*	*
0	**	*	**	**	*

[_{IP}'ətə at ʑiwa 'a [_{CP}[_{IP}'ətʑət wə-l-aik pro₁ [_{CP}ʈəmt

at this time never knew will

3				*
2			*	*
1	*		*	*
0	*	*	*	*

[_{IP} wə-l-at₂ [_{IP}[_{VP}[_{VC}ət hən] t₁] PRO₁ t₂]]]]]

how spear salmon

3			*
2		*	*
1		*	*
0	*	*	*

[_{CP}ʈʌʌ 'əl [_{IP}[₁-ʈʌʌ] hən]]

altho plenty salmon

3			*		*
2		*	*		*
1	*	*	*	*	*
0	**	*	*	*	*

[_{CP} 'ətə'al [_{IP}ʔko-ksənt pro₁ [_{CP}ʈəmt [_{VP}mak't pro₁ | PRO₁]]]

but can't do it will catch

3			*
2			*
1		*	*
0	* *	* *	* *
	[CP 'ad-a [IP[1-ta-sam	ðalpkət] pro ₁	
	and	very	close

3			*
2			* *
1	*		* *
0	* * *		* * * *
	[CP 'asçə ðəm [IP[VPLV	ðəm la'asçət.]] PRO ₁]]]]	
	to	die-of-starvation	

5. The poetic foot. Assign poetic prominence (P-level in the following grids), i.e., dramatic length, to every syllable that has beat-level (1) or greater prominence and to every syllable that Beynon marked with a long consonant. Note that [l-] is ambisyllabic; in each of its occurrences in the text it assigns P-level prominence to the syllable that already qualifies for dramatic length on other grounds.

P	P...../	P.../	P.../	P.../
3	*	[*]	[*]	*
2	*	[*]	*	*
1	*	*	*	*
0	* * *	* *	* * *	*
	[IPsəm ðax tka. [CPwəl-a [IP[VPLVðʒə	ðʒəçə t ₁]	ge t ₁]]]]	
	very hard	how	lived	people

P	P..../	P.../	P..../	P..../	
3	[*]	*	[*]	*	
2	[*]	*	[*]	*	
1	*	*	*	*	
0	**	* * *	* *	* *	*
	[IP 'alə	çiwə 'a [CP[IP'alçət	wəl-aik	pro ₁ [CPðəmt	
	at	this time	never	knew	will

P	P...../	P..../	
3	[*]	*	
2	[*]	* *	
1	*	* *	
0	* *	* *	
	[IP wəl-at ₂ [IP[VPLVçə	hən] t ₁] PRO ₁ t ₂]]]]]]]]	
	how	spear salmon	

P		P.../	P..../
3		[*]	*
2		*	*
1		*	*
0	* *	*	*
	[CP θ̄ʒo 'al [IP [I -θ̄ʒə]	hɔn]]	
	altho	plenty	salmon

P	P.../	P..../	P..../
3	[*]	*	*
2	[*]	*	*
1	*	*	*
0	***	* *	* *
	[CP 'at̄a'al [IP tko-ksənt pro ₁ [CP θ̄əmt [VP mak't pro ₁] PRO ₁]]]		
	but	can't do it	will catch

P	P.../	P.../	P..../
3	[*]	[*]	*
2	[*]	[*]	*
1	[*]	*	*
0	* *	* *	* *
	[CP 'að-a [IP [I -	λa-səɱ	ðalβkət] pro ₁
	and	very	close

P	P.../	P.../	P.../
3	[*]	[*]	*
2	[*]	*	*
1	*	*	*
0	* * *	*	***
	[CP 'aʒə θ̄əɱ [IP [VP [V θ̄əɱ	la'aʒət.]] PRO ₁]]]	
	to	die-of-starvation	

6. Strophometric interpretation. The principle of accentual rhythm in combination with Beynon's pause diacritics suggests that this fragment consists of six poetic lines, the first three with four feet each and the second three with three feet each. A pause divides each line into two half-lines. Except for the fact that the third line now has two principal verbs, this revision confirms and enriches the fragment's stichometric features. Each new line (and all but one of the half-lines) is a major syntactic unit; there is still a definite line tag structure; the symmetrical, enveloping parallelism is intact.

^P ^P ^P ^P
 səm ɔ̃x̃t̃kə. wəl-a ɔ̃zəɔ̃zəzə ʒət
 very hard how lived people

^P ^P ^P ^P
 'ət̃a ʒiwa 'a, 'ət̃zət wəl-aɪt̃
 at this time not knowing

^P ^P ^P ^P
 ɔ̃m̃t wəl-at̃zət̃ hən ɔ̃zə 'al ɔ̃zə hən
 to how spear salmon though plenty salmon

^P ^P ^P
 'at̃a'al t̃kəksənt ɔ̃m̃t mak't̃
 and not know to catch it

^P ^P ^P
 'ət̃-a t̃a-səm ɔ̃al̃pkət̃
 and now very near (narrow)

^P ^P ^P
 'as̃zə ɔ̃m̃ ɔ̃m̃ la'as̃zət̃.
 to to death starvation

7. Ornamental consonance. This text fragment, in its revised poetic form, brings into focus a typical ornamental feature of Tsimshian poetry, a feature that has unusual richness and texture in this carefully refined passage. This ornamental feature or device is one part alliteration and another part end-rhyme. Yet it is neither. It is more than alliteration, the successive repetition of syllable onsets, because it is the successive repetition of onsets and parts of onsets along with syllable codas and parts of codas. It is less than rhyming, the successive repetition of syllable rimes (peaks plus codas), because the repetition often does not involve the syllable peaks. A general term that analysts of poetry use is "consonance," the successive repetition of consonantal material. In this sense of the term, the Tsimshian device includes initial consonance, both complete (succession of identical syllable onsets) and partial (succession of similar syllable onsets), and final consonance, both complete and partial. But it is still more, for it also includes occasional rhyming, both complete and partial. It is simply and generally the succession of phonetically similar (sometimes identical) phonetic units. Its roots lie in part in the extensive reduplicative or chameleon morphological structures, both inflectional and derivational, of the Tsimshian

grammar. It is the interplay of chameleon morphology with the dramatic lengthening that constitutes poetic prominence in the metrical or prosodic structures of oral performance. The following version of the fragment isolates and numbers the various consonance sets.

		P		P		P		P
1	səm	ḏax̄tkə.	wəl-a	ḏzəḏzɔ̄çə	gēt			
		ḏax̄tk		ḏz	ḏzɔ̄ç	g		
		P		P		P		P
2	'ā	çiwā'a,	'ā	çə	t	wəl-aī		
3	'ā	ç	w	'ā	ç	t	w	a
			wā'a'ā			wəl-aī		
		P		P		P		P
2	ḏəmt	wəl-at	ç	a	t	hən	ḏzə	'al
3		w	t	ç	a	t	ḏzə	hən
4			wəl-at	ç	a	t		
5				hən			ḏzə	hən
		P		P		P		P
6	'ā	tā'al	tko-ksənt	ḏəmt	māk't			
			ksənt	ḏəmt	māk't			
		P		P		P		P
7	'ā	ḏ-a	ḏa-səm	ḏal	ḏpkət			
		ḏ-a	ḏ	ḏal				
		P		P		P		P
8	'ā	çə	ḏəm	ḏəm	lā'açət.			
			ḏəm	ḏəm				

8. Strophometric re-presentation and translation. The following presentation and translation of the fragment is an attempt to be sensitive to the poetic features this paper discusses.

səm	ḏḡx̄tkə.	wəl-a	ḏzəḏzɔ̄çə	gēt
'ā	çiwā'a,	'ā	çə	t
ḏəmt	wəl-at	ç	a	t
'ā	tā'al	tko	ksənt	ḏəmt
		'ā	çə	t
'ā	çə	ḏəm	ḏəm	lā'açət.

it was hárd	hów the péople lived
in those óld dáys	they did nó't yet knów
hów to speár sálmon	though sálmon abóunded
no, they'd nó't fóund	how to catch fish
and thús	they were dráwn dówn
éven to the déath	of their stárving

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