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Putting More Words in Chief Seattle's Mouth: A Seediq Translation of Chief Seattle's Speech

This is a preliminary consideration of a Seediq translation of Chief Seattle's famous speech about the inalienability of the land. Seediq is an Austronesian language spoken in central Taiwan that is close to Proto-Austronesian (a reconstructed proto-language). If the Proto-Austronesian thesis holds water, then Seediq is a very early branch on the Austronesian language family tree. Māori is another, much later, branch on the same tree.

I found out about the translation when the Toda Sediq Presbyterian Minister Watan Diro asked me to write an introduction for his self-published book *Kari*, where *kari* in Watan's dialect is both a noun meaning "words" and a stative verb meaning "abundant." Watan's book is a mixed bag of Christian materials, an essay on hunting dogs, and a series of essays about naming and historical injustices that Watan thinks the government of Taiwan has yet to address. In addition, there are *three* translations of Chief Seattle's speech into three dialects of the Seediq language (Toda, Tgdaya, and Truku). The word *seediq* means "person" in the Tgdaya dialect. In Toda, the same word is *sediq*. In Truku, it is *seejiq*. I am just going to look at the Tgdaya translation. Even though Tgdaya is not Watan's first language, he is very good at it, and I find Watan's mother tongue of Toda a bit harder to read.

In Seediq, Seattle is Siyatu. In the language Chief Seattle spoke, his name would have been pronounced ['si ʔaːɬ]. It is hard to tell if it is in two or three syllables; it could be two. If so, the second syllable begins with a glottal stop and ends with what sounds to me like a breathy "l." In English, we pronounce the word ['si aː ɾl̩] in three syllables; with a stress on the first syllable, a second syllable that consists of a single vowel, and a third syllable consisting of an alveolar flap, like a really quick "t" or "d" sound, and a vocalic "l," meaning that there does not seem to be a separate vowel sound from the "l." In Mandarin Chinese, Seattle is Xiyatu ([ɕi ja tʰu]). It is also in three syllables, where [ɕ] is a hissy "sh" sound and [j] is a "y" sound. The Seediq word is based on the Mandarin, with nearly identical pronunciation [ʃi ya tu], where [ʃ] is an "sh" sound. Why is "s" in Siyatu an "sh" sound, and not an "s" sound? Because of a rule that changes "s" into "sh" in front of [i], the long "e" sound. Japanese has the same rule, as in *sushi*.

The Tgdaya translation is significant for two reasons. First, Watan translated the speech partly for the sake of language revival. Seediq is mainly a mother tongue that people under the age of forty do not speak, and it tends to not be a written language. Second, Watan is embracing an environmentalism that was supposedly of Indigenous origin. Surely Chief Seattle's words were crystallizations of traditional North American environmental wisdom? This is what Joseph Campbell thought. I

first heard about Chief Seattle's speech from the popular mythologist Joseph Campbell in conversation with the journalist Bill Moyers. According to Campbell, in opposing the idea that the land could be bought and sold, Seattle was the last spokesman of the "Paleolithic moral order." Then Campbell went on to quote what I assumed was a verbatim transcript of Chief Seattle's speech.

Campbell was an important part of my adolescence; actually he was still important to me during the first few years of my doctoral dissertation. My professors seemed like walking encyclopedias—dry and dusty. Campbell's books seemed sunny—full of warmth and vitality. Over a decade later, having become a scholar myself, my attitude towards Campbell has changed somewhat. I still think his books are good for young people, but I also have more respect for the dry, even dull methods of my professors than I once did.

Scholars like the ones who guided me through my doctorate have looked into the textual history of Chief Seattle's speech. It's a fascinating story. Scholars are sure that the US government had made Chief Seattle's people an offer they literally could not refuse. They had no choice but to sell their land and move onto reservations. But nobody knows exactly what Chief Seattle said. He supposedly orated for hours on end to an audience of white men, mustering all the rhetorical art of his people in Lushootseed, a language, or "dialect continuum," commonly known as Coast Salish. One may wonder how many of these white men understood what he was saying in Lushootseed. Maybe a few, maybe one? Perhaps none. What he said had to be translated into a pidgin or trade language, then into English. It was a relay translation.

One of the white men in attendance was a guy called Henry A. Smith, a would-be founding father of Seattle, though he was certainly not as important to Seattle history as Chief Seattle's friend Doc Maynard. Apparently, Smith took notes from the English translation on that day, which he then sat on for twenty-five years before he published a partial version of the speech in the *Seattle Sunday Star*. Why did he publish it then? It has been suggested that he was self-indulgently identifying with Seattle's sentiment. Seattle lamented that the age of the red man had passed, and now the white man had dominion over the land. Smith felt like the younger generation of settlers was pushing out people like him.

Whatever Smith's motivation, his partial version begins thus: "Yonder sky has wept tears of compassion on our fathers for centuries untold, and which to us looks eternal may change. Today, it is fair. Tomorrow, it may be overcast with clouds." It is sentimental. It is also full of pseudo-archaisms and parallelisms. The style is pompously Victorian. It is certainly not a pleasure for us to read today, but it isn't completely inappropriate to the speaker. Chief Seattle was part of an oratory culture. I do not know about the sentimentality and the pseudo-archaisms, but his speech would have been heavily parallel. I also do not think it is a big deal that Smith's article does not contain Seattle's exact words. If we could raise Seattle from his grave, he would not remember his exact words. No Indian orator would write down a speech beforehand. The speech he delivered was ad-libbed.

Whether or not the style of Smith's version of the speech is to your taste, it is definitely not the version most of us have read. In the 1960s, Smith's version was redone by a classicist named William Arrowsmith. For the first time, the speech contained what impresses most people as Seattle's main sentiment—that it is wrong to sell the land to just one person who can do what he wants with it because the land belongs to everyone. Arrowsmith came up with this line, too: "The earth does not belong to man; man belongs to the Earth." His scholarly background might have had something to do with his rewrite, because every generation of classicists has to reinvent the classics in translation. The environmental movement certainly had

something to do with it. Arrowsmith read his version of Chief Seattle's speech at the first Earth Day in 1970.

A year later, a Southern Baptist organization was making an environmentalist documentary. One wonders why the Southern Baptists would care about the environment, but in those days they were liberal. They would elect Jimmy Carter a few short years later, who was an environmentalist among other things. At any rate, a scriptwriter redid Arrowsmith's text for the environmentalist documentary in 1971, and the producer made further amendments to the text, including lines in which Chief Seattle refers to himself as "a savage." This highly edited text ended up on a promotional poster for the film. The poster went viral, and the rest is history.

It's just that history keeps getting written as we keep on adding to it. People keep on adding to the history of Chief Seattle's speech, borrowing the cachet of his name to promote the issue of the day. Since the 1960s, the speech has been synonymous with environmental protection—and that's what the speech means to my friend, the Presbyterian Minister Watan Diro. Watan is a progressive guy who supports Taiwanese independence and gay marriage, so it is not surprising to me that he would respond positively to Chief Seattle as an environmentalist. At any rate, he did not translate the promotional poster text from English into Seediq. He translated an anonymous Chinese translation of the text on the poster. In other words, his translation is a relay translation of a relay translation of a relay translation of a translation. The speech had to be translated from Lushootseed into Chinook Jargon, then into English, and then into Mandarin before it could be translated into Seediq.

As noted above, Seediq is an Austronesian language. It is uncannily close to Tagalog. It is lexically similar. *Babuy* means pig in both languages. *Pila* is money in Seediq, whereas *pilak* is silver in Tagalog. There's a scholarly discipline called linguistic paleontology in which such lexical connections are assessed against archeological research to reconstruct ways of life as well as patterns of migration and trade. Seediq is also grammatically similar to Tagalog. To be more specific, the two languages have a similar system of verbal morphology, consisting of affixes—prefixes, suffixes, and infixes—that indicate what kind of subject the verb takes. In Tagalog and Seediq linguistics, there are four "focuses," where a verb in a certain focus focuses a certain kind of subject. A verb in agent focus, for instance, focuses an agent subject. It's a lot like the active voice in English. In "I sang a song," the "I" is the subject and the doer of the action, though if the sentence had been "I heard a song," the "I" would have been the experiencer. A verb in passive focus focuses a patient, which is something to which something happens. It's just like the passive voice in English: the door was opened, the chair got crushed. But beyond the patient focus, there is also location focus, (where the subject is a location) and instrument focus (where the subject is an instrument, a beneficiary, or a patient). Because instrument focus can focus a beneficiary or patient subject, "instrument focus" is a legacy designation to some extent. In some ways, so are patient and locative focus. Both are often nominal. For instance, *ppuqun* is the future patient focus form of the verb for "eat," but it means "food" (literally "that which could be eaten").

Grammar also includes syntax, which is sentence structure. Any description of the syntax of a language is a hypothesis about word order patterns. The basic pattern in English is to start with the subject, then the verb, then the object or complement, with adverbs at the end (especially if the adverb is long). We can formalize this pattern as SVOA, subject-verb-object-adverb. For example: "The dog ate the bone in the garden." Seediq is basically VOSA:[1] "Ate the bone the dog in the garden." It is a rare

1. But after V one can add a special kind of pronoun called a clitic that either suggests the S or identifies the agent in a passive sentence.

ordering among the world's languages. Somewhere around 40% of languages in the world are SVO, but only 4% are VOS. Perhaps this tells us something about the human mind, or perhaps it is a historical accident.

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In its most famous version, Chief Seattle's speech contains about 1,300 words. It does not have a clear rhetorical structure, but there are a few obvious related points that he keeps repeating. For example, the Indians have an intimacy with the land that the white man does not understand and which Seattle appeals to the white man to put into practice. This is why Seattle's claim that he is an ignorant savage is ironic. While Seattle did not approve of the white man's way of life, he had no choice but to accept the offer of the Great Chief in Washington. However, he pretended to have a choice to preserve his dignity, and kept saying he would consider it. This is not the occasion for a complete analysis of Seattle's speech in Seediq translation, so I will pick and choose among my favorite lines, beginning with the rhetorical question with which Seattle begins:

> How can you buy or sell the sky, the warmth of the land?
> *Maa su malu brig-un ka karac ma dheran peni?*
> How your well buy-pf nom sky and land oh?
> How will the sky and land be well bought by you?

Maa is a question word like "how." Su is a clitic pronoun. In Seediq, a clitic pronoun moves left from the verb it goes with and attaches to the first "verbal element" in the sentence. In this sentence, su goes with *brigun*, which is the passive focus form of the verb for "buy." With a verb in passive focus, the clitic indicates the agent. It is glossed as "your" because it is genitive. One of the functions of the genitive clitics is to identify the agent in a passive sentence. Basically, *brigun su*, means "is (or will be) bought by you." Even though *su* in the sentence above has moved left two words, it still means "by you" and it still goes with *brigun*. *Ka* is a nominative. It is a case marker. Its purpose is to identify the subject. Whatever comes after *ka* is the subject, what will be bought by you. The translation I have given from the Seediq is deliberately literal. I am sure that to a Seediq speaker the sentence is perfectly ordinary. But as a translation, there is room for improvement. Watan didn't translate "warmth," which implies a relationship between the sky and the land: the sky warms the land. As Seattle would have put it, everything is interconnected.

> The idea is strange to us.
> *Maa so kingal naq ka lnglung-an so nii.*
> What thus one just ka think-lf like this.
> Just what kind of a thought is this one?

Lnglungan is a way to say thought. It is the locative focus form of the verb "to think". It either means what or where you think, or your mind.

Seattle's speech is full of figures for environmental intimacy. Here's one of my favorites:

> The sap which courses through the trees carries the memories of the red man.
> *Kana biyuq ckceka qhuni we niq-an k<n>kela seediq tn-pusu kana.*
> all juice in tree topic exist-lf know<pf.preterit>know people of-root all.
> As for all the sap in the trees, (it) has all the memories of the Indigenous people.

Here, too, Watan has not translated everything. Instead of coursing through the trees, the sap in his version is static. The same is true of his translation of "carry" into "has." But he gets the main point across. He begins with a topic, which is actually the subject of the main verb, *niqan*. In English the object can be topicalized, as in: "Pine sap, I like to smell it." In Seediq, the subject can be topicalized, as in this example. I am not positive, but I think that *knkela* is a preterit or past tense patient focus form of a verb meaning "to know"—literally, "what was known." One thing that we know is what happened to us—in other words, our memories. In this case the memories belong to the *seediq* ("the people") who *tn-pusu* ("belong to the root"). This is Watan's way of referring to Indigenous people worldwide, but it has a special resonance in Seediq culture. Apparently, the Seediq (or at least some Seediq) believe that they are descended from the Pusu Qhuni. You should be able to guess what it means.

Another favorite line of mine evokes a traditional gift economy, in which everything one gets is received as a gift and has to be returned in the end:

> The wind that gave our grandfather his first breath also receives his last sigh.
> *S-bege pnrdingan hengak tama rudan mu nom bgihur we,*
> if-give first breath father elder my nom wind when,
> As for the wind giving my grandfather his first breath,
>
> *...wada m-ege heya nhdaan bale hengak uri.*
> preterit af-give he last truly breath also.
> he gave his last breath also.

I am not sure why he used *sbege* in the first line of the translation, because usually *sbege* focuses the gift, and not the giver. The contrast between give and receive is lost, but then again something is gained: my grandfather is, like the wind, a giver. *Sbege* and *mege*, as you can probably tell, are cognates. They are both from the same root, or at least the same base *bege* (meaning "give!"). I am also quite fond of the following antithesis, which contrasts the white man's hope for transcendence and the red man's contentment with immanence; the white man assumed he is a separate entity apart from the world, while the red man is happy to be in it:

> The white man's dead forget the country of their birth when they go to walk among the stars.
> *Wada mhuqil ka seediq dame doriq de,*
> preterit af-die ka person blue eye topic,
> When the blue-eyed men die,
>
> *chngiy-un daha kana ka dheran p-nting-an daha di;*
> will.forget-pf their all nom land cause-be.born-lf their preterit;
> the land of their birth will be totally forgotten by them;
>
> *utux daha we wada m-suupu ppngerah karac di.*
> spirit their topic preterit af-together stars sky preterit.
> as for their spirits, they accompany the stars.

I labeled *wada* in the first line as a preterit because some readers might know the term. In English, the preterit is often called the past tense, but it combines past tense and perfective aspect, which means an action is bounded (completed). Actually, an event does not have to be in the past to be viewed as completed. For instance: "After

dying, you will rise into heaven." Dying here has to be complete for you to be able to rise into heaven. *Wada* is actually perfective aspect, not past tense: the white man hasn't died yet. According to Chief Seattle, he will forget after he dies. But Watan chose patient focus, meaning that the subject is what is forgotten—the land. The land, in turn, is modified by *pnttingan daha* ("their birth"). Here, birth is a nominalized preterit locative focus derived from the verb *tuting* ("fall"). Why is a word meaning "fall" used for "to be born?" Because the Seediq believe (or some of them believed) that they fell off of the *Pusu Qhuni* ("the Root Tree") at the beginning of time. As for the third line, *msuupu* can often be glossed as "together" but it can function as a verb. It is in agent focus here, meaning "accompany." And here is the contrasting line in the antithesis:

> Our dead never forget this beautiful earth, for it is the mother of the red man.
> *So wada mhuqil ka ita seediq we ini bale chung-i dheran pntingan na*
> thus preterit af-die nom we seediq topic not truly forget-pf.imp land birth his
> Having died, we Seediq each truly do not forget the land of his birth
>
> *ado pusu bale bubu na ka dheran.*
> because root true mother his nom land.
> because the land is a true root, his mother.

I'll only make two comments about this example. First, *chungi* is the patient focus imperative form of the verb for forget. The imperative is used in Seediq for the imperative ("Forget!") or the negative. What do the imperative and negative have in common? They are both for states of affairs that we can imagine but that don't exist in reality. If I order you to forget something, you obviously haven't forgotten it yet. Second, it's interesting that Watan uses the word *pusu* again in his translation. It's a keyword for him, as it's used in *Pusu Qhuni*, the root tree, in *seediq tnpusu*, the Seediq term for indigenous, and in *pusu bale*, the true origin of his people.

Finally, Seattle's main claim, and the reason why the land should not be bought and sold:

> We are part of the earth and it is part of us.
> *Ado n-dheran ta ka ita, n-ita ka dheran uri.*
> Because of-land we nom we, of-us nom land also.
> Because we are of the land, the land is also part of us.
>
> This we know: The earth does not belong to man; man belongs to the earth.
> *Kla-un miyan: uxe n-seediq ka kana bobo dheran, n-dheran ka seediq.*
> know-pf we (not including you) is:not of-person ka of-land ka people.
>
> That it's not everything in the world belonging to people but rather people belonging to the earth is known to us (but not to you)

The translation of the second line makes it sound like verbal gymnastics, but the sentiment in both lines is simple, and there is only one detail to mention: n-, meaning "of." It can indicate possession, or belonging. This is not to say that the Seediq did not distinguish possession and belonging. We certainly do, and we can use "belong" in either sense: "That belongs to me" (possession) and "I belong to something larger than myself" (belonging). The Seediq distinguish between possession and belonging, but don't have two different ways of expressing these concepts. This may have helped

them realize that even if something is yours, you and your possession are both part of something larger.

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Above, I back-translated Watan Diro's Seediq into English. Back-translation is often required to assess the accuracy of a translation, but here I have back-translated to help you appreciate how Seattle's sentiment has gained in translation. It is beyond my ability to back-translate into Lushootseed, Chief Seattle's Language. In this case, we will never know exactly what Seattle said that day. We can be sure that whatever was said, it wasn't the traditional teachings his people had passed down since the dawn of time. It was modern in the sense that it postdated contact with the Americans of European ancestry who were bringing modernity to what is now Washington State. Chief Seattle was a Catholic! He could only have said what he said after observation of the modern way of life in comparison with the life he knew when he was small.

The fact that what Seattle said was modern does not mean that Joseph Campbell was wrong to say that it was an articulation of the "Paleolithic moral order." If this turn of phrase meant gratitude for all that one has been given, then surely Seattle was advising us to try inhabiting the Paleolithic moral order. I think Campbell was wrong though to say that it was the last statement of this moral order, or that it takes a person from the Stone Age to express it. Four hundred years ago, poet John Donne wrote that "No man is an Iland, intire of it selfe." ("No man is an island in itself.")

This sentiment lives on in contemporary religious traditions like the Catholic communion in which one receives the teachings, the blood, and the body of Christ, and then donates whatever one wishes to the collection tray. It also lives on in the Environmental Movement, in the idea that we should be grateful for Mother Earth, all she has given us, and all we have taken from her. Whatever the provenance of the ideas and the idioms in the version of Seattle's speech most of us are familiar with, they strike a chord in me. They seem to have struck a chord in Watan Diro too, and I like to think that he sees in Chief Seattle's speech something of the vital wisdom of his own vanishing tradition.