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The Song of Hiawatha: Impact and Uses

Here I describe how the opening lines of *The Song of Hiawatha*, the famous 1855 poem by H.W. Longfellow that retells an amalgam of native American legends, that can be used for two purposes – one linguistic, another cultural – based upon the novel impact of its rhythmic features.

The initial task is simple: the students read the opening 20 lines in unison (the excerpt inset here shows the first nine lines). The vocabulary is not that challenging, and footnote

The Song of Hiawatha (opening)

*SHOULD you ask me, whence these stories ?
Whence these legends and traditions,
With the odours of the forest,
With the dew and damp of meadows,
With the curling smoke of wigwams,
With the rushing of great rivers,
With their frequent repetitions,
And their wild reverberations,
As of thunder in the mountains ?*

translations of difficult words should suffice. As students read together, the trochaic quadrameter that Longfellow borrowed from the Finnish epic *Kalevala*, and that seems to emulate the beat of a drum, comes out clearly: DA-da-DA-da, DA-da-DA-da.

In my experience, this exercise elicits genuine expressions of amazement from many students 「すごい！」 (“Amazing!”). This may be the first time many students have read a

poem like this out loud. Rhythm and meter, along with rhyme, are typically excluded from the English language curriculum in secondary and even tertiary Japanese education, despite their importance in language play and in the valorized texts of international pop culture that students feed on. The activity can be repeated in pairs, with one student tapping the rhythm and the other reading, so that the teacher can check understanding of the teaching point. With students engaged by the impact of the poem’s striking rhythm, the teacher can move the lesson in one of two directions.

The first direction is rhythm and meter, an appropriate teaching target given the omission of such items in curricula mentioned above. Students try to write verse of their own. Of course, they can try to write in the same trochaic meter, which is especially suited to practicing prepositions of place: *On the table in my room/ there is a Panasonic TV*. However, now aware of the idea (if not the terminology) of feet and meter, students can quickly grasp the idea of

iambic pentameter, a meter more suited to natural spoken English, and one that has a certain cachet as the meter used by Shakespeare. In attempting such tasks, students are required to manipulate sentence structure in a way that requires a focus on meaning, grammar and pronunciation (rhythm) at the same time to form a kind of “whole language” activity as they try to fit their writing to the meter (see inset, right). What should be noted is how this kind of exercise – which prescribes a poetic form and structure – can start to bring out expressive, emotional or even funny material that is aesthetically satisfying both to student and teacher.

*A “whole language” activity:
Editing to fit iambic pentameter.*

My mother likes going for long walks in the mountains.
→ *My mother likes (~~going~~) to go for (~~long~~) walks.*
→ *My mother really likes to go for walks.*
My mother really likes to go for walks.
Long mountain walks can make her feel so calm.

The second use of the poem’s impact is to draw attention to issues of colonialism, cultural appropriation, and literary value. *The Song of Hiawatha*, although written by a white author, has generally not been seen as an egregious case of cultural appropriation: Longfellow seemed authentically interested in retelling

Racism and Colonialism:

“As an Indian Saga, embalming pleasantly enough the monstrous traditions of an uninteresting, and one may almost say, a justly exterminated race, the Song of "Hiawatha" is entitled to commendation...Hiawatha, we feel, will never add to Mr Longfellow's reputation as a poet. It deals with a subject in which we of the present day have little interest; a subject too, which will never command any interest upon its own intrinsic merits. These Indian legends...are too clumsy too monstrous, too unnatural to be touched by the Poet.”

The New York Times, December 28, 1855

native American stories, even if some of his sources were somewhat unreliable. On the other hand, *The Song of Hiawatha* has been identified as an instantiation of the *noble savage* myth. But perhaps, most striking is that the poem was the subject of a famously scathing and racist review in the New York Times excerpted left.

This shocking review, along with the initial impact of reading the poem aloud, can provide a memorable introduction for more advanced students to questions of respect for minority literatures,

championing minorities vs. cultural appropriation, and the Noble Savage tradition.