FOUR CREE LOVE SONGS: THE INTERACTION OF TEXT AND MUSIC

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ABSTRACT/RESUME

This paper examines four recent Cree love songs from Saskatchewan, two with text in English, and two with text in Cree. Special attention is paid to the interaction of text and music, based on an examination of language use in Cree and English. There is also a discussion of the role of love songs in a typical performance context.

Cet article étudie quatre chansons d'amour récentes de la Saskatchewan, dont deux sont en anglais et deux en Cree. On fait une attention particulière à l'interaction du texte et de la musique, suivant un examen de l'emploi de la langue Cree et de l'anglais. Il y a aussi un examen du rôle des chansons d'amour dans un contexte d'une représentation typique.

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The four love songs on which this paper is based are all relatively new, composed within the recent past by singers from Saskatchewan's Little Pine Reserve. They were sung for me in June of 1986 by Rick Favel who was then a student at the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College.[1] The two songs with text in English are attributable to the drum group of Rick Favel and his brothers who have often performed together at powwows and other gatherings. The two songs with text in Cree were composed by Favel's friend Larry Bull, also of the Little Pine Reserve. As Favel describes them, these songs are the sort that might be performed on a summer night in a powwow campground after the formal activities of the day have ended. Singing, taping and socializing continue through the night, while new romances are inspired by songs like these.

The performance context which Favel describes for these songs corresponds closely to that for which Heth (1984:94) uses the term "49 Dance." She describes the 49 Dance as a pan-tribal or pan-Indian social event in which the dances and songs are "mostly for fun." The context in which Favel performed these songs for recording, however, was far removed from the powwow campground. The interview took place in a park in downtown Regina by the side of Wascana Lake. In addition to the songs, which were sung solo, I was also given the opportunity to record some of the stories that belong with them as well as the singer's comments about music and love songs in general. These four songs, so similar in style, offer us the opportunity to observe the interaction of text and music, to compare language use in English and Cree, and, through the singer's additional comments about the songs, to make a few broader observations about their role within a typical performance context.

Song Structure

All four of the songs are strophic in structure, with each strophe made up of a number of shorter phrases which have been labelled within the transcriptions as A, B, C etc. While the second and subsequent short phrases (B, C, D, etc.) may be repeated with or without variation, the A phrase is never repeated within the strophe.[2] It is this incomplete repetition which establishes the pattern of the chorus and the verse within the strophe. A sample strophe might take the following form with chorus used to refer to the first occurrence of the melodic material within the strophe, and verse indicating the incomplete repetition:

Sample Strophe

CHORUS	+	VERSE
A B C + cadence		B C + cadence (incomplete repetition)

This entire strophe may be repeated.

Text Distribution

The first important correspondence of musical structure and text emerges in the distribution of the text within the strophe. Text appears only within the *verse* section, the incomplete repetition of the chorus. All other portions of the strophe, including cadences in both verse and chorus, are sung to vocables (non-lexical syllables).

The disposition of text is mostly syllabic, with one syllable of text for each note of melody. Throughout the transcriptions, and in the discussion of each song, syllables that are sung over more than one note are underlined. Generally speaking, syllables treated this way receive a little extra musical stress.

In recording the third song in this collection, Favel sang through the entire first strophe using vocables even in the verse section where the text is expected to appear. Thus we see that although the location of text appears to be prescribed within the strophe, the text itself is not essential to the performance. Vocables, on the other hand, are indispensable.

Vocables

As noted above, vocables (or non-lexical syllables) can be used throughout the song. The use of vocables is typical of all North American Indian music (Nettl, 1954:8). Of the many songs that Nettl examined for his 1954 survey, "the majority contain[ed] either entirely or partly meaningless syllables." Heth (1984:94) also comments that "all of these pan-tribal (or pan-Indian) dances and songs use a large number of vocables...[which] allow a group of singers from different tribes to sing together with ease." Unfortunately, neither Nettl nor Heth offer any description or analysis of the vocables used. Thomas Vennum's comments about Ojibwe vocables provide an interesting basis for comparison with the songs examined here. In discussing some of the songs which he recorded himself, Vennum notes that William Bineshi Baker, Sr., his source of Ojibwe cultural knowledge, uses a rich variety of vocables. For at least one example, Vennum suggests that the vocables may in fact echo the vowel patterns of a missing or omitted text (1975:293). He also notes, however, that this rich variety of vocables is

missing among the young, citing as one possible cause the fact that many young singers speak only English:

> Acculturative processes, such as the loss of the native language and absorption of music from other tribes, must have hastened the disappearance of connotative vocables, leaving only vowel sounds in their place (1975:292).

Although we know that Favel is bilingual in Cree and English, the inventory of vocables which he uses is relatively small, made up of the glide consonants, *h, y* and *w*, plus the four different vowel qualities used in Cree. There is no correspondence between the pattern of vowel sounds in the texted and untexted portions of the songs. Neither does the increased inventory of vowel sounds available in the English song texts have any effect on the choice of vocables.

Inventory of Vocables:

he	hi	ha	ho
ye	–	ya	yo
we	wi	–	–
e	–	a	o

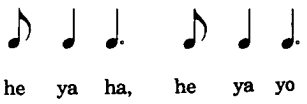
Cree Vowels Qualities:

/e/ /i/ /a/ /o/

Cadences

The cadences in all of the songs are identical, appearing at the end of each chorus and each verse. The cadence consists of a six-note attenuation of the key note (or tonic), ending with a portamento on the last note, where the singer glides down in pitch as he finishes the last syllable. This cadence always follows the same rhythmic and vocable patterns:

Cadential Pattern



Transcription Conventions

In all of the transcriptions, a number of conventions have been followed which are intended to help display musical patterns and irregularities more clearly. As far as possible, corresponding musical phrases are vertically aligned on the page, and all barlines have been omitted except for those

which delimit the structural divisions of the songs. The time signature has also been suppressed from the transcriptions even though all four songs might have been assigned a time signature of 3-8, based on the identical cadence patterns (described above) which occur in all of the songs.

Because the songs were sung within the comfortable tenor vocal range of the singer, without any reference to exact pitch, they were transcribed using relative pitch, in keys that avoided the need for accidentals or key signatures. The tonal material for each of the songs is pentatonic.

If the singer had been playing a drum instead of beating quietly on his knee, it would have been possible to transcribe the pattern of long-short, long-short which he maintained throughout all of the songs. This pattern would most likely be transcribed as follows:

Its consistency throughout the song would define the basic metrical unit of all four songs as a dotted-quarter note.

In the Cree song texts, the symbol '~' has been used to mark the places where the words are broken or spread out to make them align better with the music. Standard Cree spelling and hyphenation of the text is given separately.

SONG I: Don't you cry for me

Text: *Don't* you *cry* for me (Section B)
I'll be *back* some day, ha yo ye, ha he ya (Section B')[3]

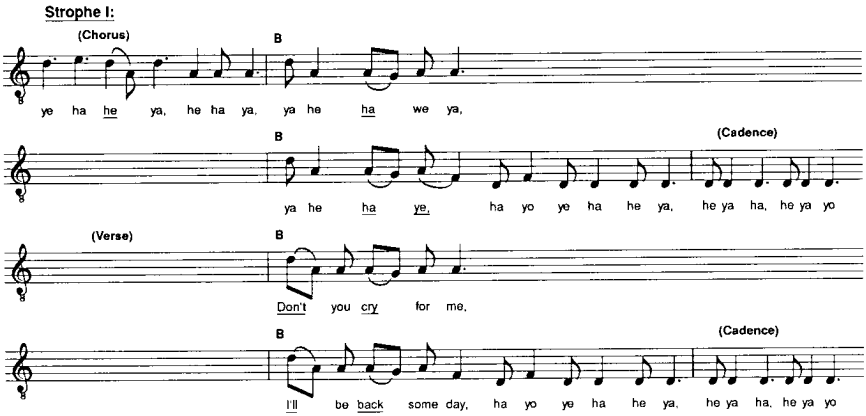
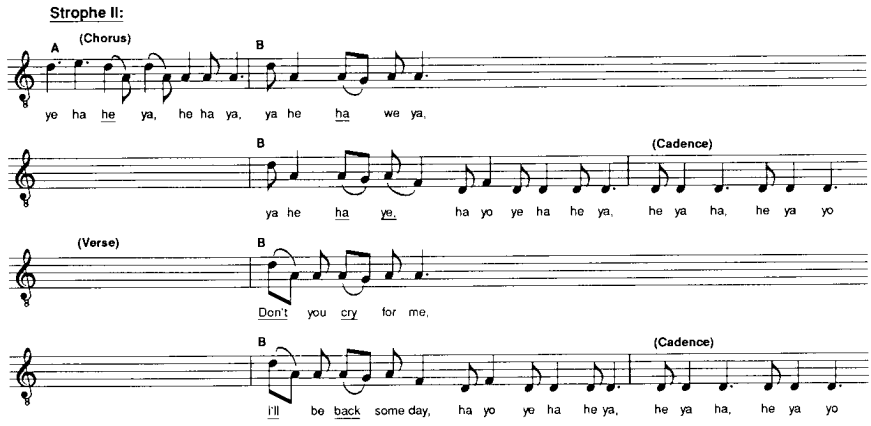
Structure:
Chorus (no text): A B B' cadence
Verse (with text): B B' cadence
} Strophe 1

Chorus (no text): A B B' cadence
Verse (with text): B B' cadence
} Strophe 2

Text

The simple text of the first song requires little explanation. The text disposition in this song, as in the others, is mostly syllabic, using one note of the melody per syllable. Words that are underlined in the transcription are sung over two notes, and therefore receive a little extra musical emphasis. These are also the words that would most likely be stressed in ordinary spoken English. The rhythmic pattern of the two lines of text is identical, and the emphasized (italicized) syllables occur in the same place in each line of the transcription so that the use of text supports the parallelism of the

Song I: Don't you cry for me



melody. This is easily observed in the vertical alignment (and therefore musical correspondence) of italicized syllables in the transcription.

Vocables

The second line of text includes the vocables, *he yo ye, ha he ya.* These are not part of a cadential pattern, but rather appear to be an extension of the text line, used to fill out the melody. Nettl (1954:30) mentions this as a frequent practice in the Plains-Pueblo area where the verse "begins with the meaningful text, which is usually not long enough to fill out the music, and ends again with meaningless syllables."[4] This song, however, is the only one in the present set to exhibit that characteristic.

Melody

Although the transcription shows some slight melodic variation between the chorus and the verse, the two are essentially parallel. This is most noticeable in the B section: the words 'cry' and 'back', as we have already noted, are slightly emphasized by being sung over two eighth-notes. The syllable ha, which falls in a parallel part of the musical phrase (and therefore aligns vertically in the transcription), is always sung to two eighth-notes in the same way.

SONG II: When the Moon Comes Up

Text: When the *moon* comes // up over the *moun-tain* (section B C)
I will *kiss* you // under*neath* the *moon*-light (section D C)

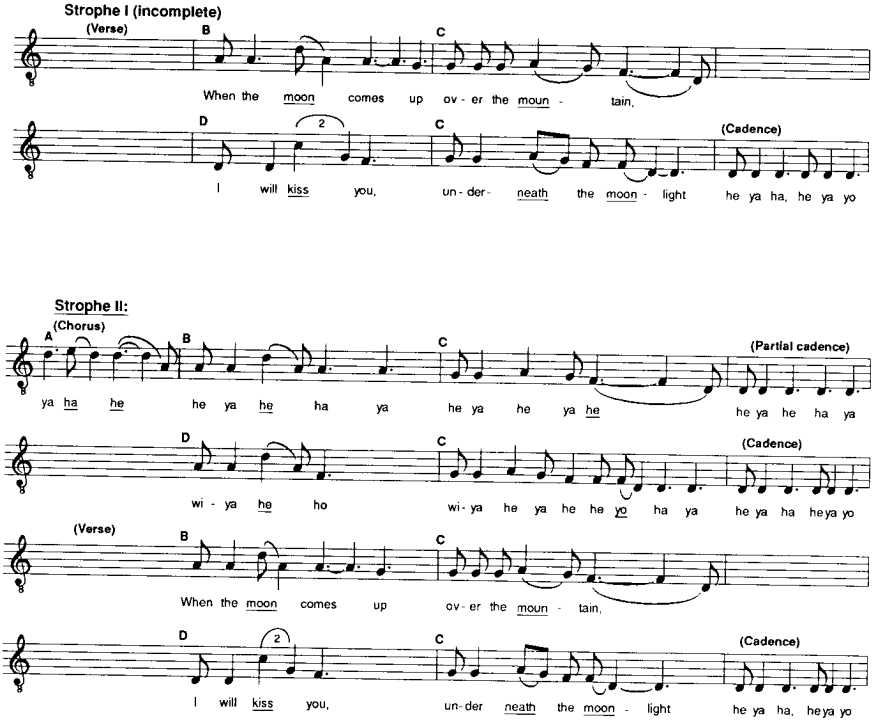
Structure:

Verse:	B C	D C cadence	(Incomplete Strophe) (with text)
Chorus:	A B C	partial cadence D' C cadence	(Strophe 2)
Verse:	B C	D C cadence	(Text with verse only)

Context:

The second song is the only one of the four for which the story of its creation and its first performance was told by the singer. It was created by Rick Favel and his brothers for an "Indian Princess" whom one of his brothers wanted very badly to meet. This is how he told the story:

> He just didn't know how to approach her, and she was standing there watching us. You could tell he was thinking a song, you know, just looking at her. My older brother was with us. He

Song II: When the Moon Comes Up

> was the one that had a lot to do with my getting into pow-wows...I was more into doing other songs. He said, "Make her a song," [and he started to sing,] "When the moon comes up over the mountain, I will kiss you underneath the moonlight, heyaha, heyayo." He says, "You got it?" He says, "Yeah, yeah! that's the way!" So, you know, we all started standing around there, hitting the top of the hood of the car and we had a hard time putting it together. And finally, "Well, we'll sing it this way:"

At this point he sang the whole song. And when he was finished, he continued the story:

> And then we sang it all for about an-hour-and-a-half. She was taping us, and he finally came up and pulled away and says"I'm gonna go talk to her." And she was taping it. So he walked over and started talking to her and finally, "Will you come stand [behind me while I sing]." So she came back and stood behind him.[5]

This story tells us not only about this song and its significance to the original singers, but it also provides details of the way that other love songs might be inspired, composed and performed.

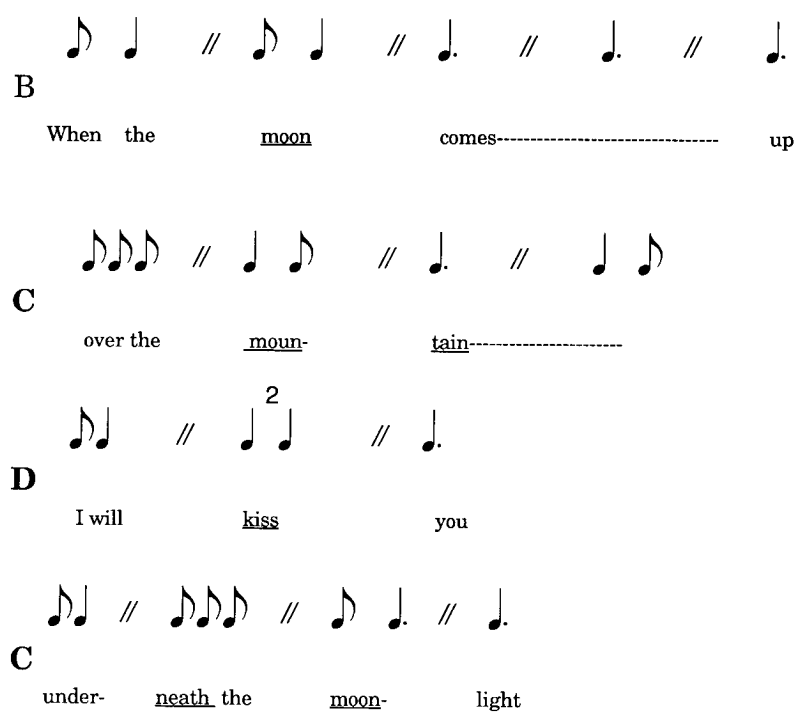
The recording of a story like this is, of course, the exception rather than the rule. Vennum (1975:213) notes that "songs having the widest circulation are for the most part anonymous in authorship, and [few] details of their creation remembered." In an ordinary performance context, this story would not be told, nor would it be available to people who randomly walked up to the drum and taped it. Other singers who learned it from a tape and subsequently performed it would not likely be aware of the story but, in time, they might provide the song with stories of their own, based on their own experiences in performing it.

Text

In this transcription, as in the first, we can clearly see the musical alignment in sections B, D and D' of syllables which are slightly emphasized by being sung over two eighth-notes (indicated by italicizing). Elsewhere in the song, however, the correspondence between the melody and the words is less regular than in the first example. The irregularity adds a fair amount of complexity to an otherwise simple song. Looking at the transcription which has been arranged to line up similar musical phrases, "extra beats" are easily seen. The best example of this occurs with the word up, sung to a dotted-quarter note. This note has the effect of adding an extra dotted-quarter which

expands the phrase from four to five beats of a dotted-quarter each. As we can see from the B-section of the transcription, the note to which the word up is sung appears only in the texted portion of the song, and disappears in the portion of the song that is sung to vocables. This is an obvious adjustment of the song structure to allow for the extra syllable. Examining the D-section where the text "I will kiss you" appears, we see that this musical phrase is only three dotted-quarters in length. It is quite remarkable, therefore, that this irregularity in the D-section is maintained in the chorus where there is no text to accommodate.

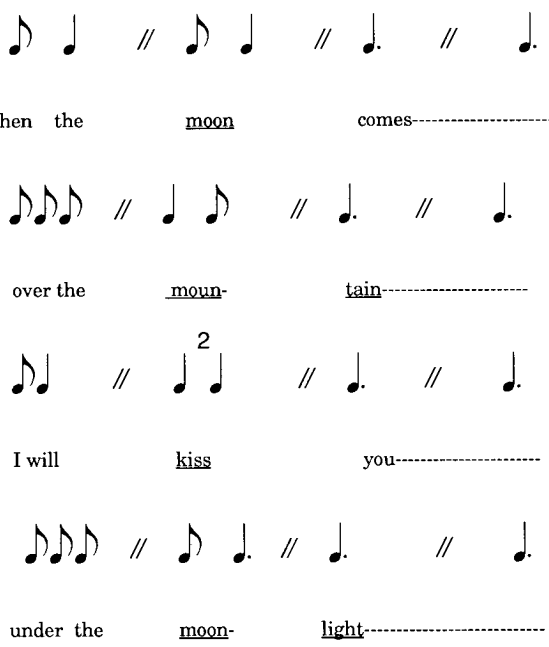
Actual Rhythmic Pattern of Verse:



The word *up* is not really necessary to convey the meaning of the song in English. When people see the moon moving toward them, it is always considered to be moving upward. The syllable *neath* in the word *underneath* could be seen the same way: there is no difference between being *under* the moonlight and *underneath* it. If we were to experiment with this song text for a moment and remove these two syllables that are not essential to the meaning, we might make the song fall into a pattern of complete rhythmic regularity.

Of course this experiment is strictly academic: the only reason for looking at the song this way is to illustrate the fact that much of its complexity and musical interest are derived from the tiny rearrangements of rhythmical patterns which depend on the composer's choice of text.

Hypothetical Rhythmic Pattern of Verse:



SONG III: kispin kisiwâsit

Text: kispin kisiwâsit, ni kîcimos (section D)
sôskwâc waya*wî*tân, niya ka-wìcêtin (section B)
misawâc ka-mih*tâtam*, ahpô cì ka-wì-matow (section C)

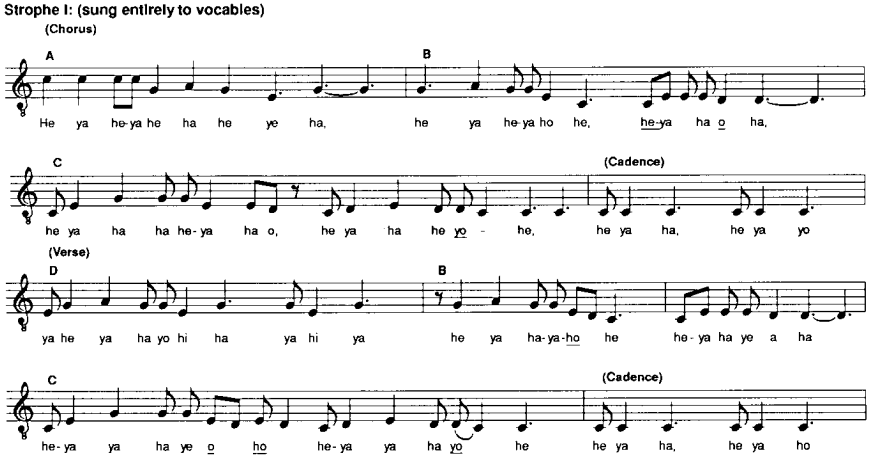
Free translation: If your sweetheart is angry [with you]
Let's just walk right out, I will go with you
I know he'll feel sorry, he might even cry

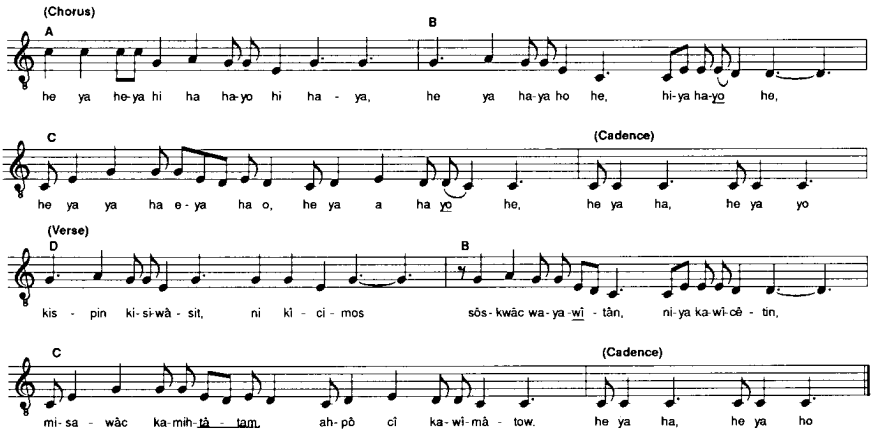
Structure:

Chorus: A B C cadence	(vocables)	Strophe 1
Verse: D B C cadence	(vocables)	
Chorus: A B C cadence	(vocables	Strophe 2
Verse: D B C cadence	(with text)	

Song III: kîspin kisiwâsit

Strophe I: (sung entirely to vocables)



Strophe II: (includes text)

Context

In the third song as in the others, the singer speaks directly to the object of his affections, but in this case, she happens to be someone else's sweetheart. The story that the singer told about this song is especially interesting because it provides us with a context for assessing the role of multilingualism in a typical informal performance setting.

Rick Favel tells the story of a friend with a reputation for performing a suggestive song such as this to a woman whom he has picked from the crowd, whether or not she is alone. As the story goes, he will sing the song directly to that woman, and if she fails to acknowledge him while he sings to her in Cree, he will try again in Saulteaux or Sioux or English until he gets the response he is looking for.[6] I am not certain that exactly the same song is sung in all of these languages; this is a fascinating question which remains to be explored.

Vocables provide one way of coping with the diversity of language and musical styles at a widely-mixed pan-Indian gathering such as the 49 Dance. Heth (1984:94) suggests that vocables "provide the means for a group of singers from different tribes to sing together with ease." While the vocables may provide an even footing for musicians, clearly, without the words, this song would lose much of its impact for the intended audience.

Text

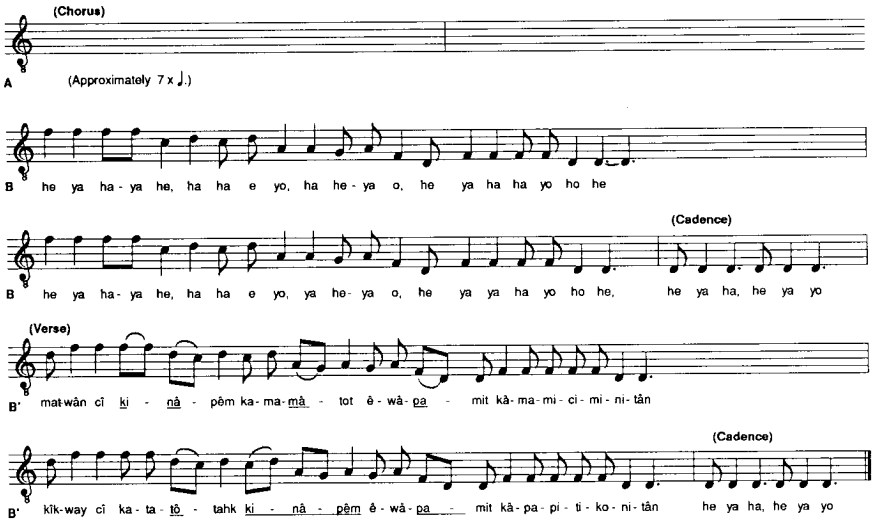
One of the most interesting musical aspects of Cree song texts - at least from a linguist's point of view - is the way they treat the difference between long and short vowels. Long vowels in the text transcription are indicated by the use of circumflex accents. In Cree, the difference between long and short vowels is one of duration, a difference which can completely change the meaning of a word; for example,

Cree Vowel Length

Short vowel /a/		**Long Vowel /â/**
sakahikan 'nail"	vs.	sâkahikan 'lake'
nimaci-nikamon	vs.	nimâci-nikamon
'I sing badly'		'I begin to sing'

When Cree language and music are put together, there is an opportunity to emphasize these differences by using long notes for long vowels and short notes for short vowels. Within the texted portion of the song, all of the syllables with long vowels are sung to notes of at least a quarter note in duration, or else to a pair of eighths, the temporal equivalent of a quarter. Throughout the entire song, no long vowel is sung to a note of shorter length. The situation with short vowels is less simple: while many short syllables are

Song IV: matwân cî kinâpêm ka-ma-mâtot

Strophe I (not repeated)

sung to eighth notes, the transcription also shows that short syllables which coincide with musical phrase-endings are all sung to notes of at least a dotted-quarter in length. Thus we see that musical attenuation at the end of the phrase is given priority over the issue of vowel length.

This phenomenon is no doubt subject to a great deal of variation in time and place. Vennum (1975:276), for example, comments that "since the time of Densmore's collecting, there has been a trend toward bringing the stress of sung Ojibwa more into line with that of the spoken language." With the exception of the musical attenuation at phrase-endings, this is the pattern which is, for the most part, exemplified in this song. The situation in the fourth song is more complex.

SONG IV: matwân cî kinâpêm ka-ma-mâtot

Text
(as sung): matwâ cî *ki*nâpêm ka-ma-*mâ*tot ê-wâ*pa*mit kâ-ma-miciminitân
kìkway cî ka-ta-tôtahk *kinâ*pêm ê-wâ*pa*mit kâ-pa-pitikonitân

Text
(dictated): matwân cî *ki*nâpêm ka-ma-mâtôt ê-wâ*pa*mit kâ-ma-miciminitân
ahpô cî *ki*nâpêm ka-ma-mâtot ê-wâ*pa*mit kâ-pa-pitikonitân

Free translation: I wonder if your man will cry if he saw me holding you
(as sung) I wonder if he will do anything if he saw me embracing you

Structure:	Chorus (no text):	$(A)^7$ B B cadence	performed
	Verse (text):	B' B' cadence	once only

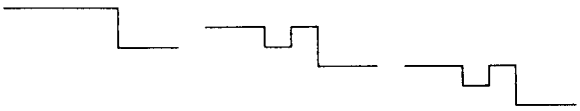
Structure

The structure of this fourth song is different from that of the others because the melodic subsections of the chorus and of the verse are almost identical. The sections B and B' show only slight melodic and rhythmic differences. Both of these sections are made up of a descending sequential pattern with an extension at the end of the section. Although this can be seen in the transcription, the structure is most clearly displayed in the following graph: the horizontal lines indicate relative pitch, and their length indicates relative duration. The spaces between the segments show musical phrase endings. Here, as in the transcriptions, the symbol '~' is used to show where words have been broken to spread them out over the duration of the music.

This graph illustrates the distribution of text. In the line of vocables, commas have been used to indicate the places where the singer breathes. These breath marks have been interpreted as phrase indicators. The phrases of vocables are perfectly aligned with the melodic phases: the commas cor-

respond directly with the spaces in the graph that indicate musical phrasing.

Graph of Melodic Sequence



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ya  haya he,  ha   ha e yo,   ha  heya o,          (vocables line 1)
    ki~~~nâ~~~pêm  ka-ma-mâ~~~tot ê-wâpa~~~mit     (text line 1)
    ka-ta-tô~~tahk ki~~~nâ~~~~pêm ê-wâpa~~~mit    (text line 2)
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Although we might expect the text to fall into the same phrasing pattern as the vocables, the words are all shifted ahead one beat, maintaining a rhythmic pattern of their own. The result of this shift is that the final syllable of each of these words, which would not be stressed in ordinary speech, falls on notes which were stressed when sung with the vocables. We see that the phrasing of text and the phrasing of vocables are treated differently in their correspondence to the musical phrasing of this song. In addition, we see that in the word *ê-wâpamit*, both of the long vowels are sung to eighth notes. In this case, it seems that the repetitive musical sequence (outlined in the graph), has priority over the issue of vowel length. This song offers the clearest example in the present set of the way musical and text patterns co-exist in Cree music without corresponding directly; yet, in this song, their non-correspondence is exploited in a highly creative and systematic way.

Verse

In dictating this text after singing it, the singer changed the words of the second line; unfortunately, the spoken dictation was not recorded, nor was the substitution noticed at the time. The differences do not change the meaning significantly, and because the total number of syllables is still the same, either text would fit the melody. In effect, the singer has carried out the very experiment which we had called "purely academic" for song II. Two words are different in the dictated version of the text, but what is more interesting is the rearrangement of the position of the word *kinâpêm* 'your man, your husband' from the third word in the sung version to the second in the dictated one. Since Cree does not use word order to indicate the roles of subject and object in a sentence, this changed word order of the dictated version

does not affect the meaning of the Cree sentence in the same way that it might in English. In this case, the change in word order creates a more regular syllable pattern between the two lines of text, a pattern that conforms more closely to the shape of the melody.

Another optional stylistic device that occurs within the text of this song is called "reduplication." Ahenakew & Wolfart (1983:369-370) describe this as a process "in which the first syllable [of a word stem] is repeated more or less exactly at the beginning of the stem." Light reduplication, which is identified by the use of a short *a* in the repeated syllable, "is used to express an on-going action or state". The four words in this text which are reduplicated are the following (with reduplicated syllables italicized):

ka-*ma*-mâtot	'he will be crying'
	(unreduplicated: ka-mâtot)
kâ-*ma*-miciminitân	'when I was holding you'
	(unreduplicated: kâ-miciminitân)
ka-*ta*-tôtahk	'he will be doing it'
	(unreduplicated: ka-tôtahk)
Kâ-*pa*-pitikonitân	'when I was embracing you'
	(unreduplicated: kâ-pitikonitân)

In the case of the words *kâ-ma-miciminitân* and *kâ-pa-pitikonitân*, the reduplications readily make sense within the context of the song. The actions of holding and embracing have continuity. In the case of the other two examples, *ka-ma-mâtot* and *ka-ta-tôtahk*, the purpose of the reduplication is less obvious, as we don't expect the woman's husband to react by crying or "doing something about it" on a continuous basis. What appears to be reduplication in these two words may well be above all a musical device to make the text fit the melody better.

It is interesting to note that in the dictated text, where the word order was changed, not only the reduplicated words, but the actual syllables of reduplication would land on parallel melodic points. Thus we see that parallel structure is built into this song not only in the melodic and syllable patterns of words, but also in the stylistic devices used to enhance them.

Conclusion

In comparing the interaction of text and music in these four songs, we have been able to isolate a number of features which all four have in common:

(1) All four songs are composed with a similar structure based on incomplete repetition within the strophe. Text distribution is always limited to

the incomplete repetition or verse section of the song. Vocables are used everywhere else.

(2) Text disposition throughout the songs is mostly syllabic, using one note per syllable of text, regardless of the language of the text. The pattern of two notes per syllable occurs less frequently.

(3) The songs make use of a limited inventory of vocables, with essentially the same set used in all four, regardless of the language of the text.

(4) The two songs with Cree texts maintain, for the most part, a correspondence between long vowels and notes of longer duration.

(5) Musical phrase-endings are always attenuated in English and in Cree, regardless of whether they coincide with a short vowel or un-accented syllable. In this context, musical structure always takes priority over vowel length.

(6) Cadence patterns in all four songs are identical both musically, and in their use of vocables.

With respect to other features, however, the songs present conflicting evidence:

(1) Whereas the musical structure of the second song is clearly adjusted to conform to the irregular patten of the text, the musical pattern of the fourth song is so strongly maintained that syllables with long vowels are sung to eighth notes and some weak text syllables (other than those at phrase-endings) are sung to musically stressed notes.

(2) When melodic material is repeated within the first song, the syllabic pattern is largely maintained in both the chorus and the verse, regardless of whether text or vocables are used. In this way, the pattern of the melody is reinforced by that of the vocables and text. Where the melody is repeated in the fourth song, text and vocables are each phrased differently. The systematic way in which they differ shows that patterns within the song can co-exist without corresponding directly.

Although these contrasts appear between a song with English text in Cree, the differences are not of a nature that could be reasonably attributed to the language distinction. Instead, they seem to point to a flexibility in the text/music relationship which leaves room for the creative preference of the composer.

As we have already noted, there is little difference between the text/music relationship in English or in Cree. What differences we can observe have been limited to language-specific characteristics which English and Cree do not share. Cree vowel length, for example, seems for the most part to be supported by the musical structure, while other Cree literary

devices such as reduplication may also be built into the shape of the song. Although English has no language devices comparable to these, the two English song texts seem to maintain a correspondence between the more important syllables and slight musical emphases.

In either language, these song texts are romantic. All address the beloved directly, probably in her language of preference. In a typical inter-tribal performance context, such as the part after the powwow or a "49 Dance," participants come from many different tribes, and speak many different languages. Serving as a *lingua franca* (especially among the young), English can sometimes provide a means of communicating in an Indian style while overcoming the usual barriers to inter-tribal communication. While vocables may permit a group of singers to perform together easily, these four songs show that, above all, it is the use of text that provides the singers of love songs with the most direct means of communicating with their intended audience.

NOTES

1. I wish to record my sincere thanks to Rick Favel for sharing these songs, and his thoughts about them; to H.C. Wolfart and J. D. Nichols for their unfailing moral support and wise counsel; to R. Burleson who commented on a draft of this paper; and finally, to the Cree Language Project at the University of Manitoba and The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for field support. Any errors or misinterpretations in this paper are entirely my own.

2. Nettl (1954:25,30) recognizes this pattern of strophic structure with incomplete repetition within the strophe as an important type within the Plains-Pueblo area, especially among songs with meaningful texts. Although Nettl's description of Plains-Pueblo area characteristics does not include data from Little Pine, O. Thomas Hatton's 1974 survey of Grass Dance performance practices does include songs from this part of Saskatchewan, which he characterizes by reference to the same passage from Nettl, 1954.

3. Italicized words are sung over two notes; all other text disposition (excluding vocables) is syllabic.

4. Nettl (1954:30) also comments that, among the Arapaho, two texts of different lengths are frequently associated with the same melody, in which case, vocables would be required to "fill in the remaining part of the melody."

5. Heth (1984:94) remarks in her description of the 49 Dance that it is not uncommon for the drum (which is "central to most Plains music") to be replaced at this sort of gathering by a car hood or a cardboard box.

6. After presenting an earlier version of this paper at the "First Native Music Symposium" at Brandon University, I had my attention drawn to the fact that aside from the obvious "desired response," songs like this might also be used for teasing the person to whom they are sung (S. Corrigan, R. Mason, personal communication, 1988).

7. Although there is a distinctly different opening phrase in the chorus, this A section was not sung clearly enough to be transcribed. In the transcription, the presence and approximate duration of this phrase is indicated, but individual pitches and durations are not.

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