

Developing teaching materials for the Umatilla Sahaptin language: Balancing insights from linguistic theory with learners' communicative needs

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In this talk we describe an ongoing community linguistics project to create new textbooks and teaching methods for the Umatilla Sahaptin language, a member of the Sahaptian language family along with Nez Perce. We are linguists employed by the tribal government and work under the direction of the Language Program on the documentation and revitalization of the tribes' three languages, building on previous work which includes a Umatilla Dictionary (Rude, 2014) and translated pedagogical materials that were originally developed for an unrelated Salish language and culture (Peterson, 2018).

The textbooks are planned to form a three-book series. In this talk, we discuss how the topics were selected for each chapter to guide students from beginner to competent speaker and our efforts to encourage use of the language in the community. The first book introduces students to the basics of Umatilla grammar and vocabulary, using only intransitive verbs. This allows students to begin to communicate in Umatilla while avoiding the grammatical complications that come with transitive verbs: Namely, split ergativity conditioned by the animacy of direct objects (Rude, 2009). This becomes the focus of the second book, introducing the animacy hierarchy, the inverse and the split ergative system, as well as reflexive and reciprocal prefixes. The third book will focus on reading and listening to old recorded narratives and discussing the language in them, and will also introduce more idiomatic Umatilla, by making fuller use of the verbal complex through adverbial prefixes and trans- and cis-locative suffixes, rather than expressing this periphrastically.

We have a team of Language Program employees working together to create the textbooks. The Linguist works with the Master Speakers and Language Instructors to come up with a list of words and grammar to include in each chapter. This includes selecting appropriate vocabulary to go along with each topic (introductions, describing nouns, going places, etc.) The vocabulary are selected to be useful, but not overwhelming in quantity, to get students speaking rather than memorizing word lists.

Each chapter begins with a dialog to demonstrate the colloquial use of the language which has often been overlooked in other language resources, which are often based on narratives. Some of our work has been to document conversational use of language, such as asking "and you?", interjections (e.g. reacting to what someone has said), onomatopoeia, and other expressive language.

When we are choosing between multiple ways to express something in Umatilla, such as in (1) and (2), we favor the phrasing that is more similar to English, such as (2). While (1) is considered by the Master Speakers to be the more idiomatic Umatilla way to express this question, they felt that (2) was also correct and acceptable. By balancing grammatical complexity and familiarity with learners' communicative needs, we hope that they will grow more quickly as speakers.

1. Šínmaš wá náymu?

Šín=maš Ø-wá náymu
who=2SG.POSS 1st,2nd-be.PRES relative
"Who do you have as a relative?"

2. Šín iwá imíin náymu?

Šín i-wá imíin náymu
who 3SG-be.PRES 2SG.GEN relative
"Who is your relative?"

We also favor grammatical concepts that can be used in a variety of ways, and so provide students with more opportunities to practice and thus master the same grammatical concepts, as well as to maximize their communicative ability. For example, when we introduce the instrumental suffix –ki

for learners to talk about how they travel (3), we also introduce its usage in introductions, such as in giving one's English and Umatilla names (4).

3. Šapsik^wapamáyawnaš šapawayχtitáwaski wínaša čikúuk.
 Šapsik^wapamá-yaw=naš šapawayχtitáwas-ki wína-ša čikúuk.
 school-to=1SG bus-INSTR go-PRES.IMPF today
 "I am taking the bus to school today."
4. Wanišáaš Táwtalikš tanántimtki, ku Fred šuyáputimtki.
 Wani-šá=aš Táwtalikš tanan-tímt-ki, ku Fred šuyapu-tímt-ki.
 be.called-PRES.IMPF=1SG T. Indian-language-INSTR and F. white.person-language-INSTR
 "I am called Táwtalikš in Indian and Fred in English."

Similarly, the genitive pronouns which were introduced to talk about what belongs to a student (5) were revisited in the 'going places' chapter to refer to someone's home (6).

5. Čí kúsíkusi iwá imíin.
 Čí kúsíkusi i-wá imíin
 this dog 3SG-be.PRES 2SG.GEN
 "This dog is yours."
6. Nišayšáaš imíinpa.
 Nišay-šá=aš imíin-pa.
 reside-PRES.IMPF=1SG 2SG.GEN-LOC
 "I'm staying at your place."

Once each chapter has been drafted, the Language Resource Developer (also a linguist) works with the two Language Apprentices to write exercises to accompany the grammar and vocabulary introduced in the textbook. These include a combination of written exercises (often involving scenarios that highlight contexts in which students could also use Umatilla at home, such as naming animals with a younger sibling), in-class activities, and activities involving using the language with family members (e.g. interviews), to bring Language into the home. We hope that by including a number of activities which allow learners to use the language creatively, they will learn more quickly than through memorizing and repeating alone. Providing a variety of activities along with the textbook also allows the teachers to focus on their in-class instruction, rather than coming up with activities on the fly for learners.

While the focus of the new teaching materials is on speaking and using the language in everyday contexts, we are also working to incorporate cultural information which is specific to the language (e.g. Hunn 1980, 1991). For this, the Language Resource Developer has made ethnobiology guides that show with pictures that the Umatilla words for Deer, both the generic term and species-specific terms, do not line up perfectly with the words for these in English. Plans are in place for similar guides for other life forms, such as for Salmon, which are named at different life stages in Umatilla. These lessons aim to introduce students to differences in how Umatilla and English name and understand the natural world. At the same they, they highlight examples where Umatilla makes more refined distinctions than does English (or even Western scientific traditions) in the hopes of preventing students from developing doubts in Umatilla as they discover that it does not name the same categories as does English.

References

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