

Pit River Languages Project

Summary of work during November 2024

You can download the current Achumawi backup from

- <http://zelligharris.org/Achumawi/achumawi-db.html>

I have updated the automatically generated Achumawi webonary at

- <https://www.webonary.org/odissi/>

The sections in this report are

1. Syntactic analysis
2. 'Acwuké' database project
3. Acúmmá 'ó tiši ímaàcci'

The last two sections are from Paul Cason and Lisa Craig, reporting their work. This and all prior monthly summaries are archived at

- <https://zelligharris.org/Achumawi/achumawi-db.html>

This has been one of those months, with illness in the family, engaging in significant home maintenance and construction, a daughter and grandson moving into our studio apartment downstairs, looking to replace my car, holidays ... yes, one of *those* months.

But in the intervals of actual work, and in the background thoughts where I'm always turning this stuff around, I realized that it was time to reorganize my collections of analyzed sentences according to whether the verb is intransitive, transitive, or ditransitive. It became clear it was best to do this now, before adding a lot more text analysis data under the old system of organization, which would make the reorganization much more onerous later. This change carries the analysis of the core sentences beyond the center-and-adjunct preliminaries and closer to the word dependencies of operator grammar. The second-order verbs Vs, Vsn, etc. are already so characterized. The result approaches a tree-adjointing grammar, with the strings generated by dependency rules rather than the obfuscating pseudo-hierarchy of abstract phrase categories generated by rewrite rules (phrase-structure grammar).

In an earlier monthly report I quoted Zellig Harris's [advice to a student](#), a note that turned up

among his papers as I was helping his widow pack them up for the archivists at the American Philosophical Society. He likened the work of descriptive linguistics to accounting. The major difference is that if you are an accountant you don't have to invent the organizational system, but in descriptive linguistics, you must; because (as he also said) "Let language decide, do not tell lang. what to do—do not project, that is one of greatest dangers. ... Do not be afraid of getting [a] simple system."

With operator grammar so fully exemplified for English and tested in some forty other languages I feel confident that a focus on word dependencies and reductions imposes the least risk of oppressing the facts of the language with presuppositions.

I had some good conversations with Paul and Lisa about their their teaching methods and their presentations of them to groups in other parts of the state. You can read about that in their portion of this report. I have posted their document "[Triangulation: 4 Cs, 4 Principles, 4 Pillars](#)" under a new link for 'Teaching' on the download page.

On Sunday the 24th I was delighted to get a draft of a paper that Connor has been writing with his dissertation supervisor, Dr. Georgia Zellou, reporting results of their study of the challenges that English speakers have learning Pit River pronunciation. With it came a very welcome request to comment and make suggestions. I was able to return it on Thursday the 28th.

1. Syntactic analysis

As mentioned above, I am reorganizing the text analysis tables. In the reorganized tables, I sort the verbs (of the core sentences) according to the number of N arguments (their 'valence', to borrow the term from Tesnière's dependency grammar). This arrangement takes explicit notice of zeroing, when an argument noun is understood from context and is reduced to zero phonemic content.

As always, many matters of interest come to attention and sometimes to a new resolution in the course of the analysis work. I had thought to include several, but I am past my time to post this.

Argument order

I've put some thought into what ordering might be the preferred linearization of arguments. The pronominal order is OSV:

- *sááwá* 'I gave it.' *kááwá* 'You gave it.' *skááwá* 'You gave it to me.'
táwwá 'Give it!'; *stáwwá* 'Give it to me!'

The fact that *amq^há* is always preverbal is suggestive as possible corroboration, but this is complicated by its function for anaphoric reference to something said prior.

OSV, the word order displayed by the character Yoda in the Star Wars series, is in fact very rare among the languages of the world, reported as the default order only for a few languages in the Amazon basin and the Tibeto-Burman language Mizo.¹ I remember Edna Webster telling me “We say everything backward,” with the expectation that there was something wrong with the language. If the default external argument order in external syntax is preverbal, SV for intransitive verbs and OSV for transitive verbs, that postverbal N is anaphoric repetition, with the reduced prominence of a parenthetical.

- *palá’ qa úp [qa ís] timéeti*, [The person] had already lit the tobacco
- *mimééka ya má tkiyí tóólolmi kááwá* You gave it to all of them.
- *q^héemas [qa ís] yááwá.* [The person] gave it to that one.

However, alternative linearizations do not seem less abundant. Ambiguity of multiple arguments in any order under transitive and ditransitive verbs may be prevented by marking the subject or agent with the postfixed auxiliary *waka*, (reduced to *ka* if the noun ends in a vowel).

An alternative explanation of the OS order of pronominal prefixes is that they are adjuncts in the construction of the sentential verb. The order of adjuncts is from the ‘inside’ out; that is, a second adjunct after a first adjunct on the same center is adjoined to the previously established center-plus-adjunct construction. If this is the case, then e.g. the *s-* of *as skááwá* ‘you gave me water’ is adjoined after the *k-* ‘you’. Treating all the morphemes in the verb complex as adjuncts to the main root opens a way to accounting for the various semantic specializations, since in that analysis each adjoined root or affix can be a reduction of an adjoined phrase or conjoined sentence.

In languages generally, pronouns can be analyzed as reduced forms of nouns, e.g. in English *I* may be reduced from *speaker* and *you* from *audience*., or they can be treated as primitive N glossed ‘speaker’ and ‘audience’. The reduction to a 3rd person pronoun occurs when the correlative noun is repeated under a metalanguage assertion of sameness, so that e.g. *it* is reduced from *N same as prior*. A relationship of the 3rd person *w-* and *y-* prefixes to the corresponding stative morphemes is not established but seems likely. The other prefixes in the pronominal paradigms are reduced from the same sources plus zeroed conjuncts or adjuncts such as *sit^hikli S ma cé S* ‘I ask whether S or not S’ for the interrogative. Each root in a compound verb stem has the same arguments as is seen overtly in

1 Wikipedia, “Object-subject-verb word order”, citing O’Grady, Dobrovolsky, & Aronoff (1997) *Contemporary Linguistics: An Introduction*.

the verb as a unit in external syntax. Reductions in general are optional, so whether any, all, or none of the arguments are left unreduced to pronoun is elective. This may help account for the freedom with which speakers reiterate an argument word, as shown in recent reports and in the tables of syntactic analysis.

2. 'Acwuké' database project

November was a busy month with differing events that required detailed preparations. Among the holidays of the month, work on the Atsuge database was slowed due to these other events. Database entries continued from Talmy files 002.001 with cross referencing from many other files for accuracy purposes. I have continued to revise some glosses, for example when an additional location in Talmy's notes provides a more suitable gloss form for a particular stem or root. More data will give a better clue to what individual stems and roots really correspond to in English.

3. Acúmmá 'ó tisi íímacci'

All around it was a very productive month for many of us throughout Pit River country. We held two local language classes and completed a calendar for the upcoming years' Pit River language classes.

Nov 5-7:

Our team had the exciting opportunity to present at the 10th Annual Miwuk Language Symposium in Tuolumne, California. We are proud to share our innovative approaches to language education and engaging pedagogical methods, which have resonated with audiences from various backgrounds. Connecting with other heritage language teachers and learners is always beneficial, as it fosters collaboration and inspires new ideas in our ongoing journey of language education.

In this session, we implemented our WAYK (Where Are Your Keys) approach to domain-based activities, incorporating various props commonly found in a home. We began with a group of over 70 participants by facilitating an icebreaker where everyone arranged themselves in alphabetical order by the first letter of their names. This exercise encouraged light communication and fostered a sense of connection as participants lined up together. We then split the group in half to create partners, inviting pairs to introduce themselves and engage in a series of structured questions, culminating in a reflective discussion about when and why they started their language journeys. This activity was an effective way to begin building community and creating a supportive learning environment.

To enhance our collaborative experience, we asked participants to bring chairs to form a large circle, which facilitated further activities and discussions. We proceeded with a relevant lesson plan that allowed participants to overlay their own languages. In one engaging lesson on handwashing, we utilized five steps in Craig's List style and guided participants through the four pillars of learning: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. We

also developed flashcards to demonstrate how learners could introduce text to their students and incorporated these cards into various reading and writing activities, generating additional ideas on their usage.

As we wrapped up our session, we took the opportunity to revisit the question of when and why each participant began their language journey. This time, we encouraged the team to share their insights with the entire group, which not only reinforced our collective experiences but also strengthened our sense of community. This engaging discussion provided a valuable platform to explore the journey of the Pit River language and offered a vivid picture of what Pit River's happy hunting ground looks like. We were particularly excited to share Bruce Nevin's work on the Achumawi FLEx database, which is accessible on the [website for the Pit River Languages Project](#). This resource offers a valuable opportunity for all of us to become hunters in this field, enhancing our ability to collaboratively create effective lessons. It's crucial to recognize that many language learners in our state face challenges in accessing their own languages and lack a shared database that supports their needs within their communities. By continuously improving our model and approaches, we aim to provide greater assistance to neighboring tribes in their important efforts to reclaim and revitalize their heritage languages.

We thank our fellow team of Achumawi language learners, Tony Yiamkis, Renee Gemmill, and Irvin Jim, for their invaluable assistance during the presentation.

Nov 9th

Oakland Museum of California: Born of the Bear Dance an exhibition through June 2025 showing the life's work of famed PitRiver/Maidu photographer Dugan Aguilar- *wílóo*. Dugans' works span the 36 years 1982-2018 and capture powerful images of breathtaking California landscapes, ceremonies, and cultural practices by the most reputable practitioners of the times. I saw many of my departed friends in this exhibit who were very impactful in my life's journey. He documented a rich array of powerful stories of resilience and celebration among the many artists, basketweavers and cultural practitioners of California. It was very much an honor to open up this exhibit to the public with a prayer

November 21st

In celebration of Native American Heritage Month, the California Department of Education recognized the impactful work of Resources for Indian Student Education Inc. (RISE) and its culturally relevant prevention programs. One remarkable initiative involved honoring the Achumawi language by creating an 8-minute segment that highlighted its usage in various projects. It is especially important that these programs actively encouraged collaboration with local elders, ensuring their invaluable insights and contributions were integrated into the initiatives. Notably, we showcased several opportunities where the Achumawi language was woven into the fabric of the work, such as in prevention PSAs, the Culture in Schools project, the Stems for STEM project, and the Water Protectors project. This approach strengthens community ties and promotes mutual respect while preserving cultural heritage..