

## Linguistic Aspects of Language Teaching and Learning in Immersion Contexts

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There are at least five “degrees of immersion” which can be identified in categorizing the various monolingual situations in which a person may acquire a language. The first degree is the most favorable. It corresponds to the situation in which a child learns a language within the context of his or her family. Virtually everyone experiences the first degree of immersion, since this is the environment in which one’s first language is learned.

The second degree of immersion would be that corresponding to the situation in which preschool and kindergarten children are cared for and instructed by people who speak to them always and only in a particular language (referred to here as “L”) during the period when the children are in the school environment. Where L is not the child’s first language, this is indeed a lesser degree of immersion. The exposure to L in this second degree of immersion is extremely valuable and often leads to native-like mastery of the language, but it is not as full and consistent as the first-degree immersion situation characteristic of the acquisition of one’s first language. Nonetheless, it is in many communities the most promising environment for language revitalization. This second degree of immersion, depending on the nature of the education framework in which it functions, can in principle be extended to the elementary, secondary, and tertiary school years (see, for example, Chapters 10, 11, and 12 on the Hawaiian and Māori immersion programs). In principle, therefore, the second-degree immersion program can lead to the circumstance in which a learner achieves a mastery of L essentially equivalent to that of a native speaker, that is, a command of L virtually indistinguishable from that of a person who learned the language in the first-degree immersion situation.

The third degree of immersion can be realized in a num-

ber of different formats. An important one is that in which two people, one a native speaker of L, the other a learner of L, spend their days together speaking only L. Where the speaker and the learner are able to spend a great amount of time together, even an adult lifetime together, this can also bring a learner to a level of competence functionally equivalent to that of a native speaker. Typically, however, such associations are more short-lived, resulting in a level of mastery which, though significant, is generally much less than that of a native speaker. This is essentially the situation involved in the master-apprentice immersion program (see Chapter 28). We place this at the third degree because that amount of exposure is typically less here than in the second degree, and certainly less than in the first degree. There are exceptions, of course, of couples (a speaker and a learner) who spend their lives speaking the language together, the learner becoming almost as competent as the native speaker, functionally at least. This learning environment is also found in a relationship which might not occur to one as at all relevant to a discussion of immersion. This is the relationship between a linguist or anthropologist and his or her informants, or language consultants, the former being the apprentices, the latter the masters. Typically, of course, this relationship begins with the use of two languages, the apprentice’s language being used to elicit forms in the language of the master, but in many cases, the work shifts to the master’s language entirely. In these cases, the master-apprentice model is operating, to all intents and purposes.

Our suggested fourth degree of immersion is the “content course,” in which L is used as the language of instruction in a series of lessons whose content is something other than the language itself—for example, biology, math, geography, philosophy, and so on. This is similar to the second-degree

immersion situation, but the amount of contact is less. While the subject matter of the course is not L itself, the purpose of the course is both to teach the subject matter and to teach the language as well, through the example of its use in explaining the course content. To say that this is the fourth degree of immersion is not to say that it is less important or less valuable than higher degrees, because in many present-day communities, the fourth-degree immersion situation is the only realistic possibility within the general immersion class of language-learning situations. Furthermore, the fourth degree is a good language-learning environment, fully worthy of the immersion label.

The fifth and final degree in our classification of immersion environments is the monolingual language class. In some variants, this is virtually indistinguishable from the fourth-degree learning situation. In the monolingual class, L is used exclusively, generally in a conversational setting and often around a particular topic—a movie, a *telenovela* or soap opera, food, the news, and so on. This model is common in contemporary conversational language classes.

The degree of immersion has interesting implications for training. I will consider here the training required to ensure that the learner acquires the structural features of L—that is, its sound system, morphology, syntax, and semantics. In general, the higher the degree of immersion, the less attention needs to be paid to the structure of L. That is to say, less attention has to be given specifically to teaching structure in the first and second degrees. In fact, little if any attention has to be given specifically to grammar in the first and second degrees, since these are full and rich immersion environments. In the best of circumstances, the learner is exposed to all the data needed to acquire L in the manner of a first-language learner, and where the learner is an infant or young child, he or she has the great advantage of being able to make use of the special language-learning capacity of children. The first degree, and to some extent the second degree, are “natural” language learning environments and are normally not specially constructed for the teaching of structure, although, as is well known, in many societies mothers and other close kin will present children with carefully edited models of a standard form of L, often adjusted in accordance with their perception of what is appropriate to their age.

The situation is very different for the lower degrees of immersion, where the contact with the language is less. This is especially true of the fourth and fifth degrees, where the teacher must have training not only in teaching methods, but also specifically in the structural features of L. The reason for this is obvious: since the exposure to the language is limited, special measures must be taken to ensure that the structural features of L are adequately covered, especially those features which are in some sense “characteristic” of L—those features which one must acquire in order to be able to say that one is actually speaking L and not some diluted or modified version of it.

By way of illustrating the point just made, I present part of a fourth-degree immersion lesson in Miskitu, the indigenous lingua franca of eastern Nicaragua. The content of the lesson deals with certain aspects of the geography of Nicaragua. Although the written version of the text does not show this very well, the oral classroom version, aided by various props, such as a map of the country, and pictures, makes it clear to the students what is being said in the lesson, even if their command of the Miskitu is still incipient. Embedded in the text are a number of Miskitu constructions, of course, but this lesson is constructed in such a way as to give special attention to a particular construction which figures prominently in the grammar of the language. The lesson is of course monolingual in Miskitu, but for present purposes the lecture will be given in translation as well, in parentheses; stage directions are also given in English, in square brackets.

WAN TASBAYA ‘Our Land’

[pointing to map]

*Naha kuntrika sika Nicaragua.*  
‘This country is Nicaragua’.

*Bara naha kuntrika sika Honduras.*  
‘And this country is Honduras’.

*Nicaragua kuntri sirpi sa.*  
‘Nicaragua is a small country’.

[pointing and signaling “two” with the fingers]

*Nicaragua pís wal brisa.*  
‘Nicaragua has two parts’.

[pointing to the western part]

*Naha píska sika Pasipik Kus.*  
‘This part is the Pacific Coast’.

*Bara naha píska sika Atlantik Kus.*  
‘And this part is the Atlantic Coast’.

[pointing and indicating sizes]

*Atlantik Kus târa sa, kuna Pasipik Kus sirpi sa.*  
‘The Atlantic Coast is big, but the Pacific Coast is small’.

[pointing at the Coco River]

*Nicaragua wihki Honduras wal lilapas ra âwala kum bâra sa.*  
‘Between Nicaragua and Honduras there is a river’.

*Âwalka ba lika Wangki mâkisa.*  
‘The river is called the Wangki [Coco]’.

[indicating large size]

*Wangki ba âwala târa sa.*  
‘The Coco is a large river’.

[pointing at houses and villages on the Atlantic Coast]

*Miskitu uplika nani ba Atlantik Kus ra îwisa.*  
‘The Miskitu people live on the Atlantic Coast’.

*Upla ailal Wangki âwalka ra îwisa.*  
‘Many people live on the Coco River’.

[pointing to Waspam on the Coco River and indicating large size]

*Naha tâwanka sika Waspam. Tâwan târa sa.*  
‘This town is Waspam. It is a large town’.

*Waspam uplika nani ba Miskitu sa.*  
‘The people of Waspam are Miskitu’.

*Waspam tâwanka Miskitu tâwanka kum sa.*  
‘The town of Waspam is a Miskitu community’.

This is part of the “lecture portion” of a lesson on the geography of Central America presenting part of the content of a course on Nicaragua. It is monolingual and could be addressed to any audience learning Miskitu, particularly one that has had some exposure to Miskitu through earlier lessons. In actual practice, courses on Miskitu are addressed to non-Miskitu people living and working on the Atlantic Coast, such as people from the Pacific Coast or foreigners, including families, hence both children and adults. Apart from the information which is given about Nicaragua, there is of course a linguistic point to be made. Thus, the course has the dual purpose of teaching about a part of Central America and, more important, the Miskitu language. In this lesson, the main grammatical question is, what is the difference between the two forms which nouns take in Miskitu? That is, what is the principle governing the use of the forms given in the left-hand column and those given in the center column below?

|               |                 |                   |
|---------------|-----------------|-------------------|
| <i>pîs</i>    | <i>pîska</i>    | ‘part, piece’     |
| <i>kuntri</i> | <i>kuntrika</i> | ‘country’         |
| <i>âwala</i>  | <i>âwalka</i>   | ‘river’           |
| <i>upla</i>   | <i>uplika</i>   | ‘people’          |
| <i>tâwan</i>  | <i>tâwanka</i>  | ‘town, community’ |

In these examples, the morphological difference is quite clear: the ending *-ka* is present in the forms of the center column, and it is absent from the forms of the left-hand column. But this is not the point of interest here. Rather, we need to understand *when* to use these different forms. This is an important feature of Miskitu grammar.

The teaching method implied in the fourth-degree immersion environment is based on the idea that principles of grammar are to be *discovered* by the learner. They are not told to the learner explicitly. Direct teaching of grammar is avoided, unless it becomes necessary for some reason. The hope in this program is that the discourse will be rich enough in examples of the two nominal forms to permit the learner to “figure out” the principle involved.

The principle is revealed in the following pair of sentences:

*Naha kuntri târa sa.*  
‘This is a big country’.

*Naha kuntrika târa sa.*  
‘This country is big’.

In the first sentence, the subject is the word *naha* ‘this’, and the remainder is the predicate. In the second sentence, the subject is the sequence *naha kuntrika*. The essential point is that in this use, the noun is “in construction” with a preceding element (in this case, the demonstrative *naha*). And the

grammatical principle involved here is that a noun appears in the “construct state” if it is in a construction with a preceding element. In the first sentence, the noun appears in the “absolute state” *kuntri*, because it is a part of the predicate and therefore is not in construction with the demonstrative *naha*. The structural relationships involved in the two sentences are:

|                      |                       |
|----------------------|-----------------------|
| Subject              | Predicate             |
| <i>Naha</i>          | <i>kuntri târa sa</i> |
| this                 | country big is        |
| <i>Naha kuntrika</i> | <i>târa sa</i>        |
| this country         | big is                |

There is a more natural way to express these assertions, utilizing one of the topicalization particles *lika* or *sika* in the equational or identificational construction, in which the subject (on the left) is clearly set off from the predicate (on the right). The position of this particle clearly indicates the structural difference between the two sentences:

|                          |             |                     |
|--------------------------|-------------|---------------------|
| Subject                  | Particle    | Predicate           |
| <i>Naha</i>              | <i>lika</i> | <i>kuntri târa.</i> |
| this                     | [topic]     | country big         |
| ‘This is a big country’. |             |                     |
| <i>Naha kuntrika</i>     | <i>lika</i> | <i>târa.</i>        |
| this country             | [topic]     | big                 |
| ‘This country is big’.   |             |                     |

Here the particle *lika* partitions the sentence into a subject and a predicate. Structurally, it indicates clearly what does and does not “go with” the subject. Thus, its position shows clearly that *naha kuntrika* is a single constituent, a nominal construction, whose head noun must appear in the construct state.

The use of the particles *lika* and *sika* would quite naturally be introduced in the course lectures themselves, and they could be used as the basis of an ancillary lesson of the type we have referred to as the fifth-degree immersion environment, that is, a monolingual lesson devoted specifically to the Miskitu construct-state construction. Further evidence to help the learner is given in the following forms:

|                          |                       |
|--------------------------|-----------------------|
| Subject                  | Predicate             |
| <i>Naha na</i>           | <i>kuntri târa sa</i> |
| this [proximate]         | country big is        |
| <i>Naha kuntrika na</i>  | <i>târa sa</i>        |
| this country [proximate] | big is                |

Here the demonstrative is accompanied by the proximate marker, an enclitic element indicating that the entity referred to by the phrase is located near the speaker (spatially or psychologically). This gives us a handy way to see whether or not the noun is in construction with the demonstrative. If it is, then the proximate enclitic will follow the noun, as in the second sentence. As expected, the noun is in the construct state there, hence it has the form *kuntrika*. By contrast, in the first sentence, the noun *kuntri* is part of the predicate, and the

proximate enclitic directly follows the demonstrative. The point of this lesson could be illustrated further by sentences using the non-proximate demonstrative and enclitic, as in:

|                          |                        |
|--------------------------|------------------------|
| Subject                  | Predicate              |
| <i>Baha ba</i>           | <i>kuntri târa sa.</i> |
| that [non-proximate]     | country big is         |
| 'That is a big country'. |                        |

|                              |                 |
|------------------------------|-----------------|
| <i>Baha kuntrika ba</i>      | <i>târa sa.</i> |
| that country [non-proximate] | big is          |
| 'That country is big'.       |                 |

The partial lecture cited above is not enough, actually, to permit all participants in the class to discover the principle involved in the Miskitu construct state construction, since it is necessary to have an understanding of the relevant aspects of constituent structure, reflected in part by the manner in which the clauses are partitioned into a subject or topic, on the one hand, and a predicate in the other. These principles must also be learned. In an actual class, or sequence of classes, more evidence would have to be given. In addition, the interactive component would engage the students in using the construct and absolute forms of nouns. For example, in comparing the sizes of different countries, the instructor might say:

*Nicaragua kuntri sirpi sa.*  
'Nicaragua is a small country'.

*Rusia lika kuntri târa sa.*  
'Russia, on the other hand, is a large country'.

The instructor might then say:

*Âni kuntrika târa sa ki?*  
'Which country is large?'

to which the following is a possible, and even true, answer:

*Rusia kuntri târa sa.*  
'Russia is a big country'.

In the question, the noun is in the construct state, because *âni kuntrika* 'which country' forms a constituent, that is, a single nominal construction, in which an interrogative determiner (*âni* 'which') precedes the noun (*kuntrika* 'country'). In the answer, however, the word preceding the noun *kuntri* is the subject of the sentence and it is not "in construction" with *kuntri*, which consequently appears in the absolute form, as expected.

The example of the Miskitu construct state is presented to illustrate the fact that learning Miskitu as a second language, as would be the case in a fourth- or fifth-degree immersion situation, involves the acquisition of a structural feature of the language which is in a sense definitive of it—if one acquires Miskitu, one necessarily acquires the construct state. But at these degrees of immersion, it is not possible simply to assume that the learner will pick up the principles underlying the grammar of the construct on the basis of a "natural

and essentially random corpus" of the language. By contrast, this expectation *is* reasonable in the first and second degrees of immersion, because there the "accidental corpus" is large enough to virtually guarantee that the learner will eventually have the data needed to acquire the construction and the associated morphology (*-ka* in the examples given, though this is just one of the forms it takes).

At the fourth and fifth degrees of immersion, a somewhat artificial environment must be created, one in which the structural properties of the language are brought forward often, and in a context which reflects as clearly as possible the meaning of what is being said. To learn the Miskitu construct state, one must not only learn to create the correct morphological form of a noun appearing in that construction, but also learn the syntactic structure associated with it. In an immersion situation, that is, a monolingual environment, one needs to learn what the construction "means"—its associate semantics—and since no one is going to tell the learner what it means, the learner must figure it out on the basis of what he or she hears. All of this requires data, and in the lower degrees of immersion, these data must be made to appear frequently and in a context rich enough to reveal adequately the form and meaning of the construction.

It is for this reason that teachers at the fourth and fifth degrees of immersion must have the training that will ensure that they are consciously aware of the special structural properties of the language being taught, L. It is not enough to be a fluent speaker of L; it is necessary to make *conscious* appeal to its grammar in order to plan the revelation of its special structural and grammatical properties in sufficient abundance to guarantee their acquisition. In some cases, inevitably, the teacher will have to resort to explicit explanations of grammatical forms and constructions. This also requires training, of course. In effect, the teacher is a language scholar, or linguist, in relation to L.

The remarks just made assume that the training burden falls exclusively on the teacher, not the student. This may not be the case, however, in all instances. It can be the student, rather than the teacher, who brings the necessary training. This is sometimes true in the master-apprentice relationship, where it is often the student who must have conscious awareness of what he or she needs to learn in order to acquire the language. Here the student may not be aware of the special properties of L, but a background in linguistics, or experience with learning other languages, will be useful in discovering its structural features. This is essentially the situation in which a linguistic or anthropological field worker operates in learning a new language in the field.

What is it that must be given special attention in teaching and learning a language in the fourth- and fifth-degree immersion environments? Many aspects of a given language are so richly forthcoming in an immersion situation that it is unnecessary to give them any extra attention, above and beyond the usage inherent in the situation itself, unless, of

course, mistakes persistently appear in the learners' speech. For example, the standard unmarked verb-final word order of Miskitu is evident at every turn, only deviations from it deserve special attention. And, for the most part, the segmental phonology and accentual system of Miskitu are likewise evident at all points. Sufficient usage alone will guarantee acquisition of Miskitu phonology—though, to be sure, special practice in pronunciation may be required. However, all languages, so far as we know, have certain “special features” that deserve attention at the lower degrees of immersion. A small subset of such features for Miskitu includes:

- (1) Verbal inflection
- (2) Nominal inflection
- (3) Subject obviation (switch-reference)
- (4) The causative construction
- (5) The transitivity alternation

For the most part, languages will differ in the features belonging to this special category—hence my use of the label “special.” These features are special because they belong to the parametric and language-specific inventory of elements and constructions. They are not directly attributable to the universal properties of the human linguistic capacity, only indirectly so. It is not surprising, therefore, that they must be specially learned. And in the case of the lower degrees of immersion, they must be given special attention, or so I contend.

Miskitu is not alone, of course, in having verbal inflections, but the particulars of the Miskitu system must be learned, and the system is sufficiently rich to require special attention. The same is true of the nominal system, whose inflectional complexity is expressed in the possessive construction. This latter is built upon the construct state, illustrated in earlier paragraphs. The Miskitu construct is, in its details at least, quite unique to that language and clearly deserving of special attention.

Subject obviation (switch-reference) is pervasive in Miskitu usage, but it is easy to miss. Many second-language learners of Miskitu have failed to acquire it, since it must be consciously taught at the lower degrees of immersion. It is exemplified in the following pair of sentences:

|  |             |           |              |                    |
|--|-------------|-----------|--------------|--------------------|
| <i>Yang</i>                                  | <i>âras</i> | <i>ba</i> | <i>atk-i</i> | <i>dakak-amna.</i> |
| (I   | horse       | the       | buy-PROX     | feed-I.will)       |
| ‘I will buy the horse and (I will) feed it’. |             |           |              |                    |

|  |             |           |                 |                  |
|--|-------------|-----------|-----------------|------------------|
| <i>Yang</i>                                  | <i>âras</i> | <i>ba</i> | <i>atk-rika</i> | <i>dakak-ma.</i> |
| (I   | horse       | the       | buy-OBV         | feed-you.will)   |
| ‘I will buy the horse and you will feed it’. |             |           |                 |                  |

In the first sentence, the proximate suffix *-i* (glossed PROX) indicates that the subject of the verb to which it is attached is the same as the subject of the second verb (for this reason, the suffix can also be glossed SS, for “same subject”)—*yang* ‘I’, the first person singular, is the subject of both verbs. In the second sentence, by contrast, the obviative suffix *-rika*

(glossed OBV, or DS for “different subject”) indicates that the subject of the first verb is different from that of the second verb. In that sentence, *yang* ‘I’ is the subject of the first verb, while *man* ‘you’ is the subject of the second verb (the independent second person pronoun *man* is actually omitted, being embodied in the verbal inflection, *-ma* [second person future]).

The Miskitu causative is based on the obviative variant of the switch-reference system. It is shared by the other Miskitulan languages but is otherwise virtually unique among the languages of the world. The causative verb itself is drawn from the set of so-called light verbs, verbs of abstract semantic content, including *yâb-* ‘give’ and *mun-* ‘do’. The second of these is exemplified in the following:

|                              |             |           |                 |                  |
|------------------------------|-------------|-----------|-----------------|------------------|
| <i>Yang</i>                  | <i>âras</i> | <i>ba</i> | <i>mun-rika</i> | <i>plap-bia.</i> |
| I                            | horse       | the       | do-OBV          | run-it.will      |
| ‘I will make the horse run’. |             |           |                 |                  |

Superficially, the causative has the same form as the obviative member of the pair of simple clause-sequencing examples cited above. But there is an important syntactic difference between the two constructions. The clause-sequencing construction is just that, a sequence of clauses each representing a separate proposition arranged in some sort of logical sequence, knitted together by means of the subject obviation construction. The causative, however, is a syntactically integrated complex clause representing a single proposition. This difference is reflected in the grammar of the two constructions and, for a second-language learner, it takes some time to understand what is going on in this aspect of Miskitu grammar. Again, this is something that can be missed entirely if not given special attention.

In many languages of the world, perhaps most, there exist verbal pairs, one member of which is intransitive, the other transitive. The morphological details differ from language to language, as expected. In English, the alternation is morphologically unmarked, hence *break* intransitive and phonologically identical *break* transitive. The Miskitu equivalent of this verb also alternates, but the alternation is morphologically marked, thus *kri-w-* ‘break (intransitive)’ beside *kri-k-* ‘break (transitive)’. Apart from simply learning this alternation and its associated morphology, there is the problem of learning how it is constrained, that is, of learning which verbs participate in the alternation and which do not. This is a principled matter, governed by principles of a universal character. But it is not a simple matter to teach this to second-language learners in an immersion setting, as opposed to a setting in which grammatical principles are taught explicitly. The reason is that the evidence for the constraints on this transitivity alternation is negative and hence unlearnable. In most cases, it will become obvious eventually that the verbs which participate in the alternation—that is, those seen to do so in a sufficiently rich linguistic context—belong to a class which can be characterized

semantically as involving a change in state (e.g., from whole to broken, in the case of Miskitu *kri-w-/kri-k-*). This is “learned” on the basis of positive evidence, and it can be reinforced by another bit of positive evidence, that is, the fact that an intransitive verb like *krat-w-* ‘snore’, which is not a change-of-state verb, usually takes, as its “transitive partner,” the productive syntactic causative form *mun-ka krat-w-aia* ‘to make snore’. We can predict, then, that there is no Miskitu verb *\*krat-k-* ‘snore (transitive)’. This is correct. And we also predict the lack of any transitivity alternation of the form *\*plap-w-/plap-k-* ‘run’. These observations can be made by a second-language learner in an immersion environment, but the linguistic context must be quite rich in examples, a circumstance which can only be ensured if the teacher consciously contrives to make it so. It should perhaps be mentioned that the facts pertaining to the Miskitu transitivity alternation, in particular the constraints on it, are only partially “learned.” Here, and elsewhere as well, it is reasonable to assume that at some point in a learner’s exposure to a sufficiently forthcoming linguistic sample, the principles involved are grasped in part through a process that could be called learning and in part through something that the learner (even the second-language learner) already knows by virtue of being an organism endowed with the human capacity for language. Be this as it may, the linguistic context must be appropriately rich to permit mastery of the system.

At the level of second-language learning, which is my primary concern here, languages are notoriously unequal in the matter of difficulty. While Miskitu is relatively “learner friendly,” many other languages erect impressive, though ultimately surmountable, barriers for the second-language learner. Navajo is such a language, as are other members of the Athabaskan family to which it belongs. I will use Navajo as another example of my general point about lower-degree-immersion learning environments. A small selection from the large set of special features of Navajo is set out below:

- (1) The verb word
- (2) Obviation and the inverse
- (3) The animacy hierarchy
- (4) The internally headed relative clause
- (5) Classificatory verb stems

For the second-language learner of Navajo, mastery of the verb word is a long and arduous process, and it must be a constant focus of attention in the immersion settings of concern here. The Navajo verb word is not like that of French, say, or even that of Russian. While these also take time to learn and are to some extent challenging, the process consists essentially in learning regular inflections, an inventory of irregular forms, and, in the case of Russian, the aspectual pairs and the rather daunting system of accent placement. By contrast, the Navajo verb word is a “compressed phrase,” containing within it not only the verb stem and a rich system of inflectional morphology, but also adverbial, aspectual, and

relational elements which, in languages like English, are expressed by means of separate words and phrases (including adverbs, aspectual verbs, particles, and prepositional phrases). I use the informal locution “compressed phrase” here to reflect the fact that the components of a Navajo verb word are not simply arranged agglutinatively like beads on a string, but rather accommodated within a word-sized package in great measure through the effects of an impressive array of morphological and phonological processes which often considerably obscure the morpheme boundaries between them. It is this latter circumstance, as much as any other, that makes the Navajo verb a formidable and quite wonderful challenge. As an example of this, we cite the inflected verb word *ch'éénish'nil* ‘I released them (as horses), I got them back out (of some enclosure)’. The elements contained in this word are listed below:

- (1) *ch'í-* [adverbial] ‘out, outward (horizontally)’
- (2) *ná-* [adverbial] ‘back (to previous state or position)’
- (3) *n-* [mode] ‘ni-conjugation marker’
- (4) PERF [aspect] ‘perfective’
- (5) *sh-* [person] ‘first person singular’
- (6) *d-* [voice] ‘passive, middle, reflexive’
- (7) *-nil* [perfective stem] ‘move/be (of plural entities)’

For present purposes, one can say that these components are grouped as follows within the verb word:

[ch'í-ná-][n-PERF-sh-][d-nil]

They do not appear as such, obviously. Instead, certain morphophonological principles apply, resulting in the actual pronunciation. Let us consider first the pair [d-nil], consisting of the stem *-nil* and the reflexive *d-*. The stem itself is in the perfective form—if the verb were in the imperfective, the stem would take the form *-níłł*. The reflexive voice marker *d-* appears here not because the construction is reflexive in the usual sense; rather, it is an “event or state reflexive,” reflecting a *return* to the state of affairs described by the verbal theme—in this case, the condition of being *out* or *uncontained*, *free*. In this use, the *d-* voice marker is functioning in concert with the “reversionary” adverbial prefix *ná-* ‘back (to previous state or position)’. This cooperative arrangement is common but not altogether regular, and it must be learned for each verb. Phonologically, the *d-* prefix is not realized as such before the initial consonant of a stem (only if the stem begins in a vowel does the *d-* appear as phonetic [d]). In this verb, the so-called “d-effect” takes place, so that the sequence /dn/ is realized phonetically as [ʔn], the glottalized apical nasal. Moving leftward in the verb word, the combination [n-PERF-sh-] requires a number of comments. This combination amounts to the first person singular of the perfective mode, in the form it takes it before the voice element *d-* (if this were absent, the first person prefix *sh-* would be deleted). The morpheme representing the perfective aspect is represented by PERF because it is not a uniformly

definable affix. Here, it is essentially non-overt, giving us the sequence /n-sh/, to which i-epenthesis applies, inserting the vowel [i] between the two consonants, resulting here in the syllable [nísh], with high tone acquired automatically through tone-spreading from the vowel of the prefix immediately to the left. The full story of the Navaho verb word would, in addition, include an account of the selectional relationship between the mood marker *n-* and the adverbial prefix *ch'i-* 'out (horizontally)'. Finally, the leftmost pair, *ch'i-ná-*, exemplifies a somewhat idiosyncratic process whereby the combination fuses to *ch'ée-* in certain environments, including that in which the combination immediately precedes certain (conjunct) prefixes of the form CV, as here (compare the imperfective where this fusion fails to take place: *ch'inásh'níít*).

This example is a rather ordinary one for Navajo; many verbs are much more complex, and some are actually simpler. I give this example to demonstrate the impressive task, and adventure, that presents itself to the student who embarks on the journey of acquiring the language. In the normal course of an immersion program, of course, the analytical details informally set out in the preceding paragraph would not be explicitly "taught" to the learner. In the immersion setting, the linguistic context will have to be extraordinarily rich. And at the fourth and fifth degrees of immersion, the teacher will have to create, consciously, a linguistic context capable of revealing the internal structure of the Navajo verb word in all of its rich diversity, all its variability from verb to verb, and, at the same time, all of the shared features which will function as "cornerstones" and "safe havens" in the difficult work of mastering the system.

Turning to the area of sentential syntax, we illustrate another special feature of Navajo. In transitive sentences in which both the subject and the object are third person, the object appears in the *obviative* form if the subject precedes it (indicating that the subject occupies a higher position in the syntactic structure). This arrangement is reflected in the object agreement morphology internal to the Navajo verb word—the obviative object agreement is represented by the prefix *yi-*, as in the following example:

|                              |                 |                  |
|------------------------------|-----------------|------------------|
| <i>Łíí'</i>                  | <i>dzaanééz</i> | <i>yi-z-tał.</i> |
| horse                        | mule            | yi-PERF-kick.    |
| 'The horse kicked the mule'. |                 |                  |

The obviative construction is the "unmarked" or normal form of a transitive sentence in which the subject and the object are both third person. It places the second of the 2 third person arguments in a semantically subordinate position, while the subject assumes the more prominent "topic" position.

If the object is elevated to the topic role, it is represented by the normal third person object prefix *bi-* and, in addition, it is advanced to a higher structural position, at the front of the sentence. This object-advancement construction is sometimes called the "inverse":

|                              |             |                  |
|------------------------------|-------------|------------------|
| <i>Dzaanééz</i>              | <i>łíí'</i> | <i>bi-z-tał.</i> |
| mule                         | horse       | bi-PERF-kick     |
| 'The horse kicked the mule'. |             |                  |

The meaning remains the same, essentially, except that *dzaanééz*, the mule, is now the primary topic, as it would be, for example, in the corresponding passive in English, *the mule was kicked by the horse*.

In this example, the inverse is freely possible. In other cases, however, this is not so. In (1) below, the inverse is impossible, while in (2) it is obligatory:

- |                               |               |                  |
|-------------------------------|---------------|------------------|
| (1) <i>Łíí'</i>               | <i>tsé</i>    | <i>yi-z-tał.</i> |
| horse                         | stone         | yi-PERF-kick.    |
| 'The horse kicked the stone'. |               |                  |
| (2) <i>Tsís'ná</i>            | <i>ashkii</i> | <i>bi-shish.</i> |
| bee                           | boy           | bi-PERF.sting    |
| 'The bee stung the boy'.      |               |                  |

This circumstance reflects an animacy hierarchy in the language, placing humans at the highest rank, animals at a lower rank, and inanimates at a lower rank yet. In relation to the use or nonuse of the inverse, the rule is basically:

Arrange the sentence so that the higher-ranking argument assumes the structurally and semantically most prominent position (i.e., topic position).

If two arguments are of the same rank, the inverse can be used freely to alter the topic-comment relations in the clause. In (1), the horse outranks the stone, so the inverse is not possible, as it would violate the principle. In (2), the boy (corresponding to the grammatical object) is higher in rank than the bee (the grammatical subject). Consequently, the inverse must apply there.

In the realm of complex sentences, the Navajo internally headed relative clause deserves special attention. In many languages of the world, the relative clause is externally headed. That is to say, the head is outside the relative clause itself, either to the left (as in English) or to the right (as in Japanese). By contrast, many languages employ a relative clause construction in which the semantic head is internal to the clause, the latter being nominalized in some manner. Miskitu and Navajo share this type. Consider, for example, the way in which these two languages render the equivalent of the English complex sentence *I will brand the horse I bought yesterday*, where [I bought (it) yesterday] is the relative clause and [the horse] is the head, external to the clause and to its left in English. In the following examples, glossing of the verb forms is in the manner of a translation, not a formal item-by-item glossing:

|           |                 |                 |                     |                      |
|-----------|-----------------|-----------------|---------------------|----------------------|
| Navajo:   | <i>'Adáááá'</i> | <i>łíí'</i>     | <i>nahátnii'-éé</i> | <i>bí'dideeshít.</i> |
| yesterday | horse           | I.bought.it-REL | I.will.brand.it     |                      |

|           |                 |                       |           |                       |
|-----------|-----------------|-----------------------|-----------|-----------------------|
| Miskitu:  | <i>Nauhwala</i> | <i>âras kum atkri</i> | <i>ba</i> | <i>brân-angkamna.</i> |
| Yesterday | horse a         | I.bought.it           | REL       | brand-I.will burn.it  |



The relative clause is formed on the sentences

*ʔAdááááááʔ hǫǫʔ nahátniiʔ.*  
‘I bought the/a horse yesterday’.

*Nauhwala áras kum atkri.*  
‘I bought a horse yesterday’.

In the relative clause construction, these are simply nominalized by means of the appropriate determiners (*-éé* ‘the aforementioned’ in Navajo, *ba* ‘the’ in Miskitu), and the semantic head is represented by the relevant argument (*hǫǫʔ* ‘the/a horse’ and *áras kum* ‘a horse’) located *in situ* in its basic object position internal to the dependent nominalized clause.

While this construction is rather easy to get used to, it can be missed or badly misunderstood by a learner whose first language lacks it. In the case of Navajo and Miskitu, languages relatively well documented, explicit recognition of the fact that they possess the internally headed relative clause is remarkably recent in the history of scholarship pertaining to them. In general, second-language learners of Navajo and Miskitu have to have this construction brought to their attention. At the fourth and fifth degrees of immersion, it deserves special attention, without question.

Navajo is renowned for its classificatory verb stems, the final item on my brief list of special features. The phenomenon itself is not unusual, but the extent to which it is developed in Navajo is impressive. So-called handling verbs (verbs of giving, putting, and the like) have received the most attention, though related intransitive verbs of being at rest have also figured in studies of this aspect of Navajo grammar. Essentially what is involved is this: A standard classificatory verb construction consists of a verb theme in which the stem position is occupied by an item drawn from a set of more than a dozen verb stems, each of which has the property that it selects arguments having certain semantic properties and not others (allowing latitude for joking and metaphor). The verb with which we began this discussion of Navajo exemplifies the classificatory verb construction. In its most basic form, omitting inflectional material (and the reversionary adverbial prefix *ná-* as well, for simplicity), the theme of the verb is set out below, with the stem cited in the perfective form:

*chʔi-n-níl* ‘put/let them out horizontally’

The stem *-níl* is the one which is appropriate where the grammatical object refers to plural countable entities. Themes expressing the idea of carrying an entity or entities out horizontally share this structure. Some of them are presented below (with the stem cited in the perfective form). The examples illustrate clearly what is meant by classificatory verb stem.

*chʔi-n-tǫǫ* ‘carry animate entity out horizontally’  
*chʔi-n-tá* ‘carry slender rigid entity out horizontally’  
*chʔi-n-lá* ‘carry slender flexible entity out horizontally’

*chʔi-ni-ʔá* ‘carry solid compact entity out horizontally’  
*chʔi-n-tjool* ‘carry non-compact matter out horizontally’  
*chʔi-n-jaaʔ* ‘carry many objects out horizontally’  
*chʔi-n-yǫ* ‘carry a burden, pack out horizontally’  
*chʔi-n-tsooz* ‘carry flat, flexible entity out horizontally’  
*chʔi-n-ka* ‘carry entity in an open container out horizontally’

If the use of a particular stem can be said to involve the grammatical relation commonly termed “selection,” then here we can say that each stem selects a grammatical object represented by an argument (noun phrase or pronominal element) referring to an entity possessing certain properties, for example, that of being slender and rigid (such as a rifle, stick, etc.), that of being flat and flexible (such as a sheet of paper or blanket), and so on. It is the stem that changes from theme to theme; otherwise these are essentially the “same verb.” This is typical for classificatory verb systems. The complexity of the system is only partially revealed here. In addition to verbs of handling, exemplified here, there are also verbs of falling and dropping, verbs of throwing, verbs of eating, and verbs of impact and concussion which enter into selectional relations of this sort. The identity of the selected argument must take into consideration the syntactic structure defined by the verbs as well. The selected argument is regularly an “internal argument” and therefore the grammatical object in the transitive configuration; it may be a subject only in the case of certain intransitive verbs, including those which are related to transitive classificatory verbs.

There is a special wrinkle which should be mentioned here, as it bears directly on the issue of the special features which must be mastered in acquiring Navajo. As noted above, certain verb stems select arguments according to number. The verbs of going or walking illustrate this clearly:

*Shí yisháát.* ‘I am walking along’.  
*Nihí yíitʔ ash.* ‘We (dual) are walking along’.  
*Nihí yíikah.* ‘We (plural) are walking along’.  
*ʔAshkii yigáát.* ‘The boy is walking along’.  
*ʔAshiiké yiʔ ash.* ‘The two boys (dual) are walking along’.  
*ʔAshiiké yikah.* ‘The boys (plural) are walking along’.

The verb stems here are respectively *-áát* (singular), *-ʔash* (dual), and *-kah* (plural). They are selected according to the number of the subject, hence *-áát* occurs with the first person singular subject (represented by the first person singular pronoun *shí*, and by first person singular agreement *sh-*) and with the singular nominal subject *ashkii* ‘boy’. Similarly, the dual and plural stems, *-ʔash* and *-kah*, occur with nonsingular subjects, represented by the first nonsingular pronoun *nihí* and agreement *ii(d)-* and by the nonsingular nominal *ʔashiiké* ‘boys’. All of this is representative of standard agreement relations in Navajo—singular subject with singular stem, nonsingular subject with dual or plural stem. No surprises.

But there are always surprises. We can predict on the basis of the above that the following verb forms are ill formed



as they stand, hence the asterisk (\*), following the general practice in signaling ungrammaticality:

\*yish'ash  
\*yiidáát

These represent a failure in number concordance. The first form has singular (first person) subject agreement, but the stem is dual. And the second form corresponds to the opposite situation, with first person nonsingular agreement in combination with the singular stem. Spoken in this simple form, these are indeed ungrammatical.

The two verb forms just given do in fact occur in well-formed sentences in Navajo. The first occurs in the comitative construction, and the second occurs in the partitive, as exemplified below:

'Ashkii bit yish'ash.  
'I am walking along with the boy'.

Nihí ta' yiidáát.  
'One of us is walking along'.

These sentences show us that the principle governing stem choice in the comitative and the partitive is not agreement with the grammatical subject but rather selection determined by the number of participants in the activity depicted by the construction. In the comitative example, there are two actors participating in the activity of walking, hence the dual stem is appropriate; in the partitive, only one walker is involved, hence the singular stem is appropriate there.

#### TRAINING FOR THE CONSCIOUS TEACHING OF LINGUISTIC STRUCTURE IN FOURTH- AND FIFTH-DEGREE IMMERSION SETTINGS

The Miskitu and Navajo examples cited here represent a small part of what is involved in learning the grammatical structures of those languages. The examples have been discussed only briefly but in enough detail to make clear that the grammatical features of individual languages are complex and must be consciously taught in an immersion environment at the fourth and fifth degrees. To plan adequately for building an immersion environment that will reveal the structural features of a language in sufficient abundance and appropriate sequencing, training in linguistics as well as course design and curriculum development is needed.

Fortunately, there are programs in which it is possible to obtain the necessary training, often in a context which takes into consideration the specific need of indigenous-language communities. In North America, for example, the American Indian Languages Development Institute (AILDI) offers

summer courses which have precisely this purpose. For the Americas generally, a number of resources are listed in the Native Languages Revitalization Resource Directory compiled by the Institute for the Preservation of the Original Languages of the Americas (IPOLA). While this publication deals primarily with the Americas, it also includes an international section. For training and support, the nearest university or community college (or a more distant institution, if there is no local one) may well have individuals who are capable and eager to be of assistance. This is true particularly of universities and colleges that have programs committed to the study of indigenous languages and cultures. Such institutions often prove to be the best sources for productive relationships in support of language revitalization programs. It often takes time to establish such a relationship, to find the right individuals, and so forth, but it is an avenue that is well worth pursuing.

Fundamentally, training for teachers at the fourth and fifth degrees of immersion must include a program in linguistics, leading to a good understanding of the basic elements of phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics. In many cases, the teacher will have to do what amounts to field work on the language concerned in order to plan organized and fully comprehensible lessons around its grammar. This is true not only for teachers who have acquired the language as adults but also for native-speaking teachers, who must bring these aspects of grammar to consciousness—using themselves and other speakers as consultants. Training in linguistics is necessary for this, whether this is acquired in coursework or through self-directed study.

Finally, it must be said that the immersion setting is not always adequate, especially where the time available for study is limited—for instance, as little as three or four hours per week. Direct, explicit grammatical instruction is necessary in this circumstance. It is only necessary to reflect on the fact that the simplest Navajo verb has 180 forms (compared to just 3 highly regular forms in English) to appreciate this point. Only a few of the forms themselves will occur in a class of limited time. One must come to know the general principles for forming Navajo verb words, many of which have several thousand forms. There exists now a manual of nearly 500 pages of explicit rules and exercises for communicating this aspect of Navajo grammar (Faltz 1998), giving an idea of the immensity of the task. Navajo and its Athabaskan relatives are special in this domain, to be sure, but most languages have one or more areas of complexity which may require explicit grammatical instruction.

#### Reference

- Faltz, Leonard M. 1998. *The Navajo verb: A grammar for students and scholars*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.

