

Algonquian grammar without all the grammar: making Algonquian language patterns accessible to all

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1. Introduction

In language revitalization, the first question we ask is: who are we leaving out?

Immersion works. It works really well. But it leaves out anyone who can't be there for the dozens of hours a week it takes to work. Which is basically everyone except schoolchildren.

The technical-grammar approach works. But only for a few linguistic nerds like me. It doesn't work very well for almost everyone else, and it often makes people feel LESS able to learn and use the language than they actually are.

[Writing can help. It makes the language visible, which can reclaim territory for the language, from signposts to social media. And it can give the language the respect that is standardly---but completely unfairly---only given to languages with a written form. But it leaves out all the speakers who were never schooled in it, who may never be schooled in it, and who, like many first-time learners, may have trouble with these "practical alphabets"---the ones that require them to forget the English or French use of familiar letters, and re-understand them in brand-new ways. Worst of all, though: schools' insistence on putting writing front and center makes many speakers hang back, being directly or indirectly told that their expertise as *speakers* is still not enough.

(Schools also often spend too much time teaching beginners the writing and not the speaking...)

So in designing a language program, we ask, and we keep on asking: who are we leaving out? And based on those answers, we design and redesign, aiming to leave nobody out.

Because language is for including people. It can be used to exclude, but it always starts out as a way for you and me to talk to each other, to bring our thoughts together. Language was invented first for kiyawun, not niyawun; for kəyona, not nəyona; for kilùn, not nilùn; for ginu, not ni'nen; for giinawind, not niinawind; for kîyânaw, not nîyânân, and so on.

Language reclamation is so easily ghettoized: a group of dedicated people over there in the corner, saving the language while everyone else does something else. Speakers vs. non-speakers can so easily become haves vs. have-nots. Which makes the most inclusive option be to go back to English/French. Which is so often what happens, because we want to include everybody in the conversation. So how do we keep speaking the language, without leaving anyone out?

Language should be communicable. It should be difficult NOT to share. It should be nothing but inclusive and inviting---where you can share a basic, useful lesson with an interested friend across a single conversation, so that they never have to set foot in a classroom. And the language spreads back out THAT way.

But so much of our experience, even in teaching and learning, is not that. The language is framed as difficult and demanding, requiring years of dedication. Something most of us don't really have the time and energy for.

How do we change that? How do we make it inclusive again, inviting people in, rather than scaring them away?

- We invite people in by not making a barrier out of technical grammar.
- We invite people in by not making a barrier out of writing.
- We invite people in by not making a barrier out of very demanding approaches to learning the language.

So we detechnicalize. We stop making "linguistese" a required part of learning the language.

So we (re-) oralize. We focus on speech, and leave writing at the margins of what we teach.

So we minimize. We offer lessons that are brief---absorbable in a matter of minutes---but teach patterns carefully chosen to be both immediately useful AND provide a really good framework for picking up more.

Above all, as academics, we invite people in by not asking them to simply become us. A common excuse for teaching with technical terms like "animate/inanimate", "TA/TI", etc. is that this will help learners in the long run: opening doors to read the linguistic literature, use the dictionary and grammar charts, and help them present their own analyses at conferences like these.... This is true.

But I believe that the main reason is just that it's easier for us linguists. We think of the language in "linguistese", and so it's easiest for us to ask people to wade through our "linguistese" just to get to their own language. Giving only two choices: do immersion---or learn it this academic way that's easy for us. If neither one fits your life, then you're on your own to figure the language out for yourself.

This isn't on purpose: everyone naturally explains things the way they learned to understand them. And it's a real challenge to rethink everything we learned via these technical terms, trying to work out equally accurate (not dumbing it down) but more widely accessible ways to talk about them. But it can be done, and it should be done. To do otherwise is just to keep on privileging academic priorities over the needs of everyday learners.

[Don't get me wrong. I think most linguistically-informed teaching efforts are very much trying to keep

it non-technical. But I still find that most people trying to get their language back are either getting no explanations at all---or they're struggling through all this TA, TI, (in)animate, etc. stuff. (And it's really getting in their way, and the speakers' way.) And pretty much all the published learning materials I've seen do this [the latter], too. So it's a very very real problem: it plays a big part in how everyone says they want to learn the language, but then no one shows up to the class, or the all give up after the first day or so. We need to give them something they can really connect with.]

So. How do we do this?

I've been lucky enough to work for the past 20-odd years with heritage learners of several Algonquian languages: primarily Penobscot, Passamaquoddy-Maliseet, and Mi'gmaq. I've seen how English-based learners struggle with Algonquian language patterns, and will talk about three of them,

- (a) "animate" vs. "inanimate"
- (b) complex verbs and how they richly mark participants (and other parts) of events
- (c) obviation

which are famously difficult for learners. I'll try to show that all are easily learnable when we do two things:

- we reframe the traditional academic/technical understandings strictly in everyday terms, and
- we keep new-material-per-lesson to an equally strict minimum.

Again, anything less than this leaves people out. Technical terms overwhelm beginners, and exclude untrained native speakers from direct participation. So we show how to avoid ALL technical terms by looking closely at the meaning of a given language pattern, and then creatively identifying and teaching from real conversations that hinge on/around that meaning, the meaning that that pattern provides.

Similarly, traditional, non-minimalist presentation is overwhelming. Show a whole grammar chart to people, and you lose half the class, and everyone comes home telling friends and family how complicated/unlearnable their language is. And busy learners have to set aside big chunks of time to pick up even one core idea. We stay rigorously on a less-is-more strategy: for example, we start just with ME vs. YOU forms---the minimum for grasping the pattern, yet already enough to use successfully in a simple face-to-face conversation between ME, and YOU.

2. "Animate" vs. "inanimate"

Here are some ways to deal with the problems caused by the terms "animate" and "inanimate".

1. As teachers, we can just stop calling them that.

There is no good reason to, when every Algonquian language has "inanimate" words for "live", "grow", and "die", etc. Fine to keep in the technical literature. But not fine to confuse and intimidate rank beginners. You can tell them "animate/inanimate" means something different when applied to Algonquian---but that's worse than no label at all. It tangles them up some "special" sense of animate vs. inanimate that no speaker has ever suggested, and just tells them that that language has unreachable exotic rethinkings of English ideas, some mystery that they've already missed out on by not being born into it. That drives away learners, and denies them the chance that Algonquian categories might just be equally straightforward in their own way. And learnable.

2. Instead: just name them WITHIN the language.

In Penobscot, we can call the two categories "na-words" vs. "ni-words", after the matching word for 'that...'. Years ago, Howard Webkamigad told me he did the same with maaba and maanda, using the Ojibwe words for 'this...'. A few languages don't match in this exact way. So in Mi'gmaq, for example, it's possible to use newte'jit vs. newte' as the matching word for 'one...'.

We can also name each by using short matching verbs: one for each group. (This can also be funny, if your matching "test-verb" is silly with the word at hand ("broken", etc.). And language work should never miss a chance to have people laugh.) It also solves another problem. On the separating approach, learners have to remember which group the noun belongs to, and then which verb endings and plurals, etc. match that. This is not natural, and widely unlearnable. Learn a word for the first time already with its matching word, though, and we start off not with a series of rules to follow, but a manageable handful of real models---off of which we can build up a more instinct-based sense of what "just sounds right".

3. Families of words rather than One Rule to Rule Them All

All research seems to show that the group including people and animals (and lots of other things) is in some sense the special one. While the other group covers, well, everything else. So all we need is a good grip on what's in the first group.

Here's the trick. We don't try to find the one super-rule that explains them all. Instead, we look for little families of first-group words. This helps because those families aren't entirely the same across all Algonquian languages---or even within the same community. Trees and shoes and stones change membership from language to language: there's no one single rule, no one right answer. So what does work is noticing the families as they come up, bottom-up, of themselves. When shoes are in this group, so are boots and moccasins, and so on. Other common families are fluid containers (cups, etc.), thorns-needles-spikes, and soft-skinned, substantially fleshy fruit (raspberries, plums), etc. But basically, you have to work those families out for your particular language, particular community, or even particular

speaker.

But from there, they live! New words join the old families, so that Passamaquoddy-Maliseet speakers readily tell us that for them, cup-like thermoses, and needle-like syringes, and plum-like dates, all do follow the first-group pattern. We learners no longer have to memorize endless individual mysteries, word-by-word: we can ground each of these words in families.

And then they're teachable: we can do as Mary Ann Metallic does, and collect up pictures of all the "unexpected" members of this people and animals group, and put the families together---so that we see visually all the soft fleshy fruits, all the footwear, all the needles and spikes, etc. So that we encourage learners not to think of this as something SEPARATE about each word alone, but instead, something that it's part of, a relationship that it enters into, a bigger picture that it belongs to.

[So group membership is learned by seeing and showing the togethernesses. So is its use. Many learners struggle to even remember that there are two ways to say 'I see it'. So we help by teaching mainly by two whole *phrases*: "I see the animal" vs. "I see the table". And then those two phrases become the model, from either side: whether we want to slot in a new event (hear, etc.) or a new thing (bird, knife, etc.). With phrases, we never have to say TA and TI, which require that extra level of translations. We can just refer back to those phrases directly, introducing any new verb's two forms as parallel to either "see animal", or "see table", and then get right back to using them.]

A final key point: this isn't just for learners. Every time teachers and learners talk about animate/inanimate, TA/TI, etc. in front of native speakers not trained in those terms, this quietly excludes them, and unintentionally devalues their expertise. The native words for "this/that" approach, the families-based approach, and especially the small-phrases approach are all very directly accessible for native speakers, and help bring all the traditions of understanding Algonquian languages together.

2. Complex verbs: how they richly mark parts and participants of events

Learners are intimidated by the length of Algonquian words. But even the biggest "dinosaur word" just comes out of a series of very simple buildups. Our goal for beginners is to show JUST the basic buildup. (And later, that dinosaur words are just more of the same.) Minimalism is what matters here: we don't show everything that the words can do. Just the simplest models of the core pattern, from which learners can build up.

Algonquian words, loosely speaking, have an inner layer that is the vocabulary itself, and a thin outer layer of changes that show its relations---to other words and to the conversation.

Looking at the inner layer, we demystify the dinosaur words by showing that they all come from a simple

pattern: the language has a rich vocabulary of suffixes, and most words are something (really anything) plus a meaningful suffix.

This is fun for learners and speakers alike, to see that there's no limit to how many new words you can make. Again, simplicity's important at first, so tidy common patterns are good places to start. One fun one is where the suffix names different kinds of motion (-dance, -jump, -run), and is tacked onto something telling the direction of that motion, so you can say crazy fun things like 'dance into the house', 'swim down the hill', and so on.

Another is where the suffix names different kinds of action (esp. means of action), and is tacked onto something telling the result of that action. So you can get 'bite it open', 'cut it open', 'hit it open', 'pick it up and hit it so it opens', 'stomp it open', etc.

Whichever way: the important thing is for learners (and speakers) to get to play with the patterns, having fun and enjoying what they language lets them say.

It turns out that suffixes are strictly limited to only certain kinds of meaning (like these), and knowing that can help a learner even make good guesses about the meaning of an entirely new suffix, if they already know the rest of the word and/or the context.

As it stands, suffix vocabulary tends to be LEAST and last taught, because the beginning parts of words are more obvious (esp. as you scan through a dictionary), but it's the suffixes that drive the richness of word-building. And with that, you unleash not only the ability of the learner to recognize and remember dinosaur words more easily, but also start returning to them one of the greatest gifts of their language: the humor, the poetry, and the conceptual richness of these words, and the chance to contribute their own.

For the outer layer of words, where they change to reflect different relations, this is where minimalism really comes in. Here we're really looking at the busy, only has 5min-a-day learner.

So we adopt a simple seven-point approach. What follows might sound familiar, but a key difference is that we are not teaching ANYTHING but the exact phrases given below. We never expand out to the "full grammar chart" until everyone has got these few phrases down solid. [As you listen to this, think how you'd say these few phrases in your language.]

1 We start by teaching how to ask "Who is that?" and "What is that?", and answer not only with simple identifications, but also "That is my...", "That is your...". Besides its everyday usefulness (esp. for talking about family), this introduces na-words vs. ni-words, and how to relate ME | YOU to a thing/person.

2 Next is "I am called..." vs. "you are called...". We point out to learners that we're just leveraging the

pattern for "my..." and "your..." that they already know. From the ME | YOU relating to a thing/person, to ME | YOU relating to an event.

3 Then we go on to "That's what I'm called" and "That's what you're called". This introduces the very different pattern of endings for ME | YOU---so that learners master them early on, and know not to simply use the first set of endings for everything. [And use in parallel as they go on.]

4 From there, we use the phrases "give me it" and "give h/her it" to introduce how words match the main target of the action (...me, ...h/her).

5 The pattern of the request "Give me it" leverages directly to the pattern of the statement "You give me it". And then to flip it, we simply change one part, to get "I give you it." With these two phrases, learners already have mastered the basics behind the most complex matching pattern there is.

6 Next, we just cover "That's what you give me" and "That's what I give you", for the same reasons that we went through "That's what I'm/you're called" above.

7 Finally, we bring in one or two of the words that manage the conversation: little "particles" that show a shift of topic, a focus on something, a note that the information is secondhand, etc. Exactly which get covered first is less important than just making sure that one or two of them are, so that these small words don't fall by the wayside, and their absolute centrality to conversation in these languages is clear.

So a lot is left out here. Which is a good thing. All we have done is get a learner able to identify people and things, and basic relations to events. But only in two ways: ME, and YOU. This is enough to have a simple face-to-face conversation between ME and YOU, talking about ME and YOU---the first thing we want to be able to do. And it avoids, for the moment, the complications brought in by talking about S/HE/IT/THEY---discussed the next section.

What they have learned here is a specific set of landmarks. Almost every other pattern fits into the spaces in between these, just builds off of the simple foundation of these few. Such that if in the end, the learners master just the concepts behind the above handful of phrases, and use them as models for those concepts, then they are set up for everything else.

Just to summarize, here's what we're expecting a learner to come out knowing, both as simple phrases and as the patterns they embody:

- 1 that (NA), that (NI) who what my-mother your-mother
- 2 my name is... your name is...
- 3 what my name is... what your name is...

- 4 give me it give h/her it
- 5 you give me it I give you it
- 6 what you give me what I give you
- 7 [2-3 particles]

- 1 na, ni awen kek^w nikawæss kikawæss
- 2 nətəli-wisi kətəli-wisi
- 3 eli-wisi-a eli-wisi-an
- 4 mili mile [mile awihkhikan vs. mile ččikənal]
- 5 kə[mili]n kə[miləl]ən
- 6 [mili]-a [miləl]-an
- 7 (=tte, =ak^wa, =ka, =αsk^we)

The idea is that you get a very good knowledge of a small number of things, rather than lots of things you only thinly understand.

So this is no magic promise of instant Algonquian grammar in seven days. But it comes close. And more importantly, it gives people the big picture without a big workload: just the bare minimum it takes to get talking right now about ME | YOU. It sets people up so that early on, they can see where they're going, so that from here on, almost anything new can be grounded on something they already know. And at the same time it demands about as little time as possible, and can be reviewed and refreshed just as easily---and shared with a friend over a cup of coffee. So learners have both core patterns for immediate everyday use, and exactly the foundation and framework they need to easily pick up the remaining patterns.. [Ask me about that in the Q&A if you want more detail.]

3. Obviation

Obviation is a baffling word even to other linguists. So the first point to make is that there's nothing mysterious about its basic patterns or uses. Nothing. I'll show you. Consider how we say 'my tooth' vs. 'my mother'. In Penobscot it's like this; in your language it's probably similar.

nipit...	...
kipit...	...kikawæss
wipit... but!	...wikawæssAL

Same thing happens with GIVE:

pələnsis mile...	...awihkhikan
[but!]	... ččikənal

These are the same thing. What are they? And wait: isn't that just a plural? For a lot of Algonquian languages, that ending does double duty:

- For most things = more than one: αwəti road αwətəyal roads
- For most people (etc.) = "via someone else": wətosal her daughter

And it's the second one that matters here. This special ending on a person (etc.) means we're relating to them only through someone else we have first in mind. The phrase "her daughter" means we have "her" (= the mother!) first in mind, and then bring in that daughter only by way of her. So "daughter" has the ending.

This is always a matter of perspective: if we started through the younger woman, we'd be saying "her mother", and now "mother" has the ending. So it shows that "through someone else first" perspective. Which is always going to happen in the phrase "her [somebody]". [That just forces a particular perspective.]

And back to GIVE: when you give h/her a ball/apple/dog, you're basically making it h/her ball (etc.). That sets up that same relationship, so there's that same ending again.

I find that drawing pictures sketching out these parallels can make it clear. And from there, all it really takes is memorizing two words

wipit wikawəssal

and then using them as models for understanding this pattern as it comes along, and applying it oneself.

There's more to it, of course, esp. about how we can use this perspective effect in amazing ways. But again, for beginners, minimalism's the key. We don't teach every possible version and use of it: just what it takes to have a comfortable start in it. We just aim to get the exact INITIAL understanding that's simple and clear and confident. Details can come later, slotted into this solid frame.

[Also: there is one common pattern found in English, and in fact, every language, that tracks this Algonquian pattern exactly in terms of form and meaning. So it too can be a good place to start learners from. Ask me about it in Q&A!]

4. Conclusion

It's our responsibility as linguists, and teachers, etc., to make language learning not require a school, or a teacher. We have to make it possible for one adult learner to teach another one over lunch, or sitting on

a boat while fishing. We can do this when we keep the insights of linguistic analysis, but return the way we talk about them back to the natural conversational uses they help explain. We can do this when we avoid lists and charts, and ask people to learn a basic concept/pattern using the least amount of it, which is often just YOU and ME.

Minimalism ties in also for vocabulary. Mary Ann Metallic at first introduces just a few people and things vocabulary (grounded in pictures), and then uses those as a simple anchor for saying a wide range of sentences. We are also experimenting with a "body-centered" approach to prioritizing core vocabulary, esp. for verbs. All to REDUCE the amount of vocabulary we're asking beginners to learn, even as that vocabulary allows them to express the most that they possibly can.

Thorough detechnicalization and less-is-more presentation help to create engaging, accessible materials for learners and native speakers alike. These radically change how much beginners get out for what they are asked to put in---which can decide whether they join the speech community, and whether they stay.