

Building a Bridge: Creating a Pidgin for Indigenous Language Revitalization

Southern Pomo is an Indigenous language of Northern California with no living fluent speakers (Walker 2020: 17). Between 2011 and 2014, the traditional language was taught to heritage speakers at the offices of the Dry Creek Rancheria Band of Pomo Indians (hereafter DCR Pomo). Though several students increased their knowledge of the language, none gained even a limited capacity to converse or read extant narrative texts. Since 2019, I have worked with members of the DCR Pomo to design a pidginized version of Southern Pomo, which has been named *Še:wey Čahnu* ‘New Language’. In 2021, the DCR Pomo were awarded an ANA grant to teach *Še:wey Čahnu* to a core group of students and thereby prepare instructional materials for future efforts.

This pidgin takes its inspiration from Chinook Jargon, an important trade pidgin used by both Indigenous and European speakers in the 18th to 19th centuries in the Pacific Northwest (Silverstein 1971: 191-192). Unlike most pidgins, which are lexified by Indo-European languages, Chinook Jargon took its phonology and most of its limited lexicon directly from the Indigenous languages of the area and omitted the complex inflectional morphology of the languages from which it drew its lexicon. It also preserved culturally relevant terms lacking in European languages, and preserved non-European sounds in its phonology.

Like Chinook Jargon, *Še:wey Čahnu* removes the complexities of verb paradigms and nominal declensions found in traditional Southern Pomo. It also makes use of simplified constructions that would be grammatical (or near-grammatical) in the traditional language. The end product uses a limited number of words to allow basic communication on any topic. Though inspired by the phonology and lexical sourcing in Chinook Jargon, *Še:wey Čahnu* has been designed to do more. In addition to the restriction of its lexicon to Southern-Pomo-derived vocabulary (with care to include words for key cultural concepts) and the preservation of all Southern Pomo phonemes, the way words and syntax have been simplified is meant to help students bridge the gap between English and the traditional language of extant narratives.

This project has raised many problems, and solutions have been found for many of them. Among the most difficult issues is the creation of a methodology for introducing periphrastic means of encoding concepts that are solely expressed in the traditional language via affixation, ablaut, and suppletion (e.g. tense, aspect, directionals, etc.). This has been done without creating new words that never existed before, where possible, and always by reference to corners of the traditional language that allow some extension. The associated issue concerns which concepts that lack periphrastic means of expression in the traditional language may be omitted entirely for the purposes of a pidgin (e.g. case, evidentials, lexically encoded number on verbs, etc.). These aspects of language planning have proved the most difficult part of the project, and the solutions uncovered in the ongoing process of teaching the language to new learners should prove useful to similar language revitalization programs for other Indigenous communities.

References

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Bio

Dr Neil Alexander Walker is a Research Fellow at James Cook University and sits on the board for the Western Institute for Endangered Language Documentation. He has studied Pomoan languages for more than twenty years and currently works with heritage speakers of Southern Pomo and Chhé'ee Fókaa (Northeastern Pomo) on language revitalization projects. His recent publications on Pomoan languages include a monograph, *A Grammar of Southern Pomo* (2020). In addition to work on Pomoan, he has begun work on the extant fieldnotes for the Panim language of Papua New Guinea and is preparing an external Tok Pisin course at James Cook University.