

Summary of Wiyot Project

This project is about the morphology/syntax of the Wiyot language, an indigenous language of California. Morphology is the study of the structure of words, which are composed of units called “morphemes”. Morphemes may either be identical with individual words, in which case they may stand alone (i.e. occur in a sentence as a single word), or they may be smaller than single words, in which case they will only occur as parts of larger words. An example from English is the word “friend”, which is both a word and a morpheme, and the word “friendly”, which consists of two morphemes: the stand-alone (or ‘free’) morpheme, “friend”, and the non-stand-alone (or ‘bound’) morpheme, “-ly”. In theory, this general framework should hold true for all languages, even if the specific details will differ. Finally, syntax is the study of sentence structure, or how words are combined to make sentences.

Within the Wiyot language, there are three main types of words: nouns, verbs, and particles. The class of particles includes words that would be considered adverbs and prepositions in English, but it also includes morphemes which would most likely be considered prefixes or suffixes (i.e. bound morphemes) in English. In practice then, the class of particles covers everything that is not a noun or a verb.

Within the class of particles, there is a subclass of words that occur primarily, if not exclusively, immediately before verbs. These are words (or prefixes) that most commonly signify things like verbal tense and aspect, but may also indicate negation or commands. There is some ambiguity as to whether they are bound or free morphemes (there is a lot of variation within the texts), but that is not of primary concern here. I am more concerned with the relative ordering and frequency of the various preverbs, in particular whether there are any consistent patterns that may have implications for how verb phrases are constructed in Wiyot. In total, there are about fifty different preverbs (depending on the source), but only ten to fifteen of them occur with any regularity, and of those, there are about five to seven which are far more common than the rest. According to at least one of the two main sources on Wiyot, these fifty preverbs can be classed into eight subclasses which determine their relative ordering when more than one of them occurs before a verb (i.e. preverbs from group 1 always go before those from group 2, which always go before those in group 3, etc.). That said, there are virtually never more than four preverbs in a row, and it is far more common to have one or two, or even none. As such, that classification system seems somewhat dubious to me, and if it could be shown that there is a better way of describing their relative ordering, or even that there is no dominant pattern, then I would consider that extremely valuable.

The data is organized on Microsoft Excel spreadsheets, with lines of Wiyot text with the corresponding word-for-word English translations directly below, with another space after each line of English. Furthermore, the Wiyot words are divided into morphemes, as are the English words, and in many cases, the English translation (also known as the ‘gloss’) employs abbreviations where there is not a readily available English equivalent (this is a common practice in linguistics). Finally, I extracted all the verb phrases and corresponding preverbs from each text and saved those in a separate Excel file (although I have retained the older, more complete versions, just in case). Finally, I have provided a few examples below, just to give an idea of what this looks like in practice. There are two verbs, three suffixes (three occurrences of two distinct suffix-types), and three preverbs. The verbs are, respectively, *kokw*, “to know”, and *tol*, “to go”; the suffixes are *-um*, 3OBJ (“third person object”), and *-il*, 3SBJ (= “third person

subject”); and, finally, the preverbs are *ko-*, 3NEG (= “negative, third person subject”), *hi-*, PST (= “past tense”), and *kowa-*, INCH (= “inchoative [marks the beginning of an action]”). Please note the fact that in one case, the preverb is directly attached to the verb, while in the other two, it is separate. Lastly, in this case only, I have included the idiomatic English translation, for ease of understanding.

ko *kokw-um-il*
3NEG know-3OBJ-3SBJ
“He did not know her.”

hi *kowa-tol-il*
PST INCH-go-3SBJ
“He started to go.”