Visible Grammar

Making Complex Grammatical Patterns Visible for Learners who are not Grammarians
Margaret Anderson & Debbie Leighton-Stephens

Ts’misyen Sm’algyax Authority
Ts’msyen Sm’algyałx is spoken on the Northwest coast...
Of British Columbia
In Canada
Ts’msyen Territory
There are about 10,000 Ts’msyen people, living in Northwestern British Columbia and Alaska, and in urban centres such as Vancouver and Seattle.
At this time there are only about 200 fluent speakers of Ts’msyen Sm’algyałx.
Most fluent speakers of Sm’algyax are over 70 years old.
There are no children now learning the language in the home.
Our language is seriously endangered.
Our Goal

It is our goal to provide language documentation and learning resources to help new learners so that Sm’algyax can once again take its place in our feasthalls and communities.
We have been working hard to revitalize Sm’algyałx through a number of initiatives over the past two decades.
Our Successes

Sm’algyałx is taught in our public schools. Over 600 children take Sm’algyałx each year.
We have a partnership agreement with the local school district that facilitates development of curriculum and resources.
We have an IRP for the Sm’algyax curriculum that extends from grade 3 to grade 12, and will soon have this for K–12.
We have worked in partnership with two universities, Simon Fraser University and the University of Northern British Columbia to provide professional training to language teachers.
We are authorized by the British Columbia College of Teachers to recommend fluent speakers for teaching credentials.
We have worked with linguists to develop dictionaries and grammars.
There is a useful print dictionary of Sm’algya̱x, created by a team of fluent speakers working with a graduate student. It incorporates information from the dictionary done by John Dunn, a linguist, in the 1970s, and some of the entries from the glossary published by Franz Boas in 1916.
aks [aks] (n) water Note: This word can also be used to mean any liquid. Gadzi aksa da awaan. Dump that water over there. (v) drink Gooyu hasagn dm aksn? What do you want to drink? (v) wet Aksa nap'axsa ɬgu'yuuta. The little boy's pants are wet. (n) tide Da 'naga 'wiileeksa aks dawila llooksmgangan. When there's a big tide there's a lot of driftwood. Plural: ak'aks (for 'wet' only) Plural: la'aks (for 'drink' only)

Dunn's 1978 Practical Dictionary of Sm’algyax entry:

46. AKS, AK'AKS, AKS. v.t. & v.i. drink. v.i. be wet. n. water. [ʔaks] hb,k,m,pr. [ʔakʔaks] k,mb. [ʔaks] k.
All the information from the print dictionary (and much more) has been incorporated into an online talking dictionary of Sm’algyał.
The *Living Legacy Sm’algyax Talking Dictionary* has thousands of sound files for the example sentences, recorded by fluent speakers.
The talking dictionary of Sm’algy̓ax is a unique resource for aboriginal languages in British Columbia.
Sm’algy̱x Living Legacy Talking Dictionary entry for dẓa’wes
Sm’algyax Living Legacy Talking Dictionary entry for adawx

adawx {a’/dawnx}, Doug Brown, Lax Kla, Doug Brown, Lax Kla. It is comm true telling teaching narrative legend; story, narrative true telling, oral history. [Rest. /Recordst.] Heelda adawx a’xide. I remember lots of true tellings.

Cora Robinson, Hartley Bay (d), photo by M. Seguin [Anderson] 1979

CO: 538; L13.2.21 Teach L13.3.1 Discourse types, L13.5.2 Literature, L13.2.1 Custom, tradition EnglishCrossRef history, Bibliography, TT Brown ad”waw; Anthropology R1 a. Intrans tell an oral history. Yagwa adawx te’nis da klan. Te’nis is telling us an adawx. Dunn, Practical Dictionary entry 30.

ada’nin {a’/da’nin}, Doug Brown, Lax Kla. kim intran phonorescence glowing, algae, phosphorescence; /Recordst.] Ts’un ada’nin da ts’iman. It’s glowing brightly in the water. L13.10 Mosses, fungus, and algae L23.3 Light Dunn, Practical Dictionary entry 27.
There is an academic grammar of Sm’algyax, published in 1978 by a linguist, John Dunn.
We have recently developed an innovative resource to make grammatical information more accessible: *Visible Grammar: User Friendly Grammar Modules for Sm’algyax.*
The Visible Grammar series was written by two linguists, Margaret Anderson and Marianne Ignace, in 2008. It is available in print and on CD, with sound files for examples.
Building on an idea put forward in a conference paper presented by Marie–Lucie Tarpent over twenty years ago, Anderson used colour to show the basic sentence patterns of Sm’algyax in the *Visible Grammar* modules.
The colour-coded sentence templates will be the focus of the final section of this presentation.
We are currently part of a major 7 year Partnership Grant funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. (PI Marianne Ignace) Our research goal is to increase the documentation and resources for Sm’algyax.
With funding from that grant we are providing professional development to younger teachers with emerging fluency by supporting them as community researchers.
We plan to double the amount of publicly accessible documentation of Sm’algyax.
One strategy is to rewrite some of the extensive handwritten interlinear archival texts from the 1930s in the contemporary orthography.
Once the archival texts are re-written, they are added to the database for our dictionary project and any new words or idioms are added to the dictionary.
We then have fluent speakers record the rewritten texts so that future learners can read them in the writing system we use, and hear the stories in fluent voices.
Here is an example of an archival text collected by William Beynon, a Ts’msyen ethnographer, sent to Franz Boas in the 1930s:

Beynon no. 167.

Wala wals-go Koldo su-walin'soom Gitga'at. *What happened one of hunter of Gitga'at.*

*What happened to the Gitga'at hunter.*

Recorded by Wm Beynon. Informant: Ih'm Badesq. Wala wals-go Koldo som gwak'gom su-walin'soom. *What happened one of very mountain hunter of Gitga'at.*
We are also transcribing archival audio and video recordings from the 1960s and 1970s, and recording new audio and video materials.
Here is a CD with audio files and the transcription and translation of a story told by fluent speaker Violet Robinson, collected by Margaret Seguin (Anderson) in 1979.

The story I'm going to tell you is about Little Pitch.

There lived a Big Chief and he had a daughter, and he kept her up on a platform he had put up in the house. That's where his daughter stayed, and she stayed with a little slave.

Now that's how it happened to the beach, going to had been a while, the to him! After they talk.

Now after this young outside longer, talking she didn't know, she in front of the chief's

Wayi 'nii wila waa'l da gwi, t'xelnii huul da'lik tsi yaa sup'as'm han'ga da'lik 'yaag'aa vaat gisga gyeeka, hii gyeeka.
Gawdi da'lik yileektgirt dii ghu wantwukw.
Wayi 'nii aam gaa'nhakt, wwu'waal ciya gwa'a.
Da'lik tsa'la/waay nga sup'as'm 'yuuta a gylegt! didaalikt!
Gawdi didaalikt, dawla slim tsliinc, lan'dexikt.
But despite our many successes, our language will not be safe for future generations till we have new speakers
Our Challenge

To revitalize Sm’algyax we need to make it possible for adult and youth learners to become fluent enough to use the language in our feasthalls and communities.
What are the barriers?

Fully fluent speakers can use the language productively and creatively. This a giant step beyond the novice level skills of using learned vocabulary and memorized conversational fragments.
Fully fluent speakers can use the language productively and creatively.

They can understand and produce new sentences to discuss any topic.
The young people who complete the Sm’algyাx programme through the School district have good pronunciation and have learned to understand and use hundreds of words and memorized phrases.
But none of these young learners have been able to break through to the next level – creative and productive fluency.
Why Not?
In order to move from rote memory to full fluency, learners need to develop an internal awareness of the structure of the language – the grammar of Sm’algy̓ax.
The grammatical patterns of Sm’algyax are very different from English, and this makes it difficult for learners to take this important step towards full fluency.
Productive use of Sm’algyax requires learners to grasp complex grammar patterns early on – the grammatical knowledge required for creative use of Sm’algyax is ’front-end loaded’.
Challenges in the Grammar of Sm’algyałx

There are several important ways that the grammar of Sm’algyałx is a challenge for learners whose first language is English.
Challenge 1: Word Order

The first challenge is word order.
The order of words in Sm’algyałx sentences is very different from English word order.
Sm’algýax sentences use the order:

Time Word–Verb–Subject–Object
Another way to say this is:

Sm’algýax is a VSO language
• tense is shown by using separate words before the verb.
This contrasts with English, which uses the word order:

Subject–Verb–Object (SVO)
• Tense is expressed by verb suffixes
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sm’algýax</th>
<th>Time Word</th>
<th>Verb</th>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Object</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>Subject</td>
<td>Verb with Tense Ending</td>
<td>Object</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This looks like a ’simple’ change in order, but it takes a lot of practice for a learner to change their habits and to expect to hear and say the time word and verb first.
In fact, this is a shift in the fundamental order of elements in a sentence.
Learners who try to ’translate’ from English to Sm’algyałx will find this particularly difficult. We need to help learners become comfortable with Sm’algyałx word order.
Only after learners have practiced Sm’algyax word order patterns hundreds of times do they develop their own internal ‘grammatical knowledge’ that helps them know without conscious translation ‘who did what to whom’.
Once learners have developed their internal grammar, their fluency can take off. This is what happens when children are learning their first language – at about age 2–3 they quickly move from words to full sentences and become fully productive users of the language.
This is a key step in learning to think in the language, a step towards fluency.
Challenge 2: Connectives

Each of the major parts of a sentence in Sm’algyax is joined to the next part by a connective
• The time word is followed by a connective linking it to the verb
• The verb is followed by a connective linking it to the subject noun
• The subject noun is followed by a connective linking it to the object noun
Which connective is used depends on several factors:

- Is the sentence intransitive or transitive?
- Is the following element a verb, a common noun or a proper noun?
- What is the tense of the sentence?
Depending on the types of words and connectives, there are 24 distinct patterns for just basic simple sentences in Sm’algyąx.
From the point of view of a learner, that’s 23 possible ways to go wrong!
How can we help learners navigate this treacherous landscape?
Challenge 3: Ergativity

Sm’algyax is an Ergative language, while English is not.
One way that ergativity manifests in Sm’algyax is that there are special ergative pronouns used as the subjects of transitive sentences (different from the absolutive pronouns used as the subjects of intransitive sentences and as the objects of transitive sentences).
Another way that ergativity manifests is that in a transitive sentence the verb agrees in number with the object, not the subject.
Simply put, there are a lot of pronouns in Sm’algyałx, used in ways that are confusing for people whose first language is English, and the use of singular and plural forms of the verb takes time for an English speaker to learn.
So people whose first language is English face four major challenges as they strive to acquire fluency in Sm’algyax:

• word order
• use of connectives
• ergative pronouns
• and verb–object number agreement
Overcoming the Challenges

How can we help learners figure out how words are put together in Sm’algyax so they can begin to use Sm’algyax productively and creatively?
Colour!
By assigning each major word class a distinct colour, we can make the patterns of basic sentences visible.
We use a distinct colour for each type of word that is grammatically important in Sm’algyax.
• common nouns
• proper nouns
• absolutive pronouns
• marked absolutive pronouns
• ergative pronouns, and
• 6 connectives that are used in various contexts
Our solution lets us make grammar visible to learners.

Time word  Intransitive verb  -a connective  Common noun subject
A basic sentence with an intransitive verb has four parts: time word, intransitive verb, connective and doer of the action (subject noun):
Learners don’t need to wrestle with
The concepts of verbs being
transitive or intransitive, or nouns
being common or proper.

- Time word
- Intransitive verb
- a connective
- Common noun subject
Instead, learners can manipulate the less abstract ideas of yellow words and pink words.
Here are the sentence patterns for a some intransitive sentences – with common noun subjects, proper noun subjects, and pronouns, in several tenses:
### Template 1: Intransitive Sentences with all time words with Common Noun Subjects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time Word</th>
<th>$V_{Intrans}$</th>
<th>-a connective</th>
<th>Common noun</th>
<th>end</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>yagwa/ła nah/dm</td>
<td>yaawxk</td>
<td>-a</td>
<td>haas</td>
<td>The dog is eating.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Template 2A: Intransitive Sentences w. yagwa/ła time words w. Proper Noun Subject

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time Word</th>
<th>$V_{Intrans}$</th>
<th>-as connective</th>
<th>Proper noun</th>
<th>end</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>yagwa</td>
<td>yaawxk</td>
<td>-as</td>
<td>Meli</td>
<td>Mary is eating.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ła</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Template 2B: Intransitive Sentences w. nah/dm time words w. Proper Noun Subject

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time Word</th>
<th>$V_{Intrans}$</th>
<th>-at connective</th>
<th>Proper noun</th>
<th>end</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>nah/dm</td>
<td>yaawxk</td>
<td>-at</td>
<td>Meli</td>
<td>Mary ate.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Template 3A: Intransitive Sentences with yagwa/ła time words with Pronoun Subjects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time Word</th>
<th>$V_{Intrans}$</th>
<th>-absolutive pronoun suffix</th>
<th>end</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>yagwa/ła</td>
<td>yaawxk</td>
<td>-u</td>
<td>I am eating.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Once a learner knows a basic pattern, she can make new sentences by substituting words.

- Time word
- Intransitive verb
- a connective
- Common noun subject
Knowing what should come next also helps learners to pick out key words from the speech of fluent speakers.

- Time word
- Intransitive verb
- -a connective
- Common noun subject
Colour coded flashcards can encourage students to form new combinations in the classroom.

- Time word
- Intransitive verb
- -a connective
- Common noun subject
We have created “refrigerator magnet” sentence puzzles in large and small sizes for classroom and home use.

Time word  Intransitive verb  -a connective  Common noun subject
• We are not trying to teach learners grammar

• We are seeking to help learners to put Sm’algyāx words together productively
Combined with active learning techniques such as “total physical response,” the Visible Grammar sentence templates have proven useful in helping a number of learners to break through barriers to their speaking and understanding.
This is one small step in bringing the language back to life in the mouths of a new generation of speakers.
This technique works well with a language like Sm’algyax, with a fixed word order where grammatical meanings are expressed as separate words rather than affixes, but it can be adapted to any language.
For example, if your language uses a large number of affixes on the verb rather than separate words, or if it doesn’t use word order to show grammatical relations, it should still be possible to help learners to understand the patterns of your language with colour.
In such a language, doing a colour-coded template of just the verb with the associated prefixes and suffixes can show learners useful information about the patterns of their language.
This is one small step in bringing the language back to life in the mouths of a new generation of speakers.
The team that has worked on this project on Ts’msyen Sm’algyałx offers this idea as a gift to the many groups working to revitalize their own languages.
Niił waan!