The Complexity of Simple Things: Cross-disciplinary Collaboration for Teaching Colors in Menominee

Monica Macaulay
Linguistics Department

Rita MacDonald
School of Education
Who we are

• Language documentation, description, analysis

Monica

• Applied linguistics, SLA and TESOL
• Language teacher & teacher educator

Rita

Menominee Language and Culture Commission
FIGURE 1.2. Tribal areas in Wisconsin (Boundaries have been generalized from geographic data available as 2010 Tiger/Line shapefiles from the U.S. Census Bureau)
Menominee Language

• Algonquian language of Wisconsin
• Documented 1921-1949 by Leonard Bloomfield
• MM: working with community since 1998
Menominee Language Revitalization

Current status:

• Fewer than 5 L1 speakers, all elderly
• Small number of proficient L2 speakers
• No external communities of speakers
• 2016-present: Tribal program to train teachers
  1. to speak Menominee (14 months)
  2. to become teachers for pre-school immersion
Menominee Language Revitalization

Current status:
• Fewer than 5 L1 speakers, all elderly
• Small number of proficient L2 speakers
• No external communities of speakers
• 2016-present: Tribal efforts to train teachers
  1. to speak Menominee (14 months)
  2. to become teachers for pre-school immersion
Past Attempt: CL’s lesson

- doctoral student in Curriculum and Instruction
- interested in intergenerational transmission of language
- no training in linguistics
- some SLA training
- had idea of lesson on colors as sample lesson for teachers

Included sentences like these for me to translate:
- What color do you see?
- I see orange.
- What’s your favorite color?
- My favorite color is blue.
- Touch someone wearing red.
- Touch someone wearing a red shirt.

I couldn’t do it!!!
Colors are not simple in Menominee!
Color Terms in Menominee

Three strategies for expressing color:

1. Prenouns
2. Verbs
3. ‘Looks like’ construction
Prenouns

• Compound with following noun
• Limited set (just 4)
  • ‘black, white, green, blue/dark-colored’
• Example:
  apēs-awāēhsaeh  ‘black bear’
  black-bear
Verbs

• Also limited but larger set
  • duplicates prenouns: ‘be black, be white, be green, be blue/dark-colored’
  • adds: ‘be red, be yellow/brown, be brown’

• Cross-cutting categories
  • different form for attributive vs. predicative use (so two forms per color)
  • verb must agree in animacy (so two verbs per color)
  • $2 \times 2 = 4$
Prenoun-Verb Comparison

1. Prenoun:
   \[\text{apēs-awāehsaeh} \quad \text{‘black bear’}\]
   \[\text{black-bear}\]

2. Attributive verb:
   \[\text{awāehsaeh} \, \text{apēsenet} \quad \text{‘black bear’}\]
   \[\text{bear} \quad \text{which.is.black}\]

3. Predicative verb:
   \[\text{apēsen} \, \text{awāehsaeh} \quad \text{‘the bear is black’}\]
   \[\text{is.black} \quad \text{bear}\]
‘Looks like’ construction

For any other color, you say that the object in question looks like the color of something else.

  e.g. ‘purple’ = ‘looks like grape’
‘Looks like’ construction (cont.)

Nouns we’ve seen used in this construction:

- sōmen ‘grape’ (for purple)
- askäetaäemen ‘orange’ (the fruit; for orange)
- kēsek ‘sky’ (for light blue)
- osōnamon ‘vermilion’ (a bright red)
‘Looks like’ construction (cont.)

Examples:

1. **Sōmen** esēnākosewak naqnaēhšyak **grape** they.look.like mittens ‘The mittens are purple.’

2. Wiahkwan **askaētaēmen** esēnākwat. **hat** **orange** it.looks.like ‘The hat is orange.’
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COLOR</th>
<th>PRE-NOUN</th>
<th>VERB: ATTRIBUTIVE</th>
<th>VERB: PREDICATIVE</th>
<th>“LOOKS LIKE...”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>A</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>black car</td>
<td>black car</td>
<td>black</td>
<td>black</td>
<td>car is black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>black hat</td>
<td>black hat</td>
<td>black</td>
<td>black</td>
<td>car is black</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4 colors using 2 strategies (V and prenoun) but 5 different forms

3 with 1 strategy (V) but 4 forms

4 with 1 strategy but 2 forms
Current approaches to teaching colors

Various teachers:
- lists of colors
- treated as if they were English adjectives
- Menominee Language and Culture Commission wants colors taught “correctly”
Current approaches to teaching colors

Monica:
• prose descriptions of all the possibilities
• examples
• tables
Monica:

- prose descriptions of all the possibilities
- examples
- tables

Overwhelming!
INSTEAD...
Pedagogical Support Team for New Trainees

Monica

Rita

Menominee teacher trainees
Challenge: little overlap in conceptual frameworks or meta-language

- Language documentation, description, analysis
- No SLA training

- Rita
- Applied linguistics, SLA and TESOL
- Language teacher & teacher educator
- Minimal structural linguistics, English-focused...forgotten!

- Monica

- Menominee teacher trainees
- Community members
- Menominee as L2
- Basic public school English knowledge
Teaching colors to the future teachers:

APPLYING PRINCIPLES FROM LINGUISTICS AND SLA
Linguistics Principle

Always descriptive, never prescriptive.

SLA Principle

Attend to student’s meaning over correctness.
Linguistics Principle

Always descriptive, never prescriptive.

SLA Principle

Attend to student’s meaning over correctness.
Principles from SLA Pedagogy

1. Assess Prior Knowledge
   - What shared knowledge? English fluency could be harnessed to learn English-like prenoun and attributive forms
   - What shared meta-language? (Probably) “Adjective-Noun” from English

2. Build on Student Strengths
   - Start with English-like patterns
   - Determine their meta-language
   - Use it to teach other forms

3. Focus on Function, Connect to Form
**Systematic lesson series-Step 1: Attributive+Prenoun**

1. Determine trainees’ meta-language for English N-Adj pairing.
2. Use it to teach 7 color terms (attributive form, A and I) in Menominee.
3. Next, teach the short/simple (prenoun) form for 4 of those 7 colors. (Simple=no animacy agreement).
4. Dialogue practice to help remember which 4 colors can use simple form. (No known functional difference.)
Systematic lesson series-Step 2: Predicative

1. Again, start with English, determine trainees’ meta-language.

2. Card sort, in English: Distinguish attributive from predicative. Trainees write their definitions of the distinction, based on function, and discuss.

3. Use trainees’ consensual meta-language for function to teach predicative forms in Menominee.
Reinforce function: form pairing
Write paired sentences moving between predicative and attributive forms.

English example:
- *Is that blue jacket yours?*
- *No, my jacket is black.*
Systematic lesson series


2. Teach the short/simple form (pre-noun) for 4 of those 7 colors. (No animacy agreement).

3. Dialogue practice to help cement which 4 colors can use simple form. (No known functional difference.)

------------------

1. Next, predicative form. Start with English, determine trainees’ meta-language. (“telling form”?)

2. Card sort, in English: distinguish attributive from predicative. Trainees write their definition of the distinction, based on function.

3. Teachers use it to teach predicative forms in Menominee.

------------------

Reinforce function: form pairing by writing paired sentences moving between these 2 forms.

Well, you know what they say about plans....

Formative probe: Any merit to our approach?
Purpose of probe
Does this approach:

1. prompt movement into meta-linguistic space?
2. elicit ‘natural’ meta-language?
3. give us a natural meta-language that ‘works’ for others? Does it convey the same construct to others?
The real lesson, and what happened

**Learning Activity 1:** In pairs, sorted Menominee phrases (predicative, attributive) into categories and explained their rationale. No clues, no pre-set number of categories.

**Results:** One pair derived attributive/predicative sort immediately.

**Learning Activity 2:** In pairs, using same Menominee phrases with English gloss. Instruction: sort into “new categories.”

**Results:** No pair did an attributive/predicative sort.

**Learning Activity 3:** Repeated for the group the meta-language one pair had used for the attributive/predicative sort: “One just describes the thing. The other says something about it.”

**Results:** When asked to sort using only that meta-language with no other cues, every pair did it correctly.

**Learning Activity 4:** Unpacked the pedagogy behind activity, discussed trainees’ learning and insights about future use.
Our conclusions

1. The sorting activity tapped/promoted a meta-linguistic focus for most participants.
2. We were able to derive meaningful meta-language from trainees quickly.
3. That meta-language made sense to others, and allowed them to construct similar meanings. Thus, there is strong potential here for future lessons.
4. The sorting and the effort to describe categorizations enabled trainees to notice things about Menominee that they had not yet been taught and had not yet noticed. Thus, there was additional learning (“noticing”) at the meta-linguistic level.
5. Trainees had meaningful meta-linguistic understanding that could be brought into play to hasten their learning.
Meta-conclusion

• It’s difficult for one person to fill all roles (a different kind of “lone-wolf” approach!)
• Linguists like Monica need help with all aspects of language pedagogy in order to be useful to a language reclamation project
• Linguists/educators like Rita need help understanding the language structures in order to be useful to a language reclamation project
• We need more interdisciplinary collaboration!
Thank you!