Meskwaki Transitive Inanimate Present Indicative Inflection: A Teaching Methodology

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Abstract

Like other indigenous communities across the globe, Native Americans in the United States are seeing their languages vanish, thus losing connections to both their present and past. With about 200 speakers left, the Meskwaki Nation in Tama, Iowa has undertaken the challenge of language revitalization. During Summer 2017, the author of this paper received a research grant to aid the Meskwaki in their language revitalization efforts. One of the most urgent needs they have is to create grammar explanations that are accessible to both learners and native speakers of the language. Explanations of the language currently exist; however, they are geared mainly toward linguists, and the explanations that these are based on were written about 100 years ago. Using data collected for language documentation during the summer of 2017, the current paper focused on analyzing verb inflection in Meskwaki. Considering aspects of the language such as gender, transitivity and intransitivity, and subject-verb agreement, the main focus is on Meskwaki present indicative inflection. By comparing a wide variety of forms for a basic set of verbs, the author delineates how to inflect a verb for each grammatical person and number combination. Moreover, the paper shows why some verbs have more than one form, and when to use each of them. The purpose of this analysis is to explain which aspects of verb inflection are important to the language and require special attention from English-speaking learners of Meskwaki. This work also contributes to an overview of the current state of the language, and helps identify the challenges that learning Meskwaki presents. Ultimately, this work will serve as a building block of a comprehensive grammar explanation of Meskwaki for English speakers.

Keywords: language revitalization, linguistics, Meskwaki

1. Introduction

Language revitalization is a painstaking and time-consuming process. It requires the commitment not only of the learners, but also of the community, the instructors, as well as the people in charge of designing curricula and programs. Most importantly, however, it requires the existence of documents and materials from which one may learn and teach the endangered language. It is in this last stage that many revitalization efforts struggle the most as there is shortage of materials, as well as of people with sufficient knowledge to dissect the language into teachable content. This paper aims to be the first step in building such materials and in developing ways to teach Meskwaki (Algonquian) not only to newer generations but also to current members of the community who may wish to regain their heritage language.

As an endangered language, Meskwaki stands out from many others. While there are only a couple hundred native speakers currently, Meskwaki written texts are abundant. These texts – most of which were collected a hundred years ago by Truman Michelson and translated by Ives Goddard and Lucy Thomason[1]– have helped the Meskwaki Nation in Tama, Iowa to maintain their traditions, and pass down not only stories, but language and knowledge. However,

despite the extant number of written texts, only a few linguists have conducted analyses of these texts. Moreover, these analyses tend to be highly technical and abstruse to the average language learner[2345] or serve as glossaries for common words and phrases[6]. There is, nonetheless, still a need and a desire to revitalize the language, to not let it dwindle and die, but rather to encourage its use and develop an institutionalized way of doing so. In their efforts to preserve their language, the Meskwaki Nation have set out to create a revitalization project. They expect to be able to create teaching materials based on accurate linguistic analysis of their language that is not only accessible to linguists – as is the case currently – but also to the members of the community, in particular to instructors and students. These materials ought to aid them in passing the language on to new generations of future Meskwaki, as well as to heritage speakers who may have limited proficiency in it, but who desire to regain this knowledge and reclaim part of what has been taken away from them.

   This paper outlines the challenges that Meskwaki present indicative inflection presents for second language (L2) learners in the context of language revitalization. The first section presents a review of the basic elements for present indicative inflection, as presented by Dahlstrom's work[7]. Simultaneously, the author analyzes the morphology of Meskwaki present indicative inflection, paying special attention to those elements of inflection most challenging to L2 learners. Moreover, the paper characterizes a teachable process, by which L2 learners with no linguistic backgrounds may learn to inflect Meskwaki. In doing so, the author proposes a step-by-step template that could be used to develop further teaching materials for Meskwaki. The last section outlines some of the changes the language has seen recently, in particular, phonological ones, such as a process of devoicing that is currently emerging. Finally, directions for future research on these challenges are given, as well as on the issues that arise for teaching present-day Meskwaki, and for the success of the Meskwaki revitalization project.

1.1 Initial Remarks on Meskwaki Inflection

As a member of the Algonquian family, Meskwaki has a very rich inflectional paradigm. Moreover, the complex morphology of the language in conjunction with an equally rich phonology, as well as its agglutinative nature, make it challenging to break down phrases into different morphemes. Examples of the rich morphology of Meskwaki, are seen below. All of these verbs are present indicative[8][9]:

(1) **nɛ**wi:sɛno̥
     'I eat'

(2) wi:sɛni**wɑ̱**
     'S/he eats'

(3) **nɛ**mi:t͡ʃ ɑhtɛhimini̥
     'I eat a strawberry'

(4) **kɛ**mi:t͡ʃ ɑhtɛhimɛni̥
     'You eat a strawberry'

(5) mi:t͡ʃi**wɑ̱** ɑtɛhimini̥
     'S/he eats a strawberry'

(6) **nɛ**nɛ:tɑ̱ ɑhtɛhimini̥
     'I see a strawberry'

(7) **kɛ**nɛ:tɑ̱ ɑtɛhimini̥
     'You see a strawberry'

(8) nɛ:tɑ**mɑ̱** ɑtɛhimini̥
     'S/he sees a strawberry'

(9) **nɛ**mit͡ʃi**pɛnɑ**
     'we (excl) eat it'

(10) **kɛ**mit͡ʃi**pɛnɑ**
     'we (incl) eat it'

(11) **kɛ**mit͡ʃi**pwɑ**
     'you (pl) eat it'

(12) mit͡ʃi**wɑki**
     'they eat it'

   In the examples above, indicated by bold print are the personal pronouns for each sentence. It is evident that Meskwaki makes use of circumfixes, as demonstrated by 9, 10, and 11, prefixes, as demonstrated by 1, 3, 4, 6, and 7, and suffixes, as demonstrated by the rest of the examples. Moreover, the verb 'to eat' appears in the form *wi:sen* in 1 and 2, but it appears as *mi:t͡ʃ* in the rest of the data. This abundance of affixes demonstrates the inflectional complexity of Meskwaki mentioned above. Similarly, the appearance of more than one word (root) for 'eat,' demonstrates some of the complexities of Meskwaki morphology. These two phenomena are further discussed below.

2. Meskwaki Verb Inflection

Meskwaki is a highly inflected language. It should therefore come as no surprise that the verb inflection process is characterized by a set of complex morphological processes obscure to those unfamiliar with Algonquian languages. These processes pose certain challenges to L2 learners of Meskwaki, in particular to English speakers, whose language lacks a complex inflectional system. Moreover, the linguistic terms currently used in this Algonquian language's descriptions are more often than not unfamiliar and impenetrable to language learners. Understanding the morphology is therefore crucial to being able to teach Meskwaki to L2 students. What follows is an overview of the necessary elements to inflect a Meskwaki verb for the present indicative tense.

2.1 Stem Classes

Meskwaki inflects for grammatical gender. Unfamiliar to many English speakers, grammatical gender may be better understood as word class – groups of words that share a grammatical feature (in Romance languages these classes tend to be "masculine" and "feminine;" Germanic languages also have a "neuter" gender or class). In Meskwaki, this system is binary, with nouns having one of two values – *animate* or *inanimate*. This grammatical animacy does not necessarily correspond to the animacy state of the subject or object; rather it is grammatically determined (e.g. some culturally important objects may be *animate*, and some fruits or vegetables may be both depending on context)[10]. Additionally, as with other languages, verbs may be transitive or intransitive, this is to say, they can have an object or none at all. For example, the verb 'to eat' does not require an object (e.g. *I eat* is a perfectly formed English sentence), but 'to devour' does (e.g. *I devour* would not be an acceptable English sentence).

Animacy and transitivity, are crucial to inflecting verbs in Meskwaki. In conjunction, they give rise to the main four *stem classes* of verbs in Meskwaki. These stem classes may be understood as verb groups that indicate what type of subject or object the verb will have. The four groups are traditionally named – in order of inflectional complexity – Inanimate Intransitive (II), that is to say the combination of an inanimate subject with an intransitive verb; Animate Intransitive (AI), an animate subject with an intransitive verb; Transitive Inanimate (TI), a transitive verb with an inanimate object (the subject is assumed to be animate); and Transitive Animate (TA), a transitive verb with an animate object. The focus of this paper is on the inflectional paradigm for TI verbs in the present indicative form.

In learning to inflect a verb in Meskwaki, the first step is to define both the transitivity of the verb and the gender of the subject or the object. Unfortunately, these words have to be learned through memorization, as they are vocabulary items. Generally, however, TI and TA verbs will have an animate subject, therefore the animacy value refers to the gender of the object. On the other hand, for both II and AI verbs, the animacy value refers to the gender of the subject. These two generalizations might aid the learner in choosing verb-object or verb-subject pairings. For example, one verb such as the English 'to eat' may have more than one Meskwaki equivalent stem according to these parameters. Provided that the learner knows the different stems for a verb such as 'eat,' she must then decide which verb stem to use. This can be decided by posing questions about the transitivity of the verb and animacy of the subject/object – *who is the subject of the verb? Is there an object? What is the gender of each?* The answers to these questions should yield the verb stem to be used.

Examples (1) and (3) above, repeated here as (13) and (14) illustrate this idea:

(13) nɛ -wiːsɛnǫ   (14) nɛ -miːt͡ʃ ɑhtɛhiminị
     1SG-eat.AI   1SG-eat.TI strawberry
    'I eat'   'I eat a strawberry'

While (13), uses the AI verb stem *wiːsɛn*, to indicate the intransitive action of eating, (14) uses a different stem altogether *miːt͡ʃi*, which indicates that indeed the subject is eating something. Moreover, Dahlstrom[11] mentions the existence of a third stem for this verb, the TA *amw-*. However, this stem was neither documented during fieldwork or presented by previous work done on Meskwaki. In having such differences in the verb stem, it is crucial then that the learner understand the importance of the gender of both subject and object, as well as that of the object, when present.

2.2 TI Verb Classes

TI verbs, the focus of this work, are further divided into three different verb classes, much like Spanish or Italian verbs. These classes are known as Class 1, 2, and 3. Each of them is assigned a suffix called a *theme sign*, the only purpose of which is to mark that the verb takes an inanimate object [12].

Class 1 verbs take the theme sign *-a-* or its allomorph *-am-*, used for third person subjects. This is illustrated here by examples (7) and (8) above, repeated here as (15) and (16). The theme sign is shown in bold print:

(15)   kɛ -nɛ:t -**ɑ̣**   atɛhiminị
        2SG-see.TI-0.obj strawberry
        'You see a strawberry'

(16)   nɛ:t -**am** -ɑ̣   atɛhiminị
        see.TI-0.obj-3SG strawberry
        'S/he sees a strawberry'

Class 2 verbs take the morpheme *-o-*[13]:

(17)   nɛ -pyɛ:t-**o**
        1SG-bring-0.obj
        'I bring it'

(18)   pyɛ:t-**o**   -w-ɑ
        bring-0.obj-3-SG
        'S/he brings it'

Class 3 verbs take a null theme sign, as illustrated by examples (3) and (5) above, repeated here as (19) and (20):

(19)   nɛ -mi:t͡ʃ ɑhtɛhiminị
        1SG-eat.TI strawberry
        'I eat a strawberry'

(20)   mi:t͡ʃi-w-ɑ̣   atɛhiminị
        eat.TI-3-SG strawberry
        'S/he eats a strawberry'

Upon learning that the verb belongs to the TI stem class, the learner is presented with the additional challenge of learning which of the three classes above the verb belongs to. These suffixes, which may be called *agreement vowels*, always attach to the same class making it a straight forward process of suffixation. Therefore, the learner must only remember the distinction between the nonthird affix *-a:-* and its allomorph for the third persons *-am-* for Class 1 TI verbs. Although, again this process depends mostly upon memorization, it can be better visualized by the diagram below, the first part to a template model to aid learners in learning TI present indicative Meskwaki verb inflection:
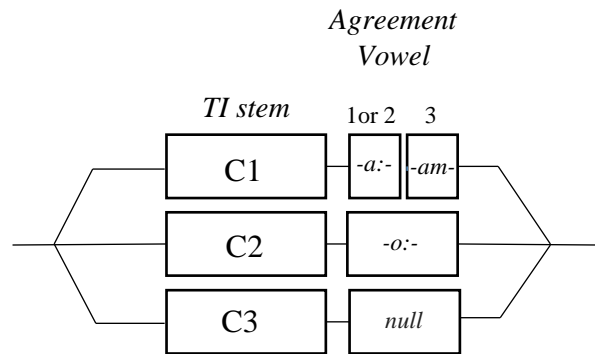

Figure 1. TI Classes and their Agreement Vowels

This, as we will see, is the first step in making Meskwaki TI present indicative inflections more accessible to L2 learners.

2.3 Subject -Verb Agreement

Inflecting for a subject is another important process of verb inflection in Meskwaki. Unlike English, which only inflects overtly for the third person singular 'he/she' (*e.g. he/she eats*), Meskwaki has a complex inflectional system for each grammatical person, making use of prefixes, suffixes, and circumfixes. In total, the language inflects for seven basic grammatical persons – one more than English does. This is due to the fact that Meskwaki makes a distinction of inclusivity when using the first-person plural 'we.' That is to say, there are two grammatical persons for the English equivalent 'we.' When the speaker uses the subject 'we,' this could refer to the speaker and the addressee (inclusive) or to the speaker and a third party, excluding the addressee (exclusive). Other inflectional forms for subject such as the impersonal, and the obviative/proximate distinction exist, but are not discussed here due to space constraints.

An additional characteristic of the present indicative is the differential treatment of nonthird and third persons[14]. Meskwaki subject agreement makes use of assigned 'slots' for nonthird and third persons. That is to say, all singular nonthird persons (*i.e.* 'I' and 'you') bear a prefix, all third persons ('he/she/it' and 'they') bear a suffix, which may be composed of compounds of two or more suffixes, and all plural nonthird persons ('we'[inclusive and exclusive], and 'you' [plural]) make use of circumfixes. Examples (3), (9), and (12) above, repeated here as (21), (22), and (23) exemplify this:

(21) **nɛ -**miːt͡ʃ ɑhtɛhiminį
      1SG-eat.TI strawberry
      'I eat a strawberry'

(22) **nɛ -**mit͡ʃi **-pɛnɑ**
      1SG-eat.TI-1PL
      'we (excl) eat it'

(23) mit͡ʃi **-w-ɑki**
      eat.TI-3-PL
      'they eat it'

As a nonthird singular person, 'I' in (21) uses a prefix *ne*, in bold above; in (23), 'they' as a third person plural uses the suffix *waki*; and finally (22) combines both of these features, using the circumfix, *ne-* to indicate that it is a first person and exclusive, and *-pena*, to indicate that it is plural.

Although complex and unfamiliar to the learner, these processes may be simplified to a teachable method, much like we did with the verb stems. One question is crucial to follow the differential treatment of the two groups of grammatical persons: *"is the subject a third person?"* If so, the learner will know that the subject agreement will come after the verb stem. If not, the inflection will necessarily have a prefix. Additionally, one must ask *"is the subject singular or plural?"* If singular, no further changes must be made. However, if it is plural, there are two possibilities, if it is a third person plural, one more suffix must be added for the phrase to be grammatical. If, on the other hand, it is nonthird and plural one must use the prefixes in conjunction with the suffixes, a circumfix, to inflect grammatically. This, therefore must be added as step number two to the diagram presented in Figure 1. The updated version is below:
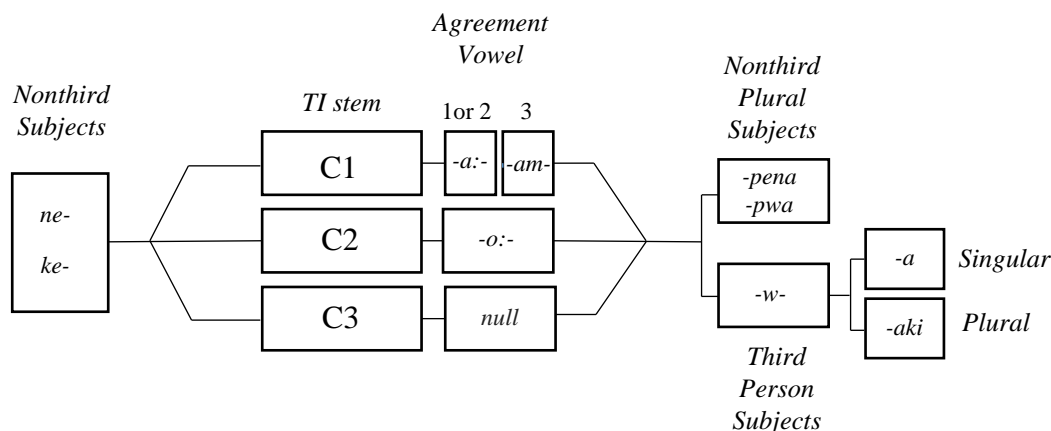
Figure 2. Diagram for the Inflection of Meskwaki TI verbs in the present indicative

As we can see, Meskwaki is an agglutinative language with a very rich morphology. The inflectional processes are complex and therefore constitute a challenge for L1 English speakers. However, if used correctly, this diagram, along with the questions provided, which may be modified to suit the needs of different students and instructors, provide a systematic way to explain Meskwaki TI present indicative inflection to L2 learners. As was mentioned above, however, this is but a very fundamental template for the inflection of one tense and one stem class in the language. There exist other persons, stem classes, and tenses which have not been mentioned here.

Moreover, the challenges of learning a language, in particular an endangered one, are not only morphological. In the case of languages whose change has not been well documented, phonology may have changed and therefore pose an additional challenge. These changes often bring about differing social attitudes toward the deviations from the norm causing issues to advancing the revitalization program. Section 3 below tackles some of these issues that were encountered during the fieldwork for this paper.

3. Change and Challenges for Meskwaki Revitalization

As mentioned earlier, despite its status as endangered, Meskwaki written texts abound. This sort of written documentation brings about benefits as well as challenges. On the one hand, the existing documents provide a good basis for linguistic analysis – of which much has been done in specialized circles (see section 1) –, as well as for a comparative study of how the language has changed since it was last documented in written form. On the other hand, these documents may stand in conflict with how the language has changed and evolved, and may therefore not represent the current status of the language or the views of current speakers. These two major challenges are discussed in this section.

3.1 Phonological Changes

Much like the morphology, Meskwaki phonology is complex and has a unique phonemic inventory that follows a system of rules and processes that may not be apparent to the eye, particularly to that of an L2 learner. The phonemic inventory of Meskwaki in and of itself poses enough of a challenge to L2 learners. For example, Meskwaki makes use of short and long vowels, a distinction that does not exist in English. Some of these phonological phenomena have been documented and indeed we know what some of the rules of the language are. Dahlstrom (2016) outlines three main ones for us:

1. Meskwaki words end in short vowels.

2. Vowel clusters in the independent indicative are not allowed and must be broken by epenthetic consonants, usually -t.

3. When the 3 person suffixes -wa or -waki are attached to a consonant final morpheme the sounds /w/ + /a/ coalesce into /o/.

Although these and some other rules are sufficiently documented, they do not entirely represent the current status of the language. Indeed, these rules can still be observed in current Meskwaki, and were in fact observed in the fieldwork conducted for this paper. However, there are new emerging processes that are not yet documented and that pose questions not only for a revitalization project, but also for the community and their identity. Examples (1), (3), and (7) above, repeated here as (24), (25), and (26) serve as illustrations:

(24)   nɛwi:sɛno̥   (25)   nɛmi:t͡ʃ ɑhtɛhimini̥   (26)   kɛnɛ:tɑ̥ ɑtɛhimini̥
         'I eat'   'I eat a strawberry'   'You see a strawberry'

By looking at the examples above, in particular the phonemes in bold print, it becomes apparent that there is a process of devoicing of word final vowels. This process was observed during the recording of these data, and was further mentioned by some of the native speaker consultants. There seems to be a new emerging phonological rule in Meskwaki that may be described as follows:

4. All vowels in word final position are devoiced.

This process proves challenging as devoicing strips away vowel properties and they may become hard to distinguish. This is to say, a word final /i/ after devoicing may sound like a devoiced /ɛ/ or an /ɑ/ like an /o/ or indeed like nothing at all. In certain occasions, these vowels were modified such that they sounded almost like the glottal stop /ʔ/. The challenges to an L2 learner are apparent not only in terms of comprehension but also in terms of production of the language. What is an L2 learner to make of these sounds? And how can an instructor teach these processes? More importantly, should we be teaching them when the existing documents do not reflect these changes? These are all questions that should be the focus of further research, not only from a linguistic perspective, but also from a sociocultural one too. We now turn to some observations on the latter.

3.2 Social Implications and Challenges of a Changing Phonology

Languages do not exist in a vacuum. The processes that have been discussed above, in particular the phonological ones, are heavily interconnected to social aspects of the lives of the speakers of a language. These processes are heavily charged with social implications. In the case of the Meskwaki, the way one produces a word seems to be a deciding factor on the identity of the person and even be a deciding factor when choosing the variant of the language that is desired for the newer generations.

In conversation with some of our consultants, there seemed to be disagreement as to what the "best" variant of the language was. In relation to the devoicing of word final vowels discussed above, one of our Meskwaki L1 consultants, referred to these phonemes as *silent vowels*. In his view, these *silent vowels* had to be articulated as such lest the speaker sound "less Meskwaki." Others didn't seem to believe articulating these *silent vowels* was crucial to learning the language. As such, our consultant, told of how his views came at a price in his role as an educator. Part of the community decided that this was not an acceptable variant of the language that newer generations should learn, and decided he should no longer teach the language.

As with all matters regarding standard language ideology, the main problem with this approach is apparent – who decides what the language sounds like? This becomes especially problematic in the environment of an endangered language, where discussion of which variant of the language is more desired might cause division and undermine the revitalization efforts. Further work in this area will be needed for the Meskwaki to succeed in their revitalization efforts, and to come to a consensus of what the community wants the language to look like for future generations.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, I have proposed a teaching methodology for Meskwaki TI verbs in the present indicative. Making use of Dahlstrom's (2016) previous work on the language, as well as on data collected through fieldwork, I illustrated what the most important aspects to TI present indicative inflection are. Moreover, I outlined particular challenges to English speakers trying to learn Meskwaki as an L2, and I gave a template model to facilitate this process. The template should serve as an example for how to develop future materials to explain Meskwaki inflection to nonlinguists. Moreover, this template should be seen as the first building block in the efforts to develop a more approachable method to Meskwaki verb morphology. Lastly, I outlined additional challenges that learners may face, namely with the different phonological processes that exist, but more importantly with emerging ones. These new processes point out to additional challenges that not only students, but also instructors might face in deciding how to teach the language. They may in turn, point to other areas of focus that are challenging in a revitalization effort such as the Meskwaki one, and remind us that language exists in a sociocultural context.

5. Acknowledgements

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