



Prefixing, Endangered, and Polysynthetic: lessons from doing useful lexicography in a PEP language

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Abstract

These are reflections upon finishing a English-Apache learner's dictionary of the Dilzh'e' dialect of Western Apache, an endangered Athabascan language, which is largely prefixing and polysynthetic. It was entirely compiled in the Word format, for two reasons. (1) That computer format is easily accessible to elderly native speakers with rudimentary experience with computers, and (2) There is no easy way of writing an Athabascan-English dictionary, even with advanced computational help, because of the phenomenal morphophonemic complexity of the prefix system, as well as of the word final verb stem (Poser 2002). So a simpler English-Apache format is more useful, especially to learners, but arguably to linguists as well.

The Athabascan-English dictionaries compiled with advanced computational resources are extremely complex, and therefore hard to use for linguists who are not advanced Athabascanists, and of very limited usefulness to speakers. The two relatively simple Apache dictionaries compiled with computational resources are satisfactory for some speaker use, but not for linguist use. The latest Athabascan

dictionary published is a learner's dictionary of Tanacross (Holton 2009). This was compiled with TOOLBOX, an advanced computer tool. Interestingly, the result is an English-Tanacross dictionary, comparable in many ways to the English-Dilze'e dictionary. One lesson to be learned is that any dictionary in a Word format should be written in such a way as to be convertible in a more advanced format such as TOOLBOX (or its descendant, Fieldworks Language Explorer), and certainly I plan to integrate this dictionary with TOOLBOX databases for the other dialects of Western Apache. Another interesting lesson has to do with the representation of the strategies by which Apache speakers abbreviate long descriptive words such as 'chair' (lit. "something one sits down on") or 'rattlesnake', (lit. "snake possessing a rattle at its tail").

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