

PREPARING LAKHOTA TEACHING MATERIALS

A PROGRESS REPORT

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ABSTRACT

Materials for the teaching of the Lakhotā dialect of the Sioux language have been under preparation since June of 1972 at the University of Colorado. A teaching grammar, elementary bilingual dictionary, and reader will be produced.

Described are problems connected with the choice of an orthography, the design of the lessons, and presentation of structure.

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1. The C. U. Lakota Teaching Project¹.

In June of 1972 participants in the C. U. Lakota Project began the preparation of classroom teaching materials for the Teton dialect of the Sioux language. This is the largest of four Sioux dialects; the other three are Santee, Yankton, and Assiniboine. These dialects are also called Dakota (Santee), and Nakota (Yankton and Assiniboine). The corresponding term for the Teton dialect is Lakota. Lakota has over 10,000 speakers living in North and South Dakota and in Canada.

The Project has as its goal the preparation of three types of language materials: lessons for teaching Lakota structure, a reader covering both traditional and contemporary Teton Sioux and American Indian life, and an elementary bilingual dictionary. Work on the reader will begin during the summer of 1973. Some textual materials from the 19th and early 20th centuries will be used, but narratives will also be obtained from contemporary informants. Language lessons are accompanied by a tape program; the lessons include materials for oral drill (dialogues, pattern drills, questions), translation into Lakota, and reading passages. The dictionary will be based on the classroom materials, although its coverage will not be limited to these alone. A computer is being used in the preparation of the dictionary, and editing is being done by a native speaker-linguist team.

A class in spoken Lakota was taught during 1972-1973 using materials prepared by the project. C. U. project materials have also been used this year at several other colleges and universities in the West.²

2. Selection and Use of an Orthography.

One problem which does not normally concern authors of foreign

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language textbooks has been the choice of an orthography. There is no single standard in use for Lakshota; there are instead several competing systems, each with advantages and disadvantages, and each with its own set of staunch advocates.

We are not overly concerned about student spelling however, for at least two reasons. First, natives vary in their preferences, and several systems are equally workable. Secondly, a somewhat casual attitude toward writing seems entirely appropriate, given that this is basically an unwritten language. Students are thus freed to concentrate on acquisition of good oral control of the language.

Our ultimate selection for our own written material has taken into account several factors. We have maintained some thoroughly established native traditions, such as using the vowels with their continental values, and writing *g* for the [g] allophone of /k/. On the other hand, we occasionally insist on purely scholarly practices not sanctioned by native tradition, such as writing stress. Moreover, we also made one decision for mainly pedagogical reasons: the device of writing *č*, *h̃*, *š*, *ǵ* and *ž* for the sounds [č, ɣ, š, γ, and ž], i.e., using only Latin letters plus the diacritic where the Latin alphabet furnishes no unitary prototype. Some traditions have written [č] as *č̇*, [ɣ] as *ḣ*, [š] as *ṧ* or *š̈*, [γ] as *ǵ̇*, and [ž] as *ž̇*; so the principle we follow here is not entirely our invention. The use of the diacritic eliminates the need for digraphs and simultaneously indicates departures from the English orthographic tradition.

Another orthographic decision had to be made with respect to the representation of the aspiration of stops and glottalization of stops and

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fricatives. Native spelling often does not mark the aspirated or glottalized stops; when it does, it generally uses Greek rough breathing for aspiration (k^c), smooth breathing for glottalization (k^v).

One fact we have taken into account in our solution is that the combination of stop plus aspiration or glottalization functions as a consonant cluster rather than as a unit. Moreover, the specific quality of the aspiration can be either $[x]$ or $[h]$, depending on the following vowel. The problem is that the details of patterning vary from speaker to speaker. While all generally use $[x]$ after /p, t and k/ and before /a, ʌ, ʊ/, and $[h]$ before /i/ or after /č/, practice is inconsistent after /p, t, k/ before /i, u, e, o/. Some speakers actually maintain a limited number of consistent (phonemic) $[C_xe]$ vs. $[Che]$ contrasts. Nevertheless, rather than accomodate the orthography to any one person, we have chosen to write aspiration as h everywhere, and allowed the students to imitate their teacher. We find, however, that both teacher and students tend to write \tilde{h} ($=[x]$) in those words where the aspiration has that quality.

Representing sounds in print is only part of the problem of orthography, however. Additional complications enter as soon as we try to spell morphemes consistently. Lakota, like English, is stress-timed, and has a tendency toward elimination of unstressed vowels, with consonant cluster modification as a consequence. This syllable reduction occurs in phrases across word boundaries, as well as within words. The question then arises whether we should spell the morphemes as they would be in isolation, and teach the reduction patterns, or whether we should spell the whole utterance phonemically and teach rules for morpheme recognition.

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So far the best answer seems to have been "some of each." Where the phrase consists of obvious content morphemes which occur elsewhere, we tend to spell it out and teach the abbreviated pronunciation. Thus 'to work', wówaši ečhŭ, is pronounced [wó·šchŭ]; 'good horse', šŭkawakhâ wašté, is pronounced [šŭkɔ:khŭ:šté]. But when the combination is more permanently fused, as in the sequences leyé 'to say this' and heyé 'to say that', even though the composition is obvious (lé 'this', hé 'that, eyé 'to say'), we write the morphemes together.

Obviously these decisions must be made one phrase at a time, and often on a subjective basis. This can result in inconsistency, as when we vacillate between pi yo or pi ye and po, pe for the plural imperative markers (pi 'plural', yo, ye 'imperative'). Nevertheless, we anticipate ultimate standardization as we continue to work on this problem.

3. Designing the Lessons.

For purposes of teaching grammatical structures, we have settled on a modified cognitive approach. Students memorize dialogues, but they know the meanings of each sentence (including literal translations of idiomatic expressions) right from the beginning. Structures used in the dialogue are carefully explained in the following grammar sections, and they are drilled there by the use of pattern or translation drills, whichever seems more appropriate.

The teacher is encouraged to spot-check the attention being given the pattern drills by asking for translation on occasion. Ultimately, the students are given complex translation exercises (into the target language) which they are expected to puzzle out by themselves, using the new rules and vocabulary they have just learned. In class, the structures are used

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in free conversation and discussion rather than always in drills. Students are encouraged to prepare dialogues out of class for presentation before their classmates, and to ask each other questions during the class.

A general problem with learning this language in the classroom is that forms for classroom activities and objects are either complex or nonexistent. Our teacher has had to invent equivalents to such terms as 'dialogue', 'test', 'assignment', and 'lesson', and although accepted words for 'book', 'paper', 'desk', 'chair', 'chalk', etc. exist, they tend to be long and complicated. By mid-semester of the first term the complex words are no longer impossible, however, and conversations about the immediate surroundings become feasible. Early conversations are limited to more personal situations, health, family size, weather, and animals such as dogs and horses.

4. Coping with Structural Problems.

A contrastive structural analysis of English and Lakota would not be apt to uncover one of the major structural problems we have encountered, but it would probably predict major problems which have not materialized, either because we anticipated them and concentrated on them, or because of accidental good luck.

The unexpected problem is in the use of the morpheme *kí*, which functions very much like English 'the', and its indefinite equivalents *wą* 'a', and *eyá* and *etá* 'some' (There are also negative and interrogative forms.). Although the indefinite system is quite complex and should (and does) present problems, *kí* occurs everywhere 'the' occurs, and in other places as well. Yet students seem to forget *kí* over and over again, even though English uses 'the' in the sentence. This failure to use a one-to-one corresponding morpheme is

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puzzling, although the fact that *ki* is postposed may be the answer. Moreover, with the indefinites, we note the opposite tendency. Although indefiniteness is often marked by zero with mass and plural referents, just as it is in English, students prefer to insert the indefinite marker where it does not belong, for reasons that are unclear to us. Our guess is that the complications are the cause: having learned how to choose among 6 indefinite articles, students tend to apply that knowledge even when it is not required.

Among the anticipated problems which have not materialized are the need to teach drastically different word order, the need to use a modified ergative case system, and the use of aspect rather than tense in the verb system.

Lakshota sentences have the order subject-object-verb for independent words, but (generally) object-subject-verb where verbal affixes are used. One would expect that the word order would be hard to master, yet no one seems to be bothered by it. Perhaps the observation that words in very many cases are "backwards" (adjectives follow nouns, case markers are postpositions, conjunctions come at the end of the first clause rather than at the beginning of the second, etc.) has enabled learners to fit this into a general scheme. Or perhaps the fact that we spend several weeks with intransitive verbs before starting on transitive constructions enables the N-V pattern to be expanded easily into N-N-V when transitives are finally introduced. A final guess at explanation is that students have simply taken seriously the sentence patterns in their dialogues and the explanations of them, and have internalized the rules.

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The problem with the case system was one we anticipated early, and our solution to it seems to have been effective. In essence, the subject markers for stative verbs are identical to the object markers of transitive verbs. A second set of morphemes is used for the subjects of active verbs. Since we expected that our English-speaking students would have the most trouble with the notion of using a 'me' form for 'I', we introduced the whole system by teaching stative verb paradigms first. Hence the most difficult task was learned at the beginning. Active intransitives were introduced next, as an entirely separate paradigm, and the two sets were carefully kept apart. Finally the transitive system was introduced, with one set of familiar affixes serving as subjects, a second set serving as objects, and no confusion appears to have resulted. This, then, is a consciously planned and executed application of contrastive analysis techniques.

The introduction of a rich and complex aspect system was a task we approached with apprehension. We expected semantic problems of all sorts, but we had not counted on the power of English to handle these notions, albeit in rather erratic ways (with adverbs and phrases). Students had no trouble with the idea that 'past' and 'present' are not distinguished. Also, the closeness with which the notion of potential coincides with the English future made learning that aspect fairly simple. Although students often forget to add the potential morpheme, they recognize the need for it at once when they are corrected.

The additional complexity which arises when indefinite ergative noun phrases change their markings in all kinds of potential sentences (including questions and commands as well as unrealized statements) was taught by

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using a list: students were told to use markers of set A for questions and commands, before the verb *chí* 'to want', and before the potential aspect marker; set B was used elsewhere. The students thus had no need to assign questions and wishes to the class of potential sentences before deciding which indefinite article to use. Finally, the habitual was introduced as meaning 'always', another aspect marker as meaning 'supposed to' or 'ought', and so on. In effect, then, although the formal characteristics of the Lakshota and English aspect marking systems are drastically different, both languages share the semantic notions involved. Teaching the target language as a new way of expressing old meanings, instead of emphasizing the internal structural patterns of the new language for their own sake, has made the teaching/learning task much simpler than it might have been.

5. Conclusion.

It is too early to talk definitively about the success of the project. There are many, many details in the materials which need to be rearranged or re-worked. Nevertheless, we feel that we have made a pedagogically and linguistically sound beginning on the task, and that it is possible to complete the work in a way which will be acceptable to native speakers and white academicians, and which will also be useful to learners from many different backgrounds.

NOTES

1. Support for this project comes from NEH grant no. EH-6501-72-360, plus an as yet unnumbered extension of this grant.

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2. It is anticipated that final materials will not be ready before 1975 or 1976, but Xeroxed materials will be made available in some instances, at nominal cost, to institutions wishing to begin a course now in this native American language. Enquiries should be addressed to Dr. A. R. Taylor, Director, Colorado University Lakhota Project, Department of Linguistics, University of Colorado, Boulder, Colorado, 80302.