

# Developing teaching materials for the Umatilla Sahaptin language

## Balancing insights from linguistic theory with learners' communicative needs

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### Background

We describe an ongoing community linguistics project to develop new teaching materials for the Umatilla Sahaptin language (Figure 1).

**Existing resources** include a dictionary (Rude, 2014) and translated pedagogical materials originally developed for an unrelated Salish language and culture (Peterson, 2018).

**New resources** will include a three-book textbook series, designed to develop speakers and encourage language use.

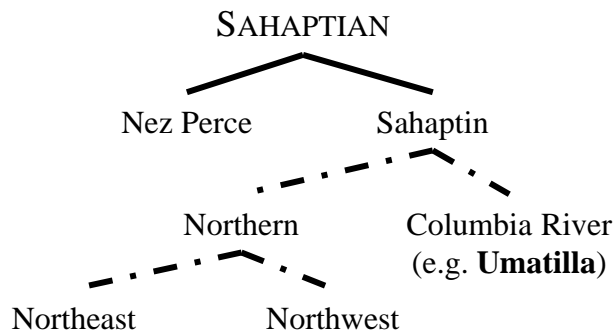
**Book 1** – Intransitive verbs, basic communication

**Book 2** – Transitive verbs: Split ergativity + animacy

**Book 3** – Narratives, fuller use of verbal complex

### Figure 1. Sahaptian language family tree.

Dashed lines indicate dialects of a language.



### What decisions go into developing textbook materials for Umatilla Sahaptin?

#### Addressing conversational language gap

We focus on building conversational competency and encouraging language use with other speakers/learners.

Linguistic research often overlooks turn-taking and dialog management strategies, and so this part of conversational language use is missing from pedagogical materials.

What can linguists do to address these gaps?

#### Conversation/Practice-focused teaching

We focus on teaching language that can be used outside of the classroom (e.g. at home, with family members).

Activities are designed to simulate language use at home and encourage language use with family.

Our goal is to provide learners with opportunities to practice, while reaching new potential learners.

#### Incorporating cultural/ecological lessons

We “localize” teaching materials by building cultural and traditional ecological knowledge into (mini)-lessons.

Can/Should grammar be taught separate from culture?

#### Limiting exposure to “tricky” grammar

We limit learners’ exposure to grammatical structures that will be unfamiliar to them as native English speakers.

For example, Sahaptin has animacy-conditioned split ergativity (Rude, 2009). We wait until Book 2 to teach transitive verbs, focusing on intransitives initially.

But in doing so, we limit students’ communicative range.

How far can the language be simplified?

#### Reusing grammatical structures

We teach grammatical concepts that can be reused in new contexts to maximize learners’ communicative abilities.

For example, we introduce the instrumental suffix *-ki* both for describing travel (“going **BY** X”) and for use in introducing someone (“I am called \_\_\_ **IN** Indian”).

#### Simplifying language for learners

We also need to consider current speakers’ perspectives.

Will Elders accept learner language and mistakes?  
Can we simplify the language yet keep it authentic?