

On some linguistic wonders of NYC

Daniel Kaufman

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ELA background

Three case studies

Garifuna auxiliaries

Asking questions in Ikota

The peculiar case of Wakhi

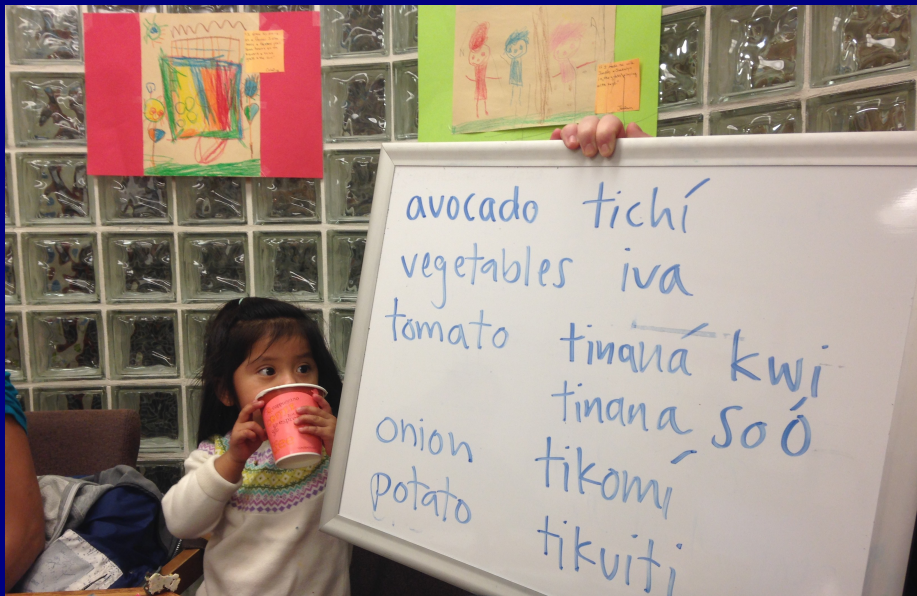
Conclusion

ELA Background

The fieldstation



Mother-tongue + English literacy



Facilitating speaker-driven documentation



Indigenous radio



Pedagogical materials



Promotion through performance: Tontemboan

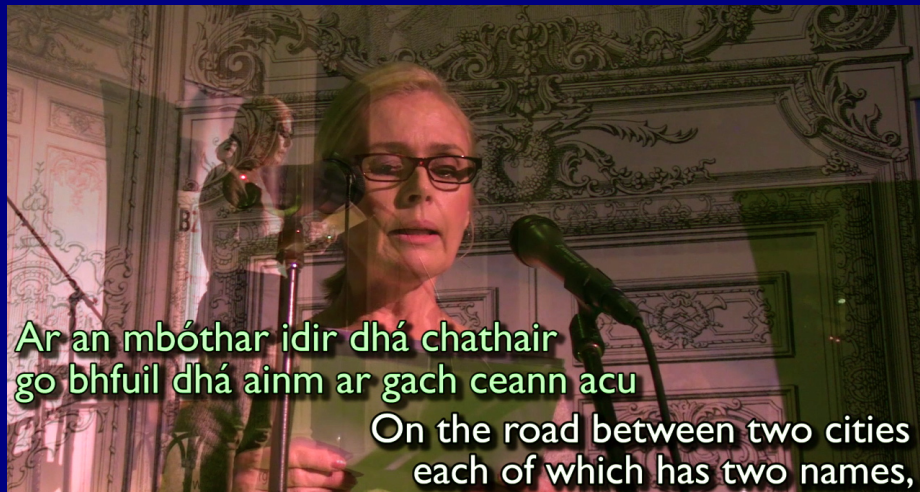


Mai cuman-ange, e wa'ilan Kasuruan, Apo' nimema' in tana'!
Come eat, o mighty god, ancestor who has cultivated the earth!

Promotion through performance: Mustang



Promotion through performance: Irish



Ar an mbóthar idir dhá chathair
go bhfuil dhá ainm ar gach ceann acu

On the road between two cities
each of which has two names,

Promotion through performance: Nahuatl



**Uan tipakiltia ikan motlatzotzontli uan motlahuiltzin
Nik tlakatia ipan moaltepemili.**

**You gladden them with your music and your light.
Because they are reborn on your land.**

A sample of endangered languages of NYC

Language	Area	Family	# of speakers
Livonian	Latvia	Finno-Ugric	1
Mahongwe	Gabon	Bantu	1,000
Tsou	Taiwan	Austronesian	2,130
Mixtec	Mexico	Oto-Manguean	—
Amuzgo	Mexico	Oto-Manguean	23,000
Wakhi	Pakistan & Tajikistan	East Iranian, Indo-European	35,000
Shughni	Tajikistan	East Iranian, Indo-European	35,000
Me'phaa	Mexico	Oto-Manguean	37,500
Mamuju	Indonesia	South Sulawesi, Austronesian	60,000
Masalit	Darfur, Sudan	Nilo-Saharan	60,900
Totonac	Mexico	Tepehua-Totonacan	120,000
Beria	Darfur, Sudan	Nilo-Saharan	160,000
Garifuna	Central America	Arawakan	195,000
Neo-Assyrian	North Iraq	Semitic	219,000
Kabardian	S. Russia	NW Caucasian	500,000
Ossetian	S. Russia	East Iranian, Indo-European	550,000

Where do NYC's threatened languages come from?

- ▶ Mexico
- ▶ Nepal
- ▶ Guatemala
- ▶ Sudan
- ▶ Central Asia + Caucasus
- ▶ Indonesia
- ▶ (among many other places)

Mapping NYC's languages

From Joshua Jelly-Schapiro & Rebecca Solnit. forthcoming. *Cultural Atlas of NYC*.
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Three case studies

A few ways in which three understudied languages contribute to our general understanding of human language:
Garifuna, Ikota and Wakhi

► The Central American region



▶ The Antilles



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- ▶ A shipwreck introduced a free West African population to the indigenous people of the island.
- ▶ The island became a contested area as French and English colonial powers extended their reach.

Garifuna grammar

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- ▶ **Aríhatina gasígamu**
'I saw an armadillo.'

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Aríha-ti Daniel gasígamu

see-3SG.MSC Daniel armadillo

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VERB AUX

SUBJECT OBJECT

Aríha I-umú-ti

Daniel gasígamu

see 3SG.MSC-TRAN-3SG.MSC Daniel armadillo

‘Daniel saw the armadillo.’

Auxiliaries and verbs

I will try to eat spinach

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I will try [to eat→spinach]

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I [will → [try → [to eat → spinach]]]
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I [will→[try→[to eat→spinach]]]

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Aku [makan→bayam]

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I [will→[try→[to eat→spinach]]]

(English)

Aku [coba→[makan→bayam]]

(Indonesian)

Ani [menase→[lexol→tered]]

(Hebrew)

Imε [manyeka→[ojaka→mpochi]]

(Ikota)

Auxiliaries and verbs

I [will→[try→[to eat→spinach]]]

(English)

Aku [akan→[coba→[makan→bayam]]]

(Indonesian)

Ani [hayiti→[menase→[lexol→tered]]]

(Hebrew)

Imε [mejaka→ [onyeka→[ojaka→mpochi]]]

(Ikota)

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- ▶ Categories thought to be in a head-complement relation:

VERB	→ OBJECT PHRASE	eat → spinach
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- ▶ Head-final orderings:

OBJECT PHRASE	←	VERB	spinach	←	eat
NOUN PHRASE	←	POSTPOSITION	New York	←	to
SUBORDINATE VERB	←	MATRIX VERB	to eat	←	try
VERB	←	AUXILIARY	eat	←	will

Back to Garifuna

- ▶ Some of these correlations are stronger than others. One of the strongest was:

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[[Aríha ← I-umú-ti] → gasígamu]

see

AUX

armadillo

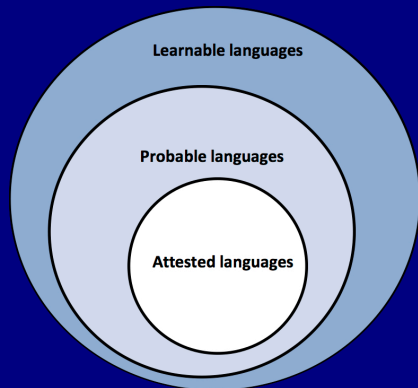
‘He saw the armadillo.’

Verb Aux Object order

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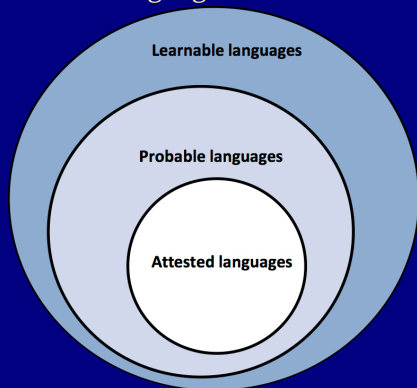
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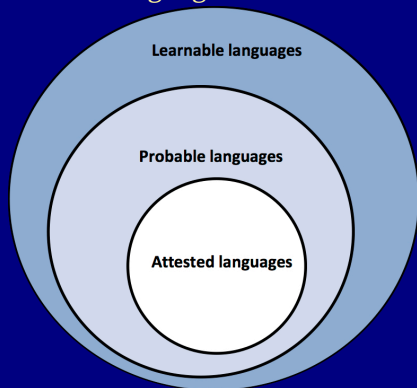
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The strongest conclusion is that the word order correlations discovered by Greenberg are not a hard-wired part of the human language faculty but rather due to something else.

Ikota background

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- ▶ Understudied and marginalized within Gabon.
- ▶ Few speakers in the United States



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you eat what?

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John ate beans.
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- ▶ Movement of question word next to the verb: (Aghem, Ossetian, Basque)

Maria Alan-ə fættə
 Maria Alan-ACC see.PST
 ‘Maria saw Alan’

Alan-ə tji fættə?
 Alan-ACC who see.PST
 ‘Who saw Alan?’

Asking questions in Ikota

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'Izanga took the pencil'

_____ **amokwa kreyon iza?**

took pencil who

'Who took the pencil?'

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You ate **WHAT?**

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You ate **WHAT**?

- ▶ which is actually the Chinese **no movement** pattern.
- ▶ This is clear when we look at subject questions:

WHO said that?

but not,

* ___ said that **WHO**?

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Izanga e-nyamwa-ka imε yana o-εlongwε
Izanga will.help me tomorrow in-house
'Izanga will help me in the house tomorrow.'

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_____ **enyamwaka imε yana o-εlongwε iza?**
 will.help me tomorrow in-house who
 ‘Who will help me in the house tomorrow?’

Asking questions in Ikota

Izanga anyeka inyamwaka ime

Izanga tried to help me

‘Izanga tried to help me.’

Asking questions in Ikota

Izanga anyeka inyamwaka imε

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'Izanga tried to help me.'

____ **Anyeka inyamwaka imε iza?**

tried to.help me who

'Who tried to help me?'

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- ▶ It turns out that what Ikota is doing is more similar to (a) than (b).
 - a. [The one who] helped me is who?
 - b. ____ helped me who?

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- ▶ It's conceivable that this pattern could replace a simpler pattern over time.
- ▶ Ikota still **disproves** the **surface generalization** that question words never gravitate towards the end of the sentence.
- ▶ The problem now becomes:
Why does only one language in the world require a pattern for questions such as: *The one who helped me is who?*

Wakhi background



Wakhi background



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photo credit: Nazir Abbas

- ▶ An Iranian language sometimes classified as “Pamiri”, spoken by roughly 58,000 people.

Case systems: Latin

- ▶ Case is assigned by verbs and adpositions to their complements as well as assigned “by position” to things like subjects and possessors.

Brutus venit.

Brutus.NOM comes
‘Brutus comes.’

Égo **Brutum** video.

1SG.NOM Brutus.ACC see.1SG
‘I see Brutus.’

Et tu, Brute!

and you, Brutus.voc
‘Even you, Brutus!’

de Brutō

about Brutus.ABL/DAT
‘about/to Brutus’

Brutī.

Brutus.GEN
‘belonging to Brutus’

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The dog bit John

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- ▶ It comes as a surprise then that Chomsky argued that the design of grammar has little to do with its role in communication.
- ▶ More specifically, **avoiding ambiguity** was not considered a major factor in the grammar of human languages.

Different types of case systems

▶ **NOMINATIVE-ACCUSATIVE**

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- gizona-k mutila-∅ ikusi du**
 ▶ man-ERG boy-ABS saw AUX
 ‘The man saw the boy.’

The Wakhi case system

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wuz=m **gefst-ε**

1SG.NOM=1SG run.PST-PST

‘I ran.’

maz_ɹ **to** **wind**

1SG.OBL 2SG.OBL see.PST

‘I saw you’

▶ Case distinguishes **SBJ** vs. **OBJ**

The Wakhi case system

	1SG (I)	2SG (you)
NOMINATIVE	wuz	tu
OBLIQUE	maz _ɔ	to/taw

▶ Wakhi has a rare split system

- ▶ NOM-ACC in the present tense

wuz=ɣ **gefs-am**

1SG.NOM=PROG run-1SG
'I run.'

- ▶ OBL-OBL in the past tense

wuz=m **gefst-ε**

1SG.NOM=1SG run.PST-PST
'I ran.'

wuz=ɣ **to** **win-am**

1SG.NOM=PROG 2SG.OBL see-1SG
'I see you.'

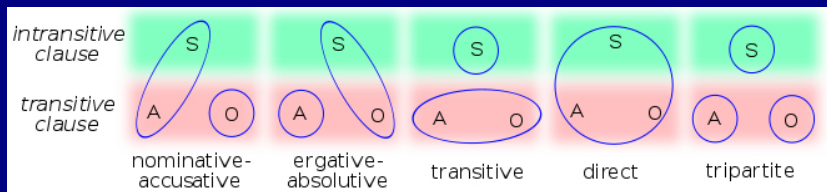
maz **to** **wind**

1SG.OBL 2SG.OBL see.PST
'I saw you'

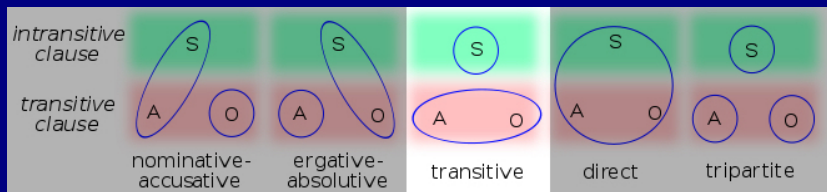
- ▶ Case distinguishes **SBJ** vs. **OBJ**

- ▶ Case serves no function!

Double oblique

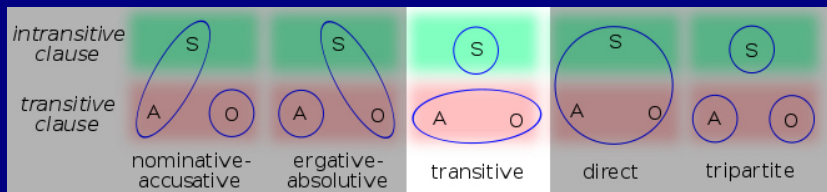


Double oblique



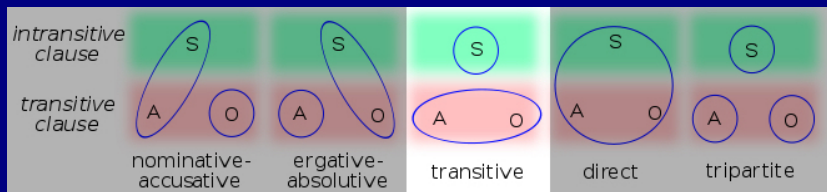
- ▶ Of all patterns that distinguish two cases, only the “double oblique” or “transitive” pattern is inherently non-informative.

Double oblique



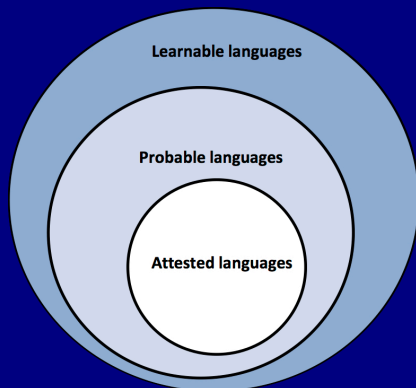
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- ▶ So anti-functional systems are rare but possible!

Double oblique

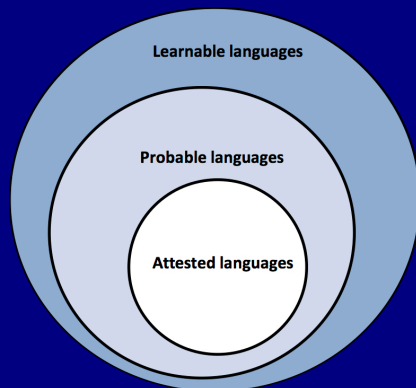


- ▶ Of all patterns that distinguish two cases, only the “double oblique” or “transitive” pattern is inherently non-informative.
- ▶ So anti-functional systems are rare but possible!
- ▶ An **improbable** but **possible human language**.

Conclusion

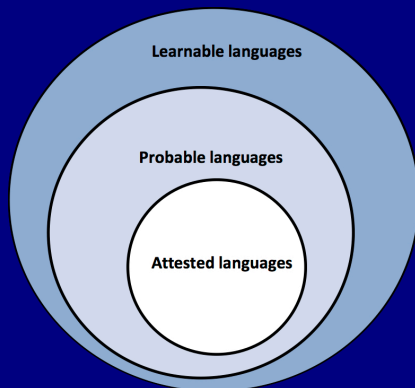


Conclusion



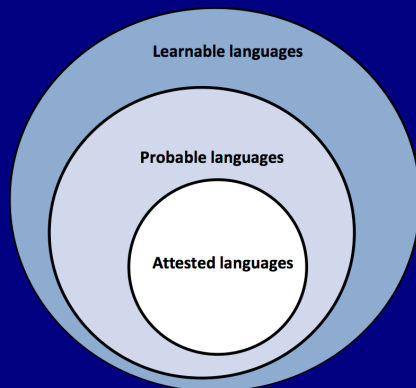
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Conclusion



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Conclusion



- ▶ Field linguists expand the innermost circles.
- ▶ Typologists improve our understanding of the middle circle.
- ▶ Theoretical linguists try to account for the outside circle.

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 - ▶ With Garifuna and Ikota, we've seen patterns that are otherwise unattested.
 - ▶ With Wakhi, we saw a pattern that makes a mess of many theories of case marking.

Conclusion

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 - ▶ For the speakers, losing a language means losing a rooted identity.
- ▶ Languages are also a feat of the human mind.
 - ▶ For linguists, there's still a long way to fully understand the limits of linguistic diversity.

Thanks for listening!

