

Issues in Teaching Dakelh

1 Dialects

“Carrier” consists of what linguists consider two distinct languages, Babine-Witsuwit’en and Carrier (narrow sense). Fluent speakers of one who are not familiar with the other say they only understand about half of what is said in the other language. Major differences in the sound systems mean that there are important differences in the writing systems for the two languages.

Carrier (narrow sense) does use a single writing system but is nonetheless dialectally quite diverse. The dialects differ not only in details of pronunciation but in having even basic words that are completely different (e.g. “knife”, “child”, “spoon”, “squirrel”, “five”, and “ten”), differences in the conjugation of verbs and in the possessive forms of nouns, and in syntax. Although fluent speakers understand other dialects, mixing dialects can produce inconsistencies that are confusing for learners.

2 Grammar very different from English

The grammar of Dakelh is **very** different from that of English. It is not safe to assume that anything works the same way as it does in English. Important differences include:

1. word order

- a. The typical word order of a simple clause is Subject-Object-Verb
- b. Dakelh has no prepositions. It has postpositions, which as their name implies, follow the noun phrase.

2. omissibility of subjects

The subject can be omitted if it is understood. In general, neither a noun phrase nor a pronoun like “I” or “you” or “they” is needed. A verb by itself can be a complete sentence.

3. conjugation of verbs

Verbs are conjugated for a large number of factors, many of them unfamiliar to speakers of English, French, and other European and Asian languages. These include: subject, object, tense/mood, negation, situation aspect, and category (mostly based on shape) of the subject of intransitive verbs/object of transitive verbs. As a result, any given verb may have tens of thousands of forms.

4. no infinitives

There are no infinitives. This means that grammatical constructions that use infinitives in English work differently. For example, the Dakelh equivalent of “I want to go swimming” is roughly “I want that I will go swimming”.

5. object-marked postpositions

In most situations postpositions cannot follow pronouns. Instead, they have special object-marked forms. For example, you can’t normally say **wheni ba** “for us”, putting the postposition **ba** “for” after **wheni** “us”. Instead, you have to say **neba** “for us”.

6. Most nouns do not have distinct singular and plural forms.

3 Word meanings often correspond poorly to English

A large part of the time, there is no one-to-one correspondance between English words and Dakelh words. This means that when learning words you cannot rely on short glosses and that when teaching you often cannot equate a Dakelh word with an English word. This is true even of what appear to be simple, basic, words. For example, the word **kwun** means not only “fire” but also the “light” in the sense of “lamp”. The kinship terms divide up people’s relatives in quite different ways. Dakelh has no word for “aunt” or “uncle”: it distinguishes two kinds of each, named by different words. Similarly it has no word for “sister” or “brother”: it distinguishes older brothers and sisters from younger brothers and sisters. On the other hand, there are no words for “great-uncle” or “great-aunt”: your grandfather’s brother is also your “grandfather”; your grandmother’s sister is also your “grandmother”.

For a large number of types of handling of objects, such as giving, carrying around, holding up, putting down, burying, and submerging, there is no single verb. There are eleven basic verbs, some with further subdivisions, for a total of twenty, for each, depending on the type of object. Giving someone a jacket requires a different verb from giving someone a mug. This means that Dakelh has no verb equivalent to English “give”, or “carry around” or “hold up”.

Since there are no infinitives, and there is no other concrete citation form that contains the information necessary to conjugate a verb, it makes no sense to ask a fluent speaker how to say “to sing” or “to love” or “to eat” or to put such a thing in a vocabulary list. You have to ask for more or teach specific verb forms, e.g. “I am going to sing” or “the two of us departed by boat”.

4 Pronunciation

Dakelh has many consonants unfamiliar to speakers of English and French. Learning to hear and produce some of them takes considerable effort and practice.

5 Resources

An extensive list of resources on Dakelh language and culture, in many cases with links to on-line or downloadable versions, is available at: <https://www.billposer.org/LanguageResources.html>

A useful source of background on the language is the book *The Carrier Language: A brief introduction*, which may be downloaded free at: <https://cnc.bc.ca/docs/default-source/library/poser-carrier-language.pdf>