

## Gitksan Word Formation: Documentation and Analysis for Linguists and Community

**Research Questions:** How are words "built" in Gitksan? Which of the available morphemes in Gitksan can be used productively to create new words? What are some strategies employed by Gitksan speakers to create these words? How can these same strategies be communicated to learners of Gitksan?

**Background and context:** Gitksan is an endangered language of the Tsimshianic language family. It is spoken in northern British Columbia with approximately 339 native speakers remaining (First Peoples' Cultural Council, 2014). As with many languages indigenous to Canada, children are no longer learning Gitksan in the home, and adults who are fluent speakers may instead speak English, both at home and within the community. Languages in these situations are at a greater risk of losing certain characteristics found in more frequently spoken languages, such as the ease with which the speaker community creates new words, called NEOLOGISMS. Neologisms naturally arise on an as-needed basis, for example when new technology or concepts are introduced to a community. Previously, when the Gitksan speaking population was larger and Gitksan was spoken more frequently, the arrival of the camera was met with a neologism: *haguxwsgalt'amdinsxw*, which may be roughly translated as 'a thing that can caused itself to be marked'. This is a phrase in English, but in Gitksan it is a single word made of many parts that cannot be separated from each other. These "word parts" are called MORPHEMES. All languages use morphemes, but each language has nuanced types with nuanced functions. To compare, the Gitksan word for 'camera' is composed of six distinct morphemes while Chinese uses only three (*zhào-xiàng-jī*, 'take a picture machine') and English needs only one morpheme, the full word. More recently invented technology such as the computer has not yet received a distinctly Gitksan word. Instead, a Gitksan speaker will use the English word which can be problematic from the perspective of language preservation. Learners may view the absence of Gitksan words needed to express modern concepts as a deficiency in the language, and as a result view English as somehow superior, discouraging the use of Gitksan as a language to be used at work, home, and in the community.

However, like all speakers of natural languages, Gitksan speakers have the capacity to create uniquely Gitksan neologisms for any concept. With the addition of neologisms relevant to any topic of discussion, Gitksan may then be spoken without have to refer to the socially and culturally dominant English language, thus aiding to dispel the myth of language deficiency and easing the pressure put upon Gitksan by English. The decline of aging native speakers of Gitksan, who are the only people inherently capable of determining the grammaticality and cultural appropriateness of a Gitksan word means that completion of this project sooner than later is imperative. With this concern in mind, the goal of this project is to consult Gitksan speakers to document the word formation processes available for neologism creation. This will result in both pedagogical material for the Gitksan community as well as contributions to the linguistic literature concerning strategies for mitigating the effects of language attrition. Through focussed and methodical consultation, I will logically derive uniquely Gitksan linguistic strategies for neologism creation and word building. A comprehensive and precise account of these strategies can then be used towards pedagogical planning and contribution to the linguistic literature.

**Methodology:** The availability of Gitksan consultants who are interested in documenting and preserving their language is crucial to this project. Through my involvement in the Gitksan Research Lab at UBC and my three years of field work on Gitksan, I already know many enthusiastic and willing Gitksan speakers with whom I can consult. Before meeting with these consultants, two phases of preparation must be completed: data analysis and hypothesis formulation.

**Data Analysis:** The number of morphemes available to create neologisms is finite. I have compiled a preliminary list of 54 morphemes to be investigated. Dictionaries (Hindle & Rigsby, 1973;

Gitksan Wet'suwet'en Education Society, n.d.) and a grammar (Rigsby, 1986) will also be consulted, resulting in a database of approximately 1000 unique morpheme-complex words. From this database, I will arrange and analyse these pre-existing Gitksan words into linguistic PARADIGMS. This is a method by which linguists discern patterns in meaning between words that appear linguistically related. When the meaning and structure of each Gitksan morpheme has been accurately described, the second phase of the project can begin.

*Hypothesis Formulation:* Before extensive consultation with consultants can begin, I must formulate hypotheses about the appropriate use of each morpheme. For example, the word for 'bucket' in Gitksan could potentially be either *ha-aks* or *an-aks*, where *aks* means 'water' and both *ha-* and *an-* are morphemes that can be used to denote 'a container' or 'to contain something'. The dictionary indicates that *ha-aks* is the actual word for 'bucket' in Gitksan. One hypothesis might then be that *ha-* works best to create nouns from other nouns. If a potential candidate for 'computer' was subsequently formulated, the morpheme *ha-* would be a strong candidate for participation in creating a neologism meaning 'computer' from a pre-existing noun. Potential candidates for words such as 'internet', 'outer space', 'movie star', or 'legal land claim' can then be created from this morpheme toolbox and can be presented to consultants for evaluation.

*Consultation:* Consensus among Gitksan speakers is important for acceptance and authenticity of new words. For this reason, I will consult a sampling of approximately 15 Gitksan speakers about all potential neologisms. The consultations will follow methodologies for linguistic elicitation as discussed in Matthewson (2004) and Burton & Matthewson (2011), and will result in data that is valuable in two ways. First, I will compile a catalogue of neologisms that have been approved by Gitksan speakers. Second, the consultations will confirm or refute the hypotheses formulated in the previous phase. These hypotheses are critical in determining how neologisms can be formed when fluent speakers of Gitksan are no longer available to give grammatical or cultural judgements on appropriateness.

*Contribution:* This project will make invaluable contributions to the viability of the endangered Gitksan language as a living, modern language, and provide descriptions and suggest strategies for future expansion of the language as the Gitksan people see fit. All approved neologisms will be uploaded to a free, online dictionary currently being written by the Gitksan Research Lab at UBC. A pedagogical guide on Gitksan word building for teachers of Gitksan will also be created. The guide will detail the appropriate and contextual uses of morphemes for the creation of words, and will help learners to rationalize some of the larger, morpheme-heavy words in Gitksan, aiding in overall language learning and encouraging language use. Additionally, the linguistic methodology and procedures employed by this project will be evaluated for the benefit of future fieldwork on other endangered languages, both in Canada and abroad.

*Personal Background:* I am a first year PhD student at the University of British Columbia. I have been working intensively with Gitksan consultants in Vancouver since 2011 and have travelled to Gitksan territory twice to conduct field work on the language. I am co-author of an upcoming phonetic sketch of Gitksan in the Journal of the International Phonetic association (Brown et al., IP), and was recently awarded a Jacobs Research Fund grant to conduct field work on neologisms. This grant provides ample and essential funds for compensating Gitksan consultants as well as fieldwork travel expenses. I am also currently involved in other projects related to Gitksan through the UBC Gitksan Research Lab (a collaborative research group of linguists and Gitksan speakers), which is directed and supervised by Drs. Henry Davis and Lisa Matthewson, both of whom have extensive experience conducting field work on Gitksan and other languages indigenous to British Columbia. These projects include the online dictionary, a book of stories told in Gitksan, and various projects in a range of linguistic subfields.