Western Apache Pronunciation Guide

The Western Apache language contains four vowels:

a—as in "father"

e—as in "red"

i—as in "police"

o—as in "go" (varying toward *u* as in "to")

All of the four vowels may be pronounced short or long, depending on duration of sound. Vowel length is indicated typographically with double vowels (e.g., *aa*).

Each of the vowels may be nasalized. This is indicated by a subscript hook placed under the vowel (e.g., *ǫ* and *ǫǫ*). In pronouncing a nasalized vowel, air passes through the nasal passage so as to give the vowel a soft, slightly ringing sound.

The four Western Apache vowels may also be pronounced with high or low tone. High tone is indicated by an accent mark over the vowel (e.g., *á*), showing that the vowel is pronounced with a rising pitch. In certain instances, the consonant *ń* is also spoken with high tone.

Western Apache contains approximately thirty-one consonants and consonant clusters. Fifteen of these are pronounced approximately as in English: *b, d, ch, h, j, k, l, m, n, s, sh, t, w, y, z.*

Another consonant in Western Apache is the *glottal stop.* Indicated by an apostrophe ('), the glottal stop may occur before and after all four vowels and after certain consonants and consonant clusters. Produced by closure of the glottis so as to momentarily halt air passing through the mouth, the glottal stop resembles the interruption of breath one hears between the two

"ohs" in the English expression "oh-oh." The glottalized con-
sonants and consonant clusters in Western Apache are *k', t',
ch', tł', and ts'.*

Other consonants and consonant clusters include:

dl—as in the final syllable of "paddling"

dz—as in the final sound of "adds"

g—as in "get" (never as in "gentle")

gh—similar to *g* but pronounced farther back in the mouth,
this consonant often sounds like a gutteral *w*

hw—as in "what"

kw—as in "quick"

ł—This consonant, sometimes called the "silent *l*," has no
counterpart in English. The mouth is shaped for *l* but the
vocal cords are not used. The sound is made by expelling air
from both sides of the tongue.

tł—as in "Tlingit"

ts—as in the final sound of "pots"

zh—as in "azure"

Basso, Keith. 1990. Western Apache Language and
Culture. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.

Development of the Writing System

In 1904, when Silas John Edwards was twenty-one years old and living in the community of East Fork on the Fort Apache Indian Reservation, he experienced a vision in which he was presented with a set of sixty-two prayers and an accompanying set of graphic symbols with which to write them. Silas John recalls his vision as follows:

> There were sixty-two prayers. They came to me in rays from above. At the same time I was instructed. He [God] was advising me and telling me what to do, at the same time teaching me chants. They were presented to me—one by one. All of these and the writing were given to me at one time in one dream. . . .

> God made it [the writing], but it came down to our earth. I liken this to what has happened in the religions we have now. In the center of the earth, when it first began, when the earth was first made, there was absolutely nothing on this world. There was no written language. So it was in 1904 that I became aware of the writing; it was then that I heard about it from God.

Silas John used his writing system for the sole purpose of recording the sixty-two prayers he received in his vision. The

script was never applied to the large body of traditional Apache prayers already in existence by 1904, nor was it ever employed as a vehicle for secular speech. This is important to keep in mind because the merits of the script, as well as its limitations, stem directly from the fact that it was purposely designed to communicate information relevant to the performance of ritual and *not* to write the infinitude of messages capable of expression in spoken Western Apache.

In 1916, a full twelve years after Silas John experienced his vision, he publicly proclaimed himself a messiah and began to preach. At the same time, he wrote down each of his prayers on separate pieces of tanned buckskin, using paints made from a mixture of pulverized minerals and the sap of yucca plants. This technique of writing soon was replaced, however, and by 1925 prayer texts rendered in ink were appearing on squares of cardboard. Today, many (and possibly all) of the original painted buckskins have been lost or disposed of, and Silas John's script is preserved in paper 'prayer books' (*sailish jaan bi 'okąąhí*) belonging to Apaches living on the San Carlos and Fort Apache reservations.

By 1920, when it was apparent to Silas John that his acceptance as a religious prophet was assured, he selected twelve 'assistants' (*sailish jaan yiłnaanałseehí*) to circulate among the Apache people, pray for them, and encourage them to congregate. The assistants were given instruction in how to read and write and, after acquiring these skills, went through an initiation ritual in which they were presented with painted buckskins of their own. Thus equipped, they were placed in charge of carefully prepared sites known as 'holy grounds' and urged to perform ceremonials on a regular basis, using their buckskins as mnemonic aids. As time passed and members of the original group of assistants began to die, Silas John appointed new ones who in turn were taught the script, formally initiated, and given the texts of prayers. This process, which has continued unmodified up to the present, accounts for the fact that even among Apaches knowledge of Silas John's writing system is not widespread. From the very beginning, access to the system was tightly controlled by Silas John himself, and competence in it

was initially restricted to a small band of elite ritual specialists. Commenting on this point, one of our Apache consultants observed:

> Silas John just let a few people know what the writing meant. He once told my father that it had to be kept just like it was when he heard about it from God. If some person ever tried to change it, he said, God would stop listening to the people when they prayed. He knew that if he let it out for all the people to know some wouldn't know about this, some wouldn't take it seriously. Maybe some would try to change it. So he just gave it to a few people, men and women who would learn it right—just the way he taught them—and leave it alone. It has been that way for a long time, and it [the writing] is still the way it was when it came to this earth from God.

Description of the Writing System

The following account of Silas John's writing system is based upon an analysis of six texts that were copied from a prayer book belonging to one of his youngest assistants on the San Carlos reservation. This was the only prayer book we were permitted to see, and although it contained several additional texts, instruction in these was prevented by the sudden and unexpected hospitalization of our chief consultant, a much older assistant whom Silas John had recommended as a particularly well-qualified teacher. The fact that we were unable to enlarge our sample hindered our analysis at certain points.[4] However, it did not prevent us from discovering the underlying principles according to which the writing system operates, the kind of information it conveys, or the concepts Apaches must learn to become literate. Our description should enable anyone with a knowledge of spoken Apache to read fully and correctly the six prayer texts that constitute our corpus. No more can honestly be claimed since these were the only texts in which we ourselves received adequate training and developed an acceptable measure of competence by Western Apache standards.

A 'Silas John prayer text' (*sailish jaan bi 'okǫǫhí*) may be defined as a set of graphic 'symbols' (*ke'eschín*) written on buckskin or paper whose members are arranged in horizontal lines
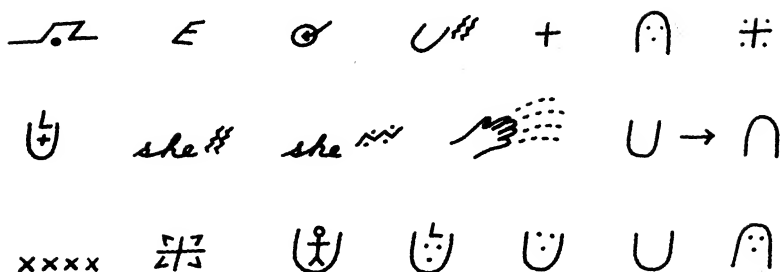
FIGURE 6. Text of 'prayer for life' in correct reading form, from left to right in descending order.

to be read from left to right in descending order (figure 6). Each symbol is separated from the one that follows it by an empty space and corresponds to a single line of prayer which may consist of a word, a phrase, or one or more sentences.

The sixty-two prayers authored by Silas John are partitioned into three major categories: (1) 'prayers for life' (*bi'ihi'da' baa 'okąąhí*), which promote health, longevity, and the maintenance of tension-free social relations; (2) 'prayers for man and woman' (*ndee hik'e 'isdzán 'okąąhí*), which are invoked to combat and resolve marital discord; and (3) 'prayers for sickness' (*'ida'áń 'okąąhí*), which are employed to relieve physiological and mental illnesses caused by witchcraft, snakebite, or supernatural forces that have been antagonized by disrespectful behavior.

Prayers belonging to the same category are virtually identical in linguistic structure with the result that the number and sequential arrangement of their written symbols exhibit little variation. Consider, for example, the three 'prayers for life' whose texts are presented in figure 7; note that each text contains the same number of symbols (20) and that their serial order is disturbed at only two points (4 and 8). Because this kind of uniformity is typical, the texts in each prayer category manifest a characteristic pattern. Two of these patterns can be readily discerned by comparing the three texts of 'prayer for life' in figure 7 with the three texts of 'prayer for sickness' that appear in figure 8.

TEXT I   TEXT 2   TEXT 3

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 *she*   *she*   *she*
10 *she*   *she*   *she*
11
12
13
14 x x x x   x x x x   x x x x
15
16
17
18
19
20

FIGURE 7. Three texts of 'prayer for life', arranged in vertical order for ease of comparison.

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