

There is a language—now with few speakers left—whose words for teaching and learning are interestingly different from English and other Western languages. The language—“Sitsiuginal”—is spoken in rural villages outside Thimpu, Bhutan, though it was once more widely spread.

The language received a modest amount of field study, done years ago, by only one linguist. She was a good (but rather reclusive) field linguist, a person I knew a bit and greatly respected, a woman named Mallory Justine Jay, who published under the rather spiffy name M. J. Jay. I liked this because it reminded me of my mother Kathleen Gee, Kay Gee, K.G.

“M. J.” (as people called her) published, with John Benjamins, a descriptive grammar of Sitsiuginal that was exemplary in associating some cultural information with grammatical aspects of the language. Her book is long out of print—as, indeed, seems to be the fate of linguistic monographs these days—though I have long treasured my battered copy of her grammar.

At the time I knew M. J., I had no interest in education and worked on syntactic theory. I was intrigued, though, that Sitsiuginal had a whole set of words that have the general meaning “one does X another does Y”. These words mean that one person does something with the intention of having another person do something and the person actually does it for the betterment or improvement of both (there are another set of words that deal with neutral or negative joint action). There is usually an assumption that the first actor is in a position to help the second and that the second person has sought out this help.

These words, like other aspects of Sitsiuginal grammar, reflect a rather different view of action that Sitsiuginal culture has in comparison to English. An action can be the joint result of more than one person acting together or in sequence. In these cases the actor and the action are “joint people” engaged in “joint action” and “joint intentions”.

Recently, in looking again at “joint action words” in Sitsiuginal, I realized that the language has no separate words for teaching or learning. It does have a variety of words that we would associate with teaching and learning. These are all joint action words. It is hard to translate these words into English, since they are very much caught up with the culture and practices of the Sitsiuginal people. I try my best below, based on examples of actual uses of the words that M. J. gives her in grammar. Some examples, among others:

[Note: Sitsiuginal is a polysynthetic language—which means it combines multiple morphemes into one word. Below I separate different morphemes from each other by a hyphen (“-”). All these words have a final suffixal type morpheme *enoe*, which means “joint action for mutual benefit or betterment”. The letters below are meant to have APA values, though I have to use characters from my keyboard to approximate APA symbols]:

*Diyh-leyt-enoe*

“When one talks, another one heeds”. The closest I can get here is to offer something like this: “when someone puts something in another person’s head with language, the other person takes it in with activity and effort”

*Nrek-sid-wohs-enoe*

“When one shows another one discerns”. Perhaps this could be put: “when one person shows or models something for someone else, the other person sees its parts as they fit into the whole”. *Nreksidwohsenoe* often involves *diyhleytenoe* in coordination. This is treated by the Sitsiuginal as a higher-order joint action.

*Tkaer-kab-diyf-enoe*

“When one reacts another one reacts”. This is even harder, perhaps something like this: “when one person offers another person a reaction that is explicitly designed to get a certain response helpful to the other (or both people), the other responds in an appropriate way”

*Tkar-etnin-gised-enoe*

“When one makes something another one uses it”. This seems simple, but in Sitsiuginal culture it is more complicated. Sitsiuginal people regularly create or rearrange spaces and environments for themselves and each other in order to facilitate certain practices. The word *tkaretningisedenoe* means that the work of creating or rearranging the environment and the way others make use of it either match or bring out good things. Sitsiuginal people view tools as sorts of mini “designed environments” that facilitate appropriate uses and products.

1. J. Jay's grammar says nothing about formal schooling in Sitsiuginal culture, since her interest was in grammar and cultural action in the Sitsiuginal "public sphere", so to speak. She did once mention to me that formal schooling of the Western sort had been imposed on the Sitsiuginal people by the more dominant cultural groups around them by the time of her fieldwork. I knew and cared nothing about education at the time and did not really know what this meant. She mentioned, as well, that Sitsiuginal people used one of their "joint action" words for formal schooling, the word *lel-lar-aep-neo* which means "one acts another acts side by side". The suffix "neo" means "neutral joint action" (the suffix for "negative joint action" is *neon*).

Now, many years later, as someone interested in education, I wonder how different debates and theories of education, teaching, and learning would be if we spoke Sitsiuginal. Would we research them differently? Would we change how we teach and learn?