

Introduction to Sahbeꞑ

*An introduction and reference grammar for
the Sahbeꞑ language*

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Introduction

I created the Sahḃ language for u/roipoiboy's March 2021 Speedlang challenge on r/conlangs and the related Discord server. As it was mentioned that the very first Segments challenge phonology would meet the phonological requirements of the challenge, I took what my submission and tweaked it a bit to make it feel a bit more like something I'd create from scratch. It marks one of a few big attempts I've made at creating an *a priori* language.

The inspirations I took for the language include: Kanien'kéha, which is one language from a number that are spoken by people in a class on language reclamation and revitalization contemporary with creating the language; Japanese, in the form of particles that dictate the roles of noun phrases and also as partial inspiration for the open pronoun system; and general bits-n-bobs I mixed together from various other languages.

God bless Awkwords for helping me create sentence-esque strings of words, Conor Quinn for his technique for teaching English-speakers to pronounce [h] in coda position, and for the now defunct Bazaar Spices for keeping me high on Svanetian salt.

Phonology

Sahbe has a relatively uniform phonemic inventory consisting of a series of stops that contrast in voicing, a series of voiceless spirants, two approximants /w/ and /l/, and the nasal consonants /m/ and /n/. It distinguishes four points of articulation: bilabial, coronal, dorsal and glottal.

	Bilabial	Coronal	Dorsal	Glottal
Stop	p b	t d	k g	
Spirant	f	s	x	h
Approximant	w	l		
Nasal	m	n		

The language has a standard five-vowel inventory, also distinguishing nasalized versions of three of them. Nasalized vowels are indicated in the orthography by the addition of an ogenek, which is called a **dani** “foot” in the language. The high vowels are not nasalized and, when in an environment that would cause them to become nasalized, are lowered to [ẽ] and [õ] respectively.

	High	Back
High	i	u
Mid	e ẽ	o õ
Low		a ã

In addition to plain vowels, there are also several rising and falling diphthongs. These include **ae** [aĩ], **oe** [oĩ], and **ei** [eĩ], as well as **ua** [ʊa], **uo** [ʊo] and **ue** [ʊe]. All diphthongs can also be nasalized, indicated in the orthography by writing the core vowel with the nasal diacritic (i.e. **aqe** [ãĩ], **uqẽ** [ʊẽ]).

Generally, words are initially stressed when mono- or bisyllabic. In words with more than three syllables, it's the even syllables that carry stress, with primary stress on the second syllable of the word.

Some syllables break the regular stress patterns of Sahbe. These might be morphemes like the collective suffix **-tá** or foreign loanwords whose stress pattern was also loaned

into the language, for example **galé** “boat”. As can be seen in the examples, the syllable that carries the stress that breaks the pattern is marked with an acute accent called a **kebqe** “thief”.

Alternations

Sound changes in Sahbe are relatively easy to predict based on their conditioning environments. For the most part, these changes are the results of nasalization, intervocalic softening and spirantization following high vowels.

The most obvious change is the devoicing and subsequent deletion of high vowels, which is responsible for geminate consonants and NP clusters. When a high vowel /i/ or /u/ occurs between two voiceless consonants or a nasal consonant and a voiceless stop, that vowel becomes unvoiced. If it is a nasal consonant and a stop consonant or two of the same voiceless consonants have a voiceless vowel between them, it's deleted. For example, the underlying phonemic structure of the perfect form of the verb **hixe** “to burn” is /hike-hti-te-he/, but it has the surface form **hixehtte** “burned”, with the second /i/ falling out between the two /t/.

The treatment of /h/ is another change that causes chain reactions. The only environment in which /h/ remains unchanged is initially. When it appears in coda position, it often slightly increases the length of the preceding vowel and gives it an aspirated release. It could also be described as preaspiration of the following consonant. Between vowels, /h/ is invariably dropped, causing diphthongs to arise as vowels collide. In the event two identical vowels occur next to one another as a result of this change, one of them is deleted.

The first of two other changes that are reflected in the orthography is the voicing of voiceless plosives before nasal vowels, which is a change that can be seen in the name of the language, **Sahbe**. The name is actually just the word **sahbe** “speech, language” which is also the infinitive of the verb “to speak” (present form **sahpe**, aorist form **sahpeya**, perfect form **sahpehtte**). Spirants besides /s/ and /h/ are also voiced before nasal vowels, but they don't change orthographically. In summary:

Phonemic	Before Nasal	Written
/p/	[b]	b
/f/	[v]	f

/t/	[d]	d
/k/	[g]	g
/χ/	[ɬ]	x

The second change that is reflected in the writing is the spirantization of plosives after high vowels. This change affects both voiceless and voiced plosives. An example of this change can be seen when applying the collective suffix **-tá** to the word **kali** “woman”, producing **kalisá** “womankind”. All plosives transition to the spirants that correspond to their place of articulation and voicing, except for /d/, which become [l], and /g/, which is deleted after /u/, but becomes [h] after /i/.

Phonemic	After High Vowel	Written
/p/	[f]	f
/b/	[v]	f
/t/	[s]	s
/d/	[l]	l
/k/	[χ]	x
/g/	∅ or [h]	h

The next most prominent sound change is the denasalization of nasal consonants intervocalically. When they occur between vowels both /m/ and /n/ nasalize the vowels that occur before and after and transition to [w] and [h], respectively. This sound change feeds the aforementioned voicing change and an example has already been presented in the form of the infinitive suffix **-ę**. Though it’s only a simple nasal vowel, the underlying form of the suffix is ***-ne** added to the verb stem’s thematic vowel **-e**. So the phonemic form of **sahbę** “to speak” is /sahpene/, transitioning in pronunciation from [sahpene] to [sahpěhě] to [sahběhě] and ultimately to [sa^hbě].

Noticeable in the accent of speakers is a process of lenition that affects consonants between vowels. For stop consonants, this surfaces as partial voicing or spirantization,

depending on if the phoneme affected is a voiceless or voiced consonant. For example, **tuatá** “rocks” is pronounced [t̪uɑɖɑ] and **kɔba** “branch, arm” is pronounced [kãβɑ]. This change also affects the phoneme /l/, which is turned into an alveolar tap [ɾ].

Grammar

In a snapshot, Sahbɛ is an agglutinative language that inflects its nouns for number and definiteness, its verbs for aspect and mostly follows a nominative accusative alignment. It relies upon particles rather than affixes to indicate the semantic roles of its noun phrases and recognizes multiple classes of noun and verb.

Nouns

The language has several types of common nouns, the simplest of which consists of just a plain CVCV root, such as **sɔsa** “girl”. More common than these bare root stems are nouns that are derived from verbs in the form of the infinitive or participles.

The infinitive of a verb, characterized by the suffix **-ɛ**, can stand as a noun referring to an instance of that action or that action as a whole. The name of the language is an example of this, where the original meaning of **sahbɛ** “to speak” has broadened to “speaking, speech” and finally to “language”.

Participles are the other common source of nouns from verbs. There are four participles attached to verb stems with their final **e** changed to **o**: **-ni**, the present active participle, **-nɔ**, the present passive participle, **-hti**, the past active participle, and **-hdã**, the past passive participle. Each of these can be used as an adjective, but also as a noun:

Participle	Example	Adjective	Noun
Present Active	hiɣɔɛ	“burning”	“torch”
Present Passive	hiɣɔhɔ	“(being) burned”	“kindling”
Past Active	hiɣohti	“burned”	“altar”
Past Passive	hiɣohdã	“(been) burned”	“ash”

Pluralization

Sahbɛ recognizes several categories of noun, which surfaces as differences in how nouns are pluralized. All nouns are singular when following numbers, except Class 3.

Class 1 nouns are nouns that are root nouns and are considered animate, including words like **kali** “woman”, **taxa** “water”, and **kiwi** “bird”. These nouns are all pluralized

through reduplication of the initial syllable, so the examples given would become **kakali** “women”, **tataxa** “waters”, and **kixiwi** “birds”.

Class 1a nouns are those that are root nouns, but are considered inanimate and form their plurals with a suffix **-tá**. This means that **tua** “rock” gives **tuatá** “rocks” and **dohta** “wood” gives **dohttá** “[various kinds of] wood”. This class also includes all foreign loanwords.

Class 2 nouns are participles that all form their plurals with the suffix **-bi**. This suffix is used with all participles, regardless of whether past or present, active or passive. For example, **gilqe** “seer, fortuneteller” becomes **gilqebi** “seers, fortunetellers” and **polehda** “child, fruit” becomes **polehdabi** “children, [multiple] fruit”.

Class 2a nouns are participles that are treated as mass nouns, such as **hixohda** “ash”. These nouns are generally not pluralized in general use, but might take the suffix **-tá** when there are multiple instances of the mass noun being referred to. The example **hixohda** “ash” is a good example of this, as culinary ash is popular with speakers, requiring vendors to speak about their **hixohdatá** “[various kinds of] ash” offerings.

Class 2b nouns are infinitive verbs which invariably take **-si** to form plurals. For example, **sahbe** “language” gives **sahbesi** “languages” and **gile** “sight, signal” gives **gilesi** “sights, signals”.

Class 3 nouns are those that are thought of as natural pairs and can include nouns from all other categories, such as **dani** “foot”, **xahlqe** “judge, caller”¹, **taxawebex** “quenching”². These words all form their initial plural with the suffix **-li**, which indicates that it’s a pair (**danili** “[two] feet”, **xahlqeli** “[two] judges, callers”, **taxawebeli** “[two] quenchings”). The dual form can be further expanded by adding the suffix **-tá**, which refers to multiple pairs of the noun (**danilisá** “pairs of feet”, **xahlqelisá** “pairs of judges, callers”, **taxawebelsá** “pairs of quenchings”). With numbers, the singular or dual form can be used to indicate lone nouns or pairs.

Definiteness

The unmarked form of the noun is always definite. To indicate that a noun is indefinite, the ignorative **wq** is added after any plural markers. Orthographically, it is not written independent of the noun it’s modifying.

¹ A traditional ceremony to serve justice amongst Sahbe speakers would require two *xahlqe*, or “callers”. The word comes from the verb *xahlq* “to call” and refers to the manner in which they would call out their ruling on whatever issue was set before them. If they were in complete opposition, no action would be taken.

² Traditional smithing required two instances of quenching the worked metal to set it.

Definite	Translation	Indefinite	Translation
pe	“the fire”	pew	“a fire”
pepe	“the fires”	pepew	“some fires”
dohtu	“the wood”	dohtu	“some wood”
dohtte	“the [kinds of] woods”	dohtte	“some [kinds of] wood”

Pronouns

Pronouns are an open class in Sahbe. Any noun can be used as a pronoun if suffixed with one of the two pronoun forming suffixes. The first of these is the speaker-reference suffix **-me**, which can be observed in the general first person pronoun **omme** “I”. Other examples of this suffix allow the speaker to identify themselves in specific ways and could be translated into English by the phrase “Speaking as a..., I...”, for example a young woman who wanted to emphasize that she was speaking from the position of someone of her gender to use a first person pronoun **sasawe** derived from the noun **sasa** “girl”.

The second pronoun forming suffix is the non-speaker-reference suffix **-se**. Applied to the same noun roots above, the pronouns **qwose** “themselves” and **sasase** can be derived. Pronouns derived with this suffix cover all second and third person pronouns.

With those two suffixes, a slew of pronouns can be formed. The following table contains a large list of potential pronouns, but by no means is exhaustive.

Noun	Translation	Pronoun	Translation
kali	woman	kalewe	I, as a woman...
kali	woman	kalise	she
sasa	girl	sasawe	I, as a girl...
sasa	girl	sasase	she

gilqe	seer	gilomme	I, being wise...
gilqe	seer	gilqese	they [who are wise]
da	big	dawe	I, as a large person...
da	big	dase	your majesty
lolo	here	lolowe	I, we here...
lolo	here	lolose	the ones here
fedá	cold	fedawe	I, being cold...
fedá	cold	fedase	the cold ones
degq	earth	degowe	we (people of the same region)
degq	earth	degqse	you, they (farmers)

Pronoun choice is influenced by personal preference and politeness, but there are some which are common and correspond generally to English pronouns. These are outlined in the table below.

	Singular	Plural
1st Person	omme	wamme
2nd Person	golose	wqese
3rd Person	kalise	kakalise
	tuase	tuatáse

Thematic Particles

Rather than using cases to indicate the thematic roles that noun phrases fill, Sahbe has a collection of particles that serve the same purpose. These particles appear immediately after the noun phrase to which they apply and before any postpositions, if present. This has the added benefit of nearly all noun phrases being punctuated by either a thematic particle or postposition, making them easy to identify. The complete inventory of thematic particles appears in the following table.

Name	Form	Use Cases
Nominative	su	Marks the subject of an intransitive verb and the agent of a transitive verb
Experiential	se	Marks the experiencer of of sensory verbs
Genitive	li	Marks a possessor and can be used with certain postpositions to indicate motion from somewhere
Dative	me	Marks an indirect object and can be used with certain postpositions to indicate motion to somewhere
Locative	da	Marks location at something and can be used with certain postpositions to indicate location

Note that the object of a transitive verb receives no explicit marking.

Adjectives

Adjectives and other nominal modifiers such as relative clauses or postpositional clauses always precede the nouns that they modify, without exception. This is because

the final element of a noun phrase is always considered the head, so if an adjective were to follow its noun, speakers would perceive it as the primary head. For example, **mexqe qwq** “the killing person (murderer)” would be confused with **qwq mexqe** “the personal killer (assassin)”.

Modifiers with Particles

If a modifier is constructed using a thematic particle, such as the genitive **li** or the locative **da**, it will precede any simple adjectives that describe the noun. If the order is ignored, the adjective will be perceived to be modifying the noun phrase marked by the particle.

kebqe li feda taxa
“the thief’s water”

feda kebqe li taxa
“the cold thief’s water”

Relative Clauses

Relative clauses are formed by taking a fully formed clause and removing the nominative or experiencer argument. The subordinating particle **ga** is then added after the clause. At this point, the clause can be treated like a noun, so the genitive particle **li** is added to make the clause modify the noun of the main clause.

Kalise su tasatawq me pehte taxa.
“She put water into some cups.”

[Tasatawq me pehte taxa] ga li sasa su hife.
“The girl who put water into some cups is running.”

Adverbs that Modify Adjectives

There is no difference between adjectives and adverbs in Sahbe, however, when used as an adverb, the treatment of the adjective in question is different. a sequence of two or more adjectives in a row sets up an adjective with an adverbial modifier, as in **da suala** “very beautiful”, which is literally *big beautiful*. If, instead, a speaker was wanting to use both of those words as descriptors for a noun, the conjunction **gala** “and” must appear between them, as in **da gala suala hiqewq** “a big and beautiful beacon” versus **da suala hiqewq** “a very beautiful beacon”.

Verbs

Sahbe recognizes and divides its verbs into intransitive and transitive categories and then further into verbs that require the nominative marker or the experiential marker. Unfortunately for learners, there is no distinction in the shape or pronunciation of these categories, so they must be learned with the verb. Each of these is marked for one of three aspects, either present, aorist or perfect.

The present form of the verb is created by adding **-he** to the verb root, which in most cases will result in it surfacing as the bare root. For example, the verb **galabe** “to join, unite” has the verb root **galabe-** and becomes **galabehe** > **galabe** in the present. The present is used for actions that are ongoing or will occur in the future.

The aorist is represented by the suffix **-xa** added to the verb root. To continue the example, the aorist of **galabe** is **galabexa**. The aorist is used to speak about the past when it’s not clear if the action was completed. It’s also used to describe things that are done habitually and to express general truths.

Kebqe su hifexa.

“The thief ran.”

Omme su gedexa taxaxa.

“I drink water.”

Kikiwiwo su hehlexa.

“Birds fly.”

The perfect has its origins in the past active participle, marked by **-hti**, and the conjugated copula **te**. These two suffixes come together because of high vowel deletion, resulting in the surface form **-htte**. Continuing the example, we end up with the perfect form **galabehtte**.

The Copula

Unlike all other verbs, the copula **te** can be used as a normal verb or as a clitic in the present tense and, perhaps more noticeably, doesn’t require the use of thematic particles. This is especially prevalent in existential clauses like **Omme sahnqete** “I am a man”.

The copula is also used in constructing the passive voice. To passivize a verb, it is changed into one of its two passive participles ending in either **-na** or **-hda** which follows the conjugated form of the copula. In order to reintroduce the agent of the verb, the agent is placed before the participle with the genitive thematic particle appearing between them.

Saşa su kepe taḡawq.

“The girl takes some water.”

Taḡawq te [saşa li] kepehda.

“The water is taken [by the girl].”

Negation

Negation in Sahbë is indicated by a change in word order and the optional presence of the word **gə** at the beginning of the sentence. At an earlier point in the language’s history, negation was tied to a strategy to indicate the evidentiality of a statement by beginning the statement by saying “I don’t hear...” or “I don’t see...”, using the defunct negative adverb **ba**. The word **gə** complementized the following clause which followed the VSO structure of matrix clauses. Over time, speakers used an insubordination strategy, dropping the evidential piece of the structure, to form negatives:

Omme su ba kule gə kepe saşa taḡawq.

“I don’t hear that the girl takes some water.”

Gə kepe saşa taḡawq.

“The girl isn’t taking some water.”

Note that the nominative thematic particle is dropped in the negative. The original structure still exists in the language and can be seen in statements like **Omme su kanne gə te tuase lolo** “I know that it’s here”, but sentences like that can no longer undergo insubordination. Also note that negating a sentence like the last example also involves the modern negation strategy.

Omme su kanne gə te tuase lolo.

I NOM know-PRES that be.PRES it here

“I know that it’s here.”

gə kanne omme gə te tuase lolo.

that know-PRES I that be.PRES it here

“I don’t know that it’s here.”

Questions

Simple yes-no questions in Sahbë are easily formed by adding the question particle **he** to the end of a sentence with an upwards intonation.

Saşa su kepe taḡawq.

“The girl takes some water.”

Sąsa su kepe taxawo, he?

“The girl takes some water?”

These questions are answered by repeating the conjugated verb, either with or without the marker of a negative phrase **ga**. So for the example above, a person could respond **Kepe** to mean “Yes” or **ga kepe** to mean “No”.

For other questions, the language employs an ignorative noun **wq**, which is the same as the suffix that marks a noun as indefinite. This noun is used in the main clause and the part of the question that contains the meaning is placed into a subordinate clause, following the word **ga**. In order to change the information being queried, thematic particles are employed following the ignorative.

Kiwi su gede taxawo.

“The bird is drinking some water.”

Wq te ga gede kiwi?

“What’s the bird drinking?”

Wq da te ga gede kiwi taxawo?

“Where is the bird drinking water?”

Wq li te ga gede kiwi taxawo?

“Why is the bird drinking water?”

Wq gise da te ga gede kiwi taxawo?

“When is the bird drinking water?”

Translation Tasks

1429th Just Used 5 Minutes of Your Day

The door almost closed because of the wind.

Bega sę nua tepe fęwǫhdą lihą sihga.

[bɛyã sę nua tepe fęwǫhɔɔã lihã sihɔga]

door EXP almost become-PRES close-PPP because wind

1428th Just Used 5 Minutes of Your Day

Big mobs of people fought each other there.

Ǫwǫtá li da sulǫhąbiwǫ su golo bahtęxa ǫwǫtáse.

[ǫwǫ'ta li da sulǫhąbiwǫ su goro bahtęxa ǫwǫ'tase]

person-PL GEN big gathering-PL-INDEF NOM there fight-AOR themselves

1427th Just Used 5 Minutes of Your Day

They walked straight past each other.

Sahnǫebise³ su sahnehte ǫwǫtáse me gęsi.

[sah'nǫiβise su sah'neht:e ǫwǫ'tase me gęsi]

they NOM walk-PERF themselves DAT past

1426th Just Used 5 Minutes of Your Day

[He] is seeking to take a pear, [and] took one, but is afraid.

Sahnǫese su sage dannusiwǫ kebę, gala hąwą kepehte, tu hąssu da galate.

[sah'nǫise su saye dan:u'siwǫ kebę gara hąwã kepeht:e tu hãs:u da garaɔe]

he NOM seek-PRES pear-INDEF take-INF and one take-PERF but fear LOC with-COP

1425th Just Used 5 Minutes of Your Day

The road is closed because the train is going to come.

Sahnę fęwǫhdąte lihą tuanedę⁴ su mide.

[sah'nę vēwǫhɔɔɔe lihã tuaneɔę su miɔe]

road closed-COP because train NOM come-PRES

³ *Sahnǫebise* is a plural 3rd person pronoun that is formed from the word *sahnǫe* “man”. Ergo, this usage refers to exclusively men.

⁴ *Tuanedę* is a compound noun comprised of *tua* “stone” and *nedę* “snake”. Being a modern coinage, it resists the usual denasalization that affects /n/ intervocalically.

Charts

Noun Pluralization

	Dual	Plural	Compound
Class 1	-	CV-	-
Class 1a	-	-tá	-
Class 2	-	-bi	-
Class 2a	-	-tá	-
Class 2b	-	-si	-
Class 3	-li	-	-lisá

Thematic Particles

Name	Form	Use Cases
Nominative	su	Marks the subject of an intransitive verb and the agent of a transitive verb
Experiential	sę	Marks the experiencer of of sensory verbs
Genitive	li	Marks a possessor and can be used with certain postpositions to indicate motion from somewhere
Dative	me	Marks an indirect object and can be used with certain postpositions to indicate motion to somewhere
Locative	da	Marks location at something and can be used with certain postpositions to indicate location

Verb Conjugation

Name	Form	Use Cases
Present	-he	Refers to ongoing actions or actions that will occur in the future
Aorist	-xa	Refers to actions in the past that may or may not have been completed, and to habitual actions. It also is used for stating general truths
Perfect	-htte	Refers to actions in the past that have been completed

Forms of the Ignorative

“who”	wq qwq
“what”	wq
“where”	wq da
“when”	wq gise da
“why”	wq li
“how”	wq de da
“which”	wq