

“Polysynthesis” in Haida
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Haida, a language isolate spoken in Haida Gwaii (or the Queen Charlotte Islands) off the northwest coast of Canada and in southeastern Alaska, has been labeled a polysynthetic language by Boas (1911), Sapir (1921), and other linguists. At the core of Haida's verbal morphology is a large inventory of verbal elements, which are divided into pre-verbal (mainly prefixes) and post-verbal elements, including derivational suffixes and (inflectional) endings. Many of the derivational suffixes have relatively concrete meanings such as “into water” or “before leaving”; the verb form with derivational suffixes can express an idea that would ordinarily necessitate more than one independent word in a less synthetic language. The endings denoting tense, aspect, and mode are categorized into nine groups (or slots) according to where they occur in a verbal structure.

However, it is doubtful whether Haida can be characterized as a polysynthetic language in a strict sense. Haida deviates from typical polysynthetic languages in that a verb form does not encode core arguments of a clause; consequently, the verb cannot function as a complete clause without lexical items. It lacks productive noun incorporation, while lexicalized noun-verb compounds are sporadically observed.

When we look at texts provided by present-day speakers, we rarely find a word that is constructed in a very complicated manner. This may be ascribed to the fact that present-day speakers tend to prefer analytic expressions with independent lexical items, which are nearly equivalent to synthetic expressions with derivational suffixes. It should also be noted that semantic factors play a significant role in constraining combinations of verbal elements: while verbal elements occupy different positions in a verbal structure, that does not mean they can appear concurrently in the same word because of the meanings they denote.