



# Tlingit Verb Conjugation

an interactive look at verb components

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Golbelt Heritage Foundation  
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Tlingit Verb Conjugation: an interactive look at verb components

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# Preface

wáanáx sáwé yá x'úx' kaḵwshixít?

Has du eetí x'aakeidíx áyá haa sitee uháan yáa yagiyeec.

Yéi áyá a daa tuxditaan xáach.

Ách áyá wa.éich tsú

i toowú toox' tlaḵ wáa sá x'alitseen.

Ách áyá a daat eehán tsu yáa yagiyeedé.

– Kaajaakwtí, L'eneidí

We are the seeds in their remains today.

This is how I think about it.

This is why you too,

inside you feel how very valuable it is.

This is why you are standing up for it even up to today.

– Walter Soboleff<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Soboleff, Walter. “Walter Soboleff and George Ramos.” *Documenting Tlingit Conversations in Video and Time-aligned Text* by Alice Taff. (Juneau: University of Alaska Southeast).



Gus'duteen Bessie Jim (Carcross), Lugóon Sophie Smarch (Whitehorse), X'unei Lance Twitchell (Juneau), ka Shayawdusteed Deborah Baerg (Carcross) – photo by Si'sele Collyne Bunn.

Gáx, Yéil, ka Dzisk'w (Carcross) – photo by Si'sele Collyne Bunn.



## why write this book?

Tlingit verbs are complex, and are basically a series of components that become activated or shift as the verb changes person, mode, and/or becomes a relative clause that is linked to another verb. Many students of Tlingit become frustrated at the complexity of the Tlingit verb, and primary reasons are the number of elements that can change and the ways that those changes create contraction.

This workbook is designed to take a step-by-step approach to verb conjugation, and relies on a fictional switchboard that will show where those changes are taking place. While doing this sort of work, we should always keep in mind that the verbal complexity is one of the ways that the Tlingit language was dynamic and powerful, and if we ignore this part of the language we will speak a simplified form of Tlingit that fails to do justice to the rich and powerful language that has been created for us, the speakers and the learners.

In order to be able to speak Tlingit fluently, you need to understand how verbs work in Tlingit, and then how other parts of grammar work in relation to verbs. At the center of this is mastering how to change objects and subjects of verbs, how to move the verb into different modes, and how to quickly internalize the components of a verb so you can keep adding more verbs to your vocabulary.

One of the real threats we face is losing a large number of verbs. Tlingit is a highly categorical language, meaning there are times when a verb will change depending on a type of object or action, and that there are sometimes specific verbs for certain types of activities. You should be learning new verbs on a regular basis, and you should also understand what changes result in a new verb based as opposed to just changing an existing verb.

However, grammar is only one component of becoming fluent in Tlingit. You need to spend as much time as possible with fluent elders, and doing so while using the language. At this point, speaking with fluent speakers in English is essentially wasting time as far as language learning and revitalization is concerned. All time with them is valuable, but you need to be entering into environments where Tlingit is the privileged language, and pushing yourself to try new things and to understand the language in all contexts and situations.

This workbook will begin by looking at what the components are in the switchboard, and then will move through the different components in each one and how they interact with one another. The order is determined by the information most commonly requested by students, starting with Objects and Subjects, and then moving into the components that create new verbs, and the components that create new conjugations. After that, we will look at how verb forms are created, and then what the prefixes look like for those verbs.

This workbook is inspired and informed by the works of James Crippen, Keri Eggleston, Seth Cable, Nora Marks Dauenhauer, Richard Dauenhauer, Jeff Leer, Constance Naish, and Gillian Story. Their work and my work would not exist if not for our fluent speakers, who have all of these wonderful patterns embedded in their ways of thinking and knowing, and are willing to share them with us and put up with question after question that helps us understand a little bit more than we did before.

In addition, the hardworking and determined students of the Tlingit language, who combine with our elders to create a future for our language, are to be commended for their courage and ability to stand up to linguistic and cultural genocide. They are the ones who never gave up, who may have taken some breaks now and then, but who made sure that Tlingit is a part of their lives and they live up the enormous responsibility that comes with the title: language warrior.

Gunalchéesh!



# The Tlingit Verb

yéi daadunéiyi át

Ch'as tula.aan,  
ka kusaxán  
kwa i téix' yéi na.oo!  
– Kaxwaan Éesh, T'akdeintaan

Only kindness,  
and love for people, though,  
put that in your heart!  
– George Davis<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Davis, George. Pers. Comm.

## Tlingit Verb Conjugation



Dolores Jackson (Teslin and Whitehorse), Keiyishí Bessie Cooley (Teslin), Yeidulitseen Millie Hall (Teslin and Haines Junction) and Ƙaaganeí Connie Jules (Teslin) – photo by Si'sele Collyne Bunn.

Gus'duteen Bessie Jim & Ƙaakligé Norman James (Carcross) – photo by Si'sele Collyne Bunn.



## Introducing the Tlingit verb

Tlingit is a polysynthetic language, meaning that it often consists of long strings of complex words that are made up of interlocking pieces that each have meaning or special functions. It is important to keep this in mind as you continue to put the pieces together in your mind. The areas that tend to get learners hung up is the amount of components, the reasons they might change, and the ways those changes create contractions in the verb prefix. In addition to this is the ways in which Tlingit categorizes the world and adjusts its grammar to those categorizations.

Once the learner has reached an intermediate level of Tlingit, then the goals shift from focusing on pronunciation and basic concepts to the following language learning methods, which should be happening in more or less equal portions:

- listening to fluent birth speakers as much as possible
- speaking with birth speakers and trying to learn how to say new things
- speaking with peers and pushing one another to stay in the language as much as possible
- expanding vocabulary in nouns, relational terms (independent bases, relational bases, relational nouns, relational suffixes), particles, adjectives, adverbs, and numbers
- internalizing the Tlingit verbal structure system and common prefix combinations
- adding new verbs to your vocabulary by memorizing the root, classifier, conjugation prefix, verb type, and stem variation

This workbook assumes that you have the resources to do all but the final two items, and will focus on those. In order to continue learning about verbs and committing more of them to memory, you should regularly be browsing and referencing the following sources:

- Crippen, James. “Tlingit Verbal Structure Handbook.” Vancouver: Department of Linguistics, University of British Columbia, 2013.
- — “Tlingitology Seminar Notes: Background and Morphology.” Vancouver: Department of Linguistics, University of British Columbia, 2013.
- — “Segmenting and glossing Tlingit.” Vancouver: Department of Lin-

guistics, University of British Columbia, 2013.

- Dauenhauer, Nora & Richard. *Beginning Tlingit*. Juneau: Sealaska Heritage Foundation, 2000.
- — *Lingít X'éináx Sá – Say It in Tlingit: A Tlingit Phrasebook*. Juneau: Sealaska Heritage Institute, 2002.
- Eggleston (nee Edwards), Keri. *Dictionary of Tlingit*. Juneau: Sealaska Heritage Institute, 2009.
- — “575+ Tlingit Verbs.” *Goldbelt Heritage Foundation*. 2009. Retrieved from <http://www.goldbeltheritage.org/verbs>
- — “575 Tlingit Verbs: A Study Of Tlingit Verb Paradigms.” Ph.D. thesis, University of Alaska Fairbanks, 2013.
- — “575 Tlingit Verbs: The Paradigms – A Component of ‘575 Tlingit Verbs: A Study Of Tlingit Verb Paradigms.’” Ph.D. thesis, University of Alaska Fairbanks, 2013.
- — “Continuing Tlingit Verb Documentation.” *Alaska Native Knowledge Network*. University of Alaska Fairbanks, 2016.
- Leer, Jeff. “Tlingit stem list.” Unpublished manuscript. Alaska Native Language Archive, 1978.
- — “Tlingit verb catalog.” Unpublished manuscript. Alaska Native Language Archive, 1976.
- — “The Schetic Categories of the Tlingit Verb.” Chicago: University of Chicago, PhD dissertation, 1991.
- — *Interior Tlingit Noun Dictionary: the Dialects Spoken by Tlingit Elders of Carcross, and Teslin, Yukon, and Atlin, British Columbia*. Whitehorse: Yukon Native Language Centre, 2001.
- Story, Gillian and Constance Naish. *Tlingit Verb Dictionary*. College: University of Alaska: Alaska Native Language Center, 1973.

Coming back to the verb, we should start with some basic structural descriptions, and then begin moving into more detail from there. To start with, the verb template is made up of several components, and we will start from the largest pieces and begin moving in to more detail from there. The first concept we should cover is the **verb phrase**, which is all the information needed to fully understand the verb.

For our purposes, we will say that the **verb phrase** includes all the things

you must have in order to understand the verb. For example, look at the following sentences:

- Aatx̄ kugastée áwé du yádi, tle noow yáx̄ gíwé wootee wé Yéil̄ ku.aa, yá lingit' aaní awliyex̄i Yéil̄.<sup>1</sup>

The first step in breaking down these sentences is to separate them into **clauses**. In Tlingit grammar, a clause consists of the verb phrase and all related information. It is helpful to see how Tlingit is structured by analyzing sentences in this manner, because then you can begin to construct similar patterns in your own speech, gradually increasing the complexity and the number of verbs that you have mastered.

This sentence, by Kaasgeiy Susie James, has two clauses, which we can identify by finding the verb and all related information. It helps that a comma separates the clauses here, but that is certainly not always the case:

- Aatx̄ kugastée áwé du yádi, |
- tle noow, yáx̄ gíwé wootee wé Yéil̄ ku.aa, yá lingit' aaní awliyex̄i Yéil̄.

Each of these **clauses** contains a verb. The last one might appear to contain two **verbs**, but the second has become an adjective: «yá lingit' aaní awliyex̄i Yéil̄» → *this Raven who created the world*. Coming back to our two clauses, we now can isolate the verb phrase by taking away everything that is not part of the functioning verb. This can sometimes be a slippery slope, because there is often information that shows specifics of the verb phrase, but are not essential for the verb to function.

For example, in the first clause the verb phrase is «aatx̄ kugastée» and the rest gives details about who was born. The second verb phrase is «noow yáx̄ gíwé wootee» because the information here is essential for the verb, and the remaining information informs the listener on details that are not grammatically tied to the function of the verb. To take this idea farther, we can change the specifying noun phrase, but it does not alter what the verb is doing.

- noow yáx̄ gíwé wootee wé xóots̄ ku.aa → that brown bear was like a fortress, I guess
- noow yáx̄ gíwé wootee wé kuts' een̄ ku.aa → that mouse was like a fortress, I guess

While these changes certainly affect meaning, the verb is doing the same thing. One could argue that the same thing could be said for «noow», but

<sup>1</sup> James, Susie Kaasgeiy. “Yéil̄ ka Du Káak / Raven and his Uncle.” *Du Yaa Kanagoodi: His Walking Along*. Ed. X̄'aagi Sháawu Keri Eggleston and Dzéiwsh James Crippen. Trans. K̄eixwnéi Nora Marks Dauenhauer.

that is tied in by the «N yáx yatee» component of the **verb theme**.

Here is another example:

- Yáa kaa kéilk', uwayáa, has du eetí x'aakeidíx áyá haa sitee uháan yáa yagiye.<sup>2</sup>

Our first step is to locate the clauses by identifying where the verbs are, and then to narrow it down to the verb phrase:

- Yáa kaa kéilk', uwayáa,
- has du eetí x'aakeidíx áyá haa sitee uháan yáa yagiye

As in the previous examples, the verb is in a box and the verb phrase is underlined with a dashed line. If we look at verbs this way, by isolating the **verb phrase**, then it can help us learn to use verbs more dynamically and to also understand the components that are embedded in the **verb theme**. Keri Eggleston covers the **verb theme** very well in her doctoral dissertation, "575 Tlingit Verbs: A Study Of Tlingit Verb Paradigms," and some review will be given here so we can learn to spot the **clause**, then **verb phrase**, and then the **verb**.

Narrowing things down like this can reveal many intricacies about Tlingit grammar, especially how verbs function and are related to other parts of speech. When doing exercises like this, it is best to get your language from fluent speakers. For those new to working on Tlingit in this manner, it is best to work with material that has already been translated so you have a bit of an answer key, but you should be working towards translating new material with assistance to see how much you can accomplish on your own.

The main purposes of exercises like this are to learn to spot verbs, increase our understanding of Tlingit grammar and verbal structure, and to increase our vocabulary of verbs. One of your goals as an experienced language learner should be to internalize as many verbs as possible, and a steady, consistent, and unending manner. As we will come to learn through our grammar exercises, mastering a verb means learning the following qualities: verb root, classifier group, +D component, thematic prefix(es), conjugation prefix, and stem variation. There are thousands of verb roots, four classifier groups, +D & -D, four conjugation prefixes, fourteen common thematic prefixes, and five stem types. The end result is a seemingly infinite variety of variables, but the reality is that it is manageable with consistent practice. That practice should come through grammar exercises, listening to speakers and under-

<sup>2</sup> Soboleff, Walter ƷaajaaƷwí. "Walter Soboleff and George Ramos." *Documenting Tlingit Conversations in Video and Time-aligned Text*. Ed. Alice Taff.

standing what they are saying, and trying to use more and more verbs and verb modes in your speech.

With that in mind, let's take a look at some sentences and work on finding the **clauses**, verb phrases, and verbs. The suggested method would be to rewrite the sentences in the space provided, separating the **clauses**, underlining the **verb phrase**, and drawing a box around the **verb**.

- Ch'a yéi gugéink' áwé a kaax̄ shukaylis'úx̄ haa tlagoo kwáanx'i aadéi s̄kunoogu yé. — Kichnáalx̄<sup>3</sup>

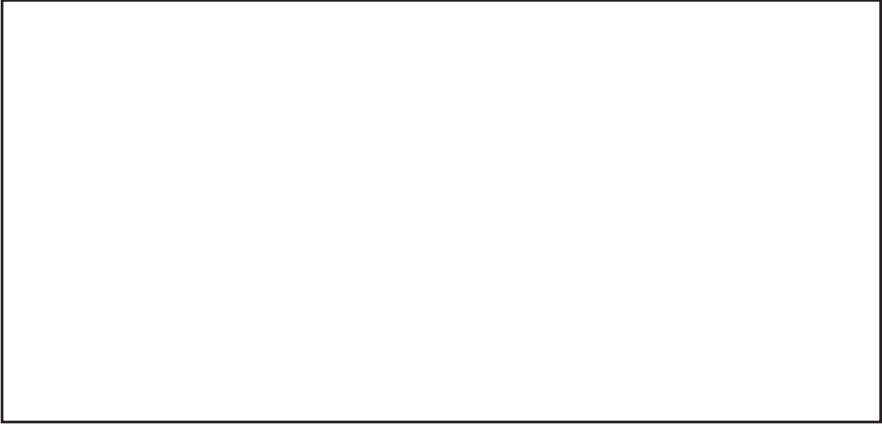
- Ch'áagu yáx̄ wooch kaanáx̄ kei du.átji noojéen. Yan at wuduḡaayídáx̄ aagáa áyú has du ée sh kadulnik nooch. — K̄aajaakwtí<sup>4</sup>

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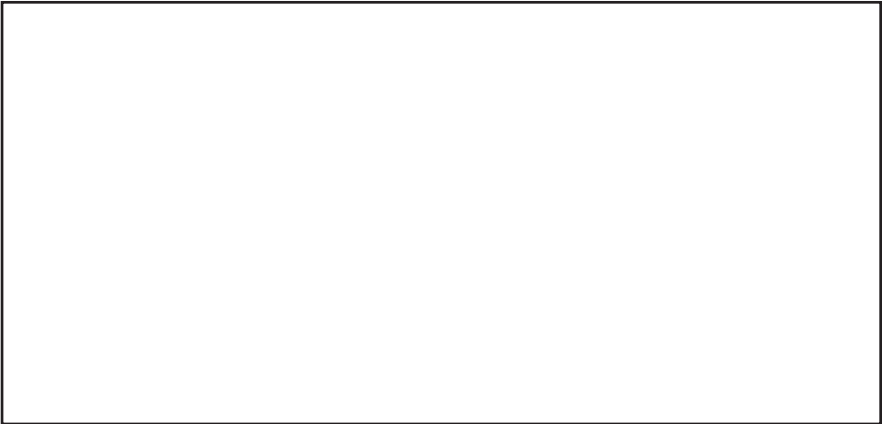
3 Dauenhauer, Nora & Richard, trans. "Because We Cherish You ..." *Sealaska Elders Speak to the Future* (Juneau: Sealaska Heritage Foundation Press, 1981), 53-53a.

4 Soboleff, Walter. "Walter Soboleff and George Ramos." *Documenting Tlingit Conversations in Video and Time-aligned Text* by Alice Taff. (Juneau: University of Alaska Southeast).

- Aḵ ḵ'agáax'i áwé yéi kgwatée: ch'u tleix̄ kugaagastee, Lingít.  
— Kaalkáawu <sup>5</sup>



- Sagú yáḵ kaa yayík du.ax̄ji nuch héendei yaa ana.ádi.  
— Taakw K'wát'i <sup>6</sup>



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5 George, Cyril. “Kaalkáawu Ḫ 'éidáḵ Lingít Yoo Ḫ 'atángi Daat (Tlingit Language).” trans. Lance Twitchell. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4DP2EVBTUrc>.

6 Johnson, Frank. “Dukt'oot' / Strong Man.” *Haa Shuka: Tlingit Oral Narratives*. trans. Nora Dauenhauer & Richard Dauenhauer. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1981), 138–139.



- Ḳustí ladzée nooch. Tlél kei kgidaleet!  
— Kingeistí <sup>7</sup>



- Oon yoo x'adudli.átk, «líl x'wán káakwx xat wuneek léelk'w,» yéi daayaduká. Á áwé kaa x'aya.áxch wé át, wé shaa tsú.  
— Seidayaa <sup>8</sup>



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7 Katzeek, David. “Taan ka X'eis'awáa – Sea Lion & Ptarmigan.” trans. Lance Twitchell. Retrieved from <http://youtu.be/A9FO6S3GTbI>.

8 Nyman, Elizabeth. “Ḳudziteeyi Át Ḳulagaawú – The Battle of the Giants.” *Gááiwduł.aat: Brought Forth to Reconfirm the Legacy of a Taku River Tlingit Clan*. trans. Jeff Leer (Whitehorse: Yukon Native Language Centre, 1993), 6-7.

- Á áwé a daa yoo x̣'atula.átgi nooch, yá el'kaadéi haa wulgáas'i. A daa yoo x̣'atula.átgi nuch.<sup>9</sup>  
— Shaadaax'

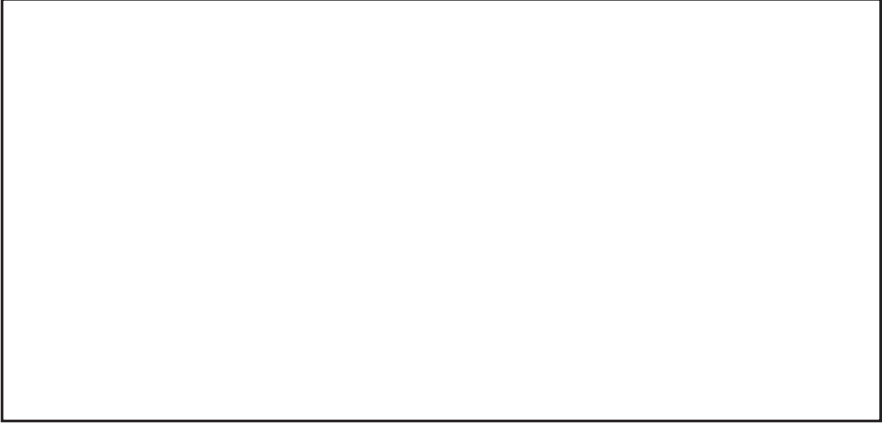
- Eeshaandéin ágé haa daa tuwatee uháan tsú ax̣ káalk'w hás ax̣ éesh hás?  
— Naa Tláa<sup>10</sup>

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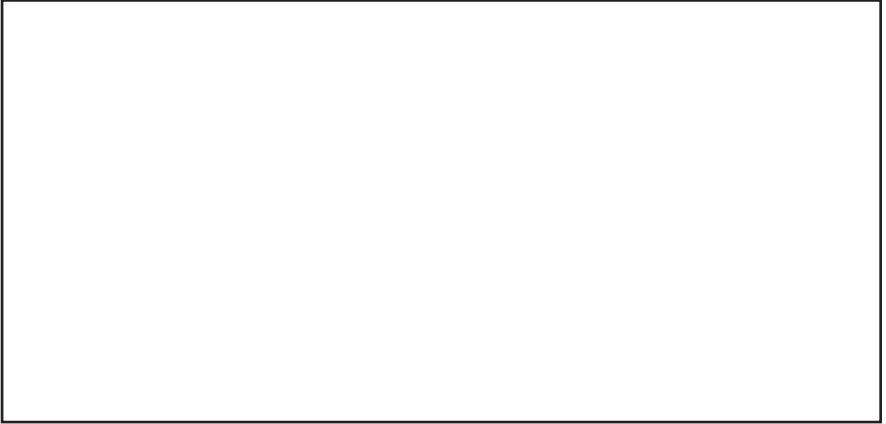
<sup>9</sup> Zuboff, Robert. “Táax’aa / Mosquito.” *Haa Shuka: Tlingit Oral Narratives*. Nora Dauenhauer & Richard Dauenhauer, trans. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1981), 74–75.

<sup>10</sup> Dauenhauer, Nora & Richard, trans. *Haa Tuwundágu Yis: For Our Healing Spirit*. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1990), 242-243.

- Keitl too akayanook. Yú neilx' áyú gagaan x'oos áwé oowayáa. Neildéi koodagáanch neildéi.  
— Tseexwáa <sup>11</sup>



- Tléil daatnáx sá kwshí yéi yándeí kaguxdayáa. Wooch isxán, ch'a tléix' tí, ach asgíwé wooch xoo yakaguxdadáa haa kusteeyí.  
— Wóochx Kaduhaa <sup>12</sup>



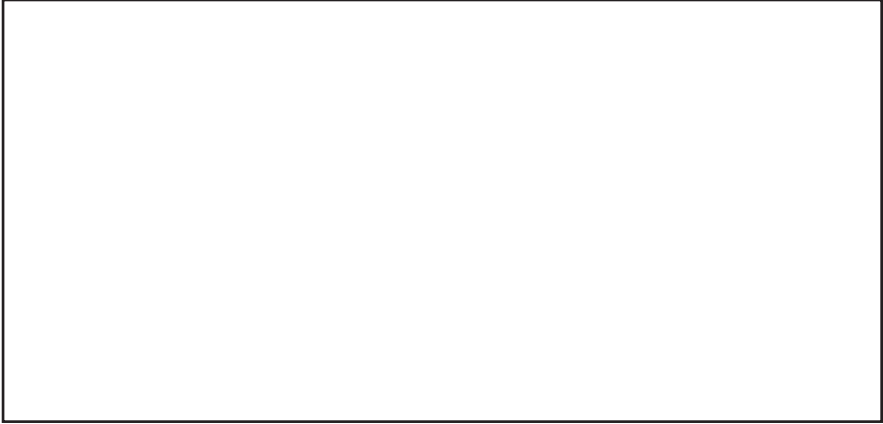
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<sup>11</sup> Fawcett, J.B. “Kaats’.” *Haa Shuka: Tlingit Oral Narratives*. trans. Nora Dauenhauer & Richard Dauenhauer. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1981), 224–225.

<sup>12</sup> George, Jimmie. “Kéix’ 1971 / Kake 1971’.” *Haa Tuwundagu Yis—For Our Healing Spirit: Tlingit Oratory*. trans. Nora Dauenhauer & Richard Dauenhauer. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1990), 168–169.

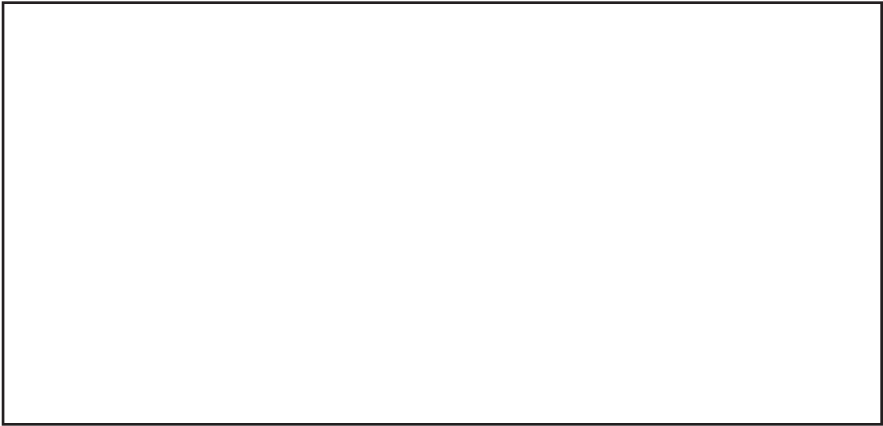
- Yagéiyi át̚ kudzitee, Yá Aas K̚wáani ch'a haa jiyís jeewanák̚. Ách áwé at kookéidich wuháanch tsú tulayé̚x nuch. Haa yoo x̚'atángi tóox' hél a ká̚x aa seix'ák̚w nooch, aadé a tóoná̚x k̚utudziteeyi yé.

— Keiheenák'w<sup>13</sup>



- Yak'éiyi l'éiw̚t galaháash yá yáay.

— Yakw̚xwaan Tláa<sup>14</sup>

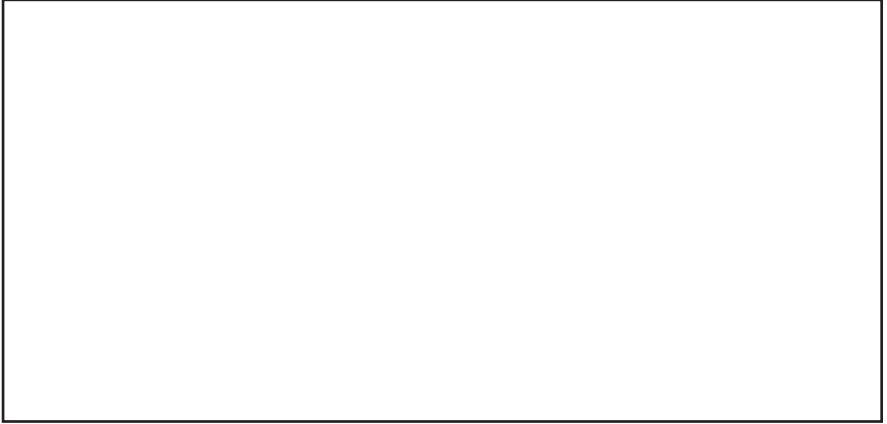


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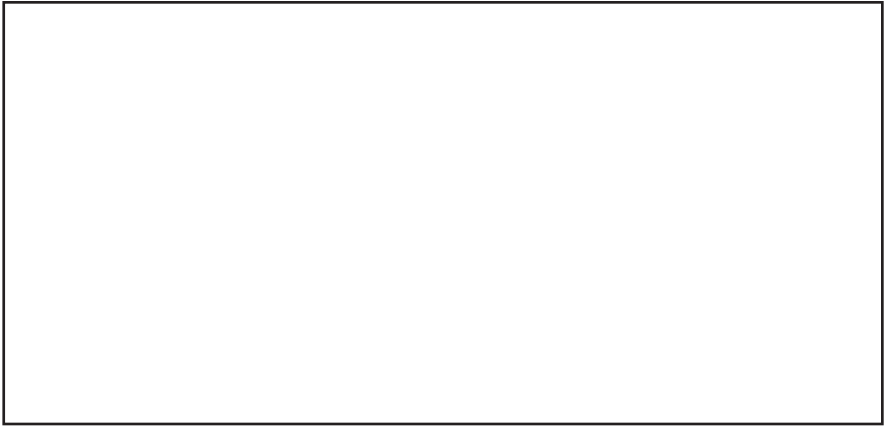
<sup>13</sup>Martin, John. “K̚ingeistú̚ ka Keiheenák'w Aas K̚wáani Daat Yoo Has X̚ 'awli.át (Tlingit Language).” trans. Lance Twitchell. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ip2iwSSSoQE>.

<sup>14</sup>Mills, Katherine. “Raven and Whale.” Raven Stories (unpublished manuscript). trans. Nora Dauenhauer & Richard Dauenhauer

- Aadóo sgí káa kaanáx kéi agaxáash?  
— Yakw̄xwaan Tláa <sup>14</sup>



- Yéi áwé yan shuwjixín yáat'aa.  
— Yakw̄xwaan Tláa <sup>14</sup>



- Tléix' yateeyi aa áwé, yá Yéil áwé át woogoot.  
— Yakwxwaan Tláa <sup>14</sup>



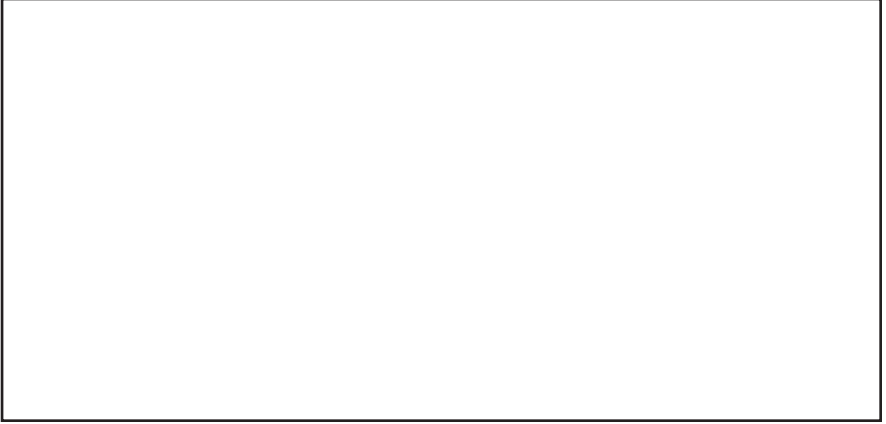
- Ch'a ldakát át, a yakgwahéiyagu kudzitee. Yéi áyá haa ee wudulítóow.  
— K̄aalkáawu <sup>15</sup>



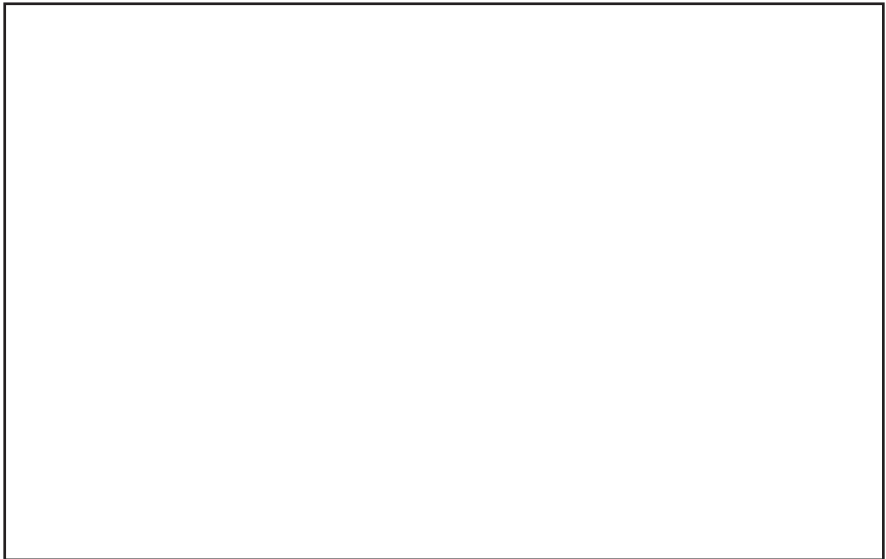
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<sup>15</sup> George, Cyril. “K̄aalkáawu X̄'ídáx̄ Shkalneek — Daax'oon — K̄ák'w (Tlingit Language).” trans. Lance Twitchell. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4DP2EVBTUrc>.

- Tlél tsu k̄ut aa x̄wagéex' tle a saax'óo teen.  
— Kooxíchx' <sup>16</sup>



- K̄aa yáa at wooné,  
haa woch.een yéi jeewaneiyi,  
aadé yateeyí yé haa yoo x'atángi.  
Haa k̄usteeyí x'éigaa Lingít á.  
— Kingeistí <sup>7</sup>



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<sup>16</sup> Dauenhauer, Nora, Richard Dauenhauer, and Lydia Black. “The Battle at Indian River.” *Anóoshi Lingít Aani Ká: Russians in Tlingit America*. trans. Nora Dauenhauer, et al. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008), 329.

We will continue using these sentences as examples as we introduce other concepts about the Tlingit verb. Words like this were left for us, so as we move through them in ways that reveal the underlying structures, it will allow us to see the deeper meanings and ways that the language is functioning in these examples.

Our initial focus is on finding the bigger pieces, and in later chapters and exercises we will be examining with different goals. After you have had a chance to go through and identify the clauses, verb phrases, and verbs, check your work with the following answers.

- Ch'a yéi gugéink' áwé, a kaax shukaylis'úx haa tlagoo kwáanx'i aadéi s kunoogu yé.
- Ch'áagu yáx wooch kaanáx kei du.átji noojéen.  
Yan at wuduxaayí dáx aagáa áyú, has du ée sh kadulnik nooch.
- Ax x'agáax'i áwé yéi kgwatée;  
ch'u tleix kugaagastee, Lingít.
- Sagú yáx kaa yayík du.axji nuch  
héendei yaa ana.ádi.
- Kustí ladzée nooch.  
Tlél kei kgidaleet!
- Oon yoo x'adudli.átk.  
«líl x'wán káakwx xat wuneeek lélk'w,»  
yéi daayaduká.  
Á áwé kaa x'aya.áxch wé át, wé shaa tsú.
- Eeshaandéin ágé haa daa tuwatee uháan tsú ax káalk'w hás ax éesh hás?
- Keitl too akayanook.  
Yú neilx' áyú gagaan x'oos áwé oowayáa.  
Neildéi koodagánch neildéi.



- Tléil daatnáx sá kwshí yéi yándeí kaguxdayáa  
Wooch isxán, ch'a tléix' tí, ach asgíwé wooch xoo yakaguxdadáa haa kusteeyí.
- Yagéiyi át kudzitee,  
Yá Aas Kwáani, ch'a haa jiyís jeewanák,  
Ách áwé at kookéidich wuháanch tsú tulayéx nuch,  
Haa yoo x'atángi toox' hél a káx aa seix'ákw nooch,  
aadé a tónáx kutudziteeyi yé,
- Yak'éiyi l'éíwt galaháash yá yáay.
- Aadóo sgi káa kaanáx kéí agaxáash?
- Yéi áwé yan shuwjixín yáat'aa.
- Tléix' yateeyi aa áwé, yá Yéil áwé át woogoot.
- Ch'a ldakát át, a yakgwahéiyagu kudzitee.  
Yéi áyá haa ee wudulitóow.
- Tléil tsu kut aa xwagéex' tle a saax'óo teen.
- Kaa yáa at wooné,  
haa wooch.een yéi jeewaneiyi,  
aadé yateeyi yé haa yoo x'atángi.  
Haa kusteeyi x'éigaa Lingít á.

