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Author: Jasmine Scott

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Sheña Showcase Part 1: Animacy and Possession

by Jasmine Therese Scott

Welcome: An Introduction

Before I delve into specifics and semantics, there are two rather mundane details about my life that are especially material here: 1) I have irritable bowel syndrome, and 2) I am a proud queer transwoman. These two realities are ostensibly unrelated, but both inalienable facets of my being are instrumental in the development of *Sheña*, my primary conlang. *Sheña*, plainly, means “stomach;” the language’s full name, *Sheñañesha*, means “stomach tongue,” because as absurd and as crass as it sounds, my guts (both physically and figuratively) often determine how I navigate spaces. In a much more visible way, my gender identity and expression shape my personal and spatial relationships, much like how a map in a video game prescribes boundaries rather than describes what lies beyond them. Safe access into certain public forums, for me, is granted by society, by those who wield social, political, and linguistic power within those domains. *Sheña* is my passport, my way (back) into these spaces proudly paved by icons before me; *Sheña* is my indigeneity, my connection with queerness, my link to generations of trailblazers that should still be alive and shining. More concretely, *Sheña* is a linguistic representation of how I process my physical experience as well as my social, emotional, and historic experience as a queer person with a perpetually rumbling tummy. *Sheña*, literally, is my “stomach tongue,” what some conlangers would call a “heartlang,” and learning it is an exercise in self-awareness, self-expression, and self-acceptance.

Sheña’s history is nebulous and somewhat purposefully mysterious. I posit that it was, and is, spoken by queer guardian spirits; by my patron saints, both given and chosen; by victims of erasure and champions of truth and justice and sparkle. *Sheña* is my link to a world of brilliant differentness that wasn’t always visible to me. In essence, it gives me another way of saying, “I am here.”

In accordance with its constructed history, *Sheña* is an *a priori* artistic language. In its construction, I take what Jessie Sams calls a “typologically oriented approach;” that is, I initially defined its typology, features, and phonoaesthetics, and as I continue developing *Sheña*’s grammar and lexicon, I am guided by these choices. I hope what has resulted so far is an internally consistent system that resembles a natural language.

Sheña is a reconstruction of a language invented to express kinship with a transnational, multicultural people; as such, it is beholden to my analysis as a white, midwestern American transwoman. *Sheña* uniquely reflects my world and its inhabitants, yet *Sheña* is not a philosophical language, nor is it an auxiliary language for queer people; that is, it is not a linguistic correction, it is not idealistic, and I make no claims about its purity, its superiority, or its ease of learning. This series is a showcase of *Sheña*’s features, its charm, and occasional whimsy.

Typological Snapshot

Typologically, *Sheña* is a mildly synthetic, highly analytic OSV language with an active-stative morphosyntax and mixed marking strategies. Predictably, *Sheña* is head-final, with attributive modifiers preceding their nominal heads, determiners preceding their heads, and postpositions following their nominal dependents. *Sheña* nouns are marked for number, and semantic animacy is realized in number morphology, demonstrative agreement, and uniquely, possession strategies. This essay will explore *Sheña*’s unique and novel strategies for encoding animacy.

Realization of Animacy in Number Morphology

Animacy in *Sheña* is a salient, but slippery feature; its realization in noun phrases primarily surfaces in number morphology. Notably, there are two separate and distinct number marking strategies that express a noun's animacy. Because singular and discrete nouns are unmarked for number, determining a given noun's animacy in its citation form requires memorization; there are, however, some semantic and syntactic clues that learners can draw upon in determining an unmarked noun's animacy. Fortunately, *Sheña* nouns inflect only for number, utilizing these two completely different strategies based on a noun's animacy. Additionally, agreement in animacy is only expressed between nouns and certain determiners.

A basic uninflected noun in *Sheña* references a definite object or entity, but these basic unmarked nouns naturally encode slightly different groupings depending on animacy; animate nouns have an unmarked discrete form and a marked collective form, whereas inanimate nouns have an unmarked singular form and a marked plural form. Essentially, discrete animates (nouns that can be counted without additional morphology) and singular inanimates (which can only ever refer to one object) are unmarked. In both cases, an unmarked noun gestures at a definite, distinct, already introduced thing.

Sheña's distinct animacy system, then, only really becomes apparent when morphology is required to refer to plurality or collectiveness. Animate collective nouns (which refer to all of one type of animate or that animate in general) are marked with an **-eh** suffix, which often triggers phonological alternations and shifts in stress. Plural inanimate nouns, however, are followed by **say**, an independent word meaning “stuff” or “and such.” Following are some examples of collective animate nouns as well as plural inanimate nouns:

Collective Animates

utle [ˈutlɛ] (rat) → *utleh* [uˈtlɛ] (rats)
rawa [ˈɾawa] (dog) → *raweh* [ɾaˈwɛ] (dogs)
ile [ˈilæ] (bone, of a living being) → *ileh* [iˈlɛ] (bones)
aqi [ˈaɟi] (ant) → *aqyeh* [aˈɟɛ] (ants)
cemu [ˈtʃɛmu] (mole) → *cemweh* [tʃɛˈmʷɛ] (moles)
meha [ˈmɛ.a] (liver) → *mehəh* [mɛˈhɛ] (livers)

Plural Inanimates

cuña [tʃuɲa] (apricot) → *cuña say* [tʃuɲa saj] (apricots)
ko [kɔ] (ball) → *ko say* [kɔ saj] (balls)
ile [ilæ] (bone, as separate from a body) → *ile say* [ilæ saj] (bones)
p'ëya [p'ɛja] (book) → *p'ëya say* [p'ɛja saj] (books)
piki [piki] (grapefruit) → *piki say* [piki saj] (grapefruits)
tsami [tsami] (candle) → *tsami say* [tsami saj] (candles)

These two distinct number marking strategies suggest a number of things about how animacy is treated in *Sheña*. Firstly, because these strategies are so morphophonologically dissimilar, it hints that their diachronic origins are also vastly different, reinforcing in modern word-building a sharp morphosemantic distinction between objects considered animate and objects considered inanimate; secondly, these two strategies in their divergent construction give clues about how certain nouns can or cannot be modified based on their animacy; lastly, this dissimilarity allows for disambiguation between homonyms or senses of different animacies, which reveals another peculiarity of *Sheña*'s animacy distinction: a unique correlation between animacy and alienability.

Realization of Animacy in Determiner Agreement

Exploring this correlation between animacy and alienability in *Sheña*, however, compels an examination of another strategy for determining something's animacy: determiner agreement. For example, *Sheña* features two sets of demonstratives that differ in animacy:

<u>Inanimate Demonstratives</u>			
<u>Form</u>	<u>Function</u>	<u>Examples</u>	
		<i>singular</i>	<i>plural</i>
<i>na</i>	proximal, near speaker	<i>na esha</i> this apple	<i>na esha say</i> these apples
<i>am</i>	medial, near listener	<i>am esha</i> that apple	<i>am esha say</i> those apples
<i>tla</i>	distal, far from both speaker and listener	<i>tla esha</i> that apple over yonder	<i>tla esha say</i> those apples over yonder
<i>ola</i>	non-visible	<i>ola esha</i> that apple (which is not or nor longer visible)	<i>ola esha say</i> those apples (which are not or nor longer visible)
<i>yosa</i>	“that one up there”	<i>yosa esha</i> that apple up there	<i>yosa esha say</i> those apples up there
<i>uso</i>	“that one down there”	<i>uso esha</i> that apple down there	<i>uso esha say</i> those apples down there

These above demonstratives situate inanimate objects in space and/or time, relative to the discourse. Another set of demonstratives modify animates, and their base forms curiously resemble genitive clitics employed in expressing inalienable possession:

<u>Animate Demonstratives</u>			
<u>Form</u>	<u>Function</u>	<u>Examples</u>	
		<i>discrete</i>	<i>collective</i>
<i>ñe</i>	proximal	<i>ñe ñambu</i> this person	<i>ñe ñambweh</i> these people
<i>re</i>	medial	<i>re ñambu</i> that person	<i>re ñambweh</i> those people
<i>tl'ä</i>	distal	<i>tl'ä ñambu</i> that person over yonder	<i>tl'ä ñambweh</i> those people over yonder

<i>le'ä</i>	non-visible, but living	<i>le'ä ñambu</i> that person (which is not visible)	<i>le'ä ñambweh</i> those people (which are not visible)
<i>p'ähyal</i>	no-longer living	<i>p'ähyal ñambu</i> that person (who is no longer alive)	<i>p'ähyal ñambwe</i> that society (which is long gone)

It appears that *Sheña's* proximal animate demonstrative has been recruited as a nominal proclitic, *ñe-*, which expresses inalienable possession of an animate entity by a second person argument. This realization reinforces a correlation in *Sheña* between an object's animacy and the various relationships it can have with its possessors and possessees. This is one place wherein *Sheña's* uniqueness lies.

Realization of Animacy in Possessive Strategies

Unlike many languages with an animacy distinction, it's *Sheña's* animacy system alone that controls which strategy is used in any given expression of possession; essentially, only animate nouns can be inalienably possessed and only by animates. Morphosyntactically, this strategy exhibits head-marking via affix; this affixual marking of animates is also apparent in number morphology, which suggests that animates in *Sheña* exhibit a kind of stickiness that inanimates lack. Here are some examples of this inalienable possession construction:

Inalienable Possession of Animates

- (a) *ne-* (1sg:GEN) + *ril* (foot) → *neril* ("my foot")
- (b) *Mimi nde-* (3sg:GEN) + *ril* (foot) → *Mimi nderil* ("Mimi's foot")
- (c) *i'ö* (child) *nderil* - "the child's foot"
- (d) *Mimi nde'ö* - "Mimi's child"

Notice that in each example above, the inalienably possessed object is animate; a person's body parts and kinship terms are always animate. By contrast, inanimate objects can never be prefixed with a variant of *ne-*, and alienable possession is expressed by a postpositional phrase, using the associative postposition, *la*:

Alienable Possession of Inanimates

- (a) *Mimi la p'ëya* - "Mimi's book"
- (b) *i'ö la sasu* - "the child's toy"
- (c) *tala tsami* - "my candle"
- (d) *thella tsami* - "their (sg.) candle"
- (e) **Mimi nde-p'ëya* - "Mimi's book"
- (f) **ne-tsami* - "my candle"

These above examples demonstrate that inanimate objects can only be alienably possessed. Additionally, inanimate objects can never inalienably possess anything; part-whole and pertinent relationships are rendered with postpositional phrases:

Possessive Relationships Between Inanimates

- (a) *fera la k'ëyna [inan.]* - “the table’s leg”
- (b) *tsami la te'ëññesha* - “the candle’s wick”
- (c) *p'ëya la p'ëhñami* - “the book’s page”
- (d) *mbatlu la ñjesh* - “the car’s wheel”

Demonstrably, possessive relationships between inanimates exhibit that same use of *la*, even when the possessees in these examples seem conceptually inextricable from the whole. While this rigid duality of possession strategies based on animacy may seem overly complex, there is a parallel convention in English:

Applying Different Possession Strategies in English Based on Animacy

- (a) **the man’s face**
- (b) **the clock’s face**
- (c) ***the face of the man**
- (d) **the face of the clock**

These above examples indicate that while both of English’s primary possession strategies can be used with inanimate possessors, using the prepositional strategy with an animate possessor (c), while grammatical, sounds awkward to most English speakers. One notable difference between English and *Sheña* is what each language considers animate. In fact, it is a cross-linguistic pattern that abstractions fall low in animacy hierarchies; in *Sheña*, however, abstractions can be inalienably possessed as characteristics of animates, suggesting that these qualities have a kind of spectral nature that classes them as animate.

Abstractions as Animate

In *Ándwa*, a grammatically unrelated philosophical language from which *Sheña* borrows lexical items and grammatical conventions, words that convey qualities of an animate noun (i.e. strength, wisdom, quietness, brightness) are morphologically classed like body parts, which are always inalienably possessed. This same classing of abstractions as part of the animate realm is present in *Sheña*. Morphologically, most abstractions are formed by adding a nominal circumfix, *as>...<e* to a stative verb, making an animate noun that can be inalienably possessed by an animate possessor:

Inalienable Possession of Abstractions

- (a) *Mimi nde* (3sg:GEN) + *asayre* (“compassion”) → *Mimi ndesayre* (“Mimi’s compassion”)
- (b) *ne* (1sg:GEN) + *athyeñashe* (“beauty”) → *nethyeñashe* (“my beauty”)
- (c) *nesheya ndeseymye* - “my mom’s cleverness”

These above examples are not just grammatical; constructions like these are widespread in *Sheña*. Nominalizing an entire possessive phrase and placing it in subject possession is a common way of attributing a person’s actions to their character. Instead of using simple adjectival expressions or relative clauses to modify syntactic subjects, for example, *Sheña* speakers will frequently utilize this strategy, especially in stories. Some examples follow:

Nominalized Possessive Phrases as Syntactic Subject

- (a) *tsilewa ehra Fa'ü nderruli yembehri xema.*
River along Violet 3sg:GEN.silliness skip 3sg:ANI.DIR
“Violet’s silliness skipped along the river.”
- (b) *Mimi ndeset'irye mbiñje xema.*
Mimi 3sg:GEN.happiness smile 3sg:ANI.DIR
“Mimi’s happiness smiled.”
- (c) *p'ëya nesheya ndeymye suñe xãñja.*
book 1sg:GEN.mother 3sg:GEN.cleverness read 3sg:ANI.RET
“My mother’s cleverness had already read the book.”

In these above sentences, it’s inalienably possessed abstractions that are syntactically acting as subjects; this peculiarity of abstractions being classed as animate in *Sheña* is further supported by person-marking on the verbal element that cross-references non-human animate subjects. Along with determiner agreement and animacy-controlled possessive strategies, these expressions of animated qualities acting as syntactic subjects illuminates something special about how *Sheña* speakers understand animacy: as an insegmentable force of great agency and importance.

Salutations: Until Next Time

While animacy is central to the physics of the *Sheña* imagination, it isn’t the sole window into it. Like other forms of expression, *Sheña* is not a stagnant, inanimate abstraction, but a writhing one full of surprises and contradictions and more than one word for laugh. Subsequent *Sheña Showcases* will traverse deeper into its ethereal geography, exploring topics in morphophonology, morphosyntax, verbal aspect, derivation, and culinary fermentation. Until next time, may your latent happiness do the smiling for you.