

SKERRE

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1. INTRODUCTION

Skerre is a constructed language whose invention began in 1994 and continues to the present. The language has been inspired by many natural languages over its history, but the language presented herein is perhaps most inspired by Philippine languages like Tagalog, Oceanic languages like Tongan and Nêlêmwa, Pacific Northwest Coast languages like Coast Tsimshian, Lushootseed, and Siuslaw, and Caddoan languages like Wichita.

The fictitious speakers of Skerre are small in number and live in the forests of the foothills of the western side of the Western Interior range. They are hunter-gatherers. Dialect variation among the different bands is not significant and is largely confined to lexical differences. The language appears to be an isolate, with no known congeners.

2. PHONOLOGY

2.1. **Inventory.** The consonant phonemes of Skerre are given in the chart below:

Stops & Affricates	t	\widehat{ts}	k	k ^w	ʔ
Fricatives		s			h
Nasals		n			
Liquids		r			
Glides			j	w	

Stops and affricates are voiced after nasals; pre-consonantal nasals assimilate to the place of the following sound. The phonemes /s/, / \widehat{ts} /, and /n/ all palatalize before /j/. The precise articulation of /h/ depends greatly on the following vowel (or preceding one, if none follows).

The vowel phonemes of Skerre can be divided into two classes, long and short:

short: ɪ, ɛ, a~ɑ, o

long: iː, ɛː, ɑː, oː

The two sets of vowels vary both in terms of length (predominantly) and quality. There are no diphthongs and no tonal contrasts.

2.2. **Phonotactics.** Roots are almost all CVV(C) or CV(V)CV(V)(C) in shape (parentheses indicate optional sounds; VV indicates a long vowel). Consonant clusters occur (especially initially), but only at morphological boundaries.

2.3. **Stress.** Stress regularly occurs near the right edge of words. Words with a final short vowel (with or without a final consonant) are stressed on the penultimate syllable, e.g. /kísi/ ‘ghost’. while words with a final long vowel (again, with or without a final consonant) are stressed on that vowel, e.g. /hetí:/ ‘sibling’s child’.

3. ORTHOGRAPHY

Skerre is written using the roman alphabet. The symbols employed follow expected IPA values, excepting that /k^w/ is *qu*, /t/ is *r*, /j/ is *y*, and /a/ is *a*. (Additionally, /ts/ is always written without the tiebar.) Long vowels are written as double vowels.

4. MORPHOLOGY AND SYNTAX

Skerre is a mildly synthetic language, though a number of important grammatical categories are expressed through function words. The syntax is strongly head-initial, with heads appearing before all kinds of dependents.

4.1. **Noun and Noun Phrase.** Skerre has no grammatical gender and, in fact, nouns have no obligatory inflection. They can be simple, compound, or derived, with a fair number falling in the last category (see section 4.7).

4.1.1. *Number.* Skerre nouns are not obligatorily marked for number, yet there are two number(-like) categories present: the distributive and collective. The distributive is marked with partial reduplication: the reduplicant consists of the base’s initial syllable with a long vowel, e.g. *kina* ‘bird’ – *kiikina* ‘various birds’. The distributive signals a number of individuated entities distributed over space, time, or types. The collective is marked with the prefix *tin-*, as in *tinkina* ‘flock of birds’. The collective signals that the group is to be considered as a whole.

4.1.2. *Prenominals.* Syntactic relationships between nouns and other parts of sentences are signaled by function words before the noun, which have been called prenominals. These function words encode both status (proper or common) and syntactic function (including what adpositions normally encode). The forms are:

	Proper	Common
Absolutive		<i>a</i>
Ergative		<i>tsa</i>
Genitive	<i>i</i>	<i>e</i>
Locative	<i>hi</i>	<i>te</i>
Dative	<i>ye</i>	<i>ya</i>
Ablative	<i>soo</i>	<i>sowa</i>
Comitative	<i>ni</i>	<i>ne</i>

As indicated above, the proper–common distinction is neutralized in the absolutive and ergative prenominals.

Some example noun phrases:

ye Tsotar
 DAT.P (name)
 ‘to Tsotar’

ya sakar
 DAT.C child
 ‘to the child’

4.2. **“Adjective”**. In attributive function, “adjectives” are morphologically invariant. They follow the relevant noun:

a yese quiko
 ABS dog wet
 ‘a wet dog’

In predicative function, “adjectives” precede the noun (phrase) of which they are predicated and are morphologically indistinguishable from verbs:

quiko a yese
 be.wet ABS dog
 ‘the dog is wet.’

In general, there is not much evidence in Skerre for sharply differentiating between adjectives and verbs.

4.3. **Pronoun.**

4.3.1. *Personal*. There are several series of personal pronouns, depending on the function of the pronoun. The independent emphatic pronouns only have forms for the first and second person:

	sg.	pl.
1	<i>hari</i>	<i>owe</i>
2	<i>naya</i>	<i>rake</i>

These are comparatively rare; subjects and objects are most usually encoded by bound pronouns, typically appearing on the verb. Independent emphatic third persons are provided by the demonstrative pronouns (see section 4.3.2).

The object-marking bound pronouns attach to the verb and are:

	sg.	pl.
1	<i>-Vh</i>	<i>-(?)o</i>
2	<i>-Vn</i>	<i>-Vr</i>
3	\emptyset	\emptyset

(The V slot is filled by *a* after a consonant, by length after a short vowel, and not filled if following a long vowel.)

The subject-marking bound pronouns usually attach to the verb (further away from the stem than the object markers), though they can appear on other words as long as that word (or phrase) is initial in the sentence. The forms for the subject-marking bound pronouns are:

	sg.	pl.
1	<i>-ha</i>	<i>-wo</i>
2	<i>-na</i>	<i>-ra</i>
3	\emptyset	<i>-ti</i>

An example of a verb with both subject and object-marking bound pronouns is given below:

E-kosa-an=ha
 POT-wash-2SG.OB=1SG.SU
 ‘I will wash you.’

Possessive personal pronouns are also encoded as bound forms, these on nouns. The forms are:

	sg.	pl.
1	<i>-he</i>	<i>-we</i>
2	<i>-ne</i>	<i>-ri</i>
3	<i>-sa</i>	<i>-te</i>

Some example possessed nouns include *wiyet-he* ‘my boat’; *ana-sa* ‘her mother’.

4.3.2. *Demonstrative*. Skerre has a three-way distinction in demonstrative pronouns and adjectives (identical forms are used for the two classes of function):

proximal	<i>tii</i>	‘this’ (associated with 1st person)
medial	<i>tena</i>	‘that’ (associated with 2nd person)
distal	<i>taar</i>	‘that, that yonder’ (associated with 3rd person)

4.3.3. *Interrogative*. The three most central question words in Skerre are *sina* ‘who’, *tseyi* ‘what’, and *rowa* ‘where’. The last usually appears with a location/direction-related pronominal. See 4.8.1 for more on the syntax of questions.

4.4. **Numerals**. 1–10: *yaat*, *haas*, *siya*, *quee*, *yaan*, *yaan-yaat*, *yaan-haas*, *yaan-siya*, *yaan-quee*, *waar*. 11 *waar-yaat* ; 12 *waar-haas*; 20 *ari*.

As is evident from the use of *yaan* ‘five’ and *waar* ‘ten’ as bases for higher numbers, Skerre has a biquinary number system.

4.5. **Verb**. The verb in Skerre is mildly inflected. The general structure of the verb is TAM – stem – TAM – OBJ – SUBJ, where only one of the TAM slots is filled (and the OBJ slot only filled if there is a pronominal object).

4.5.1. *TAM*. Tense, aspect, and mood (or TAM) is expressed inflectionally in Skerre. The imperfective for regular verbs is expressed with the prefix *hi-* and the prefix *e-* signals what is called the potential, a form that can express futurity, but also obligation or non-reality, depending on the syntactic (and pragmatic) context. The perfective is formed with a suffix, which can have the form *-in*, *-:n*, or *-yin* (following a consonant, short vowel, and long vowel, respectively). The bare stem can be used as an imperative. Thus, the following example paradigm:

<i>Hi?ahor</i>
IPFV.run
‘S/he is running.’
<i>E?ahor</i>
POT.run
‘S/he will run’
<i>Ahorin</i>
run.PFV
‘S/he ran’
<i>Ahor!</i>
run.IMP
‘Run’

4.5.2. *Causative*. The causative is formed by adding *rii-* to the basic stem: *hosi* ‘eat’ – *riihosi* ‘make eat, feed’. *Rii-* is generally preferred with verbs that are – or could be – intransitive.

4.5.3. *Negation*. Clausal negation in Skerre is signaled with the preverbal particle *koni*:

Koni ahorin.
NEG run.PFV
‘S/he didn’t run.’

Any subject marker that appears in a negative clause must appear attached to the negative particle, not the verb:

Koni-ha hi?ahor.
NEG-1SG.SU IPFV.run
‘I am not running.’

The particle *rone* negates a command:

Rone ahor.
PROH run.IMP
‘Don’t run!’

4.5.4. *Argument Marking*. With full noun phrases, Skerre exhibits an ergative pattern. This means that what one might consider subjects are ‘split’ in their marking: subjects with intransitive verbs are marked one way, while subjects with transitives are marked in another. So, the only noun phrase with an intransitive verb appears with the absolutive prenominal, *a*:

Ahorin a sakar.
run.PFV ABS child
‘The child ran.’

With a transitive verb, there is an noun phrase with the absolutive prenominal, but it is, in fact, the patient-like argument. The agent-like argument is marked not marked with *a*, but with the ergative prenominal *tsa*:

Okaan tsa srahan a sakar.
see.PFV ERG hunter ABS child
‘The hunter saw the child.’

Interestingly, this pattern is not utilized by the bound pronouns on the verb. As the examples below show, markers from the subject paradigm (such as *-ha*) straightforwardly mark subjects, while markers from the object paradigm (such as *-ah*) straightforwardly mark objects:

Ahorin-ha.
run.PFV-1SG.SU
'I ran.'

Okaan-ha a sakar.
see.PFV-1SG.SU ABS child
'I saw the child.'

Okaanah tsa sakar.
see.PFV.1SG.OB ERG child
'The child saw me.'

4.6. **Adpositions.** The function of basic adpositions is largely taken up by the prenominals – arguably, they (or at least some of them) are actually prepositions. For further specification of (mostly local) relationships, relational noun constructions are used. The general scheme of these constructions is prenominal – relational noun – genitive/possessive object. Some examples include:

te akik e kotan.
LOC.C side GEN.C box
'besides the box.'

te akik-sa.
LOC.C side-3SG.POSS
'beside it.'

4.7. **Word Formation.** Nouns can be derived from verbs quite readily with a number of different prefixes:

s- indicates agent: *teyan* 'heal' – *steyan* 'doctor, healer'
t- indicates an inanimate item associated with the verb: *rawo* 'cook' – *trawo* 'cooking pot'
i- indicates actions: *sekan* 'suggest' – *isekan* 'suggestion'
oo- indicates qualities: *heres* 'angry' – *ooheres* 'anger'

Nouns can also be derived from other nouns:

-(y)*ir* is a diminutive: *yese* 'dog' – *yeseyir* 'doggy'
-(w)*ok* is an augmentative: *yakot* 'lake' – *yakotok* 'sea'

4.8. **Word order.** Verb-initial sentences are the norm. Verb–Subject–Object (VSO) order is the most common, though VOS is also possible; permutations of S and O do not change the meaning in the 'who-does-what-to-whom' sphere. Thus, both sentences below have the same gloss:

Okaan tsa srahan a sakar.
see.PFV ERG hunter ABS child

Okaan a sakar tsa srahan.
see.PFV ABS child ERG hunter

‘The hunter saw the child.’

4.8.1. *Interrogative Clauses.* The particle *-wa* appears after the first word in the sentence to signal a yes-no question:

Okaan-wa-na a sakar?
see.PFV-Q-2SG.SU ABS child

‘Did you see the child?’

In content questions, the interrogative expression comes first.

Te rowa okaan-na a sakar?
LOC where see.PFV-2SG.SU ABS child

‘Where did you see the child?’

4.8.2. *Relative Clauses.* Relative clauses most commonly begin with the invariant word *an*:

a sakar an okaan-na
ABS child REL see.PFV-2SG.SU

‘the child that you saw’

When a non-subject/non-object role is relativized on, a resumptive pronoun (bolded below) must be used at the ‘foot’ of the relative clause:

a sakar an ireen-na te akik-sa
ABS child REL sit.PFV-2SG.SU LOC side-3SG.POSS

‘the child you sat near’

5. SAMPLE

Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 1:

Enar a yiket e riyos tsire ri riki te oowaatitaari ne
be.born ABS all GEN.C person free and equal LOC.C respectfulness COM.C
oosi?an. Hihena-ti a tsaats ne oosekos ri e?aka-ti
justice IPFV.share-3PL.SU ABS thought COM.C morality and POT.do-3PL.SU
ye kari-te tsonar te sita e isorit.
DAT self-3PL.POSS mutually LOC.C manner GEN.C agreement

‘All person are born free and equal in respectfulness and justice. They share thought and morality and should mutually act towards themselves in the manner of harmony.’