

**An areal exploration of plural systems of the indigenous  
languages of Northwest Mexico and the Southwest United States  
\*Session Abstract\***

**1 Introduction**

The northernmost tip of the Gulf of California is a point of intersection of multiple ecoregions—Sonoran, Mojave, and Baja deserts, as well as California coastal sage and chaparral. It is at the same time a region where language families come together, with speakers of a variety of Uto-Aztecan and Yuman languages living in the region, along with speakers of language isolates like Seri (Cmiique Iitom). The sustained contact between speakers of these languages has produced shared areal features (e.g., Sherzer 1976), which extend to languages further out like Salinan (isolate) suggesting perhaps a much larger contact area (Figure 1). The proposed symposium will bring together 7 researchers who focus on languages of the region to explore areal connections in their systems of plurality. The result should be descriptive and theoretical advances, but also lead to pedagogical insights.

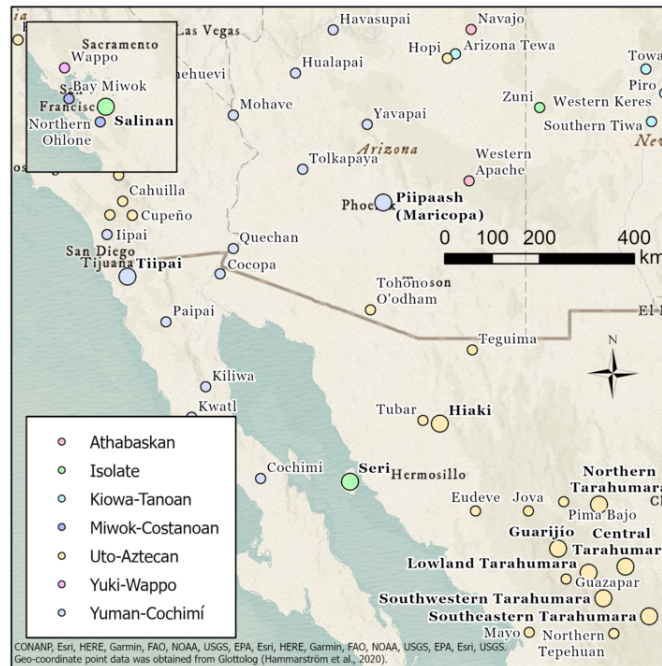


Figure 1: Southwest US-northwest Mexico as a linguistic area

The rationale for the session is based on the already-documented connections between languages of the region across various kinds of plural constructions. We focus on connections between Seri and other languages of the region because, as an isolate, we might not otherwise expect shared features except for under contact.

- **Incremental Morphology:** There are multiple instances of languages implementing ‘scale-based plura(actiona)lity’—that is, there is no one-to-one mapping between exponents and plural meanings. Instead, these languages have a list of plural meanings ordered by some notion of “more plural”, along with a list of exponents ordered by some morphosyntactically

defined order. Paradigms are well-formed as long as these order are in scale alignment. We see an example of this kind of pattern in Hualapai (Yuman) in the example in table 1 from Baerman 2019, where vowel length in the bolded forms below can mark multiple regions of meaning—we can’t say length marks paucal, for instance, but critically, once we have length, it monotonically appears in semantically “more plural” forms. Seri has strikingly similar patterns for marking verbal plurality (e.g. Baerman 2016). This is a kind of morphological marking of plura(action)ality unreported elsewhere in the world, making it a strong candidate for an areal phenomenon.

Singular	Paucal	Plural	Greater Plural	
yom	<b>yo:m-j</b>	“”	“”	go out and get X
hwal	<b>hwa:l</b>	<b>hwa:l-j</b>	“”	dig
gilgyo	gilgyo-j	<b>gilgyo:</b>	<b>gilgyo:-j</b>	tie s-large thing

Table 1: Hualapai incremental morphology

- **Pluractionality:** All the languages of this region have pluractional systems. We show some examples from Piipaash (Yuman) (Table 3) and Seri (Table 2) which have pluractional paradigms conflated with their plural agreement systems. This is rare feature, crosslinguistically, and striking that it occurs here in nearby languages.

‘wrap’		Pluractionality		
		neutral	multiple	dist
Number	singular	<i>iyacapnij</i>	<i>iyacapanl</i>	<i>iyacapnalca</i>
	plural	<i>iyacapnalcoj</i>	<i>iyacapzil</i>	<i>iyacapzilca</i>

Table 2: Seri pluractional / plural agreement paradigms

‘hit’		Number		
		singular	dual	plural
Pluractionality	neutral	axám	axámʃ	aʃu:xám
	plurc	aʃxám	aʃxámʃ	aʃu:xám

Table 3: Piipaash pluractional / plural agreement paradigms

- **Pluralia Tantum:** Hiaki (Uto-Aztecan) has recently been shown to have a large number of pluralia tantum nouns, upwards of 20% of the lexicon (Harley & Harvey 2021). Moreover, pluralia tantum nouns show an intriguing pattern of triggering plural concord, plural inflection but not agreement, perhaps suggesting that agreement is semantic in Hiaki, which we see in examples like (1)-(2). We see very similar behavior in Seri, where (at least some) pluralia tantum classes show semantic agreement on verbs.

- (1) Ehkalea-m hunum kecha!  
ladder-**pl** there stand.up.**sg**  
“Stand the ladder over there!”
- (2) Ehkalea-m hunum ha’abwa!  
ladder-**pl** there stand.up.**pl**  
“Stand the ladders over there!”

- **Numbers-as-Verbs:** One striking feature of languages of the region is that numerals are verbs. We see examples of this in Yuman languages, like Piipaash (3), as well as in Seri (4). We know these expressions are verbal because they bear verbal morphology, like the switch reference marker in the Piipaash example. More striking, though, they can bare verbal pluractional morphology and with similar interpretations in both languages.

- (3) Pam-sh Heather-m uudav-k paan **xmuk-xper-m** mash-k  
Pam-nom Heather-asc accompany-ss bread **three-each-ds** eat.du-real  
‘Pam and Heather each ate three pieces of bread.’ (Gordon 1986:p. 99)
- (4) Cmajiic coi hateeya quih **coocalcam** iyoonec.  
woman.pl def.pl bottle det **sbj.nlmz.be\_two.plur 3;3.rlyo.carry.pl**  
‘The women carried 2 bottles (each).’  
Context: Six women, they carry two bottles each. TRUE (Pasquereau 2020)

Though this is not meant to be an exhaustive list, all of these features are strong candidates for areal phenomena. In some cases, though, we need deeper exploration. For instance, pluractionality is common crosslinguistically, so we would like to see that pluractionality in the region involves similar semantic subcategories or involves similar marking. This is precisely why we want to convene a symposium, to get researchers working on these languages all talking about plurality together in the same room. It promises to be a keynote event in our understanding of this linguistic area at the border of countries, cultures, and ecologies. Additionally, we expect this kind of research to have broader impacts. All of the panel members are actively working on pedagogy, and the complex plural systems we are exploring are a hurdle to L2 learning. The areal similarities means that advances in pedagogy for one language could likely be extended to others. Finally, a greater knowledge of areal features of this region would be critical for supporting reawakening languages for which details about older systems are unknown.

## References

- Baerman, Matthew. 2016. Seri verb classes: morphosyntactic motivation and morphological autonomy. *Language* 92(4). 792–823.
- Baerman, Matthew. 2019. Feature duality. In *Morphological perspectives: Papers in honour of greville g. corbett*, 124. Edinburgh University Press.
- Gordon, Lynn. 1986. *Maricopa morphology and syntax*, vol. 108. Univ of California Press.
- Harley, Heid & Meg Harvey. 2021. Pluralia tantum in hiaki. Handout of a talk at Friends of Uto-Aztecan.
- Pasquereau, Jeremy. 2020. A unique operator for verbal pluractionality and numeral distributivity. Handout of a talk at SUB 2020.
- Sherzer, Joel. 1976. *Areal linguistics in north america*. Springer.

## An areal exploration of plural systems of the indigenous languages of Northwest Mexico and the Southwest United States

**Session Type:** Symposium with a series of invited talks

**Session Length:** 3 hours

**Organizers:**

- Robert Henderson, University of Arizona (rhenderson@arizona.edu)
- Heidi Harley, University of Arizona (hharley@arizona.edu)
- Jérémy Pasquereau, CNRS - Nantes Université (jeremy.pasquereau@cnrs.fr)

**Participants (All shall be presenters):**

- Robert Henderson, University of Arizona (rhenderson@arizona.edu)
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- Ella Hannon, University of British Columbia (eh4698@mail.ubc.ca)

**Schedule (all talks 20 minutes with 5 minutes for discussion):**

- *Morphology of Piipaash (Yuman) Number, Part III*  
Powell 0 : 00 – 0 : 25
- *Number-neutral nouns and a preliminary semantics for bare numerals in Neji Tiipay*  
Hannon 0 : 25 – 0 : 50
- *The grammaticalization of nominal plurality morphology in Taracahitan languages (Uto-Aztecan, Northwestern Mexico) (Uto-Aztecan, Northwest Mexico)*  
Alvarez Gonzalez 0 : 50 – 1 : 15
- *Kinetic body part counting in numeral etymologies in Hiaki*  
Harley and Harvey 1 : 15 – 1 : 40
- *Verbal number and argument marking in Salinan*  
Baerman 1 : 40 – 2 : 05
- *Plural participants and verbal class allomorphy in San José de la Zorra Kumiay*  
Gil Burgoin 2 : 05 – 2 : 30
- *Pluralia tantum nouns in Seri*  
Henderson and Pasquereau 2 : 30 – 2 : 55