

An Introduction to the Pohnpeian Language for
JVs

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Kaselehlie!

So you have been selected to come to Pohnpei! Here is a helpful guide to get you started on learning the Pohnpeian language. The purpose of the guide is to expose you to some useful bits of information about the language before you arrive. You by no means have to memorize all of this before you arrive, or even any of it, but it will definitely help if you learn some of the basics.

The guide goes into some depth for a few topics and others it treats lightly, based on how vital I feel it is in getting a basic understanding of the language. If you would like an in depth look at the Pohnpeian language read *Ponapean Reference Grammar* by Kenneth L. Rehg, which we have two copies of in our community.

As you prepare to leave for Pohnpei, it may be helpful to read this guide and learn what you find appropriate and what you have time for. After you arrive on Pohnpei, you can worry about all the details.

This guide is accompanied with an Audio CD to help get a better understanding of the pronunciation.¹

¹no CD yet, but one is planned, but it may never happen.

Chapter 2

Pohnpeian Sound System

2.1 Alphabet

The Pohnpeian Alphabet contains less letters than the English language. The only letters that Pohnpeian uses are a, d, e, h, i, k, l, m, mw, n, ng, o, oa, p, pw, r, s, t, u, w. Many of the sounds that we are used to in English are not used in Pohnpeian, but on the other hand, Pohnpeian only has a few sounds that English does not have, which makes it easier for English speakers to make the Pohnpeian sounds. If you look closely, you will notice that some of the above letters contain two letters together. These are used to indicate sounds in Pohnpeian that English does not have, but more on this later.

2.2 Pronunciation

The table below lists the sounds that English and Pohnpeian share, with an example word in Pohnpeian and English. The corresponding sound in the English word is in **bold**. The table below corresponds to Audio Track 1 of CD 1.

Letter	English	Pohnpeian
a	pot	anahne ‘need’
d	stick	deke ‘island’
e	be	en ‘of’
i	beat	ni ‘to’
k	keep	kang ‘eat’
l	like	malek ‘chicken’
m	mother	mahs ‘face’
n	new	nih ‘coconut palm’
ng	swimming	ngihl ‘voice’
o	open	nohn ‘too’
oa	bought	mwoakid ‘Spouse’
p	spoon	pihl ‘water’
s	supper	esil ‘three’
u	boot	onop ‘prepare’
w	‘walk’	weid ‘walk’

Notice in the table above that ‘d’ sounds more like ‘t’ in English than it does ‘d’, but also notice that it does **not** have a strong puff of air, called aspiration. So it is not like ‘tick’, but like the t in ‘stick’, that is not aspirated. Also the sound ‘l’ is made with the tip of the tongue as in ‘like’, but not like the second ‘l’ in the word ‘label’.

Now for that sounds that are not found in English. The first one is ‘r’, which is just like the rolled r in Spanish. An example in Pohnpeian is the word ‘rahr’ (finger coral). The next sounds are the ‘w’ sounds—pw and mw. The sounds add a slight ‘w’ sound after letter, as if you are pronouncing them together. This is not exactly the same, but you will get it from practice and listening to Pohnpeian. An example of these sounds is found in a common greeting: ‘pwong mwahu’ (good night). The last sound ‘t’ is pronounced like the ‘ch’ sound in ‘church’, except that you curve your tongue slightly backward along the roof of your mouth (known as retroflexion). An example of this sound is in the word ‘pwutak’ (boy). All of these Pohnpeian words and sounds can be found on Track 2.

The letter ‘h’ is **never** used in Pohnpeian to indicate the ‘h’ sound. Rather, based on the German writing system (a carry over from German colonial days), the letter ‘h’ distinguishes between short and long vowel, where ‘h’ following a vowel means that it is long, as in ‘pihl’, whereas ‘pil’ would be short. The difference between long and short vowels is a matter of length, where long vowels are held longer. The distinction between long and short vowels can often be a subtle distinction for English speakers to pick up, but where a vowel is long or short can change the meaning of

a word, as with ‘dol’ (to mix) and ‘dohl’ (mountain). Listen to Audio Track 3 and follow along with the below table to get a feeling of the difference between short and long vowels.

Short	Long
Mas	Mahs
Pe	Pehs
Ki	Kihm
Tok	Tohk
Soad	Soahd
Ruk	Ruhk

The letters ‘ai’ together produces a sound like word ‘eye’, as in the word ‘kaido’. Also the letters, i and u can sometimes be used to make the sounds ‘y’ and ‘w’ respectively. There are several rules as to when they are used as such, but are too complicated for this introduction, so just pay attention to how words with ‘i’ and ‘u’ are pronounced (sometimes i is like y and sometimes u is like w). Examples of the other pronunciations those letters are in ‘mwahu’ and ‘peid’. When there is ahu it is pronounced like ow in “he bows.”

Chapter 3

Greetings and Common Phrases

3.1 Informal Greetings

These are the most common greetings in Pohnpeian. You may use these greetings with people your age or younger or people whom you know fairly well. The most common greetings is *kaselehlie*, which literally means ‘most beautiful’. *Kaselehlie* is used both as the English ‘hello’ and ‘good bye’. *Kaselehlie* is often shorted to *lehlie*. The shortened form is slightly more informal than the longer form. In more informal settings, *kaselel* ‘beautiful’ may be used. *Kaselehlie* is the superlative form of *kaselel*.

You may also greet someone with time specific phrases. In the morning you may use *menseng mwahu* ‘good morning’ or literally ‘morning good’. In the afternoon you may say *souwas mwahu*. For the evening you may use *soutik mwahu* ‘good evening’ and at night you may say *pwohng mwahu* ‘good night’. There are other time specific phrases but they are less common.

Often people will ask you *Ia iromw?* ‘how are you?’ or literally ‘what (is) your state/condition. You may respond *i kehlail* lit. ‘I (am) strong’ or *i mwahu* ‘I (am) good’. You may drop the ‘i’ in those responses if you’d like. If you are sick you may say *i soumwahu*.

Another common greeting-like question is *Ke pahn kohla ia?* ‘Where are you going?’ lit. ‘You will go where?’. This question may seem a bit imposing to Americans but is very common and is a polite thing to ask. There are many answers to this question, but they are usually in the form *I pahn kohla [name of place, like store name or village name]*. If you are not going to a specific place but just to the store, then add the preposition *ni*. *Ni* is rarely used with proper nouns. *I pahn kohla ni stowahu*. ‘I am going to the store.’

3.2 Formal Greetings

Formal greetings are very important in Pohnpeian and are used fairly often. If you are greeting someone who is 18 or older that you do not know (well), or if you would like to show respect to someone, you should say *Kaselehhie maing*. If you are greeting more than one person you should say *Kaselehhie maingko*. To ask how are you more formally you can say “ia iromwi?”

3.3 Useful Words and Phrases

Pohnpeian	English
edei [name]	my name is [name].
ia edomw?	what is your name.
ia mwaromwi	what is your name (more specifically title..is more respectful)
ede [name]	his/her name is [name]
I kin mihmi [place].	I live at [place].
Ke kin mihmi ia?	Where do you live?
Ke kohsang ia?	where did you come from?
I kohsang [place]	I came from [place].
I iouki [food].	I like [name of food that you like].
Iawasa [place]?	Where is [place]?
I men mwenge.	lit.I want food “I’m hungry’
I med	I’m full.

Chapter 4

Nouns and Pronouns

4.1 Pronouns

In Pohnpeian there are many pronouns and they depend on where they are subject, object or possive or emphatic or non-emphatic. Some pronouns act as suffixes and cannot stand alone in a sentence. Pohnpeian also has a three-way number distinction: singular, dual (2) and plural (3 or more). There are also inclusive (included the listener) and exclusive (excludes the listener) pronouns. There are also formal and informal pronouns. Pohnpeian has three levels of formality: common, respectful (high titled and older people) and royal (reserved for the highest of titles). Most people do not know the royal forms or often the respectful forms (except for a handful of regularly used forms), and the common form (or low language) is what is used most often.

Emphatic pronouns are used when there is not a verb in the sentence. To say ‘I am a teacher’ you used the emphatic pronoun and the word teacher *Ngehi sounpadahk*. If you use a verb in the sentence, then use the non-emphatic form, for example ‘I pahn kohla ni sukuhlo.’ ‘I will go to that school.’ It is important to note that adjectives act like verbs, e.g., ‘I kehlail’ and not ‘Ngehi kehlail’.

For third person, there is no distinction between genders, as there is no grammatical in Pohnpeian.

Here is a table for emphatic subject pronouns:

Person	Singular	Dual	Plural
1st	ngehi	kita	kitail
1st exclusive		kiht	kiht
2nd	kowe	kumwa	kumwail
2nd respectful	komwi	komwa	komwail
3rd	ih	ira	irail

Here is a table for non-emphatic subject pronouns:

Person	Singular	Dual	Plural
1st	i	kita	kitail
1st exclusive		se	se
2nd	ke	kumwa	kumwail
2nd respectful	komw	komwa	komwail
3rd	e	ira	irail

Here is the table for object pronouns:

Person	Singular	Dual	Plural
1st	-ie	-kita	-kitail
1st exclusive		-kit	-kit
2nd	-uhk	-kumwa	-kumwail
3rd	-	-ira	-irail

The object pronouns are added as suffixes to verbs. For third person singular no pronoun is needed since if no pronoun is indicated it is assumed to be third person singular as the object.

4.2 Nouns

Nouns are very similar to English nouns in terms of usage. Nouns are persons, places, things, or ideas. They can be proper or common nouns. They can be the subject of a sentence or object. Unlike in English, nouns can add certain suffices to the relationship of the noun speaker and listener. Nouns in plural form do not change but sometimes add a special word after it to indicate plurality. Also every nouns belongs to a specific class depending on the noun's characteristics (more on this in the next section).

4.3 Noun Classes

Every noun belongs to a specific class. Each class has its own unique numerals (counting words) and words to show possession. The class of the noun can depend on its shape (long objects, round small objects), things that you eat, things that are dear to you, things that can fit in your hand (things you have control over), things that you are on equal terms with, sibling-relationship, vehicles, and several other that are not as commonly used. Read the grammar book for more details. Also the class of the noun is not always fixed. For example if you own a dog as a pet you would say ‘nei kidi’ ‘my dog’, but if you were not really connected with it you would say ‘ahi kidi’. If you were going to eat your dog you would say ‘kenei kidi’. If you were to use your dog as a form of transportation you would say ‘werei kidi’ (that does not really exist, but makes sense grammatically and would be kind of a joke in Pohnpeian).

4.4 Noun Affixes

Most nouns can take the following three directional suffixes -o, -en, -et. -o indicates that the object is away from both the listener and the speaker, often translated as ‘that, or that one over there.’ -en indicates that the object is located near the listener. -et indicates that the object is near the speaker. Here is an example of how to use each form: Pwuhk ‘book’, pwuhko, pwuhken. Sometimes long vowels become short because of the complicated phonological rules (see the grammar book for a detailed explanation): pihl ‘water’, pilo, pilen, pilet. If a word ends in an o or w sound, then it becomes a long o or au (written often ‘ahu’) diphthong: sdowa ‘store’, sdowahu, sdownen, sdowet.

4.5 Singular and Plural

Plural can be indicated by adding the plural marker ko, kan or ket (similar to -o, -en, -et). Those girls over there would be serepein ko. Those boys over there would be pwutang ko. The word for boy is pwutak. When k and k are combined across word boundaries with suffixes or markers, then the first k becomes an ng and the second k stays. That is an example of one of Pohnpeian’s interesting phonological rules. I believe that is an example of dis-assimilation (sounds are too similar so they change to be different).

4.6 Possession

Every noun is either directly (inalienable) or indirectly (alienable) possessed. Directly possessed nouns add a possessive suffix to the end of the noun and are used for words that the owner always possesses, thus they are inalienable. These objects tend to be body parts and some family relationships.

Here is a list of some words that use direct possession:

Word Base Form	Possessed form	English
moahng	moangei	(my) head
kihl	kili	(my) skin
peh	pahi	(my) arm
mahs	mesei	(my) face
kihk	kiki	(my) finger/toe nail
ahd	edei	(my) name
mwahr	mwarei	(my) title
sahm	semei	(my) father
ire	irei	(my) state of health

Here is a table showing the general pattern for direct possession. The exact vowel used depends on what vowel or consonant the word ends with or some underlying feature of the word that is not always obvious. There are e Root, i Root, a Root, some a mix of those and irregular patterned nouns. It is possibly easier to just memorize how each word forms direct possession.

Person	Singular	Dual	Plural
1st	-i	-ta	-tail
1st exclusive		-t	-t
2nd	-mw	-mwa	-mwait
3rd	-	-ra	-rail

Indirect (alienable) possession is used for items or people that are not always possessed by the possessor or is jointly possessed by other people. The ownership of these items is often transient or not clearly defined. This is due to Pohnpeian culture's fluid notion of material possessions. Even though this is the general rule, there are some exceptions as in any language. Indirect possession is accomplished by adding a possessive modifier before the word, which depends on the class of the noun. Indirect possession is almost the most common form of possession.

The most common form of indirect possession is 'ah'. One can use ah if you forget what the class is. It is for general usage and sometimes suggests equality, as in ahi serepein lit. 'my girl' but mean 'my wife'. Another example would be to use it for 'sohri' 'slippers', for example ahi sohri 'my slippers'. Here is the table for ah.

Person	Singular	Dual	Plural
1st	ahi	ata	atail
1st exclusive		aht	aht
2nd	ahmw	amwa	amwail
3rd	ah	ara	arail

The next possessive class is nah. These are for things that you can hold in your hand, things that are valuable or that you cherish. In some instances it indicates that it is lower than the possessor, as in ‘nei serepein’ lit. ‘my girl’ but means ‘my daughter’. Another example for nah would be the word key (it comes from English): nah key ‘his/her/its key’.

Here is the table for nah:

Person	Singular	Dual	Plural
1st	nei	neita	neitail
1st exclusive		nait	nait
2nd	noumw	noumwa	noumwail
3rd	nah	neira	neirail

The next class is nime. It is used for things that you drink, for example uhpw ‘drinking coconut’. This category is fairly straight forward.

Here is the table for nime:

Person	Singular	Dual	Plural
1st	nime	nimata	nimatail
1st exclusive		nimat	nimat
2nd	nimoumw	nimoumwa	nimoumwail
3rd	nime	nimara	nimarail

The next class is kene. It is used for things that you eat, for example kirahka ‘cracker, candy.’

Here is the table for kene:

Person	Singular	Dual	Plural
1st	kenei	kanata	kanatail
1st exclusive		kanat	kanat
2nd	kenomw	kenoumwa	kanamwail
3rd	kene	kenara	kanarail

The next class is were. It is used for vehicle and modes of transportation. An example would be pwoht ‘boat’ or sdohsa ‘car’. The word were comes from the word for canoe ‘wahr’. By itself, it means his/her canoe ‘were’, my canoe ‘werei’, etc.

Here is the table for were:

Person	Singular	Dual	Plural
1st	werei	warata	waratail
1st exclusive		warat	warat
2nd	weromw	weroumwa	weroumwail
3rd	were	werara	wararail

The next class is imwe. It is used for buildings and houses, for example nahs ‘feast house’. It comes from the word for house ihmw. If you use the word by itself it means his/her house, my house, etc. depending on the form.

Here is the table for imwe:

Person	Singular	Dual	Plural
1st	imwei	imwata	imwatail
1st exclusive		imwat	imwat
2nd	imwomw	imwoumwa	imwoumwail
3rd	imwe	imwara	imwarail

There are several other classes too, such as rie (used for siblings), but the ones listed above are the most common.

To ask ‘whose is this?’ say *En ihs met?*

To express more complicated possession like the man’s father, you have to use a special construction based on the above paradigms. First you have to figure out if it is direct or indirect possession or a combination of the two. For the man’s father there are two words to choose for father (sahm or pahpa). Sahm uses direct and pahpa used indirect so both types can be shown.

For direct possession use the 3rd person singular form (it ends with an e or other vowel and add an -n) then follow it with the word that it belongs to. Semen ohlo ‘Father of the man’. Kilin ohlo ‘the man’s skin’.

For indirect possession use the correct possessive classifier (ah, nah, nime) in 3rd person singular form and add an -n (ah and nah become en and nein). Then comes the person or thing that owns the object, then the object being owned. En ohlo pahpa ‘of that man the father’ or ‘the man’s father’. Nimen ohlo uhpw ‘The man’s drinking coconut’. Kenen ohlo mahi ‘The man’s breadfruit’.

Optionally you can add the third person singular form of the possessive classifier right before the object being possesses: en ohlo (ah) seht ‘The man’s shirt’. For the dual or plural form the possessive classifier should be third person dual or plural: en ohlo akau (ara) seht ‘those men’s shirts (dual)’ or en ohlo akau (arail) seht ‘those men’s shirts (plural)’.

Let's look at more complicated possessive constructions:

nein ohlo nah pelik 'that man's coconut grater'

nein semen ohlo nah pelik 'that man's father's coconut grater' (combination of direct and indirect possession)

nein en ohlo ah pwoud nah pwuhk 'that man's wife's book'

nein ei pwoudo nah pwuhk 'my wife's book'

kilin semen ohlo 'that man's father's skin'

Chapter 5

Verbs and Adjectives

5.1 Introduction

Verb and adjectives act the same way, so I will simply call them both verbs. There are transitive verbs (verbs that must take an object) and intransitive verbs (verbs that cannot take objects). Adjectives are examples of intransitive verbs. The subject of a verb can either be a noun or a non-emphatic subject pronoun. Pohnpeian verbs are not conjugated as they are in English. That means that the verb does not change, just the subject. For example: kehlail ‘to be strong’, i kehlail, ke kehlail, e kehlail, kumwa kehlail, ...

Pohnpeian verbs also do not have tense in the English sense. Rather, Pohnpeian has aspect. Tense indicated when something happened in time (past, present, future, etc.). Aspect indicates whether an action is complete or incomplete or anything between complete and incomplete. Because this is a different way of thinking, it takes some time to get used to. Sometimes Pohnpei will use the future form (not yet completed) when we in English would use present or even past!

Pohnpeian verbs like nouns can take several suffixes and prefixes to add relational, directional, objective, negation, aspect markers, causative and other information. Verbs can become very complex, but are rarely used with several suffixes and prefixes.

5.2 Unmarked Form

Like I mentioned earlier, Pohnpeian does not have tense. The basic form of a verb is the unmarked form. It means that an action of a verb is realized but neutral with regard to the other aspects. Take for example *Ohlo soumwahu*. ‘That man is sick.’

The unmarked form means that the man is in a state of being sick. The verb does not give us any other meaning as to when the man was sick or how often or even if he is still sick. Often the best way to translate the unmarked form is in the past tense. ‘That man was sick.’ However, context should help with this. *Ohlo soumwahu met* ‘That man is sick now’ or *Ohlo soumwahu nan sounpar samwalahro*. ‘That man was sick last year.’

5.3 Unrealized Aspect

The unrealized aspect is made by adding the verbal form ‘pahn’ between the subject and the verb. ‘I pahn kohla’. ‘I will go.’ This form indicates an action that is not yet fully realized. Often these are translated into the future tense in English, but that is not always the case, since aspect does not include a time element. Take for example the following example: *Pwopwoudo pahn wahdo rais aio, ahpw re manokehla*. ‘That couple would have brought rice yesterday, but they forgot it.’

5.4 Habitual Aspect

Pohnpeian has a habitual form, which means something that is regularly done. For example, *I kin kohla ni sukuhlo*, means I go (regularly to school). *I kin iouki uht*, mean I like bananas. For the second example, if you remove the kin, it implies that the liking is only temporary or you just happen to like bananas in this one instance but not generally.

The habitual aspect can be combined with the unrealized aspect, to express something that will be habitually done but has not started yet, such as *Lahpo pahn kin iang sukuhl University of Hawaii*. ‘That guy will attend school at the University of Hawaii.’

5.5 Durative Aspect

The durative aspect is formed by the reduplication of the verb stem (a somewhat complicated process, so needs to be learned for each verb) or if the verb in unmarked form is already reduplicated (i.e., *doadoahk* ‘work’) then add *wie* in front of it.

The durative form indicates that an action involves some sort of duration of time. Look at the following examples: *I kang rais* ‘I eat rice’ and *I kangkang rais* ‘I am eating rice’. Another example is *E wie pweipwei* ‘He is being crazy’.

The durative form can be combined any other aspect forms. *I kin kangkang rais* ‘I (habitually) am eating rice’, *I pahn kin kangkang rais ansou me i pahn kohla Sapahn.* ‘I will (habitually) be eating rice when I go to Japan.’

5.6 Perfective Aspect

The perfective aspect is formed by adding -ehr (or similar form depending on Pohnpeian phonological rules). It is used to indicate than an action, event or condition has reached or is on its way toward reaching some kind of conclusion or state of completion.

Here are some examples: *I kangehr rais.* ‘I have eaten rice.’ *Lahpo kolahr Saipan* ‘That guy has gone to Saipan.’

The perfective aspect can be combined with all the other aspects. *I pahn mwemweitalahr Pohnpei* ‘I am about to visit Pohnpei.’, *I pahn samwalahr ansou me lahpo lelodoh.* ‘I will have left by the time that guy reaches here.’

Lahpo kin pirapehr ‘That guy has engaged in one of his customary acts of theft.’

Ohlo wie lopwolopwehr. ‘That man has been doing laundry.’

Seriet lingilingeringerehr ‘That child has been being angry’

5.7 Verbal Affixes

An affix is anything that can go on the front (prefix) or back (suffix) of a word.

Here are several verbal suffixes

Suffix	meaning
-iei	outward direction
-long	inward direction
-di	downward direction
-da	upward direction
-wei	movement toward listener
-la	movement toward third person
-do	movement toward speaker
-sang	movement from third person or place
-pene	movement together
-peseng	movement apart
-seli	being scattered

The verbal root koh means to move. Kohdo means come. Kohla mean to go. Kohdihdo means to come down to or out to. Kohdahdo means to come up to. Kohwei means to go to listener or to go where you the listener came from. Kohlong mean to go in toward the center of the island.

Also to make an intransitive verbs transitive (so that they can take an object) add -ih to the verb stem. For example, kapakap ‘to pray’ and kapakapih ‘to pray for something’.

Here are some verbal prefixes

Prefix	meaning
ka-	to cause to do something
sa-	negates verb
sou-	negates verb
ak-	‘to make a demonstration of’
li-	‘given to’

Sa- is different from sou- in that sa- means not that verb and sou- means the opposite of that verb. Ak becomes ang when it comes before velar consonants (ng or k).

Ka- can be combined with other prefixes as long as it come before them, but the other cannot be combined with themselves. For example, sukusuk mean to pound and kasukusuk means to cause to pound. Ese ‘to know’ sa+ese sehse ‘to not know’. Mwahu ‘good’, soumwahu ‘ill’. Lemei ‘cruel, tough’, aklemei ‘demonstrating cruelty to embarrass others’. uh ‘to be loyal’, akuh ‘to demonstrate loyalty’. tikitik ‘small’, litikitik ‘given to pettiness’. Ohlo kalipirapiala pwutako ‘That man cause that boy to become given to stealing.’

Chapter 6

Numbers

In Pohnpeian there are several sets of words used for counting. The set that is used depends on the type of word that you are counting. The classes of words for counting differ somewhat from the classes used for possession.

6.1 Counting Numbers

Here are the numbers that are generally used for counting

Number	Pohnpeian
1	ehu
2	riau
3	silu
4	pahieu
5	limau
6	wenou
7	isu
8	waluh
9	duau
10	eisek
11	eisek ehu
20	rieisek
22	rieisek riau
30	silihsek
40	pahisek
50	limeisek
60	weneisek
70	isihsek
80	welihsek
90	duweisek
100	epwiki
200	riepwiki
300	silipwiki
400	pahpwiki
500	limepwiki
600	wenepwiki
700	isipwiki
800	welipwiki
900	duwepwiki
143	epwiki pahisek siluh
1,000	kid
10,000	nen
100,000	lopw
1,000,000	rar

6.2 Numbers for Word Classes

For the table below, class I is used for ordinal numbers (first, second, third, fourth, ...). Class II is used for counting plants and long objects. Class III is used for counting animate objects (people and animals). There are other classes, but these are the most common.

Number	I	II	III
1	keiou	oapwoat	emen
2	keriau	riopwoat	riemen
3	kesiluh	silipwoat	silimen
4	kepahieu	pahpwoat	pahmen
5	kelimau	limpwoat	limmen
6	kewenou	wenopwoat	wenemen
7	keisuh	isipwoat	isimen
8	kewaluh	walupwoat	walumen
9	keduau	duepwoat	duemen
10	keisek	ehk	ehk

Chapter 7

Prepositions

Here is a short list of common prepositions

Pohnpei	English
ni	at, during
nan/loale	in/inside
sang	from
mehn	of
mwurin	after
duehte/rasehng	like

Chapter 8

Basic Honorific Language

Pohnpeian has three registers of speech: common, respectful and royal. This means that many Pohnpeian words (at least the most widely used and ones not borrowed from another language) potentially have three separate versions. For example, meir ‘sleep’, seimwoak and derir (from least formal to most). Some words only have two forms (common and respectful/royal): kihl (skin) and ihrekiso. Don’t worry about these words since most Pohnpeians don’t know or use them.

However, there are parts of the high language that are used pretty frequently. There are good to know and a good way to show respect to older members of your host family or to people with high titles.

Pohnpeian has two mechanisms in showing respect. One is to lower yourself (humilitative) and the other is to raise up the other person (honorific).

One easy form to learn is humilitative possession. When you describe things that you own to a high titled person used this form: ei tungoal [thing that you own]. For example ei tungoal pwihk ‘my (humilitative) pig.’ You can use that construction regardless of the class of word. Also works if you forget what class a word belongs to and you end up being very respectful at the same time! This also works for indirect and direct possession. You just treat it like indirect possession: moangei becomes ei tungoal moahng. Very simple.

If you are talking about a high titled person’s things then you use these constructions (one for direct and one for indirect possession).

For direct possession add -mwi to the word being possessed. For example, sawi (clan) becomes sawimwi (your clan, honorific). Also fairly simple to do.

For indirect possession instead of ah or nah use sapwellime (for your form it will be sapwellimemwi). You see this form a lot during the Mass when describing things belonging to God. For kene use koanoat (this form does not change). For

nime use pwenieu (this form does not change). For were use tehnwere (your form is tehnweremwi). For imwe use tehnpese (your form is tehnpesemwi).

Instead of those you could just add -mwi to the possessive classifiers, for ah get omwi (your), for nah (noumwi).

When reaching the home of a high titled person it is best to greet them with Kaselehlie tehnpasen! ‘Greeting empty-nest-there!’ It is considered polite to not greet them directly since you are removing them from the normal plane of the speaker/listener relationship.