## THE SETTING

The area where the Nez Perce people (ni·mí·pu· or cú·p̓itpel̓u·) lived extends from the Bitterroot Mountains on the east to the Blue Mountains on the west, between latitudes 45° and 47°. This is where Idaho, Washington, and Oregon meet. Three rivers run through this area: the Snake, the Salmon, and the Clearwater. They provided food and means of transportation for the Nez Perce people, and routes to travel for their mythological Coyote. The hills in the area gave them game animals and edible roots, as well as many mysterious peaks for the Nez Perce young people to go to get their wé·yekin or guardian spirits.

## THE LANGUAGE

The Nez Perce language (nimipu·tímt) is related to its western neighbor, the Sahaptin language, and together they form the Sahaptian linguistic family (Aoki 1962).

The favored order in a sentence, on the surface, is VSO (verb-subject-object). The relationship among the nouns is indicated by case suffixes. Plurality of subjects and objects and certain person information are copied in the verb system in the form of prefixes. Information such as 'with foot' or 'poking with a pointed object' may be expressed either by verb prefixes or by a combination of a noun stem and an instrumental or locative case suffix. The language is very rich in the former, but younger speakers tend to resort to the latter. For example, 'he arrived in the rain' may be expressed by either:

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| (1) | hitẇalapáyna | hi-tiẇele-pá·y-e<br>*3rd person subj.* = in rain-come-past |
| or | | | |
| (2) | hipá·yna wé·qitpe | hi-pá·y-e wé·qit-pe;<br>*3rd person subj.* = come-past *lc.* rain |

(1) is a sentence using a verb prefix tiẇele 'in inclement weather,' and (2) involves a noun wé·qit 'rain' and a locative suffix -pe.

The person and number information of the subject or object, as well as some instrumental information, are prefixed to the verb stem. Some spatial information, such as 'go away to do something,' 'come back after doing something,' is expressed by suffixes which are placed immediately after the verb root. Then follow suffixes that indicate tenses.

Aoki, Haruo. 1987. Nez Perce Texts.
Berkeley: University of California Press.