

Q.20 Zuni Tunes – Solution

The markers for Zuni verbs can be described in the following table:

	he/she/it (3 rd person singular)	they (3 rd person plural)
Transitive subject (ergative)	∅	-na:we
Object/intransitive subject (absolutive)	∅	a:(w)-

The -w- is added to the 3rd person plural object form if the verb begins with a vowel. The past tense is indicated in Zuni by *-kä* on the end of the verb. *ho'* indicates "I".

Solutions:

1. I overtake him/it, he buried him/it, they steal him/it.
2. *a:kä, p'alona:we, p'ctu.*
3. Because the only example we have of the verb "love" contains the 3rd person plural object prefix, we cannot be sure whether "he loves it" will be *witcema* or *itcema*.
4. The verb "to go", where the ending *-ne* disappears before the past tense marker *-kä* (this does not happen elsewhere).

Source: <https://archive.org/details/tonkawaindianlan03hoij>

Strategy:

In this problem you are tasked with discovering the *morphology* of the Zuni verbs, that is, the identity of the parts of the verb that carry meaning. Looking at the first few pairs, it seems obvious that that the

a:- or *a:w-* prefix indicates a plural object (“them”); when there are two similar forms of a prefix or suffix, as here (two *allomorphs*), often the “choice” between them will depend on the *sound* that follows or precedes them. Here, looking further down at *a:welatena:we* and *elatekä*, we can pretty safely conclude that the prefix has a *w* added to it before a verb that begins with a vowel rather than a consonant. And this provides the answer to Question 3, since we do not have a form of the relevant verb without the prefix.

But there is an additional problem: in the forms meaning “they are sick” and “they go”, the *a:-/a:w-* prefix still appears, even though here “they” seems to be the subject rather than the object. But this is not unusual in the world’s languages: “to be sick” and “to go” are *intransitive* verbs (verbs without objects), and sometimes the form that means “them” in transitive verbs (“he stole them”) is the same as the one that means “they” in *intransitive* verbs (“they are sick”).

There doesn’t seem to be a form for “he” at all, either as subject or object. This, again, is not unusual: when a particular subject or object is expressed without any “marking” on the verb, this is known as a *zero morpheme* (expressed as \emptyset), i.e. its meaning is expressed by the *lack* of any meaningful sound.