Thumbnail sketch of Patwin (Hill) by Donald Ultan

Patwin is mainly synthetic in structure; in technique it is agglutinative and highly symbolic, with a small degree of fusion. Suffixation is the most important morphological process, but vowel ablaut and reduplication are also significant; compounding occurs to a lesser degree. Phonological processes include consonantal changes (especially alternations between plain and glottalized, aspirated, or voiced consonants), reduction of consonant clusters, assimilation of consonants, and vocalic harmonization.

The word classes are verbs, nouns, pronouns, and particles. Except for the latter, all classes may be defined by the internal morphological structure of their members. Verbs consist of stem, typically disyllabic, and verbal suffixes distinguishing categories of tense-mode, aspect, voice, etc. Stems may occur independently—usually in periphrastic constructions—and may be compounded, in which case the compound stem shares all the privileges of a simplex. All stems have a phonologically related plural form (plurality of subject, object, or action; distributive or iterative) which is formed in one of two ways: complete or partial reduplication of the initial syllable; or ablaut of the final vowel. (This final vowel may prove segmentable.) With the exception of a few volitional and imperative modal suffixes, the verb does not distinguish person and number (aside from the general notion of plurality discussed above).

The noun stem is characterized by its potential occurrence with certain case-suffixes: objective, possessive, oblique, as well as several locative suffixes. Nouns may be further divided into animate and inanimate (although the semantic categories break down) depending on whether they take the objective suffix, and in syntactic relationships, by the set of possessive suffixes with which they are in agreement. Nouns may change class—animate to inanimate or vice-versa—with some kind of lexical meaning change. Normally, nouns do not distinguish number, although they contrast specific and generic by means of suffixes. Kinship nouns, however, have a true plural suffix. In addition, most of them occur with a special possessed suffix.

Like nouns, the independent personal pronouns and demonstratives take case-suffixes. They, however, make the further distinctions of person and number (singular, plural, and dual, including for the first
and second persons dual and plural of independent personal pronouns, the further distinctions of inclusive and exclusive forms).

Large classes of stems are restricted to occurrence in either verb or noun constructions. Others may occur in both. For the restricted classes derivational suffixes may occur to provide a change in class.