Linguistic Variation and Time Travel:
Barrier, or Border-Crossing?

Jocelyn C. Ahlers
CSU San Marcos
jahlers@csusm.edu

Introduction

Language endangerment creates situations in which the indexical relationships between languages and communities prototypically defined by use of those languages (Anderson 1991) are disrupted, complicating notions of language community, speech community, and, at a more basic level, language and speaker (see Bailey 2007 for a similar point regarding multilingual communities more generally). In many Native California communities, the use of or affiliation with endangered languages of heritage potentially creates community ties not only with present-day speakers and co-affiliates, but also with imagined ancestral communities wherein that language was a dominant means of communication. Language variation, less visible in a robust speech community, is conspicuous in such contracting speech communities, and speaker/learner reactions to it indicate their metadiscursive awareness of variation at the individual and community levels. As Irvine and Gal (2000) point out, "[t]he significance of linguistic differentiation is embedded in the politics of a region and its observers", so the purpose of this paper is to explore the significance of linguistic differentiation within two Native California communities working to reclaim their endangered languages of heritage: the Pomo, and the Kawaiisu. In each case, I am particularly interested in examining the ways in which linguistic variation/differentiation can be read as creating or as interfering with speech community coherence.

Background

- Of the 6,000+ languages spoken in the world today, some 50% are endangered; 90% will be endangered in the next 100 years (Krauss 2007).
- Of the 100+ languages spoken in California at the time of European contact, fewer than 40 now have speakers; all are moribund.

Two tribes which are the focus of the data gathered for this paper:
- Kawaiisu: Uto-Aztecan language spoken in and near the Tehachapi Valley and Mojave Desert regions of California. There are currently three fluent, native speakers of Kawaiisu: Lucille Hicks, Betty Hernandez, and Luther Girado. They are all siblings, and range in age from 68-72.
- Elem Pomo: Pomoan language, spoken in the region near Clear Lake, in Lake County, CA. One speaker remaining, Mrs. Loretta Kelsey, in her 60s. Language documentation and revitalization project underway. One of seven related Pomoan languages.
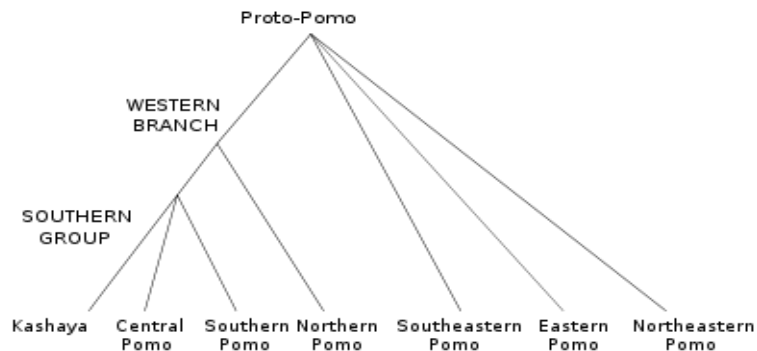
Iconization of differentiation as marker of community coherence

Gloss	Root	My	Your (sg) (Lucille)	Your (sg) (Luther)	Your (sg) (Betty)	His/Hers
father	mua-	muw**ün**	muw**am**			muw**in**
boy	eepüz-	eepüz**ün**	eepüz**ʸam**			eepüz**in**
old man	asaz-	asaz**ün**	asaz**um**			asaz**in**
man	tã'napüz-	tã'napüz**ün**; tã'napüz**üne** (Luther)	tã'napüz**ʸam**	tã'napüz**am**		tã'napüz**in**
leg	yu'uv-	yu'uv**ün**	yu'uv**am**	yu'uv**om**		yu'uv**in**
head	totsa-	tots**ün**	tots**yam**	tots**um**	tots**im**	tots**in**
face	kova-	kov**ün**	kov**yam**	kov**um**	kov**im**	kov**in**
winter	tomo-	tom**ün**	tom**yam**	tom**um**	tom**im**	tom**in**; tom**en** (Luther)
star	puutsiv-	puutsiv**ün**; puuts**üm** (Betty)	puutsiv**yam**	puutsiv**um**	puuts**üm**	puutsiv**in**; puutsiv**en** (Luther)
sun	tava-	tav**ün**	tavə**yam**	taz**um**	taz**im**	tav**in**
stick	kukup-	kukup**ün**	kukup**um**		kukup**im**	kukup**in**

- Possessive morphemes are in bold
- In the Kawaiisu practical orthography, ü represents [ɨ]; the apostrophe represents a glottal stop.
- When the cell for Luther and/or Betty is left blank, their form matches Lucille's.
- When there was variance in one of the other possessive forms, the variant form is listed, along with the speaker who produced it.

- Variance has existed historically:
  - "Alternations between **p** and **v** or **b**, between **t** and **r** or **d**, and between **k/kw** and **g/gw** are common in modern Kawaiisu but generally do not seem to be rule governed." (Munro and Booth:7)
  - "The effect of a given morpheme on a following morpheme is not predictable either." (Munro and Booth:8)
- Speakers iconize this variation, linking it to an ideology which valorizes individual expression:
  - Lucille: "They all spoke differently." "That's the way the person speaks." "It's how the speaker is speaking." (Field notes, 1 May 2011)
  - Betty: "Each Nuwa speaker speaks differently, as we found out." (Field notes, 13 October 2012)

Iconization of variation as marker (or cause?) of community division
- Data come from draft of online Pomo language curriculum, and from discussion of that draft and of the curriculum plans.
- September 2008 draft:
  - "Another major issue for Pomo tribal groups is the presence of seven distinct dialects. Many claim that these dialects are so diverse that they are actually completely different languages all together [sic]."
  - "**Need**: The diversity of Pomo dialects makes preservation challenging. How can we justify focusing our efforts to preserving one language when there are seven total? How can we stretch our limited time and resources to encompass them all? **Recommendation**: Communicate to individuals that what they are learning is an academic version of their language. Explain that this is not their grandparents' language, but it is as close as we can make it in a context for the community to use and know."
  - "**Need**: The academic language should unite rather than divide Pomo tribal communities and support efforts to preserve traditional dialects. **Recommendation**: The academic language dictionary should account for all of the words of the various dialects. Accept everyone's words so that it is representative of the diversity present within the community."

- Subsequent discussion of draft: "My concern is that I do not want to alienate any of the folks who are working diligently on their own preservation efforts. At the same time I would like to have the community start addressing the issue of how we move forward with language instruction in the future..... on a practical level it does feel like if we do not look at some kind of hybrid or academic version we could easily find ourselves down the road without any resources. How do we go about building a community of speakers when we are spread so thin."

Discussion/further thoughts

Questions: What constitutes a "speech community"? Is there a one-to-one correlation between the idea of "speech community" and that of an associated "tribal community", or "heritage language community", or "community of practice", or…? Who "counts" as an "authentic" member of a speech community of an endangered heritage language? These questions must be situated within particular contexts in order to be answered, and that embedding helps clarify the interactions between and among language ideologies, language variation, and community membership.

What we see here is that, among members of both communities, linguistic differentiation is iconized as representative of individuation. This in turn, when viewed through the lenses of community-specific ideologies, is either reclaimed as a feature of a valorized past (in the case of the Kawaiisu), or is rejected, as an imposition from without (in the case of the Pomo). Both the reclamation and the rejection are conceptualized as a way of guaranteeing an ongoing vibrant language community. In both communities, people are actively engaged in reaching for, and recreating, a valorized past, an "authentic" language community in which community members were tied together by their shared language, as distinct from the language(s) of non-community members. It is the unique ideologies of each community that lead to such different perceptions of the role of linguistic differentiation in either aiding in the crossing of the temporal boundary between now and then, or as erecting boundaries now, where there were none, then.

Selected references

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