



The Vitality and Endangerment of the Western Shoshone Language

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ABSTRACT

Shoshone, the northernmost Uto-Aztecan language, originally spoken in the area of the Great Basin (U.S.), has been frequently reported as threatened. In his paper, the author presents a vitality assessment of the Western dialect of the Shoshone language based on the methodology which stems from the *UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages*. He takes into account UNESCO's nine factors in order to determine the degree of language vitality and endangerment for Western Shoshone and to outline strategies which might help to revitalize the language in the future.

KEY WORDS: endangered languages, UNESCO, Western Shoshone, vitality

Introduction

Shoshone is a language spoken by the Shoshone Indians, traditionally inhabiting vast semi-arid and mountain regions of Great Basin in the western section of the United States. As most native tongues in the United States and Canada, Shoshone, too, belongs among endangered languages, it struggles with the loss of active users, and as a living language code it is exposed

to uncertain future. My primary aim in the presented article¹ is to map contemporary vitality of the Shoshone language, particularly of its western dialect, taking advantage of the methodological guidelines organized by the UNESCO linguistic team.

The Shoshone: History, Location, Culture

The name *Shoshone* (also spelled *Shoshoni*) derives from the Shoshone word *sosoni*, which is the plural form of the substantive *sonipe*, i.e. a special kind of high-growing grass (GOULD – LOETHER 2002:4). The grass was used for building huts and shelters resided by the Shoshone who were accordingly called “Grass House People” by some of the Plains tribes. The first written record of the word Shoshone appeared in 1805 in the journal of Meriwether Lewis of the Lewis and Clark Transcontinental Expedition (1804-1806) in which he described his encounter with a group of “Sosonees”². Before the event and also long after that they were together with neighbouring Paiute and Bannock tribes often referred to as the Snake Indians. The Shoshone themselves prefer the term *Newe*, meaning simply “the People”.

The prehistory of the Shoshone people, especially the time frame of their migration from the ancestral land to new settlements, has not been sufficiently clarified and still remains a puzzle. The linguistic analysis and the lexical reconstruction of the proto-language assumes that their ancestors, known as the *Numa*,³ dwelt along the eastern slopes of the southern tip of Sierra Nevada in what is today California; this area shows the greatest congruence between local plant and animal species and relevant features of the reconstructed vocabulary (FOWLER 1972:105-121). From this southwestern corner of the Great Basin the mother population migrated north-east direction and step by step spanned across large territories east of the Cascade Mountains and Sierra Nevada and west of the Great Plains.

By 1500 Shoshone already populated their traditional area in what is today Nevada and Utah, they possibly reached the Idaho portion of the Columbia Plateau, and some groups may have

¹ The paper is based on the master's thesis *Language and Cultural Vitality of the Shoshone Indians* (2013) written by Kateřina Kalendová and supervised by Miroslav Černý. For the purpose of the article, relevant parts have been considerably modified, re-written, and updated.

² See *Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*. Available at: <https://lewisandclarkjournals.unl.edu/journals>.

³ For more see Fowler – Fowler (1971).

even crossed the Rocky Mountains and started expansion to the Great Plains. At the end of the 17th century one group separated from the rest of the Shoshone population in the Plains, moved from what is today Wyoming southwards, developed their own identity, and entered the history as the Comanche. The remaining bands were gradually pushed back to the west by the Blackfeet (see SMOAK 2005:20-25). By the end of the 18th century, the only Newe who apart from the Comanche maintained their power in the Plains were the Eastern Shoshone (or People of the Wind River) in central Wyoming (cf. STAMM 1999).

The Shoshone community is, based on the geographical distribution, usually divided into three main parts: eastern, northern and western.⁴ While the Eastern Shoshone domesticated horse and took over the way of life of the buffalo hunters, the Northern Shoshone culturally adapted to conditions typical for the Plateau. The Western Shoshone retained the archaic basin culture of pedestrian hunters and gatherers.

Shoshone: Genealogy, Typology, Dialectology

The Shoshone speak an Uto-Aztecan language. Apart from Shoshone, the Uto-Aztecan language family includes approximately thirty languages, which could be further divided into northern and southern. Regarding the southern branch, the most famous are Aztec languages (Nahuatl etc.). This branch also comprises Pimic (Pima, O'odham, Tepehuan), Taracahitic (e.g. Tubar, Tarahumara or Guarijío), and Corachol languages (Cora and Huichol). The northern branch consists of the Hopi language, Tübatulabal language, Takic languages (e.g. Serrano, Cupeño or Kitanemuk) and, most importantly, Numic languages. The Numic languages split into Western (Mono, Northern Paiute), Southern (e.g. Southern Paiute, Chemehuevi, Kawaiisu), and Central (Comanche, Panamint, Shoshone).⁵

The Uto-Aztecan language family split into separate branches about 5000 years ago. Individual branches, subgroups and languages evolved relatively solo and, in consequence, they exhibit significant differences. Moreover, some languages (e.g. Ópata or Kitanemuk) have become extinct over the years. Among the most general features of the Uto-Aztecan

⁴ Brigham Madsen divides the Shoshone population into seven parts: (1) the Eastern Shoshone, (2) the Fort Hall Shoshone, (3) the Northwestern Shoshone, (4) the Lemhi Shoshoni, (5) the Boise and Bruneau Shoshone, (6) the Gosiute, and (7) the Western Shoshone (MADSEN 1985: 3-24).

⁵ For more see Campbell (1997).

languages belong polysyntheticity, incorporation, and the use of a great number of derivative prefixes and suffixes (see POKORNÝ 2010:189). The characteristic features of Shoshone are – in comparison with Czech for example – the subject-object-verb word order, the postposition of prepositions and auxiliary verbs, three grammatical cases (subjective, objective and possessive), dual number, or alternating stress pattern (CRUM et al. 2001:9-19, MILLER 1996:693-720).

Due to geographical and climatic circumstances the Shoshone population has always been scattered. As a result, Shoshone consists of several territorial dialects. Traditionally, we distinguish three main dialects: Eastern (in Wyoming), Northern (in Idaho) and Western (Utah and Nevada). The reservation policy by the end of the 19th century, nevertheless, caused partial redeployment of the population and the establishment of new communities where the original dialects mixed and/or were innovated. Therefore, the present-day dialects are sometimes defined and named after the reservation or colony where they are spoken. The Shoshone in Nevada thus use Reese River, Duckwater, Ely, Battle Mountain, Ruby Valley, Elko or Duck Valley dialects. The Shoshone in Utah speak Goshute, Skull Valley and Washakie dialects. The Shoshone in Idaho are centralized in Fort Hall reservation, so we speak of Fort Hall dialect, and the dialect of the Shoshone from Wyoming is named Wind River (MITHUN 1999:541), which is the name of the reservation the Eastern Shoshone share with the Northern Arapaho.

Dialectal differences are also reflected in various forms of orthographic record. At present there are three main spelling systems: (1) the system by Wick Miller (1972, created for the western dialect(s)), (2) the system by Malinda Tidzump (1970, created for the eastern dialect), and (3) the system by Drusilla Gould and Christopher Loether (2002, for the northern dialect).

Language Diversity in Danger: An American Perspective

As already suggested, Shoshone shares the fate of many native (North) American languages whose speakers gradually lose the knowledge of their mother tongues and shift in use to dominant languages of the majority: English, French, Spanish and Portuguese. The Americas comprise the territory with the largest number of the so-called *language hotspots*,⁶ referring

⁶ Language hotspots are areas with high genetic diversity, high levels of language endangerment, and low levels of language documentation. See <https://livingtongues.org/language-hotspots/>.

to places where the language diversity is under serious threat.

According to the late Michael Krauss, one third of all Native American languages (around 300 of 900) is moribund, i.e. that the languages are no longer being learned by children. The calculation shows that 50 of 300 languages (17%) in Central America (including Mexico) and 110 of 400 languages (27%) in South America are not being learned by children (KRAUSS 1992:4-10).

The most critical situation is in the United States where 155 of 175 languages (89%) have no speakers within the youngest age group. Krauss divides these languages – according to their viability – into four categories: out of the 175 languages, the smallest number belong to Category A (languages still being learned by children; 20, 11%) and Category B (languages still spoken by the parental generation; 32, 19%), whilst the largest number of indigenous languages spoken in the United States go to Category C (languages spoken only by the middle-aged or grandparental generation; 70, 40%) and Category D (languages spoken only by a few of the very oldest people; 53, 30%) (KRAUS 1996:16).⁷ The situation in Canada, where 35 native languages are spoken, seems better, but it is still serious. The rapid language shift towards English (or French) is clear even among the healthiest language groups, such as the Cree.

I believe there is no need to describe in detail what triggered this dramatic language erosion, it has been clarified by others (CRYSTAL 2000; EVANS 2010; HAGÈGE 2009; HARRISON 2007; NETTLE – ROMAINE 2000). Let me just briefly remark that most endangered are often those languages whose speakers were in past exposed to genocide and/or to destruction of their natural (social, cultural, territorial) environment. Entire language communities were relocated, children taken away from their parents and assimilated through western educational system and via the influence of dominant Christian denominations. More recently, there has been a strong impact of modern media (television and the internet).

Language Vitality and Endangerment: Methodology

The above-mentioned categorization by Krauss is not the only approach to measure vitality of languages. Other two well-known and interrelated classifications are *Graded*

⁷ It should be stressed that the data provided by Michael Krauss are twenty-five years old. The present-day situation is very likely quite different.

Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS), introduced by Joshua Fishman in his publication *Reversing Language Shift* (1991), and its more complex version *Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale* (EGIDS), used by the database of the world's languages *Ethnologue* (2019). The three language vitality assessment tools address the intergenerational transmission of the endangered languages as the most important factor. However, they overlook some other factors which are also cardinal for language maintenance.⁸

For the purpose of the present paper whose aim is to map and assess the vitality or the level of endangerment of the western dialect of the Shoshone language (spoken in Nevada and Utah), I take advantage of the UNESCO 'nine factors' system which stems from the work of leading experts on threatened languages. Unlike the three approaches introduced above, the UNESCO methodology addresses two important factors that impact on language vitality and are crucially important in the process of revitalizing any language:

1. community member's attitudes towards their own language,
2. type and quality of documentation.

Together with these two there are seven other factors implemented in the system:

3. absolute number of speakers,
4. proportion of speakers within the total population,
5. intergenerational language transmission,
6. shifts in domains of language use,
7. governmental and institutional language policies,
8. availability of materials for language education and literacy,
9. response to new media and domains.

With the exception of Factor 3 ('Absolute number of speakers'), all the other factors are graded on a 0 to 5 scale (based on given parameters) and, at the same time, correlated with a

⁸ The evaluation of different tools and techniques for endangered-language assessment and revitalization is given by Arienne Dwyer in her paper presented at *Vitality and Viability of Minority Languages*, October 23-24, 2009, in New York; see https://kuscholarworks.ku.edu/bitstream/handle/1808/7109/Dwyer2011_AssessRevitalize.pdf.

particular level of endangerment.⁹ The UNESCO database classifies languages into following categories: Safe (5), Vulnerable (4), Definitely Endangered (3), Severely Endangered (2), Critically Endangered (1), and Extinct (0). Since it has been frequently noted that a language can be under specific circumstances brought back to life, or resurrected, present-day linguists seem to prefer words “sleeping” or “dormant” instead of “extinct” or “dead” (cf. HINTON 2008).

Western Shoshone Vitality Assessment¹⁰

1. Community member's attitudes towards their own language

Since no research mapping language attitudes of the (Western) Shoshone has been realized so far, or there is no reliable data available outside the language community, the only thing I can presently do in relation to this factor is speculate. What may be judged against the background of indirect pieces of information (such as the number of speakers, level of intergenerational transmission or quality of documentation) is that some tribal members do have positive attitudes to Shoshone and struggle to preserve the language. The attitudes of many others are, nevertheless, indifferent and they do not really care about its future. With respect to the UNESCO instruction scale, Shoshone, including its western dialect, is to be assessed as a severely endangered language (2).

2. Type and quality of documentation

Shoshone belongs among the better documented languages, which is especially true regarding its western dialect. There is a grammar book available (*Western Shoshoni Grammar*, 1993) as well as a dictionary (*Newe Natekwinnappeh. Shoshone Stories and Dictionary*, 1972). There exist collections of Shoshone poetry songs (*Newe Hupia*, 2001), appended with CD records, and also anthologies of other genres (*Shoshoni Texts*, 1997). Very rich is the corpus of Western Shoshone myths and legends, published also in commented

⁹ For details see <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/themes/endangered-languages/language-vitality/>.

¹⁰ Cf. Kalendová (2013) as the investigation and vitality assessment partially draws on the data presented in her work.

English translations (*Shoshone Tales*, 1993). Thanks to the *Shoshone Language Project* organized by the University of Utah, most of the Shoshone language material is archived in a digital form. Since the language has no representation in everyday media, it is, however, given only the grade 3 (which represents ‘a definitely endangered language’).

3. Absolute number of speakers

Opinions on the number of Shoshone speakers differ. According to Drusilla Gould and Christopher Loether, the Shoshone language is spoken by approximately 5000 people (GOULD – LOETHER 2002:3). Marianne Mithun states there are over 1000 Shoshone speakers (MITHUN 1999:541). The 2010 U.S. Census counted 2,211 speakers and ranked the Shoshone language the 18th in the number of speakers of American Indian languages (U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, D.C.). However, even in this case we cannot be sure if the whole Shoshone population was addressed and whether everybody who claimed to be a speaker of Shoshone really speaks fluently or he/she knows only a limited number of phrases used in a limited number of communicative situations. It seems most likely that a half of those 2,211 consider Shoshone a mother tongue, whilst the second half speakers have only a partial knowledge and their mother tongue is English. Exact data regarding individual dialects do not exist. According to Beverly Crum et al., “there are only a few hundred people who use the [Western Shoshone] language on day-to-day basis as their first language” (CRUM et al. 2001:8).

4. Proportion of speakers within the total population

The 2010 U.S. Census states that the ethnic Shoshone population numbers 13,000. It is clear that the number of speakers of Shoshone forms a minority within the total population. Even if all 2,211 persons were recognized as native speakers, it would be mere 17%. Regarding this percentage (which can be assumed also within individual dialects) and in line with the UNESCO methodology, Shoshone is to be assessed as a severely endangered language (2).

5. Intergenerational language transmission

Based on the acquired data, the western dialect of the Shoshone language is being learned by children only in a few households (MILLER 1996:693), especially in Duck Valley and Ruby Valley Indian Reservations in Nevada and in Skull Valley Reservation in Utah. Furthermore, there is a group of teenagers who attend classes organized by the University of Utah where

they learn the language with the help of linguists and Shoshone elders. Most speakers of Shoshone are, however, older than fifty. A portion of parental generation understands Shoshone but does not speak the language. Also through the prism of this factor Shoshone should be classified as a severely endangered language (2).

6. Shifts in domains of language use

Given that Shoshone does not have a fully functional intergenerational language transmission, it is more than obvious that its use is limited only to some communication domains. Shoshone is neither a language of official education, nor a language of tribal council meetings; in both cases English is used. Apart from the everyday communication of older generations of speakers, the language is spoken exclusively during ceremonies and traditional celebrations and festivals. With respect to the factor under scrutiny, the Shoshone language is given grade 2, which in this case represents limited and formal possibilities of use.

7. Governmental and institutional language policies

The right of Native Americans (including the Shoshone) to preserve, protect, promote, practice, and develop their ancestral languages is guaranteed by *The Native American Language Acts* 1990 and 1992. Native Americans have a legitimate claim to draw federal financial support for their language revitalization projects and programs (see *Administration for Native Americans*, or *Language and Culture Preservation Program*). Nonetheless, as Jared Diamond notes, more finances are spent on the protection of one particular animal species (California Condor) than on the support of American Indian tongues altogether (2014:400). Luckily, there exist other financial sources (both private and institutional). According to UNESCO, this situation can be described as *Differentiated Support*, which classifies Shoshone as a vulnerable language (4).

8. Availability of materials for language education and literacy

The sources mentioned in Section Two ('Type and Quality of Documentation') can also be used as teaching materials. Apart from them there is a textbook entitled *Dammen Daigwape: An Introduction to the Shoshoni Language* (2002). Though primarily aimed at Northern Shoshone, it also contains information on the western dialect. Moreover, there are several children's books based on traditional Western Shoshone stories recorded by Wick Miller. Worth mentioning is *Native Voices Language Program*, organized by Reno-Sparks colony.

The program records the speech of native Western Shoshone (and also Paiute and Washo) speakers in order to sustain the language of the local people. Generally speaking, the quality of teaching materials is rather poor which reflects the fact that Shoshone is not part of school curriculum. Although much is supposed to change in this respect in future, for now this factor can be assessed only with the grade 2 ('Severely Endangered Language').

9. Response to new media and domains

In their communities Western Shoshone take advantage of several mass media. They have their own radio broadcast (www.blogtalkradio.com), information newsletters (e.g. Numa News), web pages (mj. www.wn.com/western_shoshone), facebook and printed newspapers (e.g. Te-Moak Tribal Newspaper: Shoshoni Spirit). Unfortunately, the language of the media is not Shoshone but English. The *Shoshone Youth Language Apprenticeship Program* (SYLAP) tries to inform about the importance of implementing Shoshone into new media domains, but the response is not adequate, which turns Shoshone into a critically endangered language (1).

Summary of Results and Discussion

If points in individual categories are counted (18) and divided by the number of categories (8 – 'Absolute number of speakers' is not graded), we get 2.25, rounded to 2. This result marks the place of Shoshone on the language vitality scale and represents the degree of its endangerment. As is evident, Shoshone is a severely endangered language.

The outcome deserves comment and consideration. First, it needs to be emphasized that the result does not mirror the most current state of affairs. All languages and related language behaviour of their users are under a constant process of change, which means that a description of any language situation always comes with some delay, and it in fact archives a state which has already worn off. With unstable languages – which are greatly sensitive to any social or whatever modification of conditions – it is true even more. Still, it is useful to strive to detect the language change since we can learn a lot about evolutionary tendencies in a given language community which allows us to adjust the program of revitalization.

Second, its right to admit that the chosen methodology of 'nine factors' is not perfect, as no language assessment method is perfect. Mapping language vitality and endangerment is such a complex work that the obtained data are always incomplete and fragmentary and as such

they are inaccurate and approximate, no matter which approach or classification we decide to apply. This handicap can be neutralized with a long-term fieldwork, including participant observation, which is much more effective than short-run inquiries relying on the interviews with speakers or on the questionnaire survey.

Moreover, regarding Western Shoshone we have to take into account the fact that the language community is scattered across vast territory. Unlike Eastern Shoshone and Northern Shoshone with speakers located in one reservation (Wind River – Wyoming, Fort Hall – Idaho, respectively), the community of the Western Shoshone is broken into reservations and small colonies in Utah and Nevada. In total, there are more than ten Western Shoshone locations and in some of them they live side by side with members of related ethnic groups (e.g. Northern Paiute), which can influence the form of language use. Hence the language vitality and the state of endangerment can differ colony by colony.

Conclusion

Thanks to the effort of traditionalists, language activists and field linguists Shoshone appears to be a language with future. It has been properly documented, analyzed, and archived. There are still native speakers of middle-aged or grandparental generations who could function as teachers of incoming generations. Despite that, the language of the Shoshone is severely endangered, and its stabilization will require decades of constant work. The Shoshone language community will have to care more as their language attitudes seem to be half-hearted. If the Shoshone do not immediately support intergenerational language transmission, their mother tongue will survive in an eroded form, functioning only in a limited number of domains (e.g. as a language of ritual), not as a tool of everyday communication.¹¹

Experience from other Native American communities suggest that to slow down or even to stop the process of language decline, tribal members have to focus on the methods, materials, and motivation: “Methods deal with what teaching techniques will be used at what age levels and stages of language loss. Materials deal with what things will be available for teachers and learners to use, including audiotapes, videotapes, storybooks, dictionaries, grammars, textbooks, and computer software. Motivation deals with increasing the prestige and usefulness of the indigenous language in the community and using teaching methods that

¹¹ Cf. Hinton (2013) or Shreve (2019).

learners enjoy so they will come back for more indigenous language instruction” (REYHNER 1999:xvii). Under favorable circumstances a new generation of speakers will rise who might be even willing to use Shoshone as their first language.

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