Word Shortening in Snowdrift Chipewyan

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In my fieldwork on Chipewyan in Snowdrift, N.W.T. in 1979 it became immediately apparent that variations between speakers were often extensive and that, in particular, younger speakers (roughly, under 30 years old) consistently differed from older speakers and that the variation was greatest between the youngest and the oldest speakers.[1]

The most notable difference is the t-k shift (Haas 1968) where a phonemic alveolar stop with strong velar aspiration [t^x] has merged with the velar aspirated stop /k/ in younger speakers.

The other remarkable feature of the younger speech (y.s.) is the radical shortening of words by assimilation and deletion. Thus Li's (1946) ʔi̯i̯á-unénạ 'ten' has collapsed to i̯unạ.[2] In this paper I examine this phenomenon to determine the constraints on contraction and discuss the possible motivations and consequences of this contraction.

It must be taken as axiomatic that no language may change such that speakers can no longer communicate with each other. If this should occur, then dialects arise. Within one community any change across living generations must maintain communicative ability. Thus generation I must be able to communicate with the preceding generation II and perhaps III but not necessarily with deceased generations IV or V.

The 't-k shift' illustrates this. Younger speakers no longer 'hear' t and interpret both [t] and [k] as k. Thus homonyms may arise, but this does not seem to create any difficulty. The older speakers, on the other hand, are well enough versed in the language that a younger speaker's [k] is unambiguously assigned either to t or to k as required. [kən] is assigned the value tën 'ice' and [kun] is interpreted as kun 'fire' there being no kën or tun in conservative speech.

In word shortening the process of interpretation is not as clear and it must be assumed that context plays a much larger role. In Canadian English [væn] may mean one of several things, but in the context 'I'm going to [væn] next week' the interpretation is unique: [væn] is a shortened form of Vancouver. Similarly, in Chipewyan wéléche (y.s.) is derived from bewúli desche 'Yellowknife (N.W.T.)'. The origin of bewúli is unclear[3] but desche refers to a large river. In the abbreviated wéléche the morphemes have collapsed to the point where there is now only one morpheme which refers to the town Yellowknife. The deleted syllables be- and des- are probably the possessive pronoun and river respectively, but this information is no longer required if the name is learned holophrastically and is thus subject to collapse.[4]

Among the younger speakers, several phonemic deletions are widespread which lead to word shortening. Most likely to be deleted are g, i̯, h, and initial vowels.

g-deletion

In younger speech g is frequently deleted. Intervocalically this results in contiguous vowels which then assimilate.

1. tl'oɡ = tl'o 'grass'
2. seɡaiɬchu = saiɬchu 'give it to me'

In verb stem initial g never deletes and in noun stem initials it may alternate with w.

3. seɡu = sewu 'my tooth'

The thematic prefix egáła in egálana 'he works' appears to resist deletion. g deletes only stem finally or in particles.

4. dįgį = dį 'four'

ɬ-deletion

In younger speakers ɬ appears to be deleted when it is used as the verb classifier, but not in other positions except for certain cases discussed under 'vowel initial deletion' below.

yaɬti = yaki 'he speaks'

Some speakers replace ɬ classifier with h.

yaɬti = yahki

It may be this h which is deleted as a secondary process.

ɬ is also deleted when the syllable vowel is deleted.

įɬk'etaɡi = geka 'six'
įɬk'ediɡį = gedį 'eight'

This appears to be the result of the constraint on consonant clusters within a syllable. Note the g deletion, vowel assimilation, t-k shift and de-glottalization of k'. ɬ is sometimes replaced in children's speech with s in one word.

ɬekën = sekëm 'sweet'

Other examples appear below under 'vowel initial deletion'.

h-deletion

It was already mentioned that h as an alternate of ɬ classifier may delete, especially in children's speech. h also deletes optionally initially as epenthetic h which is normally inserted to preserve a conjunct CV syllable before the verb stem. It seems this is not always necessary, even among older speakers.

hįxël	įxël	2 sg. 'hit' (e.g. a drum)
hįɡą́	įɡą́	2 sg. 'hurry'
hįle	įle	'no'

Vowel initial deletion

Initial vowels may be derived from a prefix deletion, h deletion, or as an alternate of ?V- . In younger speech, many initial vowels are deleted, though it appears that specific morphemes resist deletion.

ɨɬage	= ɬa	'one'
ebąʒagá	= banʒa	'apple'
?edlágɨ	= dlą́e	'who?'
asą́t'ile	= sąt'ile	'right, correct'

Some cases where initial vowel deletion does not occur are:

eɬgëne	= egëne	'dry meat'
?eɬdzas	= ?edzas	'trap'

The verb egálana 'he works' usually does not delete the initial vowel although one speaker produced forms with and without vowel initial.

egélasna	'I'm working'
dechën gálana k'órɨyą	'Do you know carpentry?' (wood-working)

n deletion

Intervocalically n sometimes nasalizes the preceding vowel and deletes, providing an environment for assimilation. In other cases, n deletes without nasalizing an adjoining vowel.

ɬegánaɨdër = ɬąɨdër	'he died'
neník'e = naik'e	'store'
?ɨɬá-unéna = ɬąuna = ɬuną	'ten'
naunéna = nuna	'twenty'
húniɬk'ëθ = hiɬk'éθ	'I shot it'
ts'enesθir = ts'esθir	'I wake up'

The last two examples may be deleting the ne-aspect prefix.

r deletion

There are few examples of r deletion.

daríyesɬini = dáisɬɨne	'devil'
horelyų = alyų	'all'

These may have r derived from d of di- or de-.

Morpheme deletions

Not only are phonemes deleted on a regular basis but it appears that certain morphemes can also be dropped. It has already been suggested that ne- and di- are two modal/aspect morphemes which can be deleted.

t'a deletion

The morpheme t'a- which seems to act somewhat as indefinite pronoun is sometimes deleted.

t'así hestsi = sí hestsi 'I make something'

This may actually be a result of the alternation of t' with ? and subsequent ?V- deletion.

be-deletion

The definite pronoun object prefix is sometimes deleted.

beresdzay = resdza	'I'll try it'
segáné bek'eté = segan k'eke	'My arm is broken'
bek'óreshą = k'óreshą	'I know it'

As stated earlier, this may be the morpheme deleted from bewúle desche.

ha-, ho- deletions

The prefixes ha- and ho- also delete occasionally. These prefixes are indefinite or temporal-local in meaning.

hatsáɬ = tsále	'nail' (noun)
t'ay hórel?į = t'arel?į	'he wants s.t.'

This seems to be deletion of a specific morpheme rather than h deletion followed by initial vowel deletion. ho- deletion has two interesting effects. In the verb homą 'it stinks' when ho- is deleted there is left a verb stem with no prefixes. It has long been considered a basic of Chipewyan grammar that there must be a CV prefix before verbs, though we have already seen two examples of #V + stem. In addition to mą another example of a bare stem occurs in

(seyí) xeθ	'(my throat) is dry'

These examples appear to indicate that a verb prefix is no longer mandatory.

The second effect of ho- deletion appears in the words

horadzį = radzį	'spider'
horátθën = ratθën	'grasshopper'

r (an alveolar tap) in final position is derived from -d and does not contrast in this position. Medially d alternates with its derivation r except in stem initial position where r is not reversed to d and now contrasts phonemically with d initially. At this time no minimal pairs have been recorded.

Finally, there are contractions and deletions which are inexplicable.

ɬésuyalgedeze = ɬíodes	'Murky River'

deze is obviously shortened to des but the first nine phonemes have collapsed to three with no obvious pattern. The only comment here is that neither form is likely to be confused with any other word and thus communication within a generation level is not disturbed.

There is no evidence available to indicate whether these forms are understandable across generation levels, although when presented with the longer form, younger speakers immediately produced the shorter form which they preferred. Similarly, the older form mítsage 'owl' is rejected in favour of mútsa by most younger speakers.[5]

We have seen that word shortening is a process resulting from

deletion of certain phonemes (g, ɬ, h, n, r, V) and morphemes (ne-, di-, t'a, be-, ho-). These deletions are restricted in their applications to certain environments. There seem to be no cases where ambiguity arises from the shortened form. In the case of the verb aspect prefix deletions, younger speakers seem to be developing a pattern of using tense-marking suffixes instead, possibly an influence from English.

Motivations

One question which arises is the motivation for the phenomenon of shortening.[6] Several factors may be involved.

Phonological change

Certain phonological alternations can create an environment for extension of a certain deletion. For example, if t' weakens to ? which does not prohibit initial vowel deletion, then forms such as t'a- are easily deleted.

Ignorance

Younger speakers may not hear more conservative speech. In the Snowdrift community children appear to have a large degree of freedom and independence and seem to associate little with older speakers, preferring to roam in peer groups. Thus the forms they are most exposed to are those of casual speech or 'slang' and they are unaware of underlying forms.[7]

Isolation

Snowdrift is the northeasternmost of the Chipewyan communities and is composed largely of migrants from Fort Smith and Fond-du-Lac over the past forty years. It is close to Dogrib and Slave communities, especially Yellowknife where much of the Snowdrift population shops and drinks. A number of Snowdrift residents profess an ability to speak Dogrib and some are of Dogrib descent and have learned Chipewyan as a second language. Thus speakers are in closer contact with related Dogrib than with Chipewyan communities.

Cultural disintegration

Until very recently alcoholism was an extremely damaging problem in Snowdrift. With community prohibition the extent of drinking has been reduced, but no cultural activities are sponsored except for English movies, gambling, and very infrequent dances with 'country and western' music. No traditional dances seem to have been held for quite some time. English is becoming more and more dominant so that even preschool children often speak to each other in English. The advent of television in the next few years will undoubtedly hasten this trend. The emergence of English is already causing some speakers, particularly those who have been 'out' to high school in Fort Smith or Yellowknife to interpret some of the phonemes according to the English system. Thus the plain stops and affricates are becoming voiced as in English. The deletion of g and replacement of ɬ with h or s and the reinterpretation of nasal vowels as Vn or Vm may also be part of this process.

It is not clear whether the forms recorded by Li, Scollon and Richardson are actual forms for all speakers in their communities or whether they are idealized and possibly somewhat stilted. Scollon (1978: 15) indicates that Li's informant initially gave variants but quickly established norms which he then maintained throughout the remainder of the work. Scollon's own work states he also used one informant primarily, one who was a recent arrival from an outlying area and that neither of them established close contact with the whole community.

Haas (1968) and Rice (1978) also give citations from single speakers which may or may not reflect the norms of their respective communities. But when all the sources are examined together some of the processes of word shortening and phoneme alternation become clearer.

Haas, Rice and Scollon all refer to the t-k shift whereas Li and Richarson do not. Li (1933:122) describes t as having a 'gutteral spirantal glide'. Richardson makes no mention of it at all, but speakers on the accompanying tapes clearly have a velar glide with accompanying rounding, e.g., [yałt^{xw}i] 'he speaks'. Perhaps the t-k shift is a northern Chipewyan areal feature. Thus the older Snowdrift speakers, being originally from the south (e.g. Fond-du-Lac) have not adopted it where the younger speakers have. Speakers in their late twenties or thirties alternate between t and k.

As for word shortening, Haas gives an example kaγɛ, ka' 'three' which corresponds to the Snowdrift forms and shows that -ge deletion is active in YC. A comparison of all 'dialects' for the word 'five' is illustrative.

Li (1932)	sasu̯láge
Haas (1968)	sąu̯láge
Richardson (1969)	sǫláge
Snowdrift (o.s.) (1979)	su̯lage
Rice (1978)	sulaa
Snowdrift (y.s.) (1979)	su̯lá

It is obvious that Li's medial -s- is deleted in all the other forms. Haas has not yet assimilated the vowels but the nasalization has been extended. Richardson and SD (o.s.) have deleted a. In SD u̯ is often o̯ in y.s. This appears to be the case in Richardson as well. Rice has dropped g and assimilated the vowel (and denasalized u). SD (y.s.) has dropped -ge.

One possible motivation which has not been pursued is that as speakers become older and more proficient in the language they adopt the more conservative forms and are more aware of underlying formations. Thus the shortened forms are not a recent phenomenon but are characteristic of younger speakers in each generation and only a few of the changed forms are adopted in each generation to contribute to permanent change. The t-k shift appears well established, at least in northern Chipewyan. ho- deletion is established in at least some words and may eventually expand. The other variations discussed appear only in younger SD speech and it cannot be determined at this time whether these changes are permanent.

Footnotes

[1]Li's classic monographs on Chipewyan (Li 1933, 1946) are often considered as definitive of the language. However it is seldom realized that they are based on information from one speaker and cannot reflect the variations which occur among speakers. Thus any variation has been considered a new 'dialect' of Chipewyan (cf. Haas 1968, Rice 1978).

[2]Snowdrift citations are given in their orthographic forms. ch = /tš/; ë = /ə/; e = /ɛ/; g = /ɣ/; d = /ð/ (cf. Cook 1979).

[3]Possibly from -guɬ 'to scrape', -guɬ 'to wrap' or -guɬ 'to roll'.

[4]This corresponds to the probable English /yəlnaif/ which is easily interpreted as 'Yellowknife' though /bUtšnaif/ cannot be interpreted as 'butcherknife'.

[5]This alternation is curious in that míɬ- does not become mín- as -bíl becomes -bin 'net' or tθeɬ becomes tθen 'axe'. This is the only case of initial m other than (ho)mą 'it stinks' and malay 'French'. łekëm/sekëm 'sweet' and nám 'candy' are the only cases of m final. Medially m results from a homorganic nasal, e.g. tsą, tsąmba 'metal'.

[6]I raise the issue but the answers lie outside the scope of this paper.

[7]A parallel in English is the contraction [šUda] 'shoulda' which is derived from should have but among younger speakers is often interpreted as derived from should of.

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