ABSTRACT

Numu, or Northern Paiute, is a language indigenous to the Great Basin area and is known by the Numu people. Although there have been scholarly works examining the Numu language, most are not particularly accessible to non-Numu speakers. Additionally, the Pyramid Lake dialect is especially understudied, with little comparisons drawn between it and other dialects. This thesis has two primary, intertwining goals: to analyze case marking in the Pyramid Lake dialect of Northern Paiute, and to present linguistic findings in a way that is meaningful and useful to the overall documentation, revitalization, and reclamation efforts within the Numu language community. This project aims to explain basic linguistic concepts such as subject-object case marking and Numu language learning for community members who grew up primarily with English. On a larger scale, in order for reclamation efforts to be effective, the link between the Numu language and the Numu culture as well as the relationship between the language and the earth, must be understood.

Keywords: Numu; Northern Paiute; language revitalization; language reclamation; case marking

INTRODUCTION

Numu, meaning ‘the people’ and known in English as Northern Paiute, is a language indigenous to the Great Basin area with a rapidly decreasing number of fluent speakers (Simons & Fennig, 2018). While there have been multiple linguistic works about Numu, most have not been particularly accessible or useful to achieve Numu community goals. I personally find this to be exploitative and upholding of the very structures that caused Numu to lose fluency in the first place. Thus, this project aims to employ the type of collaborative and respectful framework put forth by indigenous and allied scholars (Leonard & Haynes, 2010). The main goals of this project are to analyze case marking in the Pyramid Lake (Kooyoo Tukatu; or ‘cul-ul-eaters’) dialect of Northern Paiute, and to present linguistic findings in a way that is meaningful and useful to the overall documentation, revitalization, and reclamation efforts within the Numu language community.

Kooyoo Tukatu: ‘cul-ul-eaters’, AKA Pyramid Lake Paiute Tribe
Case marking: Indicates what role a noun phrase plays in an utterance
Case marking: specific morphemes that can be added to noun phrases to tell their relationship to the utterance’s verb
Nominative: the smallest meaningful unit of sound in a given language

METHODOLOGY

I worked with Numu elder Ralph Burns, a Numu elder and member of the Kooyoo Tukatu. He is a teacher and storyteller who grew up speaking Numu but had to “re-learn” (R. Burns, Interview 2, March 28, 2019). I prioritized Ralph’s comfort and wishes in order to follow a collaborative framework (Leonard & Haynes, 2010). Data collection was conducted in the UNR Phonetics Lab as Ralph had expressed interest and comfort in recording there. Recording sessions were also attended by Ralph’s daughter Jennie, Dr. Montoya, and Mac Mendosa, another student who works closely with the Numu community.

In the first session, Ralph recorded Numu stories and sentences: a list of virtues to live by (such as Pesa kweito’no, meaning ‘live a good life’). ‘The Dog Story’; and ‘Raccoon and Skunk’.

I did not plan on doing elicitation (wherein Ralph would directly translate English utterances into Numu), but Ralph expressed that he was comfortable with and enjoyed elicitation. I prepared many relatively simple sentences in English, making sure to include many of the same case-sensitive adjectives reported in the Fort McDermitt (Snapp, Anderson, & Anderson, 1982) and Burns (Thomas, 2003) dialects for comparison purposes. Ralph preferred to write down the Numu translations before recording, which allowed him time to think about his responses. This is an unusual method, but again, I felt it was important to respect Ralph’s wishes.

I alternated between data collection and analysis, searching for any unexpected translations. I then prepared more sentences with suspected triggers for unexpected translations to determine if the unexpected translations were one-time occurrences or part of Ralph’s regular speech.

In two of the sessions, I asked Ralph open-ended questions about his life and relationship with the Numu language, which allowed me to have a deeper understanding of Ralph’s experiences with his culture and language. During the interviews, I also asked Ralph his thoughts on case marking; most prior linguists have not explicitly written about the perceptions of speakers.

REFERENCES