
Variation vs. change

Language variation on the eve of language shift

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Languages whose speakers are shifting to a different majority language—that is, endangered languages—are often underdescribed. Reconstructing morphosyntactic variation (historical and contemporary) is a particularly difficult task in these scenarios, due to the low number of available consultants and a tendency to document the most conservative speakers who show the fewest effects of language contact. Even in investigations of language obsolescence (Dorian 1981), regular and stable multilingual speech behavior that predates shift is not targeted.

It is tempting to relegate all variation that differs from the normative variety as due to the instability of the language (disrupted acquisition, attrition), yet we know that variation is the norm and need not have contact as a source, even in endangered languages (Nagy 2017; Kasstan 2017). In this paper, I consider the case of Chukchi, a moribund Indigenous language of Siberia with no more than several hundred conversational speakers remaining. Previous documentation of Chukchi has downplayed the extent of grammatical variation in the language (Dunn 1999); however, in my own fieldwork with the current speakers, I have encountered considerable morphosyntactic variation among older speakers that cannot be explained by shift-induced dysfluency. Here, I consider variation across the following domains and show that they can be reconstructed to pre-existing variation before the onset of severe language shift in the 1950s: (1) variation in inflectional suffixes on the polysynthetic verb; (2) variation in the productivity of noun incorporation; (3) variation in use of the antipassive; and (4) frequency and regularity of code-mixing with Russian.

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