

The Road Less Traveled: Indigenous Minority Languages and Variationist Sociolinguistics

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Indigenous minority languages can bring many new insights to quantitative variationist sociolinguistics. The importance of such lesser-known languages has long been emphasized in grammatical theory, descriptive linguistics, and anthropological linguistics. Yet in quantitative variationist sociolinguistics, while great achievements have come through research of majority languages and well-known non-indigenous minority languages, considerably less research has focused on indigenous minority languages. Without more balanced research attention to such underrepresented languages and the diverse perspectives they provide, our understanding of language variation and change will be incomplete. In an era of globalization and increasing cross-cultural contact, the time is ripe for more quantitative sociolinguistic exploration of indigenous minority languages, and such languages are now starting to receive more research attention (e.g., Stanford & Preston, in prep., Di Paolo (2007), Clarke, in prep., inter alia).

This paper presents an outline of the insights that such languages are providing. The author draws from his quantitative sociolinguistic fieldwork among the Sui people of southern China, as well as analysis of other recent studies of indigenous minority languages. The author finds that indigenous minority languages communities can both confirm and challenge longstanding principles of language variation and change (e.g., Labov 1994, 2001) and related methodologies, as well as provide new perspectives.

First, socioeconomic class stratification has had a prominent place in numerous sociolinguistic studies, yet many rural indigenous communities are egalitarian. In such communities, family clan membership is often a crucial sociolinguistic variable, and inter-clan migration can raise issues of dialect contact and identity. The author provides evidence that Sui speakers perform such clan identities through contrastive linguistic features.

Similarly, while network density and multiplexity (Milroy 1982, 1987) and communities of practice (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 1992) have been proven to be very effective tools for variationist research of many language communities, small indigenous village-based communities present new challenges. For example, a small Sui village community may be an almost perfectly dense and multiplex network based on family clan relationships. Similar situations are reported in other close-knit indigenous communities.

Other sociolinguistic issues in indigenous minority languages that are investigated include gender, differences in age-related variation, issues related to the lack of a standard variety or orthography, the role of clan exogamy, and the significance of acute contact with politically and socially dominant majority languages.

- Clarke, Sandra. (In prep.). Sociolinguistic stratification and new dialect formation in a Canadian aboriginal community: Not so different after all? In James Stanford & Dennis Preston (eds.).
- Di Paolo, Marianna. (2007). Applying sociophonetic methods to Shoshoni vowels. Paper presented at the *Linguistic Society of America Annual Meeting*, January 4, Anaheim, CA.
- Stanford, James N., & Preston, Dennis R. (eds.). (In prep.). *Variation in indigenous minority languages*.