The Impact of Language Change on Cheyenne Orthographic Practice

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Cheyenne is an endangered language. In Montana today the average age of the youngest speakers is approximately 50. In Oklahoma it is higher, at about age 65.Ironically, at this time when language loss has reached an alarming rate, there may be more Cheyennes able to read their language than at any time in the past.

As others have noted, when a language is endangered, sometimes language change occurs faster than it normally would. The rate of Cheyenne language change appears to be increasing as language loss increases. And there is greater variability among speakers than in the past. Speakers of the same age group sometimes do not pronounce words the same, whereas they would have tended to do so in the past. Speakers no longer hear as much of the language as they did in the past, so it is more difficult for them to maintain historically “correct” forms. Sometimes younger speakers reanalyze morphology, regularizing it to fit patterns with which they are more familiar. Some idiosyncratic pronunciations appear.

Increasing language change in Cheyenne also has orthographic consequences. In some cases younger speakers no longer recognize words which are written as they were pronounced by their elders, sometimes just one generation earlier.

REDUCTION

Cheyenne has undergone extensive phonological reduction, probably more than most other Algonquian languages.

Apocope

Cheyenne has historically lost many word-final sounds. Word-final nasals were dropped from many words. Note that heóvo 'ha 'yellow horse' historically had a word-final /m/ which is still preserved in its plural, heóvo'hyme 'yellow horses', and the proper name, Heóvo'hyme 'Yellow
Horse’. (Cheyenne high pitch is indicated by an acute accent: á; mid pitch by a macron: ó, and voicelessness by a dot over a vowel: è).

Cheyenne sémo ‘boat’ historically had a word-final /n/ which is preserved in its plural, sémonótse, and locative, sémonéva ‘on the boat’. ka’èskóne ‘child’ historically had a word-final /h/, preserved in its plural, ka’èskóneho ‘children’.

Loss of word-final sounds continues today. Older speakers say menótse ‘berries’ while many younger speakers drop the voiceless penultimate /o/, yielding a pronunciation something like mentse, phonetically [mínc]. Most readers today, including younger ones, can, however, read the more conservative spelling of menótse without difficulty.

**Aphesis**

For some time younger speakers have been dropping some word-initial sounds which, being voiceless, are not easily heard.

Older speakers today decry the fact that younger speakers pronounce máhtamáhááhe ‘old woman’ as tamáhááhe. Similarly, mòxe’estoo’o ‘book’ is shortened to xe’estoo’o.

The proper name Mähpevána’hýne ‘Kills on the Water’ is sometimes pronounced without the first syllable of mähpe ‘water’, which becomes voiceless when it appears earlier than the penultimate position in a word. When loss such as this occurs, sometimes people are unable to figure out the meanings of words because there is no longer enough of the original form left to give them the necessary clues.

A commonly used leave-taking phrase, borrowed from English, is něstaéváhósevóomátsè ‘I’ll see you again later’. Even though younger speakers all know that the second person verb prefix is /né-/ , because it is voiceless before a future tense marker, they typically drop the prefix completely, yielding staéváhósevóomátsè as the pronunciation. Younger speakers who write Cheyenne today often begin spelling this word with ⟨s⟩ rather than ⟨n⟩.

**Syncope**

So far, I have only encountered one word where there is phonological loss through syncope. When I first began studying Cheyenne (in 1975) and for many years after that, it was pronounced as nánōhstéstóvo ‘I asked him’. Note that there are two voiceless syllables in the middle of the word.
Today almost everyone pronounces this word as náněstóvo, dropping the first voiceless syllable. Over the years, I increasingly heard this syncopated pronunciation but did not realize that it was much of an issue until a younger speaker, an excellent reader, came to me one day asking for help with a written word. It had the complete historical spelling of the stem -nóhtsěstov ‘ask someone’. Neither this reader nor a number of other new readers recognized the stem in its full historical form. I had often been warned by elders, "Younger speakers do not pronounce Cheyenne right. They leave off parts of words." I understood the sentiment, having also heard it about speakers of my own language, English. I, too, could hear the differences in the pronunciations of younger speakers, but I would always try to spell words as the elders had pronounced them for me. I did not want to be criticized for spelling words "incorrectly," until, after a number of years, I tried writing ‘ask someone’ in its syncopated form and people could then read it without difficulty.

Language change through reduction sometimes requires spelling changes if speakers of a language no longer recognize a conservative older spelling.

**Regularization**

Phonological reduction is not the only change occurring in Cheyenne. Another is morphological regularization.

Cheyenne has traditionally changed the TI theme vowel /-á/ to /-ó/ in negative forms. For instance, speakers would say návóóhta ‘I see it’, phonemically /ná-vóóht-á/ ‘l-see-TI’. But the corresponding negative is násáavóóhtóhe ‘I do not see it’. Today, an increasing number of younger speakers leave the TI theme as /-á/ in the negative, yielding násáavóóhtáihe ‘I do not see it.’ They do the same in the dubitative mode. For example, the historical dubitative móhvéóghtóhéhe ‘he must have seen it’ is now often pronounced as móhvéóghtáihe.

néséne ‘my friend (male-to-male)’ is the traditional pronunciation (and also the historically expected form). But for a few decades many speakers have been regularizing possessive forms. The result is that this and other words which have historically expected, but morphologically irregular, pronominal prefixes take the more common, "regular" prefixes
of na- ‘first person possessor’, ne- ‘second person possessor’, and he- ‘third person possessor’.

Besides nésène, then, one often hears navésène today. Both forms have been heard for so long that some speakers have sensed that there is a meaning difference between them. An elder recently told me that the older form, nésene, would be used of someone who is a very close friend, like a bosom buddy. But there would not be quite as much of a close feeling with the newer form, navésène. Such a folk etymology makes perfect sense. One would expect the older form, used more often in the past, to have more intimate connotations than a newer form.

Of course, this process of semantic differentiation based on phonetic differences is well known in other languages. For instance, for speakers of American English who live where they hear two pronunciations of greasy, [grisi] and [grizi], some say that [grizi] is a more intense condition than [grisi], or, in colloquial terms, greazy is “greasier” than greasy!

The conjunct paradigm

Some changes are also taking place within the Cheyenne conjunct paradigms.

The conjunct participle tsévéstomo means ‘my spouse’ (lit., ‘the one that I sit with’), where the ‘sit with someone’ stem is -věstoem. Some younger speakers, however, are regularizing this word to the pronunciation tsévéstoemóto. This would bring the more conservative TA form more in line with AI conjunct verbs which end in -tó/, e.g. tséhmanéto ‘when I drank’.

Other changes are taking place within the TI conjunct paradigm. In each case it seems that there is pressure to regularize forms to make the paradigms more alike, in particular, more like AI forms.

Idiosyncratic changes

Finally, there are a few idiosyncratic changes that I have heard over the years. Some are used by a number of speakers, while others are unique to just a few speakers, sometimes only a single person.

A number of people pronounce hoéhose ‘hill’ as hoéhase but many speakers still insist that hoéhose is the “correct” pronunciation.

Besides the traditional, and historically expected, form hotohke ‘star’, a few individuals use an alternative form, hetohke.
Someone recently used the form vóhkèha'ë ‘hat’. The traditional form is hóhkèha'ë, but its word-initial /h/ changes to /v/ (a historically expected change) in possessed forms, e.g., navóhkèha'ë ‘my hat’. The speaker must have heard the possessed form so many times that she assumed the non-possessed form was vóhkèha'ë.

CONCLUSION

None of changes outlined in this paper affect oral communication. Cheyenne speakers usually understand each other even when different pronunciations are used. There is a greater problem with literacy, however, when people try to read words written in a conservative pronunciation which are different in spelling from how they themselves pronounce them. So far, this problem has only arisen with the conservative verb stem -möhtéstov ‘ask someone’, but if Cheyenne remains viable for a while longer, and if the number of readers continues to increase, I would expect that the pattern will manifest itself with some other forms as well.