

Yuman language varieties of Baja California

Michael Wilken-Robertson

Introduction

Throughout the ancient history of Baja California, indigenous peoples named their world: the springs and creeks, the mountains, the plants and animals, the oceans, the stars and the different directions. They told the stories of the mythical times when the first beings sang the physical plane into existence, and they passed on the histories of memorable events and great deeds. They talked about their dreaming and they conversed about their daily lives as they gathered wild plants, fished, hunted, wove baskets, made pottery, ground acorns and traveled across the land. Through oral tradition they reinforced their links to the ancestors and transmitted the knowledge of countless generations that had gone before, constructing their identities as inhabitants of the unique landscapes of the peninsula, and differentiating themselves from neighboring groups.

After thousands of years, the languages that once could be heard throughout the deserts, coasts and hillsides of the peninsula have all but disappeared or hang by a thread. The Cochimí, Guaicura and Pericú languages and cultures of the central and southern areas of the peninsula are long gone, victims of the early onslaught of contagious diseases and cultural displacement that came with the Spanish conquest of the territory. The few remaining native speakers are mostly elderly members of the surviving indigenous communities in the northern regions of the peninsula, although a few middle-aged speakers can be found among the larger communities. These remaining speech communities are closely related to speech communities of Arizona and southern California; collectively they are known as the Yuman language family.

The ancestral territory of this language family has been divided into two separate nations by the U.S.-Mexican international border since the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, resulting in divergent influences on the surviving languages due to the imposition of distinct languages (i.e., English and Spanish), cultures and political systems over the last century and a half. The languages of Native Baja Californians, like those of indigenous hunting and gathering peoples the world over, have been dramatically devastated by the impact of colonial transformation and the resulting social inequality that leads to the eradication of entire linguistic codes (Phillips 2006:486-487).

This paper will provide an overview of the surviving Yuman language varieties in the Baja California peninsula today, and it will explore the factors in the current sociocultural context that are pushing toward language loss as well as some hopeful possibilities for language revitalization and documentation.

The Peninsular Yumans

The Baja California Yuman speakers constructed their world in the rugged natural landscapes of the peninsula. Native peoples made a living by gathering, hunting and fishing in the diverse ecosystems of this arid land. The Cucapá who lived along the lower delta of the Colorado River, like other river peoples north of them, were floodplain agriculturalists as well as desert hunters and gatherers. The ancient history of trade, intermarriage and migrations throughout the region has undoubtedly influenced the indigenous languages. Clues to a better understanding of

this vast history may be discovered in the language itself, through oral tradition, historical, archaeological and ethnographic research. Some of the questions being asked include: was there one ancestral Yuman homeland, and if so, where was it and how did its proto-language evolve into the current Yuman language varieties? How were the Yuman languages related to the Cochimí languages of the central and southern peninsula (Mixco 2006:33-36)?

Mixco finds that while the Yuman languages and the Cochimian languages diverge too much to all be subsumed under the term “Yuman,” he does consider them to both be part of a Yuman-Cochimian family. He explores the question of a Yuman-Cochimian homeland through reconstructed ecological terminology, language contacts and diversity, finding that some evidence, particularly the lack of maritime terminology, points to an inland, rather than peninsular, homeland (Mixco 2006:33-36).

It is estimated that approximately 50,000 to 60,000 native people inhabited the peninsula at the time of the arrival of the first Europeans (Cook 1935). Today only about 1,800 descendants of the original Native Baja Californians have survived, living on a fraction of their original lands in eight federally recognized communities as well as non-recognized settlements, towns and cities of the northern peninsula.

The four ethnic groups holds their remaining territories through the Mexican federal government’s legal configuration of “indigenous communities” or *ejidos*. The four Kumiai (or Tipai) communities are Juntas de Nejí, San José de la Zorra, San Antonio Necua and La Huerta; the two Paipai communities are Santa Catarina and San Isidoro; the Kiliwa community is Arroyo Leon; and the Cucapá community is El Mayor Cucapá (Figure 1). A few traditional (but non-federally recognized) settlements exist, such as Peña Blanca and Aguaje de la Tuna in the Municipality of Tecate. Some speakers have also moved to nearby towns and cities, where they find employment and better education opportunities for their children, but they also find themselves more isolated from other speakers.

Over the last two centuries, the Yuman languages of Baja California have shifted from being the dominant languages spoken in the region to being endangered languages of marginalized ethnic groups. Given the tragic loss of population due to introduced diseases, the expropriation of indigenous territory and forced changes in culture, the persistence of indigenous languages in the northern part of the peninsula is quite remarkable. During this period, some of the forces that have been influencing the native languages include the imposition of Spanish as the dominant language of Mexico, pervasive racism against indigenous peoples and cultures that leads to abandonment of the language, demographic movements away from rural communities with concentrations of speakers to towns and cities, and intergenerational isolation leading to the lack of transmission of the language during critical stages of child development. These centripetal forces push hard toward the extinction of the languages by driving speakers toward adopting a unified linguistic identity (Bakhtin 1981, quoted in Duranti 1997).

On the other hand, there are centrifugal factors that push toward language diversity, differentiation and revitalization. A revaluation of indigenous identity and pride in indigenous heritage may help motivate children to learn and speak their native language. Programs and projects designed to document and revitalize the languages support efforts aimed toward curriculum development and long-term language preservation (Hinton 1994:28-33). Economic benefits provided to speakers who teach classes or participate in language documentation programs confirm that indigenous languages continue to have pragmatic value in modern economic systems. Binational collaborations between U.S. and Mexican tribes, organizations and academic institutions serve to promote forces leading to revitalization (Wilken 2008:5-7). A three-year study

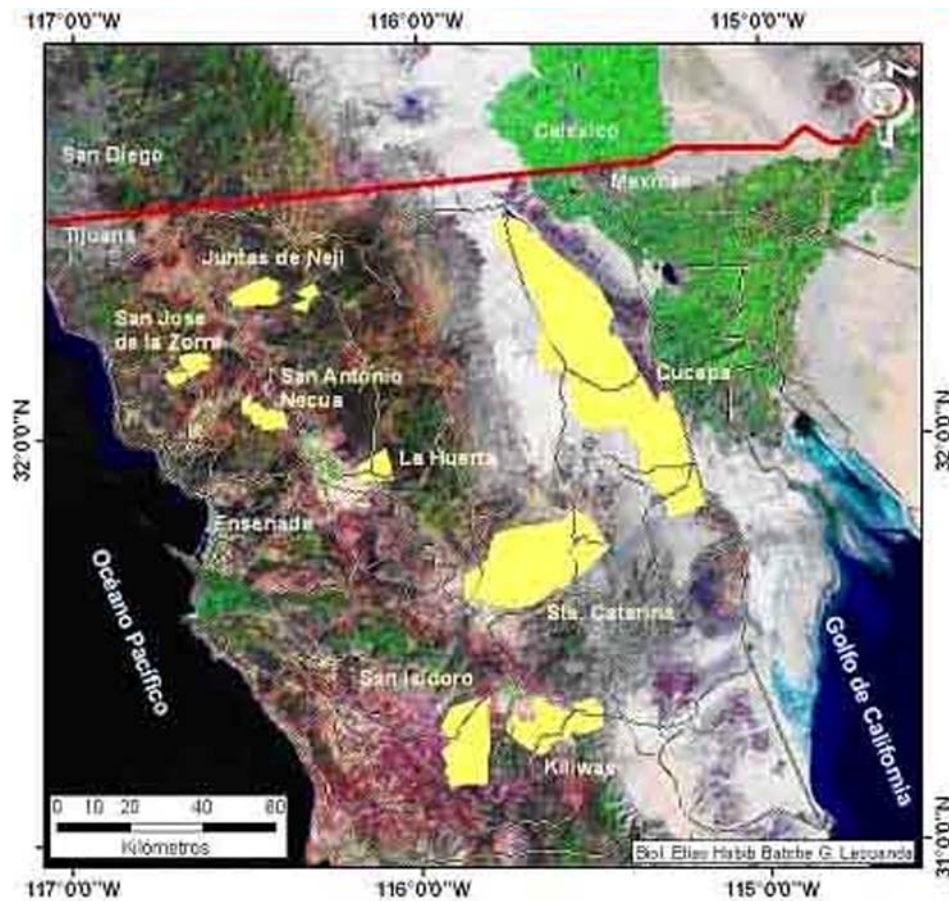


Figure 1. Indigenous communities of Baja California.

through the “Documenting Endangered Languages” program of the National Science Foundation/National Endowment for the Humanities will begin the formal documentation of the Kumiai language while also creating opportunities for language revitalization.

The state of Baja California’s indigenous languages

Surveys of Baja California’s Yuman languages include a 167-word list carried out in 1867 for the Smithsonian Institution by W. M. Gabb, who compiled wordlists for the Hataam or Tomaseño of the Santo Tomas area, the Yuma (Quechan), San Quintín Kiliwa and San Borja Cochimí. J. P. Harrington carried out linguistic fieldwork in Baja California in the 1920s; however, his work remains largely unpublished (Walsh 1976). In the second half of the twentieth century, linguists from both the U.S. and Mexico, including Carlos Robles Uribe, Jesus Angel Ochoa Zazueta and Hector Benjamin Trujillo, began to carry out linguistic fieldwork and publication on the Yuman languages of the peninsula. Mixco (2006), who carried out fieldwork with the Kiliwa, Paipai and Kw’atl, has written a detailed bibliographic review of linguistic work related to the indigenous languages of the peninsula, and Laylander (1997) has also published a useful overview. Hinton and Watahomigie’s 1984 publication *Spirit Mountain: an anthology of Yuman story and song* presents information and transcriptions of texts from the Baja California Yuman languages together with those of California and Arizona.

While the language varieties of Baja California are genetically related and face common

challenges to survival, each of the surviving speech communities of the peninsula also has its own history, its own ideologies and its own unique natural, cultural and social context, all of which have played a part in the construction of their current situations. In the following sections, the current state of each language variety and of linguistic research that has been carried out will be summarized.

Cucapá

The Cucapá language (known as Cocopah in the U.S.) belongs to the Delta-California branch of the Yuman language family, along with Kumeyaay/Kumiai. According to Yolanda Sanchez Ogaz (2006), some 400 Cucapá live in towns scattered throughout the Mexicali Valley including El Mayor Indígena, Cucapá Mestizo, Pozas de Arvizu and San Luis Río Colorado (these last two being in the state of Sonora). Linguist James Crawford has carried out linguistic studies in the related Cocopah community of Somerton, Arizona. According to a 2000 census carried out by the Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas (CDI), the Mexican federal government agency that works with indigenous communities, the Cucapá population is composed of 344 individuals, of whom 59.9% “speak the language”. It is unclear how the population and the levels of speech proficiency are defined, however; as we will see below, the numbers of speakers in this census seems to be either inflated or very loosely defined.

Paipai

The Paipai language belongs to the Pai branch of the Yuman language family, and has been shown to be closely related to the Upland Yuman languages: Yavapai, Hualapai and Havasupai (Mixco 2006). Judith Joël (1966, 1976) carried out field work with Paipai speakers as part of an ethnographic project with Ralph Michelsen and Roger Owen in the early sixties for her 1964 doctoral thesis on *Paipai phonology and morphology*. Werner Winter (1967) theorized that the Paipai were a group of Yavapai who had migrated from Arizona into Baja California in fairly recent times. Laylander (1997) proposed the opposite: that the Pai groups might have originated in Baja California and migrated into Arizona. Mixco finds ample evidence for a connection between the Paipai and the Upland Yumans as a whole, but not exclusively with the Yavapai. The Paipai speech community in Santa Catarina also includes the embedded Kw’atl speech community which appears to be a southern dialect of the Kumiai or Tipai language (see below) and which probably existed in the geographic area prior to the Paipai migration from Arizona. San Isidoro, a second Paipai community in Baja California, has no remaining Paipai speakers.

According to the CDI census of 2001, there are 418 Paipai with 52.9% of the population that “speak the language”. The author’s field experience with the Paipai indicates that there is a much smaller speech community and that very few young people are learning the language. Mexican linguist Elena Ibáñez Bravo has been carrying out field research in the community of Santa Catarina since 2002. She is completing her thesis on Paipai phonology and verbal semantics for a graduate degree in anthropological linguistics at Escuela Nacional de Antropología e Historia (ENAH) in Mexico City.

Kiliwa

The Kiliwa language is probably the most divergent branch of the Yuman language family,

considered a separate branch from Core Yuman. According to linguist Mauricio Mixco, “Kiliwa stands apart from its Yuman congeners in several aspects of phonology, grammar and lexicon, particularly in the maritime, kinship and numerical domains. This substantiates the long-held perception of Kiliwa’s relative divergence” (Mixco 2006:36). Mixco has carried out fieldwork with the Kiliwa and published extensively (1971, 1976, 1977, 1983, 1985, 1996, 2006). The language currently does not exhibit dialectal variation; however, Mixco (1977) believes that Kiliwa dialects (Ñakipa, Juigrepa and Yakakual) did exist in the southern and eastern parts of Kiliwa territory.

Today there are only five fluent speakers of Kiliwa (Leonor Farlow, personal communication), although an inflated figure of 51 is indicated on the CDI census. In recent years, oceanographer Arnulfo Estrada has worked with Kiliwa traditional authorities Cruz Ochurte Espinoza and Leonor Fardlow to document the language and create materials for language revitalization, including a dictionary and a set of language teaching audiocassettes (Estrada and Ochurte 1998). As one of the country’s most endangered languages, Kiliwa has received significant press coverage in Mexico.

Kumiai

Kumiai (known as Kumeyaay, ‘Iipay/Tiipay or Diegueño in the U.S.) belongs to the California-Delta branch of the Yuman language family. It is not yet clear whether the language varieties spoken in the original territory (extending from Escondido, California in the north to Santo Tomás, Baja California in the south, and east across the peninsular range to the Colorado River) represent several different languages or dialects. Linguist Margaret Langdon (1990), a specialist in Kumeyaay speech varieties, suggested that there were three distinct languages in the region; however, a recent survey by linguist Margaret Field found strong similarities between the Kumeyaay spoken in some southern San Diego speech communities and that spoken in the northern Baja California communities. The Kwa’tl language variety found in the Paipai community of Santa Catarina also appears to be a southern dialect of Kumiai (Mixco 2006). The CDI 2000 census for Baja California reports a population of 328, with 56.3% who “speak the language”; however, a field survey by Field found less than 60 fluent speakers, all over age 40.

Conclusion

The peninsular Yuman languages represent an irreplaceable component of the indigenous identity of Baja California and of the world’s linguistic heritage. All are presently endangered to different degrees, and due to the lack of younger generations of speakers, they are considered moribund languages. Whether or not they survive or are sufficiently documented depends on the will of the speech communities themselves to conserve and revitalize them, as well as the ability of researchers to provide the technical support and institutions to provide the logistical and financial support needed to carry out this formidable task.

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