

Klamath Language Sketch

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Abstract

There are no longer any first-language speakers of Klamath, but extensive documentation and language revitalization programs exist to support some form of language maintenance. This language sketch briefly examines the history and nature of the language, highlighting the nature of Klamath verb morphology, and also reports on its speakers, available resources, and existing revitalization efforts.

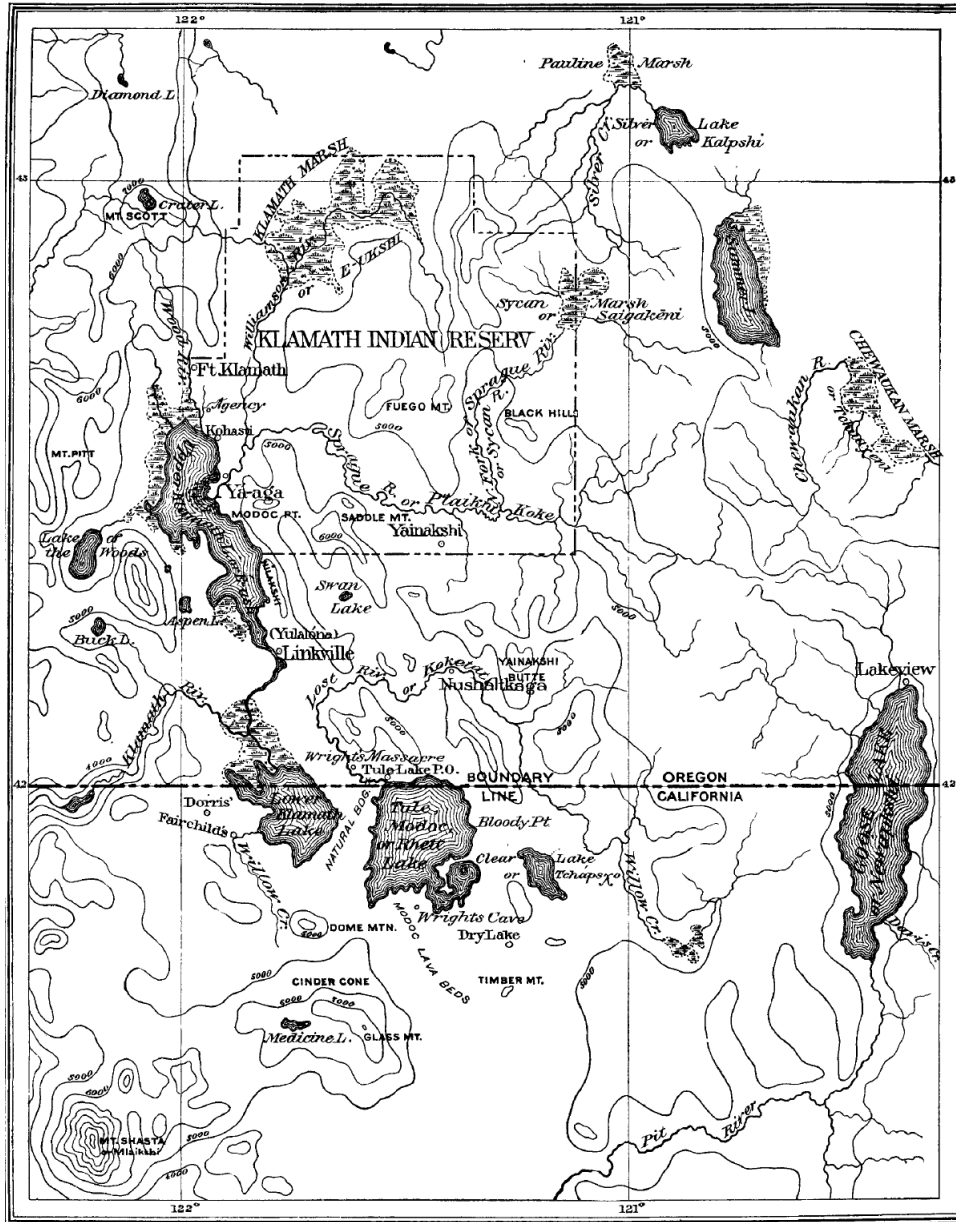


Figure 1. Map of the Headwaters of the Klamath River, Albert S. Gatschet



Figure 2. Klamath man, Edward S. Curtis, The North American Indian, volume 13, 1923

Introduction

When Mabie “Neva” Eggsman passed away in 2003 at the age of 95, she also took with her the status of being the only native and fluent speaker of the Klamath language. She had seen the termination of federal recognition of her tribe in 1954 along with the seizure of 1.8 million acres of land, as well as its restoration in 1986. She also played a vital role in the preservation of Klamath, acting as master language instructor in the early 1990s, through which recordings still remain of her speaking the language.

Speakers

According to the earliest available ethnographic sketches (Spier, 1930) there were originally an estimated 1,200 speakers of Klamath. By the time M. A. R. Barker conducted his survey in 1955, the Klamath Indian Reservation had a population of 2,018, but ‘the great majority of these no longer speak the language’.¹ There are currently approximately 3,500 enrolled members, according to the Klamath Tribes.

The Ethnologue The Ethnologue refers to Scott DeLancey’s estimate of 2,000 members (1997). It also follows Golla in its claim that one native speaker remains, a statistic that was last verified in 1998. It notes that the speakers have shifted to English.

It has been suggested that the termination of federal recognition of the Klamath tribe by Congress in 1954 by the Klamath Termination Act was instrumental in the demise of the language, though speakers were few even then.² The need to examine the issue of language identity and the necessity for language shift is present here.

Classification

Klamath, along with its closely related Modoc (together with which they are often collectively referred to as Klamath-Modoc), is classified as part of the *Plateau Penutian* languages, which are found in south-central Oregon, Washington state as well as parts of northern California and Idaho.

¹Barker, ‘Klamath Grammar’, p.1

²Klamath Tribes, online

Plateau Penutian is a specific subdivision of the Penutian language family, which consists of Native American languages spoken, currently or at one time, in the states of Washington, Oregon and California. Yokuts, Chinookan and Wintuan are among those languages classified as Penutian, but a dwindling speaker population and limited linguistic and ethnographic resources has lead to a certain amount of controversy surrounding the actual classification and family.³

Linguists have also categorized Nez Percé and Sahaptin as part of this family. It had originally been considered as a linguistic isolate, and it was given the category 'Lutuamian' by John Wesley Powell (explorer, Bureau of American Ethnology, 1891) until it was recognized that it shared lexical and grammatical characteristics with its Sahaptian neighbors, perhaps due to contact.⁴ There are also arguments for suggesting similarity to Yokuts and Wintun (DeLancey, 1987, 1991, 1997). The Ethnologue suggests similar dialects as Molala and Sahaptian. Modoc settlements are located immediately south of Klamath.

Available Resources

The University of California, Berkeley, has published a volume entitled 'Klamath Texts' written by M. A. R. Barker containing an intensive study of Klamath, doing fieldwork in Chiloquin, Oregon during the summers of 1955-57. It contains myth and ethnographic texts, an English-Klamath text for reference to a Klamath-English dictionary, as well as a comprehensive grammar survey. Much of what was transcribed by Barker took place at Chiloquin, Oregon.

Other notable resources on Klamath include 'The Klamath Indians of Southwestern Oregon' by Albert Samuel Gatschet (ethnologist, United States Geological Survey) containing a grammar, dictionary, and texts, and a collection of papers on Klamath morphology and grammar written by Scott DeLancey (linguist, University of Oregon).

Useful online resources include the University of Oregon's website (www.uoregon.edu/delancey/klamath.html through Scott DeLancey's

³Haas, 'The Northern California linguistic area', 1976. p.359

⁴Mithun, 'The Languages of Native North America', p.448

work) on the Klamath Language as well as the resources provided by the Klamath tribes (www.klamathtribes.org, which contain a brief examination of the grammar as well as links to audio recordings.

A selection of Klamath audio recordings which were obtained by M. A. R. Barker during his survey (1955-1956) are available online through the Berkeley Language Center.⁵ Five native speakers are consulted for the recordings, and include retellings of myths, stories, as well as elicitations, for a total of approximately 7 hours.

Few other relevant resources exist on the language.

Distinctive Features

Vowels in Klamath differ in duration, and Barker also notes how ‘extra vowel length for emphatic purposes is characteristic of Klamath’.⁶ All words begin with consonants. There are no terms to denote number or gender, or a set of tenses.

Another interesting feature is the use of suffixes to distinguish between subject and object: in the following example, the suffix *-as* denotes that the cougar is the object.

hiswaqs ?a siwga daaslaats
The man killed the cougar.

hiswaqs ?a siwga daaslaatsas
The man killed the cougar. (lit. Man -past kills cougar-obj)

hiswaqsas ?a siwga daaslaats
The cougar killed the man. (lit. Man-obj -past kills cougar)

Suffix modification based on constituency is similar when using kinship terms (using *-p* for subject position, *-a* for object) and adjectives (alternating between *-i* and *-a*).

⁵‘Audio Archive of Linguistic Fieldwork’ Berkeley Language Center, University of California, Berkeley

⁶Barker, ‘Klamath Dictionary’ p.13

Klamath Verbs Another important feature of Klamath is the use of classifiers to denote the nature (such as size, shape, or substance) of an object, a phenomena that is also common to many New World languages.⁷ For Klamath in particular, these are attached to verbs of manipulation (*oyi* ‘give’, *eyi* ‘bring’, etc.).

For example, if the object is bulky, the verb prefix is *c’le*:

c’oleeks ?is c’leyank

Please give me the meat.

baal’aa?as ?is c’leyank

Please give me the bread.

If the object is made of cloth or is flexible, the prefix *sle* is used.

skodas ?is sleyank

Please give me the blanket.

If the item is animate, Klamath uses *ks* :

m’ok’aak ?is ksoyank

Please give me the baby.

Categories of location, direction or manner are also a component of Klamath verbs. While Barker compiles an exhaustive study of the three large classes of morphemes (separating them into whether they are classificatory (Class 4S), they can be considered to be ‘main stem morphemes’, or locative-directives), it would be worthy of discussion to briefly include the class of locative-directive morphemes (Class 10sv), of which there are 250 morphs. These are further subdivided into a canonical ‘shape’ that one or more morphemes share in common, consisting of short or long vowels and consonants. For example:

akyamn VCCVCC, shared with 3 other morphemes
‘around, surrounding.

qwe-1 CCV-C, shared with 2 others

⁷DeLancey, ‘Klamath Stem Structure in Genetic and Areal Perspective’

‘down a hill.’

tn CC, shared with 31 others
‘at, against, onto’.

Phonology

The Klamath language consists of 35 distinct phonemes, including the glottal stop, glottalized consonants (common to many American Indian languages of the Northwest), as well as voiceless and glottalized nasals. Barker identifies fifty-four morphophonemes (phonemes that are part of the allomorphs or distinct phonological representations of morphemes). A particular distinction that is made between Klamath and English is the use of ejectives consonants p', t', c', k' and q' (using Barker's notation) that resembles a ‘popping’ sound. Consonant clusters are also a feature in Klamath that is uncommon in English, in particular at the beginning of a word:

mboosant
tomorrow

ngak
turtle

Klamath also employs voiceless resonants, which render *w* as the sound made pronouncing *where*, or *y* as the sound made pronouncing *huron*.

Language Revitalization

Despite the fact that no first-language speakers are alive today, language revitalization efforts are nonetheless extensive, sustained by the fact that it has been well documented, with a grammar and an initial spelling system developed and published by A. S. Gratchet in 1890, as well as texts and a widely-adopted dictionary published by M. A. R. Barker. The Klamath Tribes Language Project was developed in order to support language maintenance and provides an extensive resource online, and local Head Start programs include language instruction, including weekly sessions at local schools and through

community meetings. Particular examples involve language classes at Mills and Chiloquin elementary schools in Oregon, as well as a Culture Camp held annually for children.⁸ The effort is also supported by the University of Oregon.

Oregon state law was modified in 2001 in order to allow native languages to be taught by people without a teacher's licence but who instead pass a proficiency test. This was passed as part of a nationwide program called the 'Native American Languages Act', which was approved by Congress in 1990 in order to encourage language revitalization projects.

Conclusion

While this remains a cursory and superficial glance at Klamath, it is perhaps most important to recognize that language revitalization efforts still persist in Chiloquin, Oregon, even after the death of its last native and fluent speaker, and while speakers have shifted to English as the predominant language, the Klamath tribes persist in their efforts to 'protect, preserve, and enhance the spiritual, cultural, and physical values and resources of the Klamath, Modoc, and Yahooskin Peoples'.⁹ And while the future of the Klamath language remains unclear, it is hoped that with the resources that remain the language will be sustained in the coming future.

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⁸'Preserving the Klamath tongue' Herald and News, Sunday, July 31, 2005

⁹Klamath Tribes, Chiloquin, Oregon

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