

A Reconsideration of the Uto-Aztecan Vowel Shift from a Sociophonetic Perspective

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Labov's (1994) principles of vowel shifts (PVS) rely heavily on evidence from Germanic languages, especially from English. This study shows that the PVS also provide a framework for unifying the proposed historical changes in the vowel systems of the Takic and Southern branches of Uto-Aztecan (UA) with the present-day variation in the vowel system of the Northern Numic branch of UA, represented by Shoshoni.

In light of the PVS, we review the Langacker (1970), and Campbell and Langacker (1978) vowel inventory for Proto-UA *i, *ī, *u, *o, and *a, and the vowel shift they propose for the Takic and Southern UA branches. In contrast, Campbell and Langacker treat the Numic language branch as conservative in regard to vowels.

We then present results from a cross-dialect acoustic study of 800 vowel tokens from eight speakers of modern Shoshoni: four female speakers (from the Wick R. Miller Collection of narratives recorded in the 1960s-1970s) born between 1906-1912 representing four different dialect areas, and four present-day speakers reading word lists.

By employing the PVS and sociophonetic methodology, we demonstrate that the modern Shoshoni vowel data provides evidence for a vowel shift in Numic, previously thought to be a conservative branch of UA, similar to the proposed Takic and Southern UA shifts, thus adding support to Langacker and Campbell's analysis. We end by considering language "drift" and variation, invoking Brian Joseph's recent proposals concerning "parallel developments".

References

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