

Continuity and change in Sahtú Dene (Slavey), an Athabaskan language

In ethnographic work in the Sahtú region of the Northwest Territories, Canada, ethnographers conclude that there was little effect on the overall way of life or societal structure arising from the establishment of forts and missions in the early to mid 1800s, and it was only around 1950 that large changes in ways of life began. At the same time, language change and establishment of community dialects is attributed to the creation of forts and missions. Thus, while societal change was minor, language differentiation is argued to be major during the same time period, a seeming contradiction.

What is the claim of large language change based on? The Oblate missionary Emile Petitot identifies a language that he calls Peaux de Lièvre (Hareskin; later Hare). Based on the dictionary compiled by Petitot in the 1860s and on work with one speaker in 1929, phonological properties are identified that differentiate the language at these two time. The claim is that Peaux de Lièvre is the precursor of both Hare and a second variety, Bearlake, and in the second half of the 19th century, phonological changes occurred, distinguishing Hare and Bearlake. Given the time period in which the changes occurred, the presence of forts and missions is a reasonable account, although contradictory with the ethnographic record.

Within Peaux de Lièvre, Petitot distinguishes varieties, two of which are of interest, what he calls Bâtard Loucheux and what he calls Peaux de Lièvre du Grand Lac des Ours. The phonological properties that differentiate these varieties in 1929 and today are present in Bâtard Loucheux. It appears that the assumption that Petitot's Peaux de Lièvre is what is Hare rather than to what is Bearlake is the foundation for the proposal that the establishment of forts and missions led to the formation of varieties. A closer study suggests that varieties existed at Petitot's time. Further, recent work suggests that much of the variation found in Petitot continues within the communities today. Thus, we do not appear to see a situation of a variety emerging with the establishment of forts, but rather of varieties that already continuing.