

## **Phonological and lexical differences between Omaha and Ponca**

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presented at: SSILA 2011 Pittsburgh

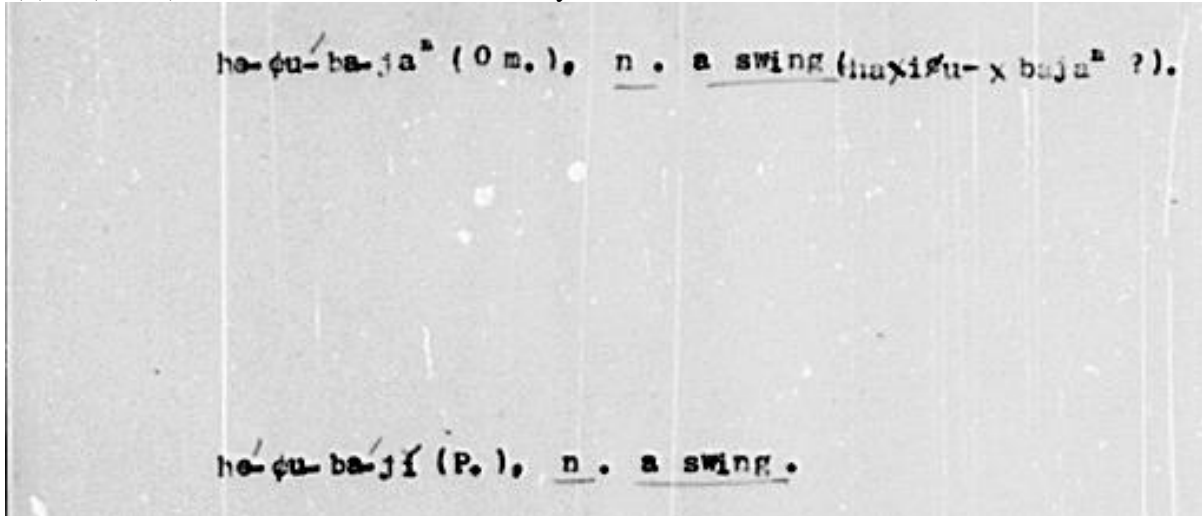
Omaha and Ponca are mutually intelligible dialects of a single Siouan language (Omaha-Ponca), spoken by members of the Omaha Tribe in Nebraska and the Ponca Tribe in Oklahoma. My goal today is to investigate just how different the two dialects are, and in what ways. This is a question I have wondered about for a long time. When I was doing fieldwork with Omaha speakers, they sometimes volunteered comments about things that Poncas say differently, though in general they claimed to understand Ponca perfectly. Usually the differences mentioned were just an individual word or two, or a general statement that Poncas have an accent. (For instance, they would joke that Poncas have a “southern drawl” now that they have mostly moved to Oklahoma.) The extent and nature of differences between the two dialects has never been systematically studied. Linguistic works on the language (Koontz 1984, Dorsey 1890, n.d., Rudin & Shea 2005, among others) mention dialect differences, but do not address them in depth.

The one resource which does contain a large amount of data on Omaha vs. Ponca differences is a slip file collected by James Owen Dorsey in the 1880s-1890s. Until recently this data could be accessed only by visiting the Smithsonian to see the original slips, or by using the microfilmed version produced a few decades ago by Mark Awakuni-Swetland -- almost equally daunting for those of us without an in-house microfilm reader. As of last year, however, the slip file is much more easily accessible. As part of the Omaha and Ponca Digital Dictionary project, directed by Mark Awakuni-Swetland and me, the slips are in the process of being scanned and made available to the public online at <http://omahalanguage.unl.edu/images.php>. Some 15,000 slips have been posted to this site so far; the entire slip file should be posted by the end of this academic year. We originally estimated that there were about 20,000 slips, but it now appears the final number will be somewhat less, perhaps 17,000, with an average of 1 to 2 lexemes per slip.

The easy availability of the slips now makes it considerably easier to investigate many issues in Omaha and Ponca vocabulary and grammar, including differences between the two dialects, at least the differences which existed a century ago and were noted by Dorsey.

The great majority of the Dorsey slips have no indication of dialect, but a significant minority (at least several hundred) do have some marking of dialect-specific status, usually a (P) for Ponca or (O) or (Om) for Omaha. This mark is found immediately after the head word on the card, and is a clear and unambiguous sign that Dorsey considered the word to belong to only the dialect indicated. The slip in (1a) is a typical example, with both O and P variants identified. More commonly only one variant appears on a given slip, with the other dialect perhaps identified on a different slip. The differences shown in (1a) are also typical: the location of accent and quality of a vowel.

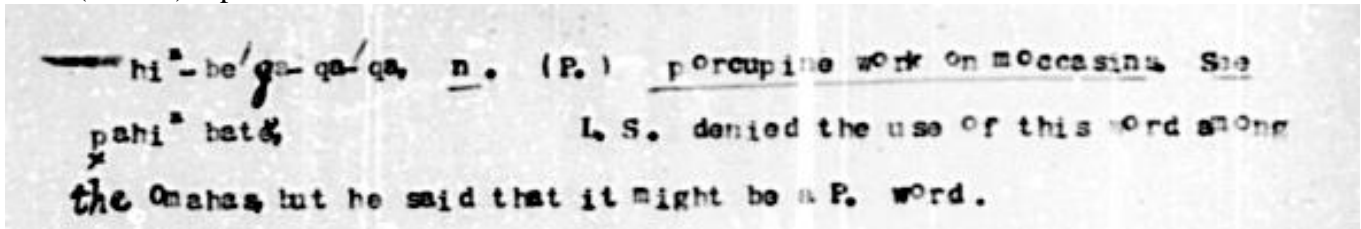
(1)a. (he/13) Om. and P. marked; differ by accent and final vowel



Sometimes there are additional indications of dialect, which can be a little harder to interpret. For instance, there may be a note that the word was rejected by one of Dorsey's consultants, most of whom were Omaha, but he thinks it "may be a Ponca word". Or a comment may state that a particular item is known to one tribe but not the other. There are also personal names, geographical names, and so on which are specific to one tribe or the other but should perhaps not be considered "dialect" forms.

Examples of a few slips with dialect indications are given in (1b-i).

b. (hiN/25) Speaker comment



This slip states that Lous Saunsoci (L.S.) "denied the use of this word among the Omahas, but he said that it might be a P(onca) word." There is no indication that Dorsey confirmed this with a Ponca speaker.

c. (hi/8) Multiple speaker comments

hi-de-a-ta-di, adv. of hide; used by Nuda<sup>n</sup>-axa, and probably a P. word;  
 Ci hi-de-ta-di ui, And they wounded him again below (the other wound;  
 ). L. S. gave hidadi, the latter probably the Om. equivalent. *I prefer hide-a-ta-di.*

This slip cites several speakers: Nuda<sup>n</sup>-axa (a Ponca), who used the head word, and two Omahas, Louis Saunsoci (L.S.) and Frank Laflesche (F.), who prefer other forms.

d. (ma-ka/8) doubtful...

ma-ka<sup>n</sup>/nu-bea<sup>n</sup>, n. sweet-scented medicine,  
*Prob. intended for i<sup>n</sup>wa-bea<sup>n</sup> (Wdj.) also a (P) word.*  
 D., pejihuta waetenna (pejihuta waetenna);

This slip states that Wadjepe (Wdj.), an Omaha, thinks the word is a mistake, but if not, it may be Ponca.

e. (gih/16) animal known to one tribe

gi-ka-xa-xa (P.), n. a species of bird known to the Ponkas when they dwelt in Dakota. See uci-wa-<sup>x</sup>, wajiga-tu,  
 Gikaxaxa prob. intended for, ki<sup>n</sup>qaqada<sup>n</sup> or kiquaqadja<sup>n</sup>.

The Omahas never “dwelt in Dakota”, so they were presumably unfamiliar with this bird and its name.

The next group of slips, (1f) all have to do with cheese:

f. (ma-wa/47) (tsubxe/222) (ma-wa/51) (baw/8) Cultural difference

ma-ze<sup>n</sup>-ni si<sup>n</sup>-da (P.), n. “firm milk”: cheese. It is not known among the Omahas, but the Ponkas are familiar with it.

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te-skà ma-ze-ni we-ggi sa-gi(O.), n. "cows' milk grease hard:"  
cheese. Not eaten by Omahas. See baweggi sagi.

ma-ze-ni we-ggi sa-gi(P.), n. "hard milk grease": cheese.

ba-we-ggi sa-gi(P.), n. "hard butter," cheese.

In this series we see differences in the two tribes' adopting of White cultural items and creating words for them. Cheese was, in Dorsey's time, a newly introduced food, which the Poncas ate and had several words for. The Omahas did not eat it but apparently were aware of its existence, at least by the time Dorsey finished collecting lexical material, and had a word. (The slips were collected over a period of a decade or so and it seems likely the words for milk products were in flux at that time.)

g. (gac/29) Cultural item

ga-ep'e'u-i<sup>2</sup>, oblong pieces of clam-shell, from two to six inches  
as ear-pendants  
long, worn by Ponca men and women. Not used by the Omaha.

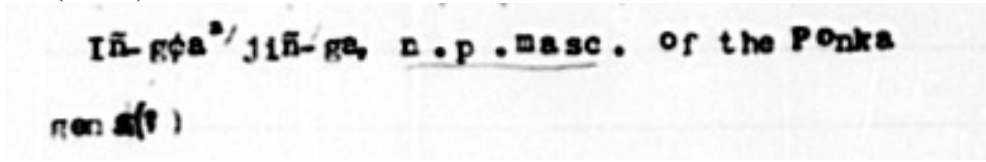
This slip is an example of an object specific to one tribe; the word may have been known to Omahas too, but since only Poncas wore these ear-pendants, the word can be considered Ponca.

h. (iN/78) Is the "see" word Omaha?

(P) iñ-gga<sup>2</sup>-xe pi-a-jji n. a demon or evil spirit. Not used by the  
Omahas. See wanaxe piäji.

This slip is marked Ponca (the (P) in the margin is to be inserted after the head word, as indicated by the editing mark). The note "See wanaxe piäji" suggests that this might be the Omaha equivalent, but it may be simply another term used by both tribes, or a term for a different type of evil spirit. In theory one could actually go look at the slip for wanaxe piäji, but in fact as of this writing the "w" slips mostly have not been uploaded yet.

i. (iN/74) Personal name



Personal names are usually specific to one tribe, but I have not included them in my lists of Omaha vs. Ponca words at this point.

This paper presents a partial survey and analysis of the slips with dialect-specific marking. As already mentioned, not quite all of the slips are on line yet, and I have not made my way through quite all of the ones that are on line. The slips themselves are not searchable, but the dictionary which is being derived from them WILL be searchable; fairly soon it should be possible to much more efficiently find the remainder of the Ponca or Omaha-marked lexical items.

The differences between (O) and (P) dialect-marked entries in the slip file fall into a number of linguistic categories. I'll look very briefly at some lexical differences and then in a little more detail at some phonological ones.

### Lexical differences

Some (O) vs. (P) words are simply different lexical items for a given meaning, some differ by morphological construction, some differ in meaning or usage of a lexical item which occurs in both dialects. I lump all of these together for purposes of this paper under the label "lexical differences". Such differences occur most commonly in relatively recent words, e.g. words for introduced domestic animals or European-introduced concepts, like those in (2a-f). However, there are also many examples of traditional, pre-contact words which differ between the two dialects.

Examples in the remainder of this paper are simply listed instead of showing the slip. The lexemes are given in current Ponca and Omaha orthography respectively (note á<sup>n</sup> and ó<sup>n</sup> are P and O spellings for the same vowel; otherwise the two spelling systems are essentially identical). In parentheses following each lexeme are the slip folder label and item number in that folder.

- (2)a. '(domestic) sheep' (P) tatshúge wanágthe ('tame antelope') (tsubxa/176)  
(O) haxúde ('gray skin'; also 'buffalo robe') (H/32)
- b. 'a Spaniard' (P) shpaiúna (ck/26)  
(O) hespaiuna (he/10)
- c. 'dollar' (P) wi<sup>n</sup> bthuga 'one round (gold)piece, a dollar' no<sup>n</sup>ba bthuga '2 dollars'  
(O) mo<sup>n</sup>zeska 'white metal' is used for 'dollar' as well as 'money'.
- d. 'sword' (P) máhi<sup>n</sup> wézhaha ('stabbing knife') (ma/203)  
(O) ma<sup>n</sup>ze wet<sup>h</sup>i<sup>n</sup> ('metal for striking')
- e. doorknob' (P) tizhéb íthishnúde búta (tsubxi/86)  
(Om) tizhébuthúthibthi<sup>n</sup>tha (tsubxi/91)
- f. zha<sup>n</sup> gáshpishpí (P) 'shingles'

(both dialects) ‘chips (of wood)’ (jaN/30)

**Some pre-contact ones:**

- g. ‘the Platte river’ (P) nitá<sup>n</sup>ga [also means “ocean, sea” in both dialects] (ni/107)  
(O) nibtháska (ni/39)
- h. ‘a stem grass...’ (P) sáhi baxúxu  
(O) sahí btháska (sa/69) (note accent as well)
- i. ‘basket made of rushes (P) sáhi<sup>n</sup> uzhí (sa/73)  
(Om) sáhi<sup>n</sup> uxthúxaha (sa/75)
- j. ‘male rabbit’ (P) máshti<sup>n</sup> núga (ma/92)  
(O) mashtshí<sup>n</sup>ge núga (ma/82)
- k. pásiáta (P) ‘astride another’s shoulders’  
(O) ‘at the head of a stream or top of tree’ (pam/31)
- l. má<sup>n</sup>thi<sup>n</sup>ázhi (P) ‘he does not go’  
(O) ‘he does not yet walk or cannot walk (applied to an infant or a person who has lost the use of his legs)’ (maN/74)

**Phonological Differences**

Although the vast majority of dialect differences noted in the slip file are lexical differences, in this paper I concentrate primarily on lexemes which differ in pronunciation between an (O) and a (P) form. My reason for looking specifically at phonological differences is that this seemed like an area where differences were more likely to be rule governed; there could be general statements made about the two dialects rather than just lists of items. However, as we will see, this turns out not to be the case. In fact, there is little regularity in any of the areas I looked at.

To keep the presentation a reasonable length, I consider only three phonological features here: vowel length, position of the accent, and nasality.

**Vowel Length**

I cover vowel length first, because I have the least to say about it. The only clear example of a vowel length difference between dialects that I have found is shown in (3). In this set of words Ponca has a long vowel: éeža<sup>n</sup> instead of éžo<sup>n</sup>. The slip containing the elm words with short vowel has no dialect label, but the Ponca-marked long vowel version suggests the short vowel may be a specifically Omaha pronunciation.

(3) “elm” words: (egi/51; ežiN/40)

(P) éezha <sup>n</sup>	(O.?) ézho <sup>n</sup>	‘an elm’
éezha <sup>n</sup> gthithíde	ézho <sup>n</sup> gthithíde	‘slippery elm’
éezha <sup>n</sup> má <sup>n</sup> de	ézho <sup>n</sup> má <sup>n</sup> de	‘the bow elm’
éezha <sup>n</sup> ukéthi <sup>n</sup>	ézho <sup>n</sup> sagi	‘the common elm’

Dorsey seldom shows vowel length, even in words which we know have long vowels, so it is not clear how many words might differ by long vs. short vowel, nor whether there is any pattern of (P) long vowel corresponding to (O) short vowel. I have not come across

other examples, but this one set strongly suggests that it will be worth investigating vowel-length differences when checking the dictionary lexemes with speakers.

Unlike vowel length, accent and nasality are consistently marked in the slip file, and numerous examples exist of Omaha and Ponca words differing by accent or by nasality. Interestingly, however, neither of these features appears to follow any predictable, regular pattern.

### Accent

Some examples of accent differences are shown in (4)-(6).

Omaha-Ponca words have the main word accent (a pitch accent) on the first or second syllable, and there are a fair number of cases where the two dialects differ in which syllable is accented. In (4) we see words and phrases with Ponca accent on the first syllable, while Omaha has second syllable accent (in some cases with other variations in the words as well). (4f) has this pattern in two of the three words in the phrase.

- (4)a. 'jealous' (P) mí<sup>n</sup>wadá<sup>n</sup> (miN/117)  
(O) miwáda  
b. 'to fish' (P) húgasi (hu/12)  
(O) hugási  
c. 'having a fishy odor' (P) húbtha<sup>n</sup> (hu/4)  
(O) hubthó<sup>n</sup> (hu/5)  
d. 'fire water, liquor' (P) pédeni  
(O) pedéni (pe/83)  
e. 'wine' (P) pédeni skithe  
(O) pedéni skíthe (pe/85)  
f. 'liquor shop' (P) pédeni úthi<sup>n</sup>wi<sup>n</sup> tí ('liquor selling house')  
(O) pedéni uthi<sup>n</sup>wi<sup>n</sup> tí (pe/87)  
g. 'moonlight' (P) nía<sup>n</sup>ba  
'a moon' (O) nió<sup>n</sup>ba (ni/36)

This pattern is the most common one in the slips I looked through; however, we cannot make any overall generalization about Ponca vs. Omaha accent from these examples. In fact, the opposite pattern, with Ponca having accent on second syllable and Omaha on the first syllable, is also fairly common, with no apparent conditioning. Some examples of this type are seen in (5).

- (5)a. 'this day, today' (P) a<sup>n</sup>báthe  
(O?) á<sup>n</sup>bathé (aN /12)  
b. 'kiss'? (P) iágik<sup>h</sup>ígthe  
(O) íágik<sup>h</sup>ígthe (I/10)  
c. 'also, too' (P) ethó<sup>n</sup>ba  
(O) étho<sup>n</sup>ba (eça/9)  
d. 'Hill-that-draws-people-into-its-mouth' (P) Pahéwatháhuni  
(O) Páhewáthahúni (pa/91)

- e. '??' (P) xubék<sup>h</sup>ithábi thi<sup>n</sup>hé  
 (O) xúbekithábi thi<sup>n</sup>hé (qp/36)

In both dialects, accent tends to occur in an alternating rhythm, often on every other syllable, so that once accent has started on a different syllable at the left edge of the word, its place is off by a syllable throughout the word; for instance, in (4a), (5a), (5d). However, this is not always the case, as a glance at the other examples shows.

Perhaps deeper investigation would show some regularity to when each pattern occurs. In at least one case, an accent difference is associated with a grammatical category in a somewhat predictable way. As Dorsey himself notes on slip #(gaN/45), "some verbs have a different stress in the imper[ative]." This does not apply to all verbs, but in those cases where the imperative form of verbs does differ between Omaha and Ponca, Ponca always has first syllable accent while Omaha has second syllable accent.

- (6). imperative:  
 a. 'take' (P) thíza-ga, thíza-a (male and female imperative forms) (gaN/45)  
 (O) thizá-ga, thizá-a  
 a. 'look!' (P) dá<sup>n</sup>baga  
 (O) da<sup>n</sup>bága (D/20-21)  
 b. 'remember them and do so' (P) wágisitháda<sup>n</sup> éga<sup>n</sup> gáxa-ga  
 (O) wagísitháda<sup>n</sup> éga<sup>n</sup> gáxa-ga (it/32-33)

In (6c) the actual imperative (*gáxa-ga*) is identical in Ponca and Omaha; the difference in accent is in the preceding verb 'remember'.

### Nasality

Similarly to the apparently irregular, almost random nature of the accent differences between Omaha and Ponca, nasality also seems to vary quite unpredictably. In most of the clear cases I have found Ponca has nasal vowels where Omaha has oral ones, as in the examples in (7).

- (7)a. 'jealous' (P) mí<sup>n</sup>wadá<sup>n</sup> (miN/117)  
 (O) miwáda  
 b. 'a grave' (P) mí<sup>n</sup>xe (miN/102)  
 (O) míxe (mi/45)  
 c. 'to wash himself' (P) kighízha<sup>n</sup>  
 (Om) kighízha (ki/52)  
 d. 'to cause to live, save from death, preserve' (P) ní<sup>n</sup>the (ni/50)  
 (O) níthe (ni/139)  
 e. 'to save someone's relative or animal' (P) ní<sup>n</sup>ík<sup>h</sup>ithe (ni/140)  
 (O) níík<sup>h</sup>ithe (ni/69)  
 f. 'the Saviour' (P) ní<sup>n</sup>awathai ak<sup>h</sup>a  
 (O) níáwathai ak<sup>h</sup>á (ni/34)



However, in other cases the opposite occurs: Ponca has oral vowels where Omaha has nasal ones. One example is given in (8).

- (8) ‘diligently’ (P) pamágthe (pam/2)  
(O) pamó<sup>n</sup>gthe (pam/5)

This second pattern, with oral vowel in Ponca, nasal in Omaha, is actually found in a huge number of lexical items, but nearly all that I have found involve the same morpheme: Ponca *naska* vs. Omaha *tho<sup>n</sup>ska*. This is found in several series of correlatives having to do with size, with numerous derived variants of each: the most basic versions are given in (9). These are interesting in that not only the vowel differs in nasality, but the preceding consonant does too, in the opposite direction. (The sound written “th” is a voiced liquid; n is its nasal counterpart.) The syllable has nasality in both cases, but in Ponca this nasality is manifested in the consonant, while in Omaha it is found in the following vowel.

- (9)a. ‘how large, of what size?’ (P) ánaska ; (O) átho<sup>n</sup>ska (aça/42), (aça/43), (aça/56),  
b. ‘that size’ (P) shénaska ; (O) shétho<sup>n</sup>ska (ceçaji/8)  
c. ‘of equal or like size’ (P) ékinaská ; (O) ékitho<sup>n</sup>ská (eki/4), (eki/25)  
d. ‘of that size’ (P) énaska ; (O) étho<sup>n</sup>ska (ena/33)  
e. ‘of that size’ (P) gánaska ; (O) gátho<sup>n</sup>ska (gam/18), (gaçaN/5)

Nasality is notoriously slippery in Omaha-Ponca anyway: there are idiolectal differences among present-day Omaha in which words are pronounced with nasal vowels, and it is often difficult to hear whether a particular vowel is nasal or not, especially in the neighborhood of a nasal consonant. Dorsey seems to confidently identify oral and nasal vowels and label oral vs. nasal variants as Ponca or Omaha. Has the nasality picture become more muddled over the past century, or was he perhaps swayed by idiolectal quirks of his consultants?

## DISCUSSION/CONCLUSION

The somewhat confusing picture of differences between Omaha and Ponca that emerges from this brief survey of the Dorsey slip file (while slightly disappointing) is actually not surprising for dialects which have been in close contact throughout their history.

Lexical differences exist but are mostly of the “you say firefly, I say lightning bug” variety -- unlikely to cause any real misunderstanding, and in many cases both words are probably known to both tribes. Many of the lexical differences apply to post-contact cultural items; these are descriptive phrases or compounds which again are probably understandable to both groups even if used in a conventionalized way by members of one tribe and not the other.

The apparently random or at least unclear distribution of phonological differences in length, accent, and nasality is consistent with a history of dialect borrowing, with intermarriage between the two tribes leading to mixing of dialects within families, and

with idiolectal and family variants perhaps becoming identified with one or the other dialect or tribe, especially in the post-contact period.

In conclusion -- this study confirms that Omaha and Ponca differ only minimally, and also demonstrates the usefulness of the Dorsey slip file for answering linguistic questions about Omaha-Ponca.

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