

The Navajo Sound System

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The Navajo language is spoken by the Navajo people who live in the Navajo Nation, located in Arizona and New Mexico in the southwestern United States. The Navajo language belongs to the Southern, or Apachean, branch of the Athabaskan language family. Athabaskan languages are closely related by their shared morphological structure; these languages have a productive and extensive inflectional morphology. The Northern Athabaskan languages are primarily spoken by people indigenous to the sub-arctic stretches of North America. Related Apachean languages are the Athabaskan languages of the Southwest: Chiricahua, Jicarilla, White Mountain and Mescalero Apache. While many other languages, like English, have benefited from decades of research on their sound and speech systems, instrumental analyses of indigenous languages are relatively rare. There is a great deal of work to do before a chapter on the acoustics of Navajo comparable to the standard acoustic description of English can be produced. The kind of detailed phonetic description required, for instance, to synthesize natural sounding speech, or to provide a background for clinical studies in a language is well beyond the scope of a single study, but it is necessary to begin this greater work with a fundamental description of the sounds and supra-segmental structure of the language. In keeping with this, the goal of this project is to provide a baseline description of the phonetic structure of Navajo, as it is spoken on the Navajo reservation today, to provide a foundation for further work on the language.

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