INTRODUCTION

The population center of the Comanches in the twentieth century is southwest Oklahoma. In past centuries, before the advent of the horse in the New World, the Comanches of the Plains and the Shoshones of the Great Basin were one people, probably then centered in the Wind River area of Wyoming and ranging through the northern part of the Great Basin and westward into the Plateau and eastward onto the northern Plains. Those early people are termed Shoshones; Comanche is the name given in later years to those Shoshones who moved onto the Plains. The early Shoshone-Comanche of the northern Plains-Plateau-Basin area were known as the Snake Indians to such explorers as Lewis and Clark.

We know that the Comanches had adopted the horse and had begun to differentiate from the northern Shoshones by the late 1600s, because they were observed in New Mexico by Europeans in 1705 (Shimkin 1940:21). From that date until their forced settlement in the Texas Panhandle the Comanches’ history becomes better and better known from writings of Europeans (and, later, of non-Indian Americans) of the eighteenth and nineteenth century. (See, for instance, Richardson 1933; Wallace and Hoebel 1952; Kavanagh n.d.)

The people who would become the Comanches hold a commanding position in the history of the Great Plains. They ranged the Plains widely, from Saskatchewan to deep into Mexico. Kavanagh (n.d.) states that in the eighteenth century “the Comanche dominated the southern Plains, holding the foothills of the Rockies, from Shoshone territory in the Wind River area of Wyoming southward to the Staked Plains of Texas and New Mexico.”

From the time the Comanches ventured onto the Plains their language began diverging from that spoken by the Shoshones who remained in the Great Basin. Miller (1970) describes the general situation of the Shoshones in the Basin, where constant movement of small groups has helped maintain language cohesion over a large area, despite a certain amount of dialect diversity. The Comanches, in contrast, having ranged widely over the Plains for at least 250 years and winding up far from the Basin, were in contact with many
languages. As the Comanches went farther and farther south, they lost all but sporadic contact with the Shoshones of Wind River. Kavanagh (p.c.) believes the last important contact between individuals of the two groups occurred before 1850.

Today the languages spoken by the two groups, although quite similar, are best thought of as two separate languages, rather than as dialects of the same language. That statement is based on observations of differences between the phonology and syntax of the languages. (The reader can observe a number of the phonological differences by a careful reading of chapter 2. Differences in syntax are not addressed herein.) One important difference is that Shoshone shows no evidence of the second-position phenomena described in chapter 8.

1.1. Remarks on the literature

Comanche and Shoshone belong to the Numic family, a group of closely related Uto-Aztecan languages found (except for Comanche) in the Great Basin. The relationships among the Numic languages are:

Western Numic
   Mono
   Northern Paiute

Eastern Numic
   Central Numic
      Shoshone
      Comanche
      Panamint
   Southern Numic
      Southern Paiute/Ute/Chemehuevi
      Kawaiisu

Very early work on describing and classifying Comanche is discussed in Shaul (1981). A flurry of interest in the language in the 1940s and 1950s produced several short articles. Casagrande’s (1948) article on “Comanche Baby Language” contains information that will never be duplicated, as Comanche children are no longer learning the language. The article also gives an interesting list of lexical items. Riggs (1949) discusses whether h plus stop should be analyzed as a cluster or a unit phoneme. She concludes that the form is a unit phoneme (and I concur).
Canonge (1957) argues for the phonemic status of some of the voiceless vowels of the language. His article initiated a debate between himself and Roman Jacobson about the nature of those voiceless vowels that resulted in Comanche voiceless vowels being well known in the linguistics literature. The debate is discussed briefly in chapter 2.

Osborn and Smalley (1949) is an excellent, but brief, preliminary analysis of the morphemes of the language. The other short article on the language from that era (Smalley 1953) discusses phonemic rhythm in Comanche, but is hard to follow, as the analysis seems to rely heavily on tape-recorded material, thus missing final and medial voiceless vowels.

Among the larger works from that era are Canonge's *Comanche Texts* (1958), an outstanding collection of folktales and personal anecdotes that includes a Comanche-English morpheme list, and Casagrande's masterful study of loanwords in Comanche (1954a, 1954b, 1955).

More recently, Comanche has been studied by James Armagost, John McLaughlin, Lila Wistrand Robinson, and myself. Armagost (1980) is a grammar of Comanche taken primarily from Canonge's texts; it is a preliminary version of the grammar in Robinson and Armagost (1990). Armagost (1979, 1982a, 1982b, 1983, 1984, 1985a) examines the ways in which morphology and syntax conspire to reference participants in Comanche narrative. Armagost (1985b, 1986, 1987, 1988a, 1988b) also explores the phenomenon of Comanche voiceless vowels. Armagost and Miller (n.d.) is an examination of the problem using material from Comanche and Shoshone. Most of the references to McLaughlin in this book (McLaughlin 1982a, 1982b, 1983a, 1983b, 1983c, 1984) are studies of Central Numic morphology, and trace the role some elements (basically affixes) of those languages have played. Much of his work is directed toward aspects of Comanche morphology. Armagost and McLaughlin work closely from Canonge's texts. Robinson and Armagost (1990) is a dictionary and grammar of Comanche based largely on Canonge's dictionary files and texts.