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Sharon E. Clark

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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EARLY INFLUENCES IN AMERICAN INDIAN LINGUISTICS

Sharon E. Clark

Department of Anthropology, University of Nebraska, Lincoln 68508

Although John Wesley Powell's *Indian Linguistic Families of America, North of Mexico*, published in 1891 stands as the basis from which modern classifications have emerged, the study of American Indian languages had begun over two hundred and fifty years earlier.

The earliest work on American Indian languages was done by missionaries. In the spirit of conquest and conversion, the missionaries learned the Indian languages to more readily facilitate their own goals. However, as Clark Wissler notes, "a missionary might learn a language and even translate the Bible into it without concern about linguistic science; on the other hand he might forget about saving the pagan souls and engage in the ungodly pursuit of linguistics" (1942:190).

One of the earliest and best known missionaries was John Eliot (1604-1690). Educated in classics in England, he became a preacher in eastern Massachusetts. There, Eliot came into contact with the Indians of the area and endeavored to learn their language. His knowledge of Hebrew, competency in grammar and aptitude for learning languages gave him confidence to pursue his study. Although his first preaching in 1646 was in English, he had progressed within a year to preaching in their own Algonkian language. Eliot gained recognition for his translation in 1663 of the Bible into an Algonkian language (Adams 1931:79-80). Three years later he completed his grammar of that language (Hallowell 1960:23).

The 1700's reflected an increased interest in relationships and origins of languages. Among those who made comparative studies of Indian languages was David Zeisberger (1721-1808), a Moravian missionary who worked on a Delaware grammar. Johnathan Edwards, a theologian suggested that there were relationships among certain Indian languages. Not only were comparisons made between the different Indian languages, but Adrian Reland, a linguist, made a study to ascertain if there were relationships between North American Indian languages and Indo-European languages.

Among his many pursuits, Thomas Jefferson was also interested in collecting Indian vocabularies as a basis for later scrutiny by scholars. He spent thirty years collecting vocabularies which resulted in about fifty lists. Unfortunately, they were for the most part destroyed. In 1809, Jefferson had them sent from Washington to Monticello in a trunk. The trunk was stolen and when the thief realized his poor judgement, he threw the contents into the James River. Jefferson's intention to publish his findings is hinted at in a letter to Doctor B. S. Barton in 1809, "I am the more concerned at this accident, as of the two hundred and fifty words of my vocabularies, and the

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one hundred and thirty words of the great Russian vocabularies of the languages of the other quarters of the globe, seventy three were common to both, and would have furnished materials for a comparison from which something might have resulted" (1944:599). The remnants of Jefferson's materials were put in the American Philosophical Society. Beside his own work, Jefferson stimulated and urged others to work on American Indian languages.

The naturalist, B. S. Barton, published his booklet on the *Origins and Subsequent Histories of the Indian Tribes* in 1798. Although Barton tried to synthesize all the available data on Indians, he did emphasize linguistic materials. According to Wissler, "Barton assumed that ultimately all New World languages would be traced to a single super-family" (1942:200). Barton gathered vocabularies from Heckewelder as well as other missionaries and traders on the "frontier." He then reworked them into special lists of words and phrases to support his conclusions. Franklin Edgerton criticizes Barton by stating, "his method and outlook may have been surprisingly modern in some respects, but linguistically he was naive, even for his day" (1943:29).

Developments abroad also stimulated interest in American Indian languages. Sir William Jones concluded in 1786 that Sanskrit was related structurally to Greek and Latin, and all three were descended from one language, perhaps extinct – but not Hebrew. Henry M. Hoenigswald points out that Jones's so called discovery was preceded by Sasseti two hundred years previous, but suggests that "his declaration on language relationship became influential, and in this lies its importance" (1963:3).

Catherine II at this time expressed her intention to promote the collection of vocabularies on a world-wide basis. She requested American Indian vocabularies from George Washington and Benjamin Franklin. Professor Pallas continued her work and this eventually led to the publication of *Mithridates* in 1816 by J. C. Adelung and J. S. Vater. A substantial part of this work is devoted to New World languages (Hallowell 1960:24). Pliny Earle Goddard states that this was "the first attempt to present a comparative view of the languages of the world" (1914:557).

In the early nineteenth century, Peter S. Duponceau and Charles Pickering became significant leaders in America in the study of American Indian languages. They were both influenced by Felding, Vater and von Humboldt. Duponceau, a lawyer with knowledge of several languages, initially left France to become involved in the American Revolution. He later became President of the American Philosophical Society (1828-44). His work in the Historical and Literary Committee which was created in 1815, focussed on the study and classification of the language materials sent to the Committee. Due to Duponceau, John Heckewelder, a Moravian missionary

became a member of the Committee and the two worked closely together. Duponceau published some of his works. He translated from German David Zeisberger's Delaware grammar. According to Goddard, this led to "some comparative observations on the languages of America in general" (1914:558). Edgerton, however, critically comments on Duponceau's work in American Indian languages, saying that it "suffered from the handicap of being based solely on the very imperfect record of others" (1943:28). Nevertheless, Clark Wissler states that, "some of his contributions may be noted, such as recognizing the languages of eastern Siberia as of American Indian type and distinct from other Asiatic languages" (1942:193). He adds that "he identified the Osage language as of the Siouan family" (1942:193). To describe the incorporative characteristics of American Indian languages Duponceau invented the term polysynthetic (Edgerton 1942:29). The term came into general usage, but it is no longer applied to all American Indian languages. John Pickering wrote in a eulogy of Duponceau that he was "the first to discover and make known to the world the remarkable character which pervades the aboriginal languages of America from Greenland to Cape Horn" (Samuel F. Haven, in Wissler 1942:193).

John Pickering, a lawyer, was also interested in American Indian languages. He was elected to the American Philosophical Society in 1820 and became an energetic force on the Committee in 1833. He made available the works of John Eliot, Johnathan Edwards, Roger Williams, Josiah Cotton and Rale and accompanied each work with his own linguistic comments. In 1831, Pickering contributed the article on Indian languages of North America to the *Encyclopedia Americana*. In reference to Pickering's study of American Indian languages, Wissler states that "Pickering accepted the existence of four great families east of the Mississippi and Hudson's Bay: the Eskimau, Algonkian, Iroquois and Floridian (Muskogean) (1942:193). In 1820, Pickering published his *Essay on a Uniform Orthography for the Indian Languages of North America*. His orthography was an attempt to regularize the inconsistent methods of recording Indian languages. According to Edgerton, "his alphabet was adopted by missionaries and exerted an important and useful influence" (1943:27).

Henry Rowe Schoolcraft lived among the Ojibwas for many years. His wife was part Ojibwa, and helped him to master the language. His most important contribution was the six volume *Historical and Statistical Information Respecting the History, Conditions and Prospects of the Indian Tribes of the United States*. Schoolcraft's work on the Ojibwa suffered from an inconsistent orthography, but it did reflect his intimate knowledge of that language. Attributed to Schoolcraft are the linguistic terms inclusive and exclusive as applied to first person plural terms of reference. Linguists still use

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these terms and Edgerton writes, "Schoolcraft was the first even to identify and clearly define the usage in any American language" (1943:31).

A leading figure of the first half of the nineteenth century was Albert Gallatin. He was born and educated in Switzerland. In a spirit of adventure he came to the United States in 1780. Gallatin was Secretary of the Treasury under Jefferson and a diplomat. As well as being an important American statesman, he was extremely important for his contribution to the study of American Indian languages. Like Duponceau and Pickering, Gallatin was also stimulated by the work of von Humboldt. In 1836, Gallatin published his comparison of North American Indian languages which included a map of tribal and linguistic distribution. This was the first serious study in American philology. Gallatin based this work on previously published materials and manuscripts. He also asked the Secretary of War to disseminate questionnaires that included an extensive vocabulary list, sentences and questions concerning grammar (Edgerton 1943:30). Unfortunately, the response was disappointing. Nevertheless, Goddard writes, "considering the small amount of material at the time available, Mr. Gallatin's conclusions are sound and accurate" (1914:558). In 1842, the American Ethnological Society was started by Gallatin. He also was its first president. Albert Gallatin is referred to today as the father of both American Philology and American Ethnography.

Missionary work in the 1800's contributed significantly in the area of American Indian languages. Although the quality varied, the work was the first done on a language in many cases, it was first hand and benefitted from long contact with the various tribes. Notable was Stephen Riggs who in 1837 began living among the eastern Sioux. Riggs learned Dakota and eventually translated the Bible from Greek into Dakota. In 1851, his *Grammar and Dictionary of the Dakota Language* was published by the Smithsonian Institution. Edgerton cites this as the "first extensive linguistic work in the field of Siouan languages" (1943:31). Two other works were published posthumously. Goddard notes that "as a result of his labor and that of his descendants, the Sioux generally have learned to write and read their own language" (1914:556). Reverend James Evans (1801-46) devised a system of syllabic characters for the Cree language which greatly facilitated these Indians in learning to read and write. It was also used for Ojibwa and modified for use in Northern Athapascan languages and Eskimo. In 1874, Father A. Lacombe published an important dictionary and grammar of Cree. Father Emile Petitot compiled a comparative dictionary of the Mackenzie River languages.

Horatio Hale gained recognition for the work he did as the ethnologist and philologist of the United States Exploring Expedition under the command of Captain Charles Wilkes. According to Jacob Gruber, Hale's

approach was “to stress language as the true basis of ethnology” (1968:306). The results of the expedition were published which included Hale’s comparison of the Indian languages of the western coast of North America. Gallatin wrote the introduction to Hale’s *Indians of the North-West America, and Vocabularies of North America* published in 1848, but Hale’s more important contribution was focussed on the Iroquois languages. Gruber sums up his later work by saying, “he defined Tutelo as a Siouan language within the Iroquois geographical range; he rescued Wyandot-Huron from disappearance and demonstrated that it had been the most ancient Iroquoian language; using a technique which anticipated more recent glottochronological methods and he attempted an arrangement of existing Iroquoian languages in a historical sequence” (1968:307).

The Smithsonian Institution was active during this time in promoting the collection of native American linguistic data. In 1863, George Gibbs put out a pamphlet called *Instructions for Research Relative to the Ethnology and Philology of America*. It was felt that the area of inquiry was too vast for the experts to handle alone so this work was an attempt to utilize the resources of missionaries, engineers, army men, teachers, government officials, and anyone else who would be in a position to secure information on the Indians. The linguistic materials were to be collected and recorded according to the standard suggested in the pamphlet. There was a recommended phonetic alphabet and a basic vocabulary of about two hundred words, prepared by Gallatin and modified by Hale. Presumably, any amateur could use this to find the basic affinities between families. The experts would concentrate on the more subtle relationships.

Daniel Brinton became well known in the area of American Indian languages. In 1886, he accepted the position of professor of linguistics and archaeology at the University of Pennsylvania. Goddard also states, “he was the first man to hold a chair in an American institution devoted to the study of American Indian languages” (1914:559). He based his work on the field collecting of others. He is still appreciated for his exposure of the fraudulent Taensa grammar. In 1891, *The American Race* was published which was the “first systematic classification of the native languages of both North and South America” (Michelson 1929:51). He was the first to point out that Natcheson was related to Muskogean and that Serri and Yuman are related. Wissler points out that Brinton stressed the importance of texts in the classification of American Indian languages. He stimulated the collecting of them and devoted himself to their translation. He reflected the interests of others in his time, feeling that ultimately a “super-American family” would be revealed (Wissler 1942:194).

In 1879, the Bureau of American Ethnology was created under the Smithsonian Institution. It’s first director was John Wesley Powell. The

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project carried on by the Bureau resulted in the publication of *Indian Linguistic Families of America, North of Mexico*. The classification was based on the work of Horatio Hale, James C. Pilling, George Gibbs, Stephen Riggs, Albert S. Gatschet and J. Owen Dorsey. Gatschet had authored his *Klamath Grammar* which was published in 1890 and is considered the first major descriptive work in American Indian languages. The basis of Powell's fifty eight family classification of American Indian languages was confined to lexical items.

There were many developments leading to the 1891 classification. The motives were diverse as well as the quality of work, but all helped to form the beginnings of modern studies of American Indian languages.

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