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## **Review of *American Indian Languages: Cultural and Social Contexts* by Shirley Silver and Wick R. Miller**

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**American Indian Languages: Cultural and Social Contexts.** Shirley Silver and Wick R. Miller. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1998. xix+433 pp. Illustrations, tables, notes, references, index. \$60.00 cloth (ISBN 0-8165-1802-5).

This wide-ranging volume, appropriately dedicated to the pioneering linguist and tireless teacher of American Indian linguistics Mary Haas, proposes "to introduce the general reader to the mosaic of American Indian languages and cultures." It carries off this tall order quite well, presenting a wealth of information about the current usage, history, and structure of the hundreds of indigenous languages of the Americas, their relations with each other and with European colonial languages, and the various ways in which linguists study and classify them. Enough technical linguistic concepts are introduced to allow a determined and serious reader to gain a deep understanding of several individual languages, but these are presented in small enough chunks to keep the book from bogging down in definitions and formulas (some details—the phonetic alphabet, for instance—are relegated to appendices); a less serious reader who skipped most of the technicalities would still gain considerable insight into the subject.

The volume consists of fourteen chapters: "Languages and their Status," "Languages and Structures," "Languages and Cultural Domains," "Languages and Social Organization," "Performers and Performances," "Fashions of Speaking," "Nonverbal Communication," "The Written Word," "Multilingualism," "Lingua Francas," "Language Contact," "Languages and Shared Histories," "The Use of Language as a Tool for Prehistory," and "Spread and Distribution of Language Families." Each chapter contains extended specific examples from several languages from different parts of the Americas, and each ends with a short but useful list of sources and suggestions for further reading. A complete bibliography appears at the end of the volume.

Although Plains Indian languages are not the book's major focus (the authors' main area of expertise is in Southwestern and Mexican languages), they do receive significant coverage. The Siouan family and its possible inclusion in a broader "Macro-Siouan" group including the Siouan, Caddoan, and Iroquoian languages is discussed in chapters 12 and 13. Plains sign language receives considerable attention in chapter 7 and elsewhere. Plains Cree is used as an example in several chapters, and the mixing of tribes and languages in present-day Oklahoma comes up in several others. Much of the general discussion of issues such as borrowing vocabulary from colonial

languages and the problems of language extinction or obsolescence applies to Plains languages as much as to those of other parts of the continent, even when specific examples cited come from outside the Great Plains.

The book is clearly and straightforwardly written. Though not light reading, its authors do a good job of making a wide range of unfamiliar examples comprehensible and interesting. A number of useful tables, charts, and maps enhance and clarify many points, especially in the chapters on historical linguistics. The lists of languages and language families are a welcome inclusion, though the index is sadly incomplete.

The volume was published after Wick Miller's untimely death in 1994. Shirley Silver is to be commended for finishing the project alone and making this valuable book available to all of us. **Catherine Rudin**, *Humanities Division, Wayne State College*.