How Come the Smithsonian Libraries has so many Indian Bibles and prayer books?

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On the occasion of the transfer of a large number of books in and on North American Indian languages from the Anthropology Library (upstairs) to the Cullman rare book library (on the floor below), I have been asked to say something about them. Why does a scientific library have so many books that originated in Christian missions in North America, including bibles, prayer books, hymn books, and other devotional works? As with many simple questions, the explanation is complicated, the connections are multiple, and exploring them sheds perhaps unexpected light on the history of science—something I think we all try to do.

I sometimes find it necessary to recall that linguistics, let's call it the scientific study of human language, has been a stated interest of the Smithsonian Institution since the beginning. In the "general plan of organization" adopted by the Regents in 1847, among the subjects about which knowledge is to be increased and diffused, is: "Ethnology, including particular history, comparative philology, antiquities, &c." ("Comparative philology," as the term was then used, is precisely scientific linguistics.)

This interest in language was soon expressed concretely. Volume 4 of the Smithsonian Contributions to Knowledge (1852) was *Grammar and Dictionary of the Dakota Language*. The author, Stephen R. Riggs, describes the book as "collected by the members of the Dakota Mission" and edited by himself. (These

were Presbyterians in Minnesota.) He acknowledges the assistance of Prof. William W. Turner, a Hebrew scholar at the Union Theological Seminary of New York, upon whose advice the grammar was "entirely remodelled and rewritten," and the transcription of sounds was made to conform to the notation then being adopted "among scientific philologists in Europe." These details are useful to recall, as they show that "missionary linguistics" (a term now being used, in a positive sense) and scientific linguistics are not distinct entities but have informed each other from an early date.

In fact, from the earliest days of human literacy, what we can recognize as linguistic analysis has been important to religion, and religious texts have been important to linguistics. The view sometimes encountered today among Native Americans that literacy is the enemy of traditional life and belief is shown by good examples to be incorrect, at least for some others. Writing systems have been developed in various contexts, but a number of very accurate alphabets (to use that term) were developed specifically for religious purposes, whether for adherents to know the precise pronunciation, or for the benefit of missionaries and their converts. When, in the first millennium B.C. in India, the ancient form of the Sanskrit language was changing into later forms, the Brahmin priests wished to fix the pronunciation and understand the grammar of the Vedic texts, which they preserved and have preserved to this day by amazing feats of rote memorization. A very precise alphabet was developed, which made all the meaningful distinctions and also wrote the accents and sung tones of the most ancient Vedas. Benefitting from the yogic tradition of examining the functions of the body by observation and introspection, these Indian linguists precisely described how the different sounds were articulated in the vocal tract. When in 1861, the American Sanskrit scholar William Dwight Whitney reviewed the standard phonetic alphabet proposed by the leading German phonetician Richard Lepsius, he had to

point out that the Hindu grammarians of more than two millennia earlier had had a better understanding of how speech sounds were made.

Early missionaries developed accurate special alphabets for Armenian, Georgian, Old Slavic, and (with fewer innovations) Gothic to enable the evangelizing of the speakers of these diverse languages. The later creation of the Vietnamese alphabet by Jesuit linguist priests was integral to the formation of Vietnamese identity. Such work, although repeatedly undertaken, was always focussed on individual languages. There was no general theory of phonetics until western linguists began to develop one in the nineteenth century, and thus there was no easy way to communicate discoveries about the articulation of unfamiliar sounds.

When Spanish priests in the sixteenth century encountered glottalized ejective consonants in Mayan languages (t', k', and so forth), they knew nothing of the similar sounds that were already written distinctly in the alphabets of, for example, Georgian and Ethiopian Semitic languages. Once they figured out that these were distinct sounds, they simply invented spellings. The Franciscan linguist Francisco de la Parra wrote them in Quiché with altered forms of the numerals 3 and 4 and in other ad hoc ways. When these sounds later turned up in Coahuilteco, the language of several small bands served by the San Antonio mission, Bartholomé García wrote them consistently using an apostrophe as a diacritic, a solution invented independently by later linguists. The copy of Garcia's 1760 priest's manual that was owned by the Bureau of Amerian Ethnology is now in the Cullman, with pencil annotations by BAE staff. This is an extraordinary book, authenticated by the amazingly complex grammar that it attests.

The work of many other pre-modern missionary linguists has high linguistic value, although it has often been given short shrift. Much remains to be learned

from the products of their efforts. There is also much to be said about the use of religious translations in Native Christian communities. The Choctaw Bible, well represented among the books we are concerned with today, is a major source for reading and learning the language in Choctaw communities, though difficult for modern speakers, and it was also used in the recent Choctaw Reference Grammar by Aaron Broadwell (2006). (I thank him and Jack Martin for these observations, which apply also to the use of the Muskogee and Cherokee bibles.) In some communities hymns are remembered and even still being sung. ("Amazing Grace" in Choctaw is on YouTube.) And there has also been recent interest in hymns that were no longer sung, from music historians, choral groups, and communities.

The first missionary grammar of a Native North American language was one written by the Jesuit lay brother Domingo Agustín Báez for Guale, spoken on the northern edge of Spanish Florida (in present Georgia) in the sixteenth century. No trace of this work or even a single word of this language is known today. The Timucua language of northeastern Florida fared better, before it disappeared with the expulsion of the Spaniards. Francisco Pareja's Timucua grammar and catechisms from the early seventeenth century and two somewhat later letters continue to provide a basis for linguistic study. Also from Florida is a 1688 letter in Apalachee, the only documentation of this language of the Muskogean family that was once spoken in the Florida panhandle. The Timucua and Apalachee letters were written, to be sent to the Spanish king, by missionaries, but appear to have been composed by community leaders.

With the arrival of the French in Canada came Jesuits, who soon set to work studying Algonquian and Northern Iroquoian languages. In the earliest years there were also some Recollects, who worked on the Iroquoian language Huron, the first language the French priests tackled in depth. The work of putting their

data together with that of the later Wyandot dialect remains to be done, but a graduate student from one of the descendant communities has taken up the task. The Seneca that the French linguists documented differs so much from the modern form of the language that it was thought to have been actually Mohawk before closer inspection of the manuscripts revealed the truth.

The first Algonquian language studied was what we call Old Algonquin, the language nearest the French settlements. Priests headed for places where other languages of the Algonquian family were spoken were often trained *first* on its grammatical peculiarities. The linguists who worked on Illinois, one of these other languages, have left us three huge manuscript dictionaries and other writings, which along with later materials have provided a substantial basis for the revival of the language by the Myaamia Project of the Miami Tribe of Oklahoma and Miami University of Ohio. (Miami-Illinois is a single language, originally with several dialects, whose last semi-speakers died in the mid-twentieth century.) There are also several dictionaries of Eastern Abenaki—yet another Algonquian language— by early French missionaries, documenting dialects spoken in western Maine that differ from Penobscot, the variety that survived well into the last century. There is still much to be learned from, for example, the dictionary by Sébastien Râle, which was siezed by the British in the mission village of Norridgewock in 1722 and published by the Harvard University printer a century later, a magnificent achievement in type-setting, which, even so, did not capture all the subtleties of Râle's complex transcription.

In the English colonies, the first great linguist was the missionary John Eliot, whose grammar of Massachusett was printed in Cambridge, Mass., in 1666, on the same press that had completed the printing of his bible translation in 1663. This was a foundational source for knowledge of Native American languages for two centuries. Numerous documents survive that were written by speakers who

had learned to write Massachusett from missionaries, including Native teachers, and there is now revived interest in the language in several communities under the name Wampanoag.

Missionaries did the first linguistic work on many other Native American languages. The Moravian David Zeisberger wrote a grammar of Delaware that was translated and published by Peter Stephen Duponceau, a significant early American scholar about whom more later. This was another work influential in nineteenth-century linguistics. Zeisberger's manuscript four-column dictionary of English, German, Onondaga, and Delaware was another feat of typography by the press in Cambridge when it was printed in 1887.

To mention some is to omit many, but I will name a few more early missionary linguists. Ivan Veniaminov, a bishop and archbishop in Alaska, wrote linguistic studies of Eastern Aleut, Pacific Yupik, and Tlingit. He was later the Metropolitan of Moscow in the Russian Orthodox Church, which recognizes him as Saint Innocent.

The Presbyterians William Hamilton and Samuel Irvin wrote *An Ioway Grammar* and printed it on their Ioway and Sac Mission Press in 1848. The Episcopalian James Owen Dorsey worked on Omaha-Ponca, and was hired by the BAE as a Siouanist. The Franciscan Felipe Arroyo de la Cuesta gathered data on several languages of California and was the most accomplished linguist among the Spanish missionaries there.

After Sequoyah invented the Cherokee syllabary in 1821, the idea took hold that syllabaries, in which each written element spelled a syllable, consonant plus vowel, might be better than alphabets for writing Native American languages. James Evans devised a syllabary of abstract shapes to write Ojibwe, then written in a mission alphabet, and soon applied it to writing Cree, another Algonquian language. This is the writing used by may Crees and northern Ojibwes today. It

was later adapted by other missionaries to write the Athabaskan language Carrier and the Eskimoan language of the Canadian Inuit, called Inuktitut. An Algonquianist has used the nineteenth-century Cree bible (written in syllabics) to demonstrate that some grammatical divergences between Cree dialects had emerged relatively recently.

Another way to write Indian sounds was promoted by the Baptist missionary and printer, Jotham Meeker in Kansas (then Indian Territory) beginning in 1834. His alphabets had standard type but assigned unneeded letters to sounds that were otherwise not provided for satisfactorily. For example, in the alphabet for Delaware "c" spells the vowel [ε], "h" spells English "ch" [č], and "v" is used for the English [h] sound but can occur also before a consonant. Similar but slightly differing alphabets were used for Shawnee, Potawatomi, Ottawa, Osage, Choctaw, and perhaps other languages. Imprints from this press are extremely rare, although the Cullman has at least one, a Shawnee Gospel of John ostensibly translated from Greek. I've used those in the Delaware language, including a harmony of the gospels in a public library in Oklahoma that bears annotations by a former owner who evidently could read it. A book of Delaware hymns is known only from local reprints (one of which the Cullman now has), also a sign of use by speakers.

The Delaware Harmony (which is the text of the four New Testament gospels reassembled into a single narrative) introduces another question that is present when the work of missionary linguists is considered: how and by whom was the translation done? On the Delaware title page the nominal translator, Ira Blanchard, acknowledges the assistance of Jimmy, certainly James Conner, the government-paid interpreter who was 20 years old when the work began. Conner's mother was Delaware and his father was William Conner, a trader who had been raised among the Delawares in Indiana. Jimmy Conner's bilingual skills

obviously explain why the translation of the Harmony is so idiomatic, often at the expense of being less literal. But saying what he was obviously involves more than choosing a label for him.

Another labeling question is raised by two sons of anglophone missionaries who acquired native-speaker knowledge of an Indian language. Experience Mayhew, from a family of missionaries on Martha's Vineyard, collaborated with John Neesnumin, a Massachusett Indian from the praying town of Natick, to begin the revision of Eliot's Massachusett bible. Of this they produced the Psalms and the Gospel of John in 1709. The translation seems generally idiomatic but occasionally inflexible, probably out of an overly conservative adherence to the King James text. This can't well be called either simply a missionary translation or a Native translation; it has to be explained. Similarly, the first description of a Native North American language by a native speaker appears to be *Observations on the Language of the Muhhekaneew Indians* by Jonathan Edwards, Jr. (1788), but the writer had become a speaker of Eastern Mahican by residing at the Stockbridge, Mass., mission as a boy, when his father was a missionary there. Charmingly, he says he checked it over by reading it to a well-traveled old soldier and local leader named Capt. Yoghum. So, does this qualify, or should we acknowledge as the first, the Luiseño neophyte Pablo Tac, who wrote descriptions of his language for the polyglot Cardinal Giuseppe Mezzofanti in Rome, where he died in 1841 at the age of 19?

When the field of linguistics emerged in the nineteenth century, materials from missionary linguists played a major role. Duponceau (Zeisberger's translator) in 1819 coined the term polysynthesis to describe the Native American languages he knew about, defining "a polysynthetic .. construction of language" as "that in which the greatest number of ideas are comprised in the least number of words." This concept was employed by Wilhelm von Humboldt in his influential

book *On the Diversity of Human Language* (1836), after which Duponceau expanded his idea in his prize-winning *Memoir on the Grammatical System of the Languages of Some of the Indian Nations of North America* (Paris, 1838). For example, a verb in an Algonquian language may have two or three lexical components (ones with word-like meanings), pronominal inflections for subject and one or two kinds of object, and other grammatical information. We now know that not all Indian languages are of this type, but the status of Duponceau's concept in linguistic theory is still debated.

When the French Semiticist Ernest Renan claimed that Indian languages were primitive, the Sulpician missionary linguist Jean-André Cuoq rebutted him in a series of articles and eventually a book (1866), detailing the complexities of the Algonquian and Iroquoian languages. Cuoq published dictionaries of both Mohawk and the Nipissing dialect of Eastern Ojibwe, which had replaced Old Algonquin in the French missions, and also a foundational grammar of this variety of Ojibwe.

With Duponceau and Cuoq, missionary linguistics had joined the emergent international scientific investigation of human language in which the Smithsonian Institution took part. A decade after the publication of the Dakota Grammar, the Smithsonian published "Instructions for Research Relative to the Ethnology and Philology of America" by George Gibbs. This was actually mostly about collecting vocabularies, and it included a simple phonetic alphabet devised by none other than the Sanskritist Whitney, who has been rightly called "the first world-class linguist the United States produced" (Golla 1992). When in 1877 John Wesley Powell assumed the directorship of the newly formed Bureau of Ethnology (soon to be the BAE), he issued his famous *Introduction to the Study of Indian Languages*. This included a phonetic alphabet that Whitney had revised in accordance with international (that is to say, European) trends, and that Powell

himself revised three years later. Powell's 1880 phonetic alphabet added some sounds known to be found in Indian languages, and it used redundant letters in the manner of Jotham Meeker to fill out the matrix. Powell's approach and several of his symbols persisted in BAE use and among American Americanists, who in 1934 codified a phonetic alphabet distinct from the International Phonetic Alphabet otherwise used by linguists. A mere three years later, however, the practical orthography for Navajo that had been developed by Franciscan missionaries, which had none of the proposed special symbols, was adapted and standardized by linguists working for the U.S. Government for use in government publications. Since then the trend has continued of developing for Native American languages adequate practical orthographies that avoid unfamiliar letters and may use letters differently for different languages. This is an important legacy of the missionary linguists.

The basic task that Powell undertook was to classify the languages of North America as a way of objectively sorting out the myriad varieties of often confusingly named Indians. His staff conducted fieldwork and library and archival research, and the BAE had extensive contacts with missionaries that resulted in obtaining mission publications. James Constantine Pilling was tasked with compiling a comprehensive bibliography of every pertinent manuscript and publication. His massive compilation appeared as *Proof Sheets* in 1885 (a very large bound book) and as separate bibliographies of the major language families. Some but not all of the bibles, prayer books, and hymn books sent from the missions ended up in the BAE library. It is essentially these publications that are now being transferred to the Cullman Library for safekeeping. In addition to being immensely important to the communities from which they came, they retain the potential to continue to inform the study of these languages and the field of linguistics generally.

Note: For further reading and linguistic bibliography, see Handbook of North American Indians vol. 17, Languages (1996).