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AMERICAN INDIAN LANGUAGES IN THE EYES OF 17TH-CENTURY FRENCH AND BRITISH MISSIONARIES

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines 17th-century descriptions of Algonquian and Iroquoian languages by French and British missionaries as well as their subsequent reinterpretations. Focusing on such representative studies as Paul Le Jeune's (1592–1664) sketch of Montagnais, John Eliot's (1604–1690) grammar of Massachusett, and the accounts of Huron by Jean de Brébeuf (1593–1649) and Gabriel Sagard-Théodat (c.1600–1650), I discuss their analysis of the sound systems, morphology, syntax, and lexicon. In addition, I examine the reception of early missionary accounts in European scholarship, focusing on the role they played in the shaping of the notion of 'primitive' languages and their speakers in the 18th and 19th centuries. I also discuss the impressionistic nature of evaluations of phonetic, lexical, and grammatical properties in terms of complexity and richness. Based on examples of the early accounts of the lexicon and structure of Algonquian and Iroquoian languages, I show that even though these accounts were preliminary in their character, they frequently provided detailed and insightful representations of unfamiliar languages. The reception and subsequent transmission of the linguistic examples they illustrated was however influenced by the changing theoretical and ideological context, resulting in interpretations that were often contradictory to those intended in the original descriptions.

Keywords: North American Indian languages; Algonquian languages; Iroquoian languages; history of linguistics; missionary linguistics.

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to examine 17th-century descriptions of Algonquian and Iroquoian languages by French and British missionaries. In particular, I focus on

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the analysis of the sound systems, morphology, syntax and lexicon as well as the often impressionistic evaluations of these properties in terms of complexity and richness. In addition, I discuss the reception of these descriptions in European scholarship, focusing on the role that they played in the 18th and 19th centuries in the shaping of the notion of 'primitive' languages and their speakers. Based on these examples, I show that although the early accounts of the lexicon and structure of Algonquian and Iroquoian languages were preliminary in their character, they frequently provided detailed and insightful representations of unfamiliar languages. However, the reception and subsequent transmission of the linguistic examples they illustrated was influenced by the changing theoretical and ideological context, resulting in interpretations that were often contradictory to those intended in the original descriptions.

The paper is structured as follows. By way of introduction, in §2 I give an overview of lexical and structural properties of Algonquian and Iroquoian languages in the context of the variation found among North American Indian languages in general. Then in §3 I review the early accounts of phonetic, lexical, and grammatical properties of languages belonging to the two families in the works of French and British missionaries, focusing on such representative studies as Jean de Brébeuf's (1593–1649) relations of 1635 and 1636 as well as *The Indian grammar begun* of 1666 by John Eliot (1604–1690). In §4 I analyse the influence of these early accounts on subsequent descriptions of North American Indian languages and their speakers in the 18th and 19th centuries. Finally, concluding remarks are given in §5.

2. Overview of Algonquian and Iroquoian languages

Despite the considerable genetic and typological diversity found among the native languages of North America, there are several pervasive commonalities in their structures (cf. Boas 1911, Mithun 1999). In particular, these include complex word structure, which can be regarded as the hallmark of most North American Indian languages, and which was first referred to as 'polysynthetic' by Peter Stephen Du Ponceau (1760–1844) (Du Ponceau 1819: xxvii).

Languages belonging to the two families discussed in this paper, i.e., Algonquian and Iroquoian, are predominantly found in the North-East.[1] Algonquian languages were originally spoken across the United States and Canada, extending from Montana and Alberta to the Atlantic Ocean.[2] Three main branches

[1] For more detailed surveys of the classification and areal distribution of the languages see Goddard (1978a, 1978b), Mithun (1999: 328–335, 418–425), and Chafe (2013).

[2] Algonquian languages are classified together with two California languages, i.e., Wiyot and Yurok, as part of the Algic (or Algonquian-Wiyot-Yurok) family.

are distinguished: Eastern, Central, and Plains. We will be concerned here with Eastern Algonquian languages, which were originally spoken along the Atlantic coast from the Canadian Maritime Provinces to North Carolina, and languages of the Central branch, which are spoken in the Great Lakes area and in the Canadian North. Several languages from the two groups played an important role in the study of North American Indian languages, in particular Micmac, Massachusett, Narragansett, and Mahican (Eastern Algonquian) and various dialects of Cree and Ojibwa (Central Algonquian). In turn, Iroquoian languages were spoken at the time of the arrival of Europeans between Quebec in the north and Georgia in the south. Iroquoian languages are subclassified into Northern and Southern, of which Cherokee is the only member. The Northern branch includes the languages of the Five Nations, i.e., Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Seneca, and Cayuga, together with Tuscarora as well as Huron-Wyandot. As will be shown below, Huron played a central role in the creation of stereotyped images of not only Iroquoian but also North American Indian languages in general. As regards the present status of Algonquian and Iroquoian languages, revitalization programmes have been introduced in several languages, for example in all the Iroquoian languages mentioned above. Mohawk is the most vigorous Five Nations language, with several immersion schools found in communities in Canada, while Cherokee is taught at the University of Oklahoma, Northeastern Oklahoma University, and Western Carolina University.

As regards their sound systems, Algonquian and Iroquoian languages are characterized by relatively small consonant and vowel inventories.[3] As I will show in the following section, the (near) absence of labial consonants in Iroquoian languages was already documented in the first grammatical descriptions. If labials are present in individual languages, their distribution is restricted to idiolects and such lexical items as loanwords, nicknames, and expressive vocabulary (Mithun 1982).

Both Algonquian and Iroquoian languages are polysynthetic. Complex word structure is typically found in verbs, which indicate not only actions and events but also the core participants and other grammatical information. In consequence, the languages have a relatively simple clause structure. Other implications of the complex verb structure concern the lexicon and discourse. For example, in addition to verbs, Iroquoian languages distinguish only two types of words, i.e., particles and nouns (Mithun 2012). Particles are morphologically simple and have a range of syntactic/pragmatic functions, while nouns consist of a prefix, stem, and suffix. Nouns are infrequent in speech as a result of the use of morphological verbs to denote entities as well as the productive nature of noun

[3] Overviews of the structures of Algonquian and Iroquoian languages are available in Lounsbury (1978) and Mithun (1996, 1999: 337–340, 426–429).

incorporation, which allows speakers to create new lexical items, convey figurative and metaphorical meanings, and can be used as a discourse device (Mithun 1999: 44–47, 2015).

A common property of Algonquian and Iroquoian languages involves grammatical gender. Algonquian languages distinguish between animate vs. inanimate genders, while Northern Iroquoian languages have three-gender systems, e.g., masculine, non-masculine, and indefinite in Huron. More complex systems are found in Mohawk, Oneida, and Onondaga, which distinguish between masculine and two feminine genders, i.e., feminine-indefinite and feminine-zoic. The assignment criteria in the two families have long been an object of controversy (for details see Kilarski 2007, 2016).

3. Early accounts of Algonquian and Iroquoian languages

The first vocabularies of Algonquian and Iroquoian languages come from the 16th century, with the first grammatical descriptions given in the early 17th century.[4] The first North American Indian language that was encountered by Europeans was Laurentian, an extinct Northern Iroquoian language formerly spoken along the St Lawrence River, which was recorded in the accounts of Jacques Cartier's (1491–1557) voyages of 1534–1536. As regards Algonquian languages, Carolina Algonquian, an Eastern Algonquian language originally spoken in North Carolina, was recorded by Thomas Harriot (1560–1621) in the years 1585–1586. More detailed descriptions of languages belonging to the two families were provided in the 1630s. These include a grammatical sketch of Montagnais, a dialect of Cree, a Central Algonquian language, given in 1634 by Paul Le Jeune (1592–1664), and John Eliot's grammar of Massachusett from 1666, the first grammar of an Algonquian language. The earliest documentation of grammatical aspects of Iroquoian languages was provided by French missionaries working with the Huron, in particular Gabriel Sagard-Théodat (c.1600–1650) in his phrase book of 1632 and Jean de Brébeuf in his descriptions of the language in the Jesuit *Relations* of 1635 and 1636.

The first descriptions of the sound systems in Algonquian and Iroquoian languages were shaped by methodological and theoretical limitations resulting from the absence of tools of phonetic analysis and the restricted status of phonology in contemporary grammars. Phonology had an 'auxiliary' status as "a minor aid in the study of grammar, diction and versification" in linguistic training and practice in the 17th century (Hanzeli 1969: 80). For example, the transcription used by the missionaries was initially shaped not by the sound

[4] For an overview of the earliest descriptions of North American Indian languages see Goddard (1996) and Koerner (2004).

systems it was meant to represent, but by the writing systems they were familiar with, leading to overdifferentiation in the representation of consonants. Nevertheless, in spite of such limitations, Hanzeli (1969) pointed to the considerable accuracy in the representation of sound systems that was achieved by the missionaries, and in consequence the high value of their records.

The earliest phonetic accounts of Huron focus on two characteristic features, i.e., gaps in its phonetic inventory with respect to the sounds found in 'European' languages and the assumed fluctuating character of phonetic elements (for details see Kilarski & Dziubalska-Kołaczyk 2012). The first motif is illustrated by the first reference that was made to the lack of labial consonants in Huron. In his relation of 1636 in "De la langue des Hurons", the Jesuit missionary Jean de Brébeuf (1593–1649) accurately described Huron consonants, and provided an impressionistic description of the way the language sounds:

> They are not acquainted with B. F. L. M. P. X. Z; and I. E. V. are never consonants to them. The greater part of their words are composed of vowels. They lack all the labial letters. This is probably the reason why they all open their lips so awkwardly and why we can scarcely understand them when they whistle or when they speak low. (Thwaites 1896–1901, 10: 117)[5]

The first reference to the supposedly vague or confused nature of Huron was made in 1632 in the first account of its sound system in the *Dictionaire de la langue huronne*, written by the Franciscan Recollect Gabriel Sagard-Théodat (c.1600–1650) (Sagard (1998 [1632]). In the preface to the phrase book Sagard explains its purpose and comments on the phonetic, grammatical, and lexical properties of Huron. Its most distinctive phonetic property is said to involve an "instability of language" in terms of both inter-speaker variation and diachronic change:

> Our Hurons and generally all the other nations have the same instability of language, and change their words so much that in the course of time the ancient Huron has become almost totally different from that of today and is still changing according to what I have been able to conjecture and find out by talking to them … (Sagard 1998 [1632]: 346, translation from Schreyer 1996: 113)[6]

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5 "Ils ne cognoissent point de B. F. L. M. P. X. Z. & iamais I. E. V. ne leur sont consones. La plus part de leurs mots sont composez de voyelles. Toutes les lettres labiales leur manquent; c'est volontiers la cause qu'ils ont tous les lévres ouuertes de si mauuaise grace, & qu'à peine les entend-t'on quand ils siflent, ou qu'ils parlent bas" (Thwaites 1896–1901, 10: 116).

6 "Nos Hurons, & generallement toutes les autres Nations, ont la mesme instabilité de langage, & changent tellement leurs mots, qu'à succession de temps l'ancien Huron est presque tout autre que celuy du present, & change encore, selon que j'ay peu conjecturer & apprendre en leur parlant" (Sagard 1998 [1632]: 346).

Such statements illustrate the methodological limitations mentioned above, in particular the lack of adequate tools of phonetic analysis and the confusion between sounds and letters.

As I will show in §4, these early phonetic descriptions indirectly contributed to the creation of the image of Huron as a 'primitive' language. For example, the lack of labials in Huron was mentioned in *Memoires de l'Amerique Septentrionale*, a widely cited travelogue by Louis Armand de Lahontan (1666–c.1715) (Lahontan 1703), which shaped the view of Huron as "the paradigmatic primitive language" (Schreyer 1996: 111) and, more generally, contributed to the notion of the Noble Savage.

Turning to grammatical descriptions, 17th-century missionaries frequently offered detailed and original accounts of grammatical categories in Algonquian and Iroquoian languages. The examples reviewed below show that they were aware of not only the differences between 'European' languages and the languages they described but also more specific issues such as the principles of semantic categorization and the internal complexity of words. Nevertheless, as in the case of phonetic descriptions, their accounts were influenced by methodological limitations, as illustrated by the misinterpretation of grammatical meanings as a form of lexical differentiation.

An example of the initial reactions among the missionaries to word and sentence structure in unfamiliar languages is provided by Gabriel Sagard-Théodat's phrase book mentioned above. In the preface Sagard blames his limited knowledge of Huron on its "confused" nature, which he attributes to an absence of rules and a general grammatical simplicity: "… we are dealing with a savage language nearly without rule and so imperfect, that a more able person than myself would have found it rather difficult" (Sagard 1998 [1632]: 347, translation from Schreyer 1996: 113).[7] Sagard's statements concerning the "instability of language" and the 'simple' grammar of Huron, as well as those made by Brébeuf about the missing labials, have often been interpreted as one of the main sources of the negative image of the American Indians and their languages in the 18th–19th centuries (cf. Andresen 1990: 85). However, it is more likely that these negative views were shaped by subsequent reinterpretations of the original accounts, for example by James Burnett Monboddo (1714–1799), who in his *Of the origin and progress of language* (1774 [1773]: 539) referred to Huron as "the most rude and imperfect [language] of any that have come to [his] knowledge". As pointed out by Schreyer (1996: 91, fn. 11), Sagard's book was too rare in the 18th century to have such a profound influence. Such examples illustrate a

[7] "Secondement, qu'il est question d'une langue sauvage, presque sans regle, & tellement imparfaicte, qu'un plus habile que moy se trouveroit bien empesché …" (Sagard 1998 [1632]: 347).

common life cycle in the history of linguistic examples, which acquire theoretical and ideological interpretations absent from the original contexts. I will return to this motif in the following section.

Other contemporary grammatical accounts were much more accurate and insightful, as illustrated by the descriptions of grammatical categories in Algonquian languages. The first description of gender in an Algonquian language was given in 1634 by the Jesuit missionary Paul Le Jeune (1592–1664) (Thwaites 1896–1901, 7: 22–23). Le Jeune's relation contains a sketch of Montagnais, a dialect of Cree, spoken in Quebec and Labrador. Le Jeune notes the presence of "different Verbs" that are used for animate and inanimate objects (*animée, inanimée*), and also points out that some exceptional inanimates, i.e., things having no soul (*choses sans ame*) such as apples and tobacco, are treated by the speakers as animate:

> … they have different Verbs to signify an action toward an animate or toward an inanimate object; and yet they join with animate things a number of things that have no souls, as tobacco, apples, etc. Let us give some examples: "I see a man," *Niouapaman iriniou*; "I see a stone," *niouabateẽ*; but in Greek, in Latin, and in French the same Verb is used to express, "I see a man, a stone, or anything else." "I strike a dog," *ni noutinau attimou*; "I strike wood," *ninoutinen misticou*. (Thwaites 1896–1901, 7: 23)[8]

Le Jeune thus successfully accounts for the fundamental properties of Algonquian gender, i.e., the principles of semantic categorization and the presence of exceptions as well as the fact that the gender of a noun is reflected in the form of the associated verb. However, his reference to the "different Verbs" shows that he misinterpreted the grammatical differentiation of verb stems in Algonquian languages as a case of lexical differentiation. In fact, the examples he provided illustrate the choice between transitive animate and transitive inanimate stems rather than different lexical items. Such a misinterpretation was a recurrent motif in the descriptions of polysynthetic languages not only with reference to gender but also other grammatical categories such as inalienable possession. In addition, the context in which Le Jeune used the examples illustrates an impressionistic evaluation of such differentiation: the passage quoted above constitutes one of the arguments that he provided for the richness of Montagnais. In contrast, Johann

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[8] "… ils ont des Verbes differents, pour signifier l'action enuers vne chose animée, & enuers vne chose inanimée, encore bien qu'ils conjoignent auec les choses animées, quelques nombres des choses sans ame, cõme le petun, les pommes, &c. donnons des exemples. Ie vois vn homme, *Niouapaman iriniou*, ie vois vne pierre, *niouabateẽ*, ainsi en Grec, en Latin, & en François, c'est vn mesme Verbe, pour dire ie vois vn homme, vne pierre, & toute autre chose. Ie frappe vn chiẽ *ni noutinau attimou*, ie frappe vn bois, *ninoutinen misticou*" (Thwaites 1896–1901, 7: 22).

Gottfried Herder (1744–1803) in his *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache* of 1772 viewed a comparable form of differentiation in Huron as characteristic of an early form of language with as yet undeveloped grammar:

> The Hurons have consistently double verbs for animate and inanimate things, so that to see, when it is "to see a stone" and to see, when it is "to see a man" are two different terms. Pursue this through all of nature. What wealth! (Herder 1986 [1772]: 155)

However, in contrast to Le Jeune, Herder concluded that such wealth only demonstrates the primitive nature of the language: "Each in its own way is both lavish and lacking, but, to be sure, each in its own way" (Herder 1986 [1772]: 154).

A much more detailed account of Algonquian gender is found in *The Indian grammar begun* of 1666, the first grammar of an Algonquian language written by John Eliot (1604–1690). The grammar deals with Massachusett (or Natick), an extinct Eastern Algonquian language spoken in present-day Massachusetts. Eliot points to the different type of semantic categorization and formal expression found in Massachusett in comparison with sex-based gender in the languages with which he was familiar such as French, Latin, and Hebrew. Within the animate gender, which is used "when the *thing signified* is a living Creature", Eliot gives examples of humans, supernatural beings, and animals, and acknowledges the presence of "*Some few Exceptions*":

> The *variation* of Nouns is not by *Male* and *Female*, as in other Learned Languages, and in *European Nations* they do. … There be two *forms* or *declensions* of Nouns: *Animate. Inanimate.* The *Animate form* or *declension* is, when the *thing signified* is a living Creature; and such Nouns do alwayes make their Plural in (*og*)*; as,* … Mittamwossis, *A Woman.* Mittamwossissog. … Manit, *God.* Manitioog. … Mosq, *A Bear.* Mosquog. … *Some few Exceptions I know.* … *The Inanimate form* or *declension* of Nouns is when the *thing signified* is not a living Creature: and these make the Plural in *ash;* as Hussun, *A Stone.* Hussunash. Qussuk, *A Rock.* Qussukquanash. (Eliot 1666: 8–10, italics in the original)

In addition, Eliot provides a list of semantic fields among inanimate nouns, including "*all Vegitables … all the parts of the Body … all Virtues, and all Vices …* All *Tools* and *Instruments* of *Labour, Hunting, Fishing, Fowling …* All *Apparel, Housing …* All *Fruits, Rivers, Waters*" (Eliot 1666: 10, italics in the original).

These two quotations illustrate the detailed nature of Eliot's discussion of morphology and syntax in Massachusett. Much has been written in praise of Eliot's achievement (see Wolfart 1967, Miner 1974, Cowan 1984, Swiggers 2007). His work has been praised for its independence from Latin grammar, awareness of the distinct status of morphemes as well as the use of semantic and

formal criteria, as shown above in the references to semantic categorization and the correlation with plural inflection, and finally the copious use of examples. The degree of independence of Eliot's grammar from the model of Latin or universal grammar is illustrated by a comparison with Tommaso Campanella's (1568–1639) *Grammatica philosophica* of 1638 (Firpo 1954). In contrast with the semantic and formal criteria applied by Eliot, Campanella viewed grammatical gender in classical languages as a reflection of active and passive properties attributed to objects in nature, in a manner that is similar to late medieval grammars (cf. Kilarski 2013: 105–106).

Finally, the main motifs in the early descriptions of the lexicon can be illustrated by the treatment of abstract and generic terms. In particular, abstract terms posed a practical problem for the missionaries in the translation of Christian religious terms and the elicitation of the native lexicon. Their interpretation was affected by the confusion between lexical and grammatical meanings that was mentioned above, where the 'different words/verbs' they described were actually related grammatical forms rather than different lexical items. In view of this misinterpretation, Hanzeli (1969: 56) pointed to common references to the "material orientation of the vocabulary" among French missionaries working with the Iroquois and Algonquians.

The earliest references to the absence of abstracts and other real or assumed lexical gaps in Algonquian and Iroquoian languages were made by the French Jesuits. For example, in his relation of 1612, Pierre Biard (1567–1622) pointed to lexical gaps involving abstract and generic terms and the resulting practical implications in Micmac, an Eastern Algonquian language now spoken in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Quebec:

> … as the savages have no definite religion, magistracy or government, liberal or mechanical arts, commercial or civil life, they have consequently no words to describe things which they have never seen or even conceived. (Thwaites 1896–1901, 2: 9–11)[9]

Similar remarks were made in 1635 by Jean de Brébeuf with reference to Huron:

> As they have hardly any virtue or Religion, or any learning or government, they have consequently no simple words suitable to express what is connected with these. Hence it is that we are at a loss in explaining to them many important matters, depending upon a knowledge of these things. (Thwaites 1896–1901, 10: 117)[10]

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9 "… que ces sauvages n'ont point de religion formée, point de magistrature ou police, point d'arts ou libéraux ou mechaniques, point de commerce ou vie civile; et par consequent les mots leur défaillent des choses qu'ils n'ont jamais veues ou apprehendées" (Thwaites 1896–1901, 2: 8–10).

10 "Comme ils n'ont presque ny vertu, ny Religion, ny science aucune, ou police, aussi n'ont-ils aucuns mots simples propres à signifier tout ce qui en est. Delà est que nous demeurõs

As I will show in the following section, such early statements contributed to the negative views dominant in the 18th and 19th centuries concerning 'primitive' languages and their speakers. It should be pointed out, however, that these are preliminary observations and other 17th-century commentators did not mention the issue. For example, John Pickering (1777–1846) pointed out that Eliot did not mention the absence of abstracts in Massachusett in his grammar and used them in his translation of the Bible (Eliot 1663) (cf. Pickering 1823: 40). Still others, writing at the turn of the 18th century, challenged the notion of the primitive status of North American Indians, as illustrated by the following statement made by Jonathan Edwards, Jr. (1745–1801) in his *Observations on the language of the Muhhekaneew Indians*:

> It has been said also, that savages never abstract, and have no abstract terms, which with regard to the Mohegans, is another mistake. They have *uhwhundowukon*, love; *sekeenundowhkon*, hatred; *nsconmowukon*, malice; *peyuhtommauwukon*, religion, &c. I doubt not, but that there is in this language the full proportion of abstract, to concrete terms, which is commonly to be found in other languages. (Edwards 1788: 14)

In conclusion, the examples of phonetic, grammatical, and lexical descriptions that I have reviewed above illustrate not only a preliminary character of the early missionary studies but frequently also their accurate and insightful nature. However, with a number of exceptions, for example in the case of the accounts found in the Jesuit *Relations*, the early studies had a restricted impact on European scholarship as a result of poor dissemination. In addition, as I will show below, their reception in the 18th and 19th centuries was influenced by the theoretical and ideological context, leading to contradictory interpretations of the original aims of the missionaries.

4. Subsequent interpretations of missionaries' works

The study of North American Indian languages in the 18th and 19th centuries can be characterized in terms of three periods. Initially original work on the languages of the North-East declined in the 18th century due to the changing theoretical, ideological, and external context. Thus, Hanzeli (1969: 81) pointed to the waning of both linguistic and religious activity in New France in the course of the 18th century: "The decline of the 'intellectual history' of the Algonquian linguistica parallels the decline of the missionary efforts of New France". Likewise, with respect to the theoretical shift in European scholarship, Koerner (2004: 105)

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courts à leur expliquer plusieurs belles choses tirées de ces cognoissances" (Thwaites 1896–1901, 10: 116).

attributed the decline in original work to "the Enlightenment preoccupation with philosophical and universal grammar, not to mention its concern for the development of logical systems of communication". The 18th century was also characterized by the continuing marginalization of indigenous communities and their languages in north-eastern North America. In particular, the decline of the indigenous population can be attributed to the devastating effect of infectious diseases, which constituted the deadliest element of the 'Columbian Exchange' (cf. Crosby 1972). In contrast, extensive documentation was carried out in the late 18th and the early 19th centuries by scholars that have already been mentioned, i.e., Jonathan Edwards, Jr., Peter Stephen Du Ponceau, and John Pickering as well as David Zeisberger (1721–1808), John Heckewelder (1743–1823), and Albert Gallatin (1761–1849). Finally, a continuous tradition of research can be distinguished since the late 19th century in the work of Daniel Garrison Brinton (1837–1899), John Wesley Powell (1834–1902), and in particular Franz Boas (1858–1942) and his students.

However, the extensive documentation and analysis of the languages of the North-East that was carried out in the late 18th and the 19th centuries had an indirect influence on the wider scholarship, where references to these languages, in particular Huron, were found mostly in contexts concerning accounts of 'primitive' languages and their speakers. In fact, the early accounts of Huron – contrary to the original aims – had an instrumental role in shaping the notion of 'primitive' languages in the 18th century. The assumed 'primitive' features of Huron included deficiencies in the phonetic inventory (cf. Lahontan 1703: 300), either a pleasing (cf. Charlevoix 1744) or guttural sound (cf. Herder 1986 [1772]), as well as lexical and grammatical simplicity (cf. Monboddo 1774 [1773]). In addition, phonetic, grammatical, and lexical examples were used as evidence of properties attributed to the speakers themselves. As mentioned above, the remarks made by Jonathan Edwards, Jr. were meant to counter an already prevalent view concerning the lack of abstract terms in Native American Indian languages and the concomitant incapacity for abstract thought among the speakers. Such views became dominant in the late 19th century, when linguistic examples from Iroquoian, Algonquian, and other 'primitive' or 'exotic' languages were used as indexes of civilizational development.

The range of cognitive and cultural correlates that were proposed in contemporary works is illustrated by *The principles of sociology* by the mainstream British sociologist Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) (Spencer 1884, 1st ed. 1876). According to Spencer, the assumed absence of abstraction and generalization in 'primitive' languages constitutes the main obstacle to intellectual development. In consequence, their speakers are said to be characterized by an absence of curiosity and creative imagination, a tendency to imitate, an inability to count and categorize, as well as a general restriction to the

most immediate needs. For example, the cognitive, cultural, and social implications of the absence of abstraction and generalization are illustrated by Spencer with examples of supposed lexical deficiencies among the Damara, speakers of the Khoisan language Khoekhoe, and among the Cherokee:

> If now we remember that in the languages of inferior races the advances in generalization and abstraction are so slight that while there are words for particular kinds of trees there is no word for tree; and that, as among the Damaras, while each reach of a river has its special title, there is none for the river as a whole, much less a word for river; or if, still better, we consider the fact that the Cherokees have thirteen different verbs for washing different parts of the body, and different things, but no word for washing, dissociated from the part or thing washed; we shall see that social life must have passed through sundry stages, with their accompanying steps in linguistic progress, before the conception of a name became possible. (Spencer 1884 [1876]: 382)

The two languages mentioned by Spencer played an important role in descriptions of 'exotic' languages and cultures in the second half of the 19th century. While the Damara were commonly mentioned in the 1870s and 1880s in the context of discussions concerning arithmetical limitations of 'primitive' speakers (cf. Barany 2014), the Cherokee verbs for washing, which were first mentioned in print by Pickering (1820), constituted a standard example of a cognitive and cultural deficiency up until the mid-20th century (cf. Kilarski 2009). In addition, the reference to the absence of a generic term for trees, which can be traced back to an account of the Tasmanian vocabulary by Joseph Milligan (1807–1884) (Milligan 1859), illustrates another contemporary example of a lexical deficiency that was viewed as a window onto human prehistory. The value of evidence from the languages of Van Diemen's Land, i.e., Tasmania, was explicitly stated by John Lubbock (1834–1913) in his *Pre-historic times*: "[…] the Van Diemaner and South American are to the antiquary, what the opossum and the sloth are to the geologist." (Lubbock 1865: 336). In the case of references to North American Indian languages, a close association was made between the supposed absence of abstract/generic terms and other grammatical phenomena, in particular polysynthesis and noun incorporation. Such examples were viewed as not only an indication of the general lowliness of the speakers but also the evolutionary dead end that was awaiting them in consequence of cognitive deficiencies, indolence, and alcohol abuse (cf. Farrar 1870: 185, Lefèvre 1894: 196).

Such reinterpretations of examples first mentioned in earlier descriptions of Iroquoian and Algonquian languages illustrate several characteristic features of the use of linguistic examples in general. These include a shift in their life cycles from an unbiased origin to theoretical and ideological interpretations, unawareness of the original aims and contexts among later commentators, as well as the impressionistic and contradictory nature of their subsequent uses. The often

arbitrary choice of linguistic examples can be illustrated by the ambivalent attitude towards complexity, as both assumed absence and abundance were viewed as impressionistic evidence of wealth and poverty. This 'heads I win, tails you lose' approach (cf. Liberman 2009)[11] was a characteristic motif in accounts of North American Indian languages:

> … the Indian culture and language … did not achieve that golden, rational mean: … either they had no grammar or too many verb endings; either they had no language or too much language. The Indian could not win, and did not win. (Andresen 1990: 92)

More generally, such an ambivalent attitude towards linguistic complexity was characteristic of descriptions of other 'primitive' or 'exotic' languages and cultures, as illustrated for example by the interpretations of the extremes of phonetic complexity in Khoisan and Polynesian languages (cf. Kilarski & Dziubalska-Kołaczyk 2012).

5. Concluding remarks

As demonstrated by the growing interest in missionary linguistics (cf. Zwartjes 2012), the early accounts of 'exotic' languages provide a source of information about not only the theory and methodology of earlier periods in the history of language study but also the lexicon and structure of languages that have since become extinct. In fact, just as we can now talk about the big, bright future of linguistics (cf. Gray 2016), early missionary work demonstrates the big, bright past of linguistics. Among the studies referred to in this paper, perhaps the best illustration of the quality of linguistic description among the missionaries is provided by Eliot's (1666: 66) acknowledgment of the unique properties of Massachusett, a language described as having "new wayes of Grammar, which no other Learned Language (so far as I know) useth". However, as I have shown above, subsequent interpretations of these early studies were subject to the changing theoretical, ideological, and external context. This resulted in reinterpretations that were contrary to the original aims of the missionaries, as illustrated by the role that linguistic examples played in the 18th and 19th centuries as benchmarks of civilizational development that were meant to bracket both the languages and their speakers out of scientific and human status.

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[11] With reference to Spencer's discussion of the lexical deficiencies among the Damara and Cherokee, Liberman (2009) observed that "The fact that languages differ somewhat in the generality of their semantic categories can be spun in several different ways – if your terminology is more specific than mine, perhaps this is because you're not yet advanced enough to see the crucial generalization; on the other hand, if it's more general, perhaps this is because you haven't yet learned to make the needed distinctions".

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