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CLASSIFICATION OF AMERICAN INDIAN LANGUAGES

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[The author points out cases in which contiguous languages, though different in structure and vocabulary, exhibit in common striking morphologic peculiarities that must have spread by borrowing from language to language. A simple genealogical classification cannot therefore adequately represent the development, but 'hybridization' must also be taken into account.]

In a paper published in 1920¹ I discussed the problem of the interrelation of American Indian languages. I pointed out that morphological types are distributed over large areas and that in these morphological groups differences representing the character of the vocabulary occur which make it difficult to assume that the languages, as now spoken, are derived from the same 'Ursprache'. I pointed out that in the small linguistic units of early times, the conditions of mixture were quite different from those found in languages spoken over large areas and by many individuals. A further consideration of the problem led to the conclusion that an answer to the fundamental question must be sought through an investigation of mutual influences and the extent to which they may modify languages; particularly, in how far one linguistic type may influence the morphology of another.

I believe everybody will agree that words may be borrowed and may modify the vocabulary of a language; perhaps also that the phonetic character of one language may influence that of its neighbors. I have given a few general instances in the paper mentioned before, and today I will add one example that seems to be particularly instructive. The Nez Percé, an eastern Sahaptin language, has rigid rules of vocalic harmony according to which vowels may be divided into two classes: *a* and *o* as one group; all the others as a second group. In the system of consonants occurs an *s* with raised margin of the tongue and the dental *t* series. Another characteristic sound is a voiced affricative, something like *dl*. During the 18th century a large group of the Sahap-

¹ *American Anthropologist* 22. 367-76.

tin penetrated into the State of Washington and some of them crossed the Cascade Mountains where they intermarried with the Salishan tribes resident there. The phonetic elements of the present dialect of this region are practically identical with those of the neighboring Salish tribes. The vocalic system is the same. There is no trace of vocalic harmony.

We recognize that a comparison of vocabularies of languages, the history of which is unknown, offers serious difficulties, and that the changes brought about by the shifting of sounds, by semantic modification, and by new formations, may be so numerous that identification becomes possible in exceptional cases only. Languages behave differently in these respects. Some, like the Eskimo, are so conservative that even now the differentiation between Alaskan and Greenland dialects is slight, although the two groups have been separated for more than a thousand years. The more striking is the divergence of the vocabulary of the related Aleutian. Nahuatl of Mexico has changed in so far as the higher literary style has disappeared and as old ideas have vanished and new ones have been introduced with concomitant change of vocabulary. The syntactic subordination and coördination of phrases have yielded to Spanish types. In all other respects the modern language has not changed. It seems even possible to recognize the dialectic differences of various areas which may be reconstructed from the grammars of the early 16th century. On the other hand, the Salishan languages of British Columbia and Washington illustrate a great instability in morphology and lexicography. We can only guess what the causes of the difference in behavior of different languages may be. The often expressed opinion that 'primitive languages' undergo very rapid changes is true to a very limited extent only.

There is no doubt that in many cases languages sprung from the same source and changing by internal forces only may have become so different that without historical data their relation cannot be established.

Nevertheless the question remains whether hybridization of languages, not only in phonetics and vocabulary, but also in morphology, may have occurred.

So far as I know the actual process of a transfer of grammatical categories from one language to another has never been observed, although minor changes, like the adoption of a form here and there, and syntactic influences are known to occur. The syntactic modification of American languages under Spanish influence, offers a good example of the latter type of change. The proof of the diffusion of morpho-

logical forms can be only indirect, based on facts of distribution and partial conformity by the side of fundamental differences.

In some cases of farreaching similarity of morphology, like that of Athapascan and Tlingit, we may feel that an assimilation of the structure of an older language by Athapascan is quite unlikely; and that, if no safer correspondence of vocabulary can be found than has been presented up to this time, we may suspect that an older vocabulary has been taken over by the invading Athapascan. Until definite phonetic shifts can be proven by a sufficient number of parallel forms, and until an exhaustive comparison of vocabularies has been made, we have to admit that a vast array of stems in the two languages cannot be identified, including pronouns, numerals, and most other stems; and we must leave open the question whether all, or most of the lexicographic material can be derived from a common source.

More difficult are those cases in which a partial agreement in morphological traits exists between neighboring and apparently distinct languages, and disagreement in the dialects of obviously related languages. I may give an example of this kind. I mentioned before the vocalic harmony of the Nez Percé. So far as I am aware only the Coos of Oregon exhibit a similar, consistent phenomenon. It is not known whether the neighboring Molala and Kalapuya have it. Other Sahaptin dialects do not show it.

Chinook possesses pronominal gender. There are not only pronouns of three genders,—or more strictly speaking five nominal categories, for dual and plural belong to the same system,—but every noun has prefixed one of the five pronouns. None of the languages of the adjoining groups have sex gender except a number of dialects located in close proximity to the Chinook, particularly all the dialects of Salish tribes that live along the coast northward and southward, and the Quilleute. In the Salish dialects of the interior, gender does not occur. If the Quilleute should prove to be related to Wakashan, to which it shows morphological resemblances, it will be the only language of this group which has gender. In all these dialects gender is confined to the pronoun.

Chinook expresses diminutives by consonantic changes. Voiced and unvoiced consonants become glottalized and *š* changes to *s*. Velar fricatives become midpalatal fricatives. The neighboring Sahaptin groups, which differ fundamentally from Chinook, use consonantic changes for the same purpose. Some of the changes are the same as in Chinook; *š* changes to *s*, velars to midpalatals, and besides these a change from *n* to *l* occurs.

We find sporadic, fossilized use of the same process in the Salish dialect spoken just north of the Chinook area, in Coos on the coast of Oregon,² and as a living feature in Wiyot in Northern California. Geographical contiguity for the last example cannot be established.

It will be noticed that while gender exists in a coastwise direction north and south, the formation of the diminutive by consonantic changes occurs in a territory extending eastward.

Another curious resemblance may be traced between Quilleute, Kwakiutl, and Tsimshian, which are spoken in an area extending from the State of Washington to the Alaskan boundary. In these three languages the pronominal representation of the noun (or article) is treated differently for proper names and for common nouns. These form throughout two distinct classes. In Quilleute and Kwakiutl a further correspondence is found in so far as the article used with proper names is also used for indefinite, that is unknown objects. For instance, 'I look for a whale', indefinite; 'I found a whale', definite.

Many American languages draw a clear distinction between possession by the subject and possession by another person, like the Latin *suus* and *ejus*. A small group, including the Eskimo, Algonquian, and Kutenai, express these relations by special verbal forms, the so-called obviative of the missionaries who wrote on Algonquian, the fourth person of Thalbitzer. The phenomenon is most pronounced in Kutenai, for even in the case of the simple transitive verb with third person subject and nominal object the presence of the two third persons is indicated by the obviative suffix following the nominal object. It is interesting to note that the western Sahaptin languages, which as a whole group adjoin the Kutenai, make the same distinction for the subject of the sentence for sentences containing only one third person and those in which the sentence contains two third persons. In both Kutenai and western Sahaptin there is a differentiation between the forms in a sentence like, 'the man saw me', and 'the man saw the woman'. In Kutenai the difference is found in the object, in Sahaptin in the subject. In some of the Sahaptin dialects this trait is found only in the pronoun, not in the noun. The general usage, in the group of languages just discussed, is alike notwithstanding the difference of devices used.

Another interesting feature may be observed in the languages of the North Pacific Coast. Demonstrative pronouns are often very elaborate. They not only distinguish between the person near the

² *Handbook of American Languages* 2. 383.

speaker, near the person addressed, and near the person spoken of, but more exact locations are often added. The Tlingit of Alaska differentiate between what is near him but nearer than you, and what is near him but farther than you; or positions in front, behind, above, or below the speaker may be designated. Among the tribes extending from Columbia River northward to Alaska—the same group which differentiates between proper names and common nouns—a different demonstrative concept is introduced, namely that of visibility and invisibility. The Chinook has demonstratives designating, for instance, ‘near the speaker, visible’. The same occurs in Quilleute and Coast Salish, but not in the Salish dialects of the interior. It is a characteristic feature of Kwakiutl and is highly developed in Tsimshian. I do not know of its occurrence in any other group of neighboring languages.

Still another feature characteristic of part of the same group is the separation of pronominal subject and object in transitive verbs. The verb unaccompanied by what we should call an adverb, takes a suffix consisting of pronominal subject and object combined. When a qualifying adverb accompanies the verb, the subject is attached to this qualifier which takes the form of an intransitive verb, while the object remains attached to the primary verb. ‘I did not see him’ would be expressed by ‘not-I see-him’. This tendency occurs in exactly the same form in Quilleute, Coast Salish, and Wakashan. In Tsimshian it is less fully developed, in so far as in subjunctive forms the pronominal subject precedes the verb and is phonetically united with the preceding adverb. The analogy, however, is not strict.

Another interesting comparison may be made between Chukchee and Eskimo. In regard to the general form, these two languages are quite distinct. Chukchee employs terminal reduplication, prefixes, suffixes, and vocalic harmony. Besides this there are rigid rules regarding initial consonantic clusters which bring about important modifications of stem form. Eskimo has nothing of the kind. There is no reduplication, no prefixes whatever, no trace of vocalic harmony. Whatever changes occur in stem are due to the influence of suffixes. On the other hand, a number of categories occur which are common to these two neighboring languages. The plural forms are alike; both Eskimo and Chukchee form the plural by a suffix *t*. The nominal subject in Eskimo is treated differently in the case of transitive and intransitive verbs. The subject of the transitive verb has what might be called a relational form, common to both the genitive and the transitive subject. The subject of the intransitive verb has the same form as the object of

the transitive verb. This feature occurs also in other languages, as in Sahaptin, and it is found in the pronominal forms of many other languages. But in the circumpolar area only the Chukchee and Eskimo have this differentiation of the nominal forms. The processes by means of which this differentiation is made in Eskimo and Chukchee are quite distinct, for the object in Chukchee is formed by terminal reduplication; in Eskimo the subject is differentiated by a suffix. Furthermore we find in both languages a considerable number of postpositions which express local relationships, such as 'at', 'towards', 'from', and so on. The analogy in the modal development of the verb is also quite striking. A considerable number of participial forms occur which may take personal pronouns and the group of concepts expressed by the modalities shows marked similarity.

Considering these data as a whole, we may say that in a considerable number of native languages of the North Pacific Coast we find, notwithstanding fundamental differences in structure and vocabulary, similarities in particular grammatical features distributed in such a way that neighboring languages show striking similarities. The areas in which similar features are found do not coincide in regard to the various traits compared.

It seems to me almost impossible to explain this phenomenon without assuming the diffusion of grammatical processes over contiguous areas.

Stress must be laid here upon the contiguity of distribution, because comparative grammar shows clearly that similar features may develop independently in different parts of the world. Sex categories, phonetic similarity between the Northwest Coast and Chile, the application of reduplication, and many other traits appear in such distribution that historical connection is excluded. On the other hand the distribution of the same particular grouping of concepts, or of the same methods of expression over contiguous areas can hardly be explained on the basis of independent origin.

So far as I can see an attempt to bring together the different languages of contiguous areas which have similar processes, is not feasible on account of the fundamental differences in conceptualization, in grammatical processes, and in vocabulary.

The phenomena here discussed lead to a result analogous to that reached by Lepsius in his study of African languages. He concluded that a large number of mixed languages occur in Africa. His conclusions are largely corroborated by more recent investigations, particularly of the Sudanese languages. It is also parallel to the results ob-

tained by von der Gabelentz in his study of the languages of New Guinea and Melanesia, and his inferences are substantiated by the recent investigations of Dempwolff. The problem has been well formulated by Professor Prokosch who demands a detailed comparison of the European languages with all their neighbors no matter to what linguistic stock they may belong. It also agrees with the view of Schuchardt who points out that there is a gradation beginning with a slight amount of borrowing and extending through more intensive intermingling, to a complete change of language. The question in which we are interested is not that of the theoretical definition of relation of languages as defined by Meillet and Ween, but merely a question of historical development.

If the view expressed here is correct, then it is not possible to group American languages rigidly in a genealogical scheme in which each linguistic family is shown to have developed to modern forms, but we have to recognize that many of the languages have multiple roots.