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Review of: The Languages of Native North America

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Marianne Mithun, *The languages of Native North America* (Cambridge Language Surveys). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. Pp. xx + 773.

Reviewed by EDWARD J. VAJDA, Western Washington University

This important publication deserves a place among the best standard references on Native American languages, superseding in part the now somewhat outdated Campbell & Mithun (1979), and nicely complementing more recent books such as Campbell's (1997) landmark treatment of Native American diachronic linguistics historiography and the *Handbook of North American Indians*, vol. 17: *Languages* (Goddard 1996), which likewise surveys Native North American languages from a typological and genetic perspective. The information in these works concurs in all important respects, but Mithun has gathered a wealth of specific descriptive detail on synchronic language structure, typology and sociolinguistics previously unavailable in any single source. Brimming with illustrative examples from every language family of North America, many recorded by the author herself and some of the data representing fieldwork with the last known native speaker of this or that disappearing language, Mithun's book will offer much to the serious typologist as well as to anyone convinced of the urgency and intrinsic value of recording and preserving linguistic diversity.

The main body of the book is divided into two distinct sections, each of which could serve by itself as a separate monograph. Part I, entitled 'The nature of the languages' (13–294), is a wide ranging typological survey of Native North America focusing on those structural features distributed with unusual frequency across the region or which happen to be rare or otherwise noteworthy from a cross-linguistic perspective. Part II, 'Catalog of Languages' (295–605), groups the languages according to their proven genetic affiliation and supplies up-to-date sociolinguistic data on each surviving language and dialect. The contents of both sections will be discussed in more detail below. Also important are the author's introduction (1–12), which spells out the unique value of Native North America as a linguistic region; a transcription key (xiii–xv), with the development of transcription conventions discussed further on pages 20–22; and a dozen maps showing the known range of languages and languages families in various parts of the continent at about the time of contact (because contact with Europeans occurred at different times in the various regions, the maps do not reflect a temporally uniform situation). Some of the maps are adapted from Goddard (1996), while others were specifically prepared for this book. Finally, an extensive bibliography (617–750) includes every important and readily accessible publication on individual North American languages or language families, so that Mithun's survey represents an encyclopedic

overview of virtually all important synchronic work on Native American linguistics.

Part I, which surveys Native North American languages according to various structural parameters rather than from a genetic perspective, will be of the greatest interest to general typologists. The phonological features covered include: consonant and vowel inventories, syllable structure, tone, vowel harmony, sound symbolism and an overview of Native American writing systems beginning with Sequoyah's Cherokee syllabary of the early 1800s and continuing through more recent developments of the lesser known Cree and Yupik syllabaries of Northern Canada. Of special note are the rich consonant inventories observed in many North Pacific languages (Tlingit has 45 consonant phonemes, over half of which are voiceless velar or postvelar obstruents). Glottalized or labialized obstruents and lateral fricatives or affricates also turn up fairly commonly across the continent. A number of languages lack phonemic nasals (these include Quileute, Makah and Lushootseed, which belong to three separate but contiguous Pacific Northwest families). Labial (as opposed to labialized) consonants are also weakly represented in many languages of northwestern North America. Also noteworthy is the frequency with which tones have developed on the basis of laryngeal constriction or other non-melodic features in many unrelated families and the tendency for glottalization to produce low rather than high tone, the exact opposite of the pattern typically observed among the tone languages of Southeast Asia. Examples of sound symbolic expression of diminutive or augmentative meaning are also well attested among members of several different language families and a section is devoted to this topic.

The section comparing word derivation patterns across languages is particularly interesting, as Native America has long been famous for its formally and functionally diverse lexical systems. Mithun notes the prevalence of complex lexical morphology (polysynthesis) but is careful to emphasize that many Native American languages are merely synthetic, though monomorphemic words do not predominate in any of them. Yupik and Northern Iroquois examples illustrate various types of polysynthesis, incorporation and morpheme ordering patterns. Additional illustrations from Athabaskan or Tlingit would have been particularly useful here, as the templatic prefixing structures of verbs in these languages differ strikingly from the type of word formation found in Yupik and most other families. Other highlights include the difficulty of formally delimiting nouns from verbs in a number of Pacific Northwest families (among which the case of Salish is best known). Grammatical, as opposed to lexical, categories receive discussion in a separate section, with attention to such unusually prevalent features as the distinction between inclusive and exclusive first, and person, the phenomenon of 'obviation' – a formal distinction between topicalized as opposed to non-topicalized, or obviated, third person actants, the latter normally being referred to as the 'fourth person'. The rich variety of

classificatory phenomena in many Native American languages, which may receive formal expression in nouns, verbs or numerals, is also given detailed attention, as are the elaborate inventories of instrumental affixes, demonstratives, and morphemes expressing a range of particular nuances of space or direction found in some languages. Grammatical variations in the expression of tense and aspect distinctions are also briefly discussed, and examples illustrate the frequency of grammatical distinctions involving 'evidentiality' (the degree and nature of speaker assessment regarding the truth value of statements). A separate section discusses grammatical patterns on the sentence level, such as word order, and grammatical relations and case, patterns of conveying possession (with alienable vs. inalienable possession often receiving different formal expressions), methods of introducing oblique (as opposed to core) arguments into the sentence, the use of applicatives (derivational affixes which add the role of instrument, locative, etc. to verbs as core arguments), characteristic techniques of clause linkage, and switch reference – an anaphoric discourse pattern first described in 1967 for Washo, a Nevada isolate, and now known to be particularly prevalent in New Guinea, among other areas. The prevalence in the Americas of variations of the agentive/active agreement patterns (as defined in Mithun 1991) is typologically noteworthy, but examples also illustrate large numbers of Native American languages with nominative/accusative, ergative/absolutive, and direct/inverse patterns of noun/verb coordination, as well as certain combinations of these strategies. The exploitation of these and other grammatical strategies for discourse purposes, while not given a separate section, is mentioned in passing throughout the discussion. The final section of Part I, entitled 'Special language' (272–294), covers such topics as baby talk, animal talk (special phonological patterns that characterize speech addressed to animals in certain languages), abnormal speech patterns, special narrative and ceremonial styles of language, and formalized structural differences between men's and women's speech (observed in Lakhota, Koasati, Yana and a scattering of other languages from diverse families). Several examples of language games and other forms of speech play, as well as a description of the special language form called Plains Sign Talk (PST), a lingua franca whose roots seem to predate contact with Europeans, round out this part of the book. Topics that might have been added with profit here include a survey of culturally noteworthy semantic patterns of Native American lexeme creation, including observed cross-linguistic differences in attitude toward borrowing new vocabulary, and a discussion of the main sources of Native American lexical items that have found their way into the vocabularies of English and other European languages.

Part II, 'Catalog of languages', follows with an encyclopedic description of the language families attested north of Mexico. Each appears in alphabetical order and begins with an outline of family membership that includes a listing of local dialects. Each entry also contains a thorough

account of the scholarly publications and research which contributed to our current knowledge of the family. In addition, estimates of the current location and number of native speakers are provided and alternate language names are discussed. Most important, a great deal of space is devoted to providing an account of the typological distinctiveness (or at least the salient structural features) of each genetic family. Detailed, though by no means exhaustive, data on the phonology and grammar of representative languages in each family are included, along with a historiographic account of how each family came to be recognized and described. Here too, emphasis is placed on synchronic, typological factors rather than on residual disputes regarding genetic classification. Most significant from a diachronic perspective, Greenberg's (1987) tripartite genetic classification is rejected as speculative, and only non-controversial, generally recognized language families are presented as valid genetic units. Postulations of deeper genetic connections, such as Gulf, Aztec-Tanoan, Na-Dene, Hokan, Penutian, and several others, receive only brief discussion (301–310), as do patterns of borrowing and other forms of language contact (310–321). Readers interested in these aspects of Native American linguistics will find a much more detailed treatment in Campbell (1997) or Goddard (1996). But Mithun's synchronic descriptions of each family are superb and represent the best, most inclusive single source available on the topic. Also, the examples included in this half of the book complement, rather than duplicate, those provided in the earlier typological survey.

Mithun estimates that at least 300 distinct languages may have been spoken in North America on the eve of European contact. Of these, many disappeared without being adequately recorded or were not recorded at all. Of those that remained long enough to be documented in some appreciable detail, Goddard (1996: 3) lists 120 as already extinct by the mid 1990s, and 72 as spoken by only a handful of elderly speakers. Of the remaining languages, 91 are no longer being learned naturally by children, and only 46 are still currently spoken by appreciable numbers of people of all ages. To this Mithun adds precise detail as to the exact number of speakers still extant, though unfortunately even her numbers are now probably a bit optimistic in some cases. This ongoing, catastrophic loss of so much of the continent's linguistic diversity makes Mithun's book all the more important as a record of what is being lost and as a possible inspiration to today's linguists to take up the synchronic description of the remaining languages. In this sense, the descriptive work already completed, so wonderfully represented in the present book, will only grow in importance with every passing year. One wonders whether the vast amount of effort spent during the past forty years in subjecting familiar European languages to a parade of trendy theoretical interpretations might have been applied with greater profit to the profession of linguistics if more attention had been placed on describing the disappearing languages of the world. Given the world's present sociolinguistic situation, it

is hardly possible to overestimate the value of the contributions to linguistics made by Mithun and her numerous Native Americanist colleagues.

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Suzanne Romaine (ed.), *The Cambridge history of the English language*, vol. IV: 1776–1997. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. Pp. xx + 783.

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Recent English – that is, the language since about 1700 – has been famously described by Charles Jones as a ‘Cinderella’ in her pre-princess days, sitting neglected in the chimney corner (1989: 279). With this volume, Cinderella has brushed off the ashes and soot and presents herself to us as a dazzler. Feeling (or feigning) surprise that English since 1776 has any interesting history whatsoever is a theme running through this massive book.

Even the editor of the volume, Suzanne Romaine, is reluctant to present dowdy Cinderella in her full glory, writing in the very first sentence of her introduction that ‘the final decades of the eighteenth century’ were a dull time. Radical changes in grammar ‘had already taken place’, changes in morphology ‘are insignificant by comparison with those of previous periods’, ‘the phonology of English underwent nothing like the series of changes called the Great Vowel Shift’ (1). The same sentiment is expressed by David Denison at the beginning of his chapter on syntax: ‘By 1776 the English language had already undergone most of the syntactic changes which differentiate Present-Day English ... from Old English’ (92). He then launches into more than 200 densely packed pages devoted to some of the residue. Michael K. C. MacMahon begins with these words: ‘Superficially, the period under consideration might appear to contain little of phonetic and phonological interest’ (373). His chapter then goes on with 162 pages to show that this superficial view is false.