Linguistic Research in Dakota / Lakota Language

by
Janette Murray

The study of the language of the Sioux Indians has been undertaken by many non-Indians for various reasons. In the early 19th century missionaries studied and learned the language of the Sioux tribes in Minnesota and Dakota Territories as a necessary prerequisite to their work. About the turn of the century, the federal government recognized the need for accurate scientific information about the lives, customs, beliefs and languages of the Indian tribes inhabiting the Great Plains and the West. Congress, through the Bureau of American Ethnology, commissioned a number of scholars to study these diverse tribes and to publish their findings in a series of bulletins and annual reports. After the 1930's when English clearly became the dominent language on the reservations, language research became the province of university trained scholars in field or applied linguistics.

The Siouan language family, as outlined by J. W. Powell in 1917, covered a large territory with speakers as far east as North Carolina, as far south as Biloxi, Mississippi; west to the Rocky Mountains; and north into Canada. Sioux tribes residing in North Dakota and South Dakota speak one of the three dialects belonging to the Siouan family. Nakota, or the *N* dialect, is spoken by the Yankton on the Yankton Reservation; the Yanktonai on the Standing Rock Reservation, the Lower Crow Creek Reservation, and the Fort Totten Reservation. Dakota, or the *D* dialect, is spoken by the Mdewakantonwan on the Flandreau Reservation; the Sisseton on the Sisseton and Fort Totten Reservations; and the Wahpeton at Sisseton, Flandreau, and Fort Totten. The *L* dialect, Lakota, is spoken by the largest group, the Teton or western Sioux. The bands are the Hunkpapa, and the Sihasapa (Blackfoot) at Standing Rock; the Minneconjou, the Sihasapa, the Oohenonpa (Two Kettle), and Sans Arc at Cheyenne River; and the Brule and Oglala at Rosebud; the Brule at Lower Brule Reservation; and the Brule and Oglala at Pine Ridge.[1] There are only slight differences in pronunciation and vocabulary. A Lakota speaker will have no difficulty conversing

with a Dakota speaker.

There are two major periods of language study of Dakota/Lakota language though they are closely related and somewhat overlapping. The first studies were the publications of the missionaries to the Santee in the later part of the nineteenth century. The seeond group of publications deal mainly with the Teton and were sponsored by the Bureau of American Ethnology (1890 - 1932).

Missionaries began their work among the Santee living in Minnesota in the 1820's and 1830's. Joseph Renville, of French and Indian descent, established a trading post at Lac que Parle on the Minnesota River in 1826. As was happening throughout the frontier, the traders were soon followed by the missionaries. In 1834 Samuel Pond and his brother Gideon left their Connecticut village to settle among the Sioux for the purpose of converting them to Christianity. Even though they lacked the support of any church group, they set out for Minnesota Territory. Encountering the Sioux at Prairie de Chien, the Ponds began their language study by asking Dakota words for objects. Later, when they settled at Lake Calhoun, they also used the word lists made up by army officers in the area. In 1836 Gideon Pond went to Renville's post at Lac que Parle where he met Dr. Thomas Williamson, a physician and Episeopal missionary. A year later Rev. Stephen Return Riggs joined the "Dakota Mission". The Pond brothers assisted both Williamson and Riggs in learning Dakota. They began by translating hymns and simple Bible stories. Their most ambitious project was translating both the New Testament and Old Testament into Dakota.[2]

Ella Deloria, the daughter of Episcipal minister Philip Deloria, gives this description of how the work proceeded:

> It is a log house, ample and many roomed, for it is the home of the French and Dakota trader, Renville, a man of keen intellect, though without any schooling to speak of and without any fluency of English. In a bare room with flickering candlelight he sits hour on hour of an evening after a hard day of manual work. Dr. Riggs and his helpers are across the table from him. They are working on the translation. It is a blessing incalcuable for all Dakota missions that Dr. Williamson and Riggs are scholars. One of them reads a verse in Hebrew, if it is from the Old Testament; or in Greek, if from the new. He ponders its essence, stripped of idiom, and then gives it in French. Renville, receiving it thus in his father's civilized language, now thinks it through very carefully an at length turns it out again, this time in his mother's tongue. Slowly and patiently he repeats it as often as needed while Dr. Riggs and the others write it down in the Dakota phonetics already devised by the Pond brothers.[3]

Riggs and Williamson worked together for five years (1835 -1840). Their work was supported in part by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions and the Historical Society of

Minnesota. *A Dakota Grammar and Dictionary* was printed in 1852. Although the title page noted that the material was "collected by the members of the Dakota Mission" and only edited by Riggs, the Pond brothers felt that they had not been given adequate credit for their part in the contribution.[4] A translation of *Pilgrim's Progress* appeared in 1858.[5] The dictionary was expanded and republished by the Bureau of North American Ethnology in 1890. *Dakota Grammar, Texts, and Ethnography* was published by the U. S. Geographical and Geological Survey in 1893. Listed as story tellers were three Dakota speakers: Michael Renville, the son of Joseph Renville; David Grey Cloud, a Presbytery preacher; and James Garvie, a teacher at the Nebraska Indian School established by Rev. Alfred Riggs, the son of Stephen Return Riggs. The inclusion of these stories was significant because it marked the first printing of native speakers telling their own stories in their own language rather than Dakota translations of English stories.

John Williamson, the son of Dr. Thomas Williamson, accompanied the Santee, who were forced out of Minnesota following the uprising of 1862 to their reservation at Crow Creek. He stayed at Crow Creek for seven years giving them instructions in religion and writing their language. His dictionary was reprinted in 1868, 1886, and 1902.

There can be no doubt that the dictionaries, grammars, and translations were of great value to the many missions in the Dakotas. The books continued to be used for a number of years. However, the purposes of Riggs and his colleagues were not to preserve the culture and language of the Dakota, but to use it as a vehicle for bringing about the transition to English and non-Indian customs.

In his, "Ethnography," Riggs wrote:

> Let a well-arranged severalty bill be enacted into law, and Indians be guaranteed civil rights as other men, and they will soon cease to be Indians. The Indian tribes of our continent may become extinct as such; but if this extinction is brought about by introducing them into civilization and Christianity and merging them into our great nation, which is receiving accretions from all others, who will deplore the result? Rather let us labor for it, realizing that if by our efforts they cease to be Indians and become fellow citizens it will be our glory and joy.[6]

Other missionaries worked among the Lakota, or Teton Sioux. For example, Rev. Eugene Buechel, a native of Germany, began his ministery at the Holy Rosary Mission on the Pine Ridge Reservation in 1907 under the auspices of the Catholic Church. For nearly forty years he collected Lakota words for a dictionary. He published a detailed grammatical study, *A Grammar of Lakota*, in 1939. His

dictionary of Lakota, which is the best source curreutly available, was published in 1970.

Valuable as these scholarly works are, they do have limitations in the linguistic study of Dakota/Lakota language. Dr. Franz Boas of Columbia University commented on Buechel's work: "The analysis of Dakota in Buechel's Grammar is based on the theory that every syllable has a meaning. The arrangement is that of an English Grammar with Dakota equivalents. Sinec mueh of the material is based on Bible translations and prayers, many unidiomatie forms oceur."[7] Because the same is true of the Riggs' work, these sources must be used with care.

Following the Civil War, the U. S. government again turned its attention to the problems of the western territories. For purposes of treaty-making and administration, the government needed to locate, identify, and classify the various western tribes uuder some sort of central system. For fifty-four years (1878-1932) this work was undertaken by the Bureau of American Ethnology of the Smithsonian Institution. Congress authorized the publieations of a series of bulletins and annual reports. The Bureau ultimately produeed 48 volumes of ethnic papers, some of which were contributed by the U. S. Geographical Survey Commission. The last volume, a eomprehensive index, was published in 1932.

One of the first publieations of the Bureau of American Ethnology was the "Indian Linguistic Families of Ameriea North of Mexico" eompiled by J. W. Powell in 1891. With comparatively few ehanges Powell's outline has continued to hold up to seholarly investigation to the present time. James Owen Dorsey's *Study of Siouan Cults* was published by the Bureau in 1891. Dorsey was a missionary to the Ponca Indians in Nebraska from 1871 to 1873. He did eomparative studies of the languages of the Ponca, Omaha, Kansa, Winnebago, and Biloxi. Unlike other missionaries, Dorsey adopted an objective approach to language and legends. By his own experience he diseovered a prineiple that Franz Boas of Columbia University was to stress with his linguistic students. That is, "It is safer to let the Indian tell his own story in his own words rather than to endeavor to question him in such a manner as to reveal what answers are desired or expected."[8] Although Dorsey did not include the Dakota/Lakota texts, he cites as his native informants John Bruyier, a Dakota speaker; George Bushotter, and George Sword, Lakota speakers.[9]

James Mooney's work, *The Ghost Dance Religion of the American Indian* appeared in 1896. In his introduction, Mooney

writes, "The main purpose of the work is not linguistic, and as uearly every tribe coneerned speaks a different language from all the other, any close linguistic study must be left to the philologist, who can afford to devote a year or more to an individual tribe. The only one of these tribes of which the author claims intimate knowledge is the Kiowa." His Lakota speaking informants include American Horse, Fire Thunder, and George Sword of Pine Ridge, South Dakota.[10] With the exception of some words and phrases, Mooney does not include the original language texts.

In 1917, the American Mnseum of Natural History, published "The Sun Dance and Other Ceremonies of the Oglala Division of the Teton Dakota," by J. R. Walker. Walker was a physician at the Pine Ridge Agency who became close friends with many of the Lakota religious leaders. Although he consulted many sources, Walker, like Dorsey and Mooney, relied heavily on the accounts of George Sword. Sword, an Oglala, was a member of the Indian police at the Pine Ridge Agency in the 1890's. Although he could neither write nor speak English, he wrote pages and pages in old Lakota using the phonetic forms. Walker wrote of him, "He was a man of marked ability with a philosophical trend far beyond the average Oglala."[11] Much of what is known about the societies, mythology, and religion of the Tetons before white eontact is derived from the Sword manuscripts.

Another very important study published by the Bureau of Ethnology was Franees Densmore's *Teton Sioux Music* in 1918. Densmore recorded the words to some of the Lakota songs, but most of the text is in English. Listed as informants by Densmore are Robert Higheagle, a graduate of Hampton, and Mrs. James McLaughlin, the Dakota speaking wife of Major McLaughlin at Standing Rock, and many singers from Standing Rock.[12]

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methodological principles which demonstrate the inadequacy of the old methods and point to new paths of research which were to lead to impressive results."[13] Basically Boas stressed that thorough knowledge of the language was the key to understanding everything else: ". . . we must insist that a command of the language is an indespensable means of obtaining accurate and thorough knowledge, because much information can be gained by listening to conversations of the natives and by taking part in their daily life, which to the observer who has no command of the language, will remain inaccessible."[14] Boas was conversant in Dakota/Lakota, but he trusted more to the authority of the native speaker than to the linguist working through translation. In 1929, Boas invited Ella Deloria to accept a position as Dakota language researcher in ethnology and linguistics in the Department of Anthropology at Columbia University. It was certainly a logical choice.

Ella Deloria was born in 1888. She was raised at St. Elizabeth's Mission on the Standing Rock Reservation where her father, the Rev. Philip Deloria, was the Episcopal priest. She grew up in a large circle of relatives and friends, speaking the Dakota dialect of her parents and the Lakota dialect of the Hunkpapa. The Riggs and Williamson books were her first textbooks. As teachers arrived from the east, she also learned to speak and write in English. She was intelligent, eager to learn, and had a natural faculty for language learning. After completing secondary school at All Saints School in Sioux Falls, Deloria studied at Oberlin College and finally at Columbia University (1913-1914).

Deloria had been trained in linguistic theory, research methods, and phonetics. For nearly twelve years she continued working with Boas. The general arrangement was that she spend half her time on the Sioux reservations collecting stories and varifying accounts and the other half in New York editing and transcribing the manuscripts of Bushotter, Sword and others.

Deloria's work differs from those who preceeded her in two important ways. Unlike the non-Indian missionaries who learned Dakota/Lakota as adults working through translations, Deloria knew the nuances and subtle shades of meaning accessible only to one who has grown up in the culture. Unlike the native informants like Sword, she was proficient in English as well. The results of her work are two remarkable volumes. *Dakota Texts*, published in 1932, is a collection of 64 tales and legends recorded directly and exactly from Lakota story tellers from Standing Rock, Pine Ridge, and Rosebud. One tale "The Deer Woman" is in Nakota dialect from her

father. Deloria included the original text in phonetic transcription, literal translations, and free translations with explanatory grammatical notes. *Dakota Grammar* (1941) is the most complete and detailed grammar. This grammar describes the language in terms of its own structure and uses categories as they function in Lakota language rather that applying the categories of Latin, German, or English.

Ella Deloria continued her research through the 1960's. Her manuscript for a Lakota-English dictionary remained incomplete at the time of her death 1971. This manuscript and others are in the Ella Deloria Collection at the University of South Dakota.[15]

During the present decade there has been a revival of interest in language study. Many young Indian college students, desiring to maintain their tribal identity and cultural participation, sought to learn the languages of their grandparents. The demand for written texts by students and scholars has resulted in reprinted and facsimile reproductions of many of earlier works described in this essay.

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NOTES

[1]Ethel Nurge, "Preface" *The Modern Sioux: Social Systems and Reservation Culture* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970), pp. xii-xiii.

[2]John D. Nichols, "Introduction", in Stephen Return Riggs, *Dakota Grammar, Texts, and Ethnography* (Minneapolis: Ross & Haines, Inc., 1973), pp. 2-4.

[3]Ella Deloria, *Speaking of Indians* (New York: Friendship Press, 1944), p. 100.

[4]Nichols, p. 4.

[5]Duane Robinson, *A History of the Dakota or Sioux Indians* (Minneapolis: Ross & Haines, 1974), pp. 173-175.

[6]Stephen Return Riggs, *Dakota Grammar, Texts, and Ethnography*, p. 167.

[7]Franz Boas, "Preface", in Ella Deloria and Franz Boas, *Dakota Grammar* (New York: A.M.S. Press, 1978), p. vii.

[8]James Owen Dorsey, *A Study of Siouan Cults* (Seattle: The Shorey Book Store Facsimile Reproduction, 1972), p. 365.

[9]Dorsey, pp. 362-363.

[10]James Mooney, *The Ghost Dance Religion* (Glorieta, N. Mex.: Rio Grande Press, 1973), pp. 654-655.

[11]J. R. Walker, Introduction to "The Sun Dance and Other Ceremonies of the Oglala Division of the Teton Dakota", *Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History*, Vol. XVI, Pt. II (New York, 1917), p. 51.

[12]Frances Densmore, *Teton Sioux Music* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1972), p. v.

[13]Preston Holder, "Preface," *American Indian Languages* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), pp. v-vi.

[14]Franz Boas, "Introduction," *Handbook of American Indian Languages*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), p. 57.

[15]Janette Murray, "Ella Deloria: A Biographical Sketch and Literary Analysis" (Grand Forks: University of North Dakota, Unpublished Dissertation), 1974.