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## BOOK REVIEW

*A History of the Study of the Indigenous Languages of North America.* By Marcin Kilariski (= *Studies in the History of the Language Sciences*, 129). Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2021. xiv, 443 pp. €105 US\$158 ISBN 978 90 272 1049 4 HB 978 90 272 5897 7 E-BOOK

Reviewed by John E. Joseph (University of Edinburgh)

In this review I hope to give a clear picture of the originality, solidity and significance of the research here contained, but must first advise readers that this is not the broad history that the title leads one to expect. Its scope is in fact quite narrow. Having detected how “little attention has been paid to the history of individual linguistic examples” (p. 1), Kilariski says in the introductory chapter that “This book aims at filling the gap in the historiography of Americanist linguistics by offering a comprehensive analysis of the variable functions of references to Algonquian, Iroquoian and Eskimo-Aleut languages [...]” (p. 2). “More specifically, I examine descriptions of selected phonological, lexical and grammatical phenomena” which commentators have used “to illustrate what they perceived as the most characteristic properties of the languages and their speakers” (p. 1).

To be sure, much of what Kilariski demonstrates concerning the use of particular examples in accounts of three of the several dozen North American language families can be extrapolated and generalised;<sup>1</sup> but a more precise title would equally surely have done better service to the book and its potential readership. If it is a history of the study of the indigenous languages of North America that you are looking for, Andresen (1990) remains your best bet, though it stops with the founding of the Linguistic Society of America in 1924.

The perceived properties Kilariski refers to are summarised quite succinctly with an “Overview of structural characteristics” in Chapter 2, which opens with a history of the three language families, the languages they include, and the causes of their decline in the 19th and 20th centuries. The key characteristics include the languages’ phonetic inventories, often described in terms of whatever makes them look anomalous in comparison with what Benjamin Lee Whorf (1896–1941) called “Standard Average European”. In terms of grammatical structure, polysyn-

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1. Kilariski says there are “around 50” North American language families (p. 9). The exact figure is and has always been disputed, but numbers between 40 and 60 are typically given, in addition to isolates.

thesis is the dominant theme, and indeed Kilarski affirms that “Most of the languages of North America are polysynthetic, including all the languages that I focus on in this book” (p. 48). He does not take up the preference of numerous linguists nowadays to speak not of polysynthetic languages, but only of polysynthesis as a mechanism – or even to dispense with both, on the grounds that polysynthesis “is at best an impressionistic label, and at worst an ill-defined buzzword, without much practical usefulness for functional-typological studies”, in the words of Zúñiga (2019: 15), an article which Kilarski cites repeatedly without reporting the position it takes. I am not saying that Kilarski is at fault for calling languages polysynthetic, just that his concern with “perceived” properties would seem to invite self-reflective discussion of the matter. The chapter goes on to consider gender (which includes animacy) and classifiers as treated by 20th and 21st-century linguists, though not 19th-century ones, as the section on polysynthesis does.

A reader new to the field will come away from Chapter 2 with a good understanding of a few central aspects that have been pursued in depth, including many cases in which language change has involved bilingual contact with a European language, and some where speakers have introduced ‘affective’ innovations, for instance, grammatically untraditional classifiers for individuals whose physical features do not correspond to the norm – not haphazardly, but such that “rules are broken according to rules for breaking rules” (Landar 1965: 329). All this is a good preparation for what will follow. Chapter 3 gives a history of the study of languages of the three families from the 16th century to the present, noting that “Rather than being an exhaustive presentation of the history of the Americanist tradition, this chapter is meant to provide a background for the histories of linguistic examples discussed in Chapters Four to Seven” (p. 88). Kilarski divides the history into three periods, “Missionary and other pre-modern sources”, “From 1788 till the 1840s” (with Edwards 1788 as the turning point), and “Since the second half of the 19th century”. The historical survey proceeds apace, then is followed by a more probing look at three themes: “the image of Indigenous Peoples among scholars and the general public”, “references to ‘primitive’ languages in the late 19th century”, and “approaches to linguistic complexity in the course of the 20th century” (p. 114). Each of these is presented in a very interesting way, with the scope of the latter not limited to North America, though Kilarski takes every opportunity to return to the languages he is covering.

The next four chapters are each devoted to specific topics, ones which were “first dealt with in papers which appeared in *Historiographia Linguistica*” (Cichocki & Kilarski 2010; Kilarski 2007, 2009, 2016; Kilarski & Dziubalska-Kołaczyk 2012). In the introduction Kilarski thanks his two co-authors “for sharing with me their expertise in the areas of phonology and sociology”. Chapter 4 is on the analysis of sound systems in Iroquoian languages, and the uses made of

examples showing their “real or alleged gaps in phonetic inventories with respect to the sounds found in the more familiar languages of Europe, the presence of characteristic or unusual sounds and finally the assumed fluctuating character of phonetic elements” (p.132). The coverage here extends from the 17th century through to the early 20th, and includes Franz Boas’s (1858–1942) famous paper “On Alternating Sounds” (1889), which directly and successfully challenged the then-dominant methodology of Daniel Garrison Brinton (1837–1899) and John Wesley Powell (1834–1902). Kilarski provides numerous examples of how linguists used the apparently ‘loose’ and ‘complex’ nature of American languages in their arguments for and against particular analytical approaches.

Chapter 5 examines the treatment of gender in Algonquian languages, where ‘gender’ includes more than one might expect, most notably animacy and inanimacy – terms in use as early as the 17th-century grammars of Montagnais by Paul Le Jeune S.J. (1591–1664) (as *chose animée* and *chose inanimée*) and of Massachusetts by John Eliot (1604–1690). Kilarski gives examples of other Algonquian grammars of that century which refer to ‘noble’ and ‘ignoble’ genders, and comments that “These interpretations of gender assignment in Algonquian in terms of criteria other than animacy are reminiscent of late 20th-century approaches which emphasized the role of speakers’ beliefs” (p.180). The historical account of the treatment of gender in Algonquian continues through to the 21st century, and makes it quite clear that none of the many linguists who have grappled with it, including Leonard Bloomfield (1887–1949), has ever conquered it. It is from *how* they grappled that Kilarski draws inferences concerning their conceptual and methodological approaches.

Chapter 6 is on Cherokee verbs for washing, one of those much rehashed examples in which, as Frederic W. Farrar (1831–1903) put it, “A Cherokee will have twenty verbs meaning ‘I wash my face,’ ‘I wash my hands,’ ‘I wash your face,’ ‘I wash some one else’s hands,’ and so on; because he can’t get at the abstract conception ‘I wash’ [...]” (Farrar 1870:183). The 20 is an exaggeration of the 13 or 14 verbs cited by most sources, but what really matters is Farrar’s *can’t get at the abstract conception*: the Cherokee mind is taken to be deficient. Certain other linguists instead treat the verbs for washing as evidence of the richness of the Cherokee language, but often in an exoticising way, where an alienation underlies the surface admiration, and the ‘myth’, as Kilarski terms it, remains intact. He points out that “The only published attempt to expose the myth in the second half of the 19th century was made by John Napoleon Brinton Hewitt (1857–1937)” (p.241), whose mother was part Tuscarora (a branch of the Iroquois), and who worked alongside the lone great female scholar of American anthropology of the period, Erminnie Smith (1836–1886) (on whom see Kilarski 2021).

An analysis of the fourteen examples given shows that they are not all verbs denotive of washing; some signify “to swim,” others “to soak,” others “to wet or sprinkle,” and still others “to boil,” which, of course, it would be folly to classify among the verbs meaning to wash or lave. Thus, a rational explanation is supplied for what appeared to be an anomaly in language. (Hewitt 1893:398)

Nevertheless, we find Otto Jespersen (1860–1943) still regurgitating the myth “in five among his most important works” (p.243), the last of them as late as 1941. What Kilarski calls the “final phase in the life cycle of the Cherokee example” starts with a 1952 article by Archibald A. Hill (1902–1992), who, through a careful reanalysis – subsequently refined by later linguists – showed that the various Cherokee verbs are based on two morphemes, *-wo* ‘bathe’ and *-e* ‘wash’, with the ‘abstract’ meanings Farrar claimed the Cherokee “can’t get at”. The chapter goes on to give many more examples, often chilling in their ignorance and inhumanity, of how supposed lack of abstraction was “used to gauge the cognitive and social progress of the speakers” (p.271).

A similar and even better known case is the subject of Chapter 7, “Eskimo words for snow”. Kilarski traces its origins to Boas (1894), which gives 13 words for snow and over 20 for ice that Boas had recorded a decade earlier during fieldwork with speakers of Inuktitut on southern Qikiqtaaluk (Baffin Island – Kilarski does not give its Inuktitut name, and his not even mentioning it is another surprising lacuna of self-reflection in a book with this one’s concerns). The example was perpetuated and added to by other investigators, before becoming a wider cultural meme through one particular use of it, concerning how “our word class snow” would seem “too large and inclusive [...] to an Eskimo”:

We have the same word for falling snow, snow on the ground, snow packed hard like ice, slushy snow, wind-driven flying snow – whatever the situation may be. To an Eskimo, this all-inclusive word would be almost unthinkable; he would say that falling snow, slushy snow, and so on, are sensuously and operationally different, different things to contend with; he uses different words for them and for other kinds of snow. (Whorf 1940:247)

As the ‘Sapir-Whorf hypothesis’ snowballed both within linguistics and outside it, this became its signature example. Much as Hill (1952) signalled a new phase in the interpretation of Cherokee verbs for washing, the Eskimo words for snow were re-examined by Martin (1986), who showed that “Eskimo has about as much differentiation as English does for ‘snow’ at the monolexic level: snow and flake”, with other seeming lexemes being morphological and syntactic modifications which “reflect semantic distinctions not present in English”, but not constituting separate words, or supplying evidence for any “consequences that those grammatical differences may have for perception or cognition”. Kilarski then fol-

lows how Martin's paper was used by Pullum (1991), writing in a semi-popular vein, which in turn was adopted in the best-selling Pinker (1994). Kilarski indicates Pullum's occasional lapses of precision in the course of his humorous pointing out of Whorf's lapses of precision, and cites commentators who took offence at Pullum's jollity, having apparently overlooked the 'irreverent' of his title.

The "Concluding discussion" in Chapter 8 brings into relief the motifs of "Complexity and 'richness'" and "Abstract and 'concrete'" which have emerged over the course of the book. This is a very welcome chapter indeed, given how the latter motif in particular has gone overlooked and uncritiqued in historiographic work. Neither has received as full an investigation as it gets here, and the results are wonderfully enlightening. So: a happy ending, after the tricky start with the title. The book should have been called *All's Well that Ends Well* – no – I've just Googled it and somebody took it already. And it would be the least appropriate title imaginable for a book on the history of the indigenous languages of North America: "nearly all are likely to be gone by the end of the twenty-first century" (Mithun 1999:2).

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