International Journal of American Linguistics

Volume 53 · Number 1

January 1987

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS

DEMYTHOLOGIZING PLAINS INDIAN SIGN LANGUAGE HISTORY

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1. Introduction. The history of Amerindian North America has recently come under examination by linguists from a new perspective. It has been suggested that three lingua francas—Mobilian Jargon, Chinook Jargon, and Delaware Trader's Jargon—were in existence before the arrival of Europeans on the continent (Drechsel 1979; 1981; 1983; 1984, Thomason 1980; 1983, Hymes 1980). Plains Indian Sign Language (SL) should be introduced into this discussion, because the view has long been held that it too predated the coming of the whites.

My purpose in this article is to cast doubt on this belief in the precontact existence of SL, thereby suggesting that the alternative view is at the present stage of knowledge a more credible one. I proceed by subjecting the literature to a critical reading and then invoking normal trade networks as the setting for linguistic, not signed, communication. I close by speculating on the attraction that SL had for early writers about American Indians. This manner of argumentation was followed in a discussion of the contact origin of Chinook Jargon (Samarin, in press).

2. Sources. The sources for statements about SL are papers to be found in *Aboriginal Sign Languages of the Americas and Australia* (Umiker-Sebeok and Sebeok 1978). The papers were originally published in both the past and this century. In them we find the following assertions. First, SL made it easier for the indigenous peoples to communicate with each other: "It was difficult and sometimes almost impossible for an Indian nation to acquire or speak intelligently any language but its own. . . . Yet nearly all Indians possessed a means of ready communication between themselves through the medium of the sign language . . ." (Humfreville [1899] 1978:70). Another reason given was that Indians had to communicate "at a long distance" (Webb [1931] 1978:97), specifically when they were "jumbled together" in buffalo hunting, speaking diverse languages (Harrington [1938] 1978:113), or generally because of multilingualism (Taylor [1965] 1978:225).

Attestations for SL are given for 1719–21 in the Gulf Coast (Taylor [1965] 1978:225, citing Bossu [1771] 1962:192) and for 1541–42 (Taylor

[1965] 1978:224). In the latter case the Spanish expedition under Coronado "encountered Indians who were using signs." ("Were using" suggests that signs were in use BEFORE the arrival of the whites.) It is even claimed that "Every record of the landing of Columbus tells of how they communicated with the Indians by signs" (Tomkins 1969:93).

3. Two early accounts. The critique of the precontact existence of SL begins with an examination of the sixteenth- and eighteenth-century attestations.

The account of the Coronado expedition of 1541-42 has to be taken with considerable reservation. Written by Pedro de Castañeda de Nájera about twenty years after the event but found only in a text of 1596, it says quite clearly that the Querecho Indians (identified by Winship 1896:396 as Tonkawas in the Rio Pecos and Canadian River area) "were very intelligent" because "although they conversed by means of signs they made themselves understood so well that there was no need of an interpreter" (Winship 1896:504; also 527). It should be noted that Castañeda did not say that these Indians "were using signs" when the Europeans arrived, as Taylor ([1965] 1978) leads his readers to believe. Apart from the fact that one must interpret the text as it stands, how would one imagine the Spanish, limited as they were in communicating with the Indians, being able to learn about the sociolinguistic and historical aspects of the purported sign language? By what means had they come to this ethnographic conclusion—"were using signs"?

Apart from the usual questions that can be raised about this kind of report, we must note that it is also recorded that Coronado's guide, who had been nicknamed the Turk, was an Indian who had been a captive of the Cicuye (Winship 1896:393-94) and that just before the reported contact between the Tonkawas and the Spanish, Turk had gone on ahead and had made contact with them. In other words, he may have laid the foundation for whatever needed to be said between the two groups in some language they shared. If this was true, then gestures were not needed for the important aspects of communication and gestures may have been used by only certain members of one or both parties for certain specific purposes.

The eighteenth-century account has to do with the Attacapa (Atakapa) Indians on the Gulf of Mexico, west of what is now New Orleans (located on Crawford's 1978 map in Louisiana near the Texas border). It seems on first reading rather impressive. Bossu wrote that the Indians could "speak sign language and hold long conversations in pantomime" (Bossu [1771] 1962:188, n. 2). But this was published in 1768, relating the experience of

Belle-Isle who, after being stranded on the coast, was taken captive and lived as a slave for two years among the Indians. Bossu says ([1771] 1962:189) that Belle-Isle "soon learned to speak sign language." (It is the translator who gives us "sign language," but we are not obliged to believe that the French text contained something like *langage mimique*. Writing of a period about a hundred years earlier Crawford 1978: 21, 23, 24 notes that the Europeans communicated by signs, not that they used a "sign language." The two expressions identify two entirely different speech events.) Bossu says nothing, however, about this captive's having learned the Attacapa language. Yet we are informed that on one occasion, when members of another and neighboring Indian "nation" (where we would say tribe) were in conversation with his captors, he pretended not to hear the conversation (Bossu [1771] 1962:190), information from which he eventually used toward his deliverance. Because this account was published almost fifty years after the event, and because it is not exactly autobiographical, there is reason for being hesitant in taking it as strong evidence for an indigenous sign language. More important in casting doubt on the story as evidence is the fact that this population was near Spanish territory to the west (for which see map in Bossu [1771] 1962:23). In other words, even if a signed system of communication existed, it could have developed first with the Spanish.

4. Nature of signs. A critical evaluation of all such reports requires one to determine the nature and amount of information that is being conveyed by gestures (i.e., establishing their function) and then to demonstrate that the gestures were more than ad hoc signs. Consider, for example, what is said about the use of signs and the content of gestured messages that historians attribute to them at the time of Christopher Columbus's expeditions in the Caribbean. He is reported to have said that "[the king of the island], according to the signs they make, rules all these neighboring islands, and is [the king?] covered with much gold." But then Columbus is made to add: "But I do not pay much attention to what they say, because I do not understand them well . . ." (Weiner 1920:7). Yet, on another occasion, the historian reports that Columbus "asked everyone, for he already understood some by signs" (Wiener 1920:25; see also 11, 13, 19, 20, 21, 44). And regarding the landing of Cabrillo at San Diego Bay in September 1542 we have the following statement (Tomkins 1969:93): "And the following day, in the morning, there came to the ship three large Indians, and by signs they said that there were traveling in the interior men like us, with beards, and clothes and armed like those of the ships, and they made signs that they carried cross-bows and swords, and made

gestures with the right arm as if they were throwing lances, and went running in a posture as if riding on horseback, and made signs that they killed many of the native Indians, and that for this they were afraid."

For another example, consider that when de Roquefeuil harbored at Nootka Sound early in the nineteenth century, he found that the locals "exercised a great deal of sagacity in the use and knowledge of signs to which we, on one part or the other, were obliged to have recourse" ([1823] 1952:150 [my translation]). Skill in the use of gestures might have eventually developed into a sign language at Nootka Sound, but such skill does not necessarily prove that a language already existed—something no one, to my knowledge, has claimed for the Pacific Northwest at that time.

I insist on distinguishing between origins and development. Human beings are ingenious and successful in confectioning means of communication for immediate or short-term needs, and these means can quickly develop into a stable system, as with pidgins. If this is true with speech, it must be equally—if not more—true of gestures. This would seem to be obvious and beyond the need for empirical demonstration, but we have it from Brown (1980:57) that "the first step in language learning must be easier with signs than with words" because the first 400 or so signs will be iconic—they will "resemble or otherwise suggest their referents."

5. Trade networks. Another argument for the postcontact origin of SL is the existence in precontact times of extensive trade networks. I accept as axiomatic that trade, being embedded in a complex of social-cultural structures (such as alliances of a political, marital, and amical nature), not only requires but enhances the use of (i.e., exploits) language. It would be useful to have, of course, a comprehensive view of interethnic trade at the time of European contact. Perhaps in this instance one suggestion regarding the nature of the kind of trade that would have been carried on linguistically in the fifteenth century will suffice.

The Gulf Coast peoples seem to have been involved in trade in salt and other items more specifically associated with what has come to be known as the Southern Cult. With respect to the Mississippi Valley alone it has been noted that the area now comprehended by Alabama, Louisiana, Texas, and eastern Mexico was an important source of salt (Long 1957). As for the Southern Cult, Stimmel (1984:122, citing Waring and Holder 1945) has this to say of it: "In the late Mississippian period, a complex artistic and religious iconographic style was developed. These motifs were reproduced on a number of different media and often were included as part of mortuary offerings at important Mississippian ceremonial centers. These objects are thought to have been associated with a wide-spread, pan-Mississippian ceremonial complex called 'Southern Cult.'"

Although Southern Cult items are rare in the archaeological findings in the northern part of the Mississippi Valley, there is evidence of long-nosed God Masks that remind one of the physiognomically similar Aztec God, Yacatecuhtli. Stimmel, who has studied this area, speculates (1984:123) that "It is possible that some 'Southern Cult' material was associated with a northern trading network." While not relating this cult with the trade in salt with the Oneata culture area—Kansas and western Iowa in the west, as far east as Lake Michigan, and from Missouri north to central Wisconsin, with the dominant habitat in the late prehistoric period being the prairie peninsula (Stimmel 1984:8)—she does say that after A.D. 1400 Oneata may have had to travel south to procure their salt (1984:123). Salt was not only a food product, her study reveals, but was also an important ingredient in the making of salt pans—that is, pottery made of inferior materials (montmorillonite clays and mussel shell), improved by the addition of salt to prevent the decomposition of the shell at high temperatures (i.e., lime spalling). A major center of this industry was Cahokia, located in what is now Illinois, on the Mississippi River.

There must have been other such trade networks in the North American plains from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. There is no reason to believe that they were any different from trade networks found elsewhere in the world, where communication has gone on in natural languages. Sign-language communication is out of the ordinary, and its genesis must be found in unusual circumstances. These circumstances, I am suggesting, were those of contact between the indigenous peoples of North America and the newcomers from Europe. And I find it more credible to believe that it was the latter, with their extensive contact with a variety of New World peoples—not to speak of contact with Africans from whom they were acquiring slaves—who introduced the practice of communicating in gestures. It was from them that Indians first got the idea, which they then developed so remarkably for their own use.

6. Relation to pidgins. I find in this kind of account a similarity to the way pidgins have arisen. In all cases of pidgin origins I have examined there are always compelling reasons for believing in genesis due to contact with Europeans; arguments for a precontact origin are always weaker.

7. Linguistic diversity. The final argument for the precontact origin of SL to be considered is that of linguistic diversity (also referred to as multilingualism). It was used by Taylor ([1965] 1978), for example, as an explanation for the creation of SL, and by Clark ([1885] 1982:13) a hundred years earlier: "The necessity for intercommunication between tribes existed, the vocal languages were different, and it is only reasonable

to suppose that gestures were used." It has, moreover, been used for other pidgins. This invocation of linguistic diversity as a causative factor is like saying that forests are the cause of forest fires. Without linguistic diversity there would, of course, be no need for lingua francas, but without other factors we cannot explain the emergence of lingua francas in general and of pidgins in particular. Unfortunately, these have not yet been identified, and it would be premature to attempt a characterization here. Yet we must acknowledge that demographic factors play an important role, that is, the number of speakers involved in a contact situation and their relationship. Moreover, the opportunity of learning a second language under somewhat normal circumstances or the absence of this opportunity must surely play a role. The Hiri Trading Language, a pidgin of the Gulf of Papua (Dutton 1983), is an instructive case study: regular but limited contact led to a very limited sort of pidgin. But we are far from a typology of glossogenesis for various kinds of lingua francas in the world. Even the study of multilingualism in indigenous North America is in its infancy, although Miller (1978) helpfully identifies various social factors that seem to have led to or inhibited multilingualism.

We must therefore be cautious with statements about linguistic diversity as a causative factor in the emergence of verbal or signed lingua francas. Fox's review of Crawford's book on Mobilian Jargon says (1982:607) that "[Crawford's] early sources consistently emphasize the diversity of languages and difficulty of communication." This statement is true but misleading, for Crawford on the same page (1978:22) quotes writers who say both that there was "an infinitude of nations" (i.e., tribes) speaking different languages but also that they manage to understand each other and "besides, there is always some interpreter of one nation residing in another. . . ." It should be added, for good measure, that observations about linguistic diversity are not merely statements of fact or opinion; they are also a cultural "artifact." Not all travelers in new worlds made this kind of observation, even when there was good reason for doing so. For example, the reports of the earliest French and Belgian explorers in the Congo (now Zaire) and Ubangi river basins rarely commented on linguistic diversity. Language was not one of the local phenomena that daunted them at all (for which see Samarin 1982; 1984).

8. Romantic history. It appears reasonable to view the old history of SL as a romantic one. It was appealing to westerners with a benign attitude toward the American Indian—a truly indigenous, a truly "American" feature of American life—to see him as the inventor of something as exotic as a signed language. This, moreover, at a time when Indian languages were still far from fully appreciated, and at a time when

"civilized" man was beginning to create his own artificial *lingua franca*s to cope with linguistic diversity on an international scale.

9. Code switching. I would like now to add just a note from the perspective of the ethnography of speaking. What struck the nineteenth-century observers of the Plains Indians was the fact that they used SL so extensively, that they were apparently so at home with this means of communication. What the Europeans did not realize is that this exploitation of SL was—or may have been—an instance of code switching that harmonized well with their linguistic attitudes. Those observers knew nothing explicit about the ethnography of communication, but we cannot ignore what we have learned. Given the very widespread cultural trait of "watching your speech" in aboriginal North America and for the culturally specific uses of language in ritual and ceremony, it would appear reasonable to suppose that the Plains Indians welcomed a code that enhanced ceremony, facilitated communication, and—at the same time—allowed one to keep his mouth shut! In other words, SL not only made possible communication where none would have been possible or where it would have been difficult to arrive at; it made, on the one hand, more communication and, on the other, communication of a certain kind.

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