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NATIVE LANGUAGES AS ETHNOGRAPHIC TOOLS

By ROBERT H. LOWIE

DR MEAD'S recent article (*American Anthropologist*, 41: 189sq., 1939) admirably clarifies her conception of the linguistic approach to aboriginal cultures. She effectively disposes of at least one grave misunderstanding. I had supposed that "using the native language" for participation in the speaker's community meant, *mutatis mutandis*, what it means for a would-be authority on any advanced contemporary civilization, viz., a fluent command of the vernacular, coupled with ready comprehension of the natives' speech among themselves. Such control, however, Dr Mead vehemently deprecates—almost contemptuously—as "linguistic virtuosity" (the pejorative term appears at least half a dozen times in as many pages). Her "use of native languages" bears a Pickwickian sense, involving claims so moderate that they disarm skepticism, let alone, "wholesale doubt."

Nevertheless, the article raises other issues. Is it historically accurate in defining the indicated revolution in field technique? What are "broken" or "decayed" cultures? Does Pickwickian "use" suffice for the goals set? And what is the true value of "virtuosity"?

In the following remarks I am not trying to lay down the law, but to give testimony. Nor is it my purpose to engage in controversy, but to make my position clear. Emphasis is solely in the interests of clarity: my previous comments on the subject¹ were misinterpreted into the exact reverse of their intended meaning by at least two readers, the late Dr Truman Michelson and a British colleague whose reactions reached me second-hand. I repeat what I have often said before: it is not important to me whether others agree or disagree; but it is all-important that the real points of both agreement and disagreement should stand out in relief.

HISTORICAL FACTS

Although second to none in my appreciation of Professor Malinowski's field researches, I cannot regard him as an innovator in learning the speech of his people twenty-odd years ago. Even if we eliminate as special cases Knud Rasmussen, whose *Nye Mennesker* appeared in 1905, and William Jones, whose *Fox Texts* date back to 1907, there remain a respectable number of investigators who freely employed the vernacular in daily contact with the peoples they studied. This holds for Mrs Gudmund Hatt (Emilie Demant), who learnt Lapp before 1912, the date of the German

¹ R. H. Lowie, *The Crow Indians* (New York, 1935), p. XVIIIIsq.

translation of Turi's reminiscences. I believe J. O. Dorsey knew his Omaha, and that several Russian scholars, as well as Castrén (about a century ago), used the linguistic approach. In the United States, Frank Hamilton Cushing learnt Zuni during his five years' stay (1879-1884); Alexander M. Stephen spoke Navaho by 1890 and was learning Hopi before his death (1894).

If the demands for "active linguistic participation" are reduced in accordance with Dr Mead's proposal, it is not surprising to learn that more than twenty-five investigators from England and the United States "have done authentic field work using native tongues." Only the implication is objectionable, viz., that earlier investigators failed to employ this rather obvious device. For certain studies, especially those of a technological order, the vernacular was generally dispensed with; for other purposes some of the older Americanists found direct communication a desirable method both in asking questions and in establishing rapport, two of the three purposes for which Dr Mead recommends resorting to aboriginal speech. If I illustrate solely by personal experiences, it is not in order to lay claim to especially extensive "use," but for the obvious reason that I am most familiar with them.

Arriving on the Lemhi Reservation in 1906, I found a single available Shoshone who spoke fluent English, but one day's work as interpreter exhausted his interest. I then tried out a succession of schoolboys, whose English was so largely unintelligible that I came to shift by myself, "using" denuded Shoshone such as one picks up readily enough. The lamentably meagre results obtained I eked out with the aid of a middle-aged Indian who knew little enough English and mispronounced it horribly, but who could be brought to dictate tales and give a very rough translation. After a while I found myself bandying phrases with the natives; and when a Cree visitor wished to inform some kinsman at Fort Hall that his son had a toothache, he gestured the grim fact to one of his Indian hosts, who relayed it to me in simplified Shoshone, which I promptly converted into the desired letter. At times I would establish rapport by addressing some little girl as "my mother" and by dancing with my laundress. I "used" Shoshone continually and thought I was doing very well at it. However, my bubble of conceit was pricked when one day there was a gathering of people: then I discovered that it was one thing to grasp the simplified speech of an Indian trying to make himself clear to an ignorant outsider, but quite another to understand him in the midst of a rapid conversation of his peers. It is a lesson I have not forgotten. To make a long story short, I had a good time at Lemhi and developed a fair amount of rapport. The only trouble

was that all this netted so little ethnography. Fortunately, towards the end of my stay a youth returned from boarding-school with a good knowledge of English and a willingness to interpret; and in that final fortnight I made more progress than in the preceding two months.

Repeated visits to the Crow afforded ampler "use" of another language. I constantly assumed droll relationships with my interlocutors, both for their entertainment and to familiarize myself with the kinship nomenclature. I learnt a tongue-twister to confound unsuspecting strangers. I recorded an occasional funny tale not only for textual analysis, but to read and re-read it to a never-to-be-surfeited Crow audience. I composed a mock-account of a vision resulting in my capturing twenty picketed horses and striking countless coups. I learnt to sing the favorite lullaby. Fairly often I asked informants in Crow about their clan and society membership. Once I told a Lumpwood that I was of the Fox organization and should steal his wife in the next spring; he instantly recalled that I had previously pretended affiliation with her clan and twitted me with my incestuous cravings. Characteristic remarks of this type I would jot down as soon as possible, considering the record as equal in value to formal texts. I tested whether children knew the traditional extension of kinship terms by asking a little boy: "Where is your daughter?" He instantly protruded his lips towards a two-year old girl, his maternal uncle's daughter.

Since such "use" of a native language in America prior to 1922 is in part attested in print,² I am puzzled by Dr Mead's statement as to the history of the technique. In the light of the evidence I certainly cannot believe that her reference to "apologies and explanations by field workers who did not use the native language" could possibly be meant to include me. But since the late Dr Michelson misunderstood something I said on the subject, I wish to leave no doubt as to the meaning of my "apologies." They refer not to my failure to "use" Crow—inasmuch as I have "used" it—but to my inability to use it as a sinologue uses Chinese, as a student of French civilization uses French. The point has been adequately made by Professor Boas in an accessible publication and hardly requires much elucidation.³ However, its practical aspects will receive further consideration.

² Lowie, *Notes on the Social Organization and Customs of the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Crow Indians* (Anthropological Papers, American Museum of Natural History, Vol. 21, 1917), pp. 54, 59, 64, 66, 69, 70, 71, 81. id., *A Crow Text*, (with grammatical notes in University of California Publications in American Archeology and Ethnology, Vol. 29, 1930), pp. 155-175. id., *The Crow Indians*, pp. 24, 91, 104, 105f.

³ Franz Boas, *Handbook of American Indian Languages* (Pt. I, 1911), pp. 59-63.

BROKEN AND LIVING CULTURES

When is a culture "broken"? Extreme instances are beyond dispute—communities that have adopted Caucasian dress, usage, belief, language; and communities reduced beyond the point of maintaining their traditions, no matter how hard they may try. It is the intermediate cases that are disputable. Does a Melanesian group lose vitality as soon as an administrator abolishes head-hunting? How soon does a Plains Indian tribe become deculturized? With the advent of horses? With the passing of the buffalo? When the Sun Dance is tabooed? With the death of the last visionary?

I have no ready answer, and the problem only partly overlaps the present discussion. Nevertheless, it is important. My guess is that a culture survives so long as a considerable number of its bearers use the vernacular for intra-tribal communication. For that reason I am not so deeply impressed as some colleagues appear to be with the difference between working among Plains Indians and among Melanesians. Naturally it would be better if we could observe Indians as they were in 1492, but when dozens of individuals retain a firm faith in the visions they recount and are willing to pay exorbitant fees to get themselves into the Tobacco society, their culture is not yet "decayed" even if they begin cutting their hair, wear trousers, and buy the white man's axes.

So long as several hundred adults do not speak any European language or are at best only painfully able to express themselves in one, the student of technology seems to me the chief sufferer from the contact with civilization, since the very introduction of metal blades may have far-reaching consequences on material conditions and industry. I do not understand, however, why "seasoned field workers in the American Indian field" should experience peculiar difficulties in visualizing "conditions in a living culture" and participation in it. So far as I can gather from printed reports, the anthropologist in New Guinea or Africa rarely hunts heads, eats human flesh, or practises sorcery. Watching a Papuan dance is not generically different from watching a Hopi dance. A quantitative difference must be granted: it is, of course, better to see native education without the increments due to missionaries and colonial policy. But in studying beliefs and attitudes, the two types of investigators work in much the same circumstances. No matter how untouched a people may be, their ethos, unlike their barkcloth, is never directly observed, it can be inferred only from their oral self-revelations, and these bring us back to the means of communication.

"USE" AND "VIRTUOSITY"

The topics Dr Mead lists as requiring "maximal use of the native language" are all important, and I should whole-heartedly agree were it

not that her gibes at "virtuosity" bar the interpretation that her phrase is identical with what we commonly understand by a thorough knowledge of an alien tongue. As it is, I am bewildered. On the one hand, we are made to face the subjects of religious or artistic leadership, the variations in the use of language by different individuals, etc. On the other hand, we learn that in studying these matters the demands for active linguistic participation are subnormal, which I find hard to reconcile with the postulation of "maximal use." There are some very shrewd observations on technique, which beginners will find serviceable, but I find nothing to bridge the gap between simple "use" and use that would elicit information on elusive problems of personality.

As it happens, the moot-point is amenable to a simple test. Many anthropologists have traveled abroad, and some of them retain their professional habits on a pleasure trip. I have two sets of relevant observations to offer, having spent a month or so in Spain with little Spanish, and possibly two months in Scandinavia with less Scandinavian. In both cases the minimum of knowledge requisite for transacting the absolutely essential daily routine amazed me. In a hotel where no one knew anything but Castilian I ordered all my meals, and in an office for the bull-ring I easily got my ticket. In Segovia I was apparently marooned by the refusal of a train to stop according to schedule, but a few words with the *guardia civil* and a taxi driver restored me to Madrid.

So far, so good. But not yet sufficiently chastened by Indian experience, I was lured to a comedy bearing the promising title of *Esta noche me emborracho*. There the people about me were in continuous roars of mirth, so that in the interest of rapport I burst into periodic guffaws, but actually I had not the faintest idea what it was all about. On another occasion a great actor was advertised to appear in Perez Galdos' *El abuelo*. This time I prudently bought and read a copy of the play beforehand. Thus I managed to get the general—but alas! so general—drift of what was happening on the stage.

In Spain, then, I "used" Spanish for all I was worth. I even obtained ethnographic material: a fellow-traveler taught me the proper tip for a railroad porter; an enthusiastic neighbor in the *plaza de toros* pooh-poohed the mediocre *Mexican* matador; my guide in the Alhambra poured out proverb after proverb and explained that Charles V had been "*un hombre de muy poco talento*"; and so forth. I had a much better time and found out things otherwise beyond my ken through my "use" of the language of the country. But I did not plumb the depths of the Castilian soul.

My Scandinavian equipment was slighter still. I had a smattering of Danish and Norwegian through some Scandinavian acquaintances, had

skimmed over the grammar of Danish and Dano-Norwegian, and had painfully ploughed through a few books. Also I had with me a Swedish phrase book. The synthetic product proved more useful than might be supposed. I got a haircut at a monoglot barber's in Stockholm, bought a dress tie at a unilingual haberdasher's in Göteborg. I established excellent rapport with the majestic lady who sold newspapers at the Grand Hotel. I traveled to Lapland on a train manned by employees unfamiliar with non-Swedish speech. I interpreted for an American family at Skansen and got them a dish of strawberries. The only embarrassment I recall was at the station in Vos, where a strange legend in *landsmaal* replaced the familiar "*Herrer*" and unwillingness to rupture rapport with the native population counseled patience.

Again, when departing, I had "used" the native language. But I had learnt the really vital things from Scandinavians with whom I could converse freely in German or English.

On no point am I further from Dr Mead than on the matter of "understanding." She rightly considers it more important than speaking; but she implies that it is much the easier of the two, which is flatly the reverse of my experience in all languages I have ever learnt. The difficulties that beset me are phonetic, lexical, idiomatic. If it is merely a matter of smoothing over a social situation, the problem is easy. In Molde I found myself with a unilingual Norwegian fellow-tourist and led off with "I have heard that Ibsen was an apothecary." That thrust could not be parried except by a surrendering affirmative; what amplification accompanied it I have forgotten, and if it went deep I certainly could not have grasped it. But what if I had been a writer on Ibsen pumping his countrymen at large for an ultimate treatise on "Ibsen and the Norwegian Man in the Street?" The trouble I note in speaking any tongue but German and English is that I cannot control the interlocutor's mind and tongue. I start a wonderfully planned conversational gambit, but he frustrates my trick by saying what he pleases in terms he pleases.

There are phonetic difficulties. I had read thousands of pages of French when a query about "*fēlād*" completely stumped me. How was I to know that the speaker meant "*Finlande*"? I had never heard it pronounced in French. I do not feel that Dr Mead's hint about "a feel for categories" without full analysis of meaning is helpful. My visitor was asking about *Finland*, and that my subconscious was groping about among such possibilities as Korea or Albania (*category*: place name) offered small consolation to either of us.

Phonetic difficulties of this sort have, of course, nothing to do with

technical subtleties. But where the change from a close to an open vowel changes "water" into "fire," the difference is very essential for proper understanding. Also there is the fact that in some languages words undergo incredible alterations which, though perfectly regular, still baffle the alien. In order to understand, the learner has to know not one basic form for an idea, but half a dozen. What boots it to memorize Crow *ce'*, to die, if it is likely to meet one in the guise of *ba'ciky*, I die; *sa'hi*, may he die; *su'k*, they died; *bacbi'awak*, I want to die? And would Mezzofanti himself recognize that *ba'mbi*, I shall live, is the perfectly regular future from *iri'*, he lives?

The difficulties are also lexical and idiomatic. In Papeete I picked up the description of a Tahitian doctor. It contained the sentence: "*On leur chuchotait à qui mieux mieux les explications les plus variées.*" Who could guess the sense of the idiom if introduced in casual conversation? Again, what foreigner can follow two Spanish *aficionados* discussing *tauromaquia*?

Are there not exact equivalents to these situations in aboriginal society? What have post-Columbian Plains Indians been talking about among themselves? Conversation might veer from hockey to horses, military societies, buffalo hunting, visions, a prospective dance. Each topic has its own vocabulary. Dr Mead's suggestions as to aids toward comprehension—say, noting physiognomic expression or cramming personal names—are good, but they do not cover the normal contingencies in the spontaneous flow of aboriginal speech. Primed for a dialogue about horse-racing, the unfortunate investigator may be treated to gossip about a sham suicide or the details of a hand-game. And the talk is likely to be shot through with racy phrases he has never heard and cannot possibly understand.

On re-reading Dr Mead's conclusion, however, I am left wondering what the row is about: When all is said and done, it appears that she not only "uses" the vernacular, but also requires "continual help in translating most types of text"; help in the composition of directions to natives; help in the matter of correction of phonetic and synthetic errors; help from intelligent and literate natives, whose records she admits to be generally superior to their employer's. The ethnographers of my generation call those administering such help "interpreters." The matter, then, stands as follows:

Horse-and-buggy Ethnographers

"Used" the native languages before 1922
Used interpreters for really difficult mat-
ters

Do not renounce "virtuosity," i.e., a thor-
ough knowledge of the language, on prin-
ciple.

Stream-lined Ethnographers

"Used" the native languages after 1922
Used interpreters for really difficult mat-
ters

Renounce "virtuosity" as superfluous.

WHAT PRICE "VIRTUOSITY"?

Leaving Dr Mead, who is not interested, those of us who have not renounced a thorough knowledge of our peoples' languages as the ideal aim must ask under what conditions it might be attained. How easy is it to attain thoroughness? Here the great individual variability in learning militates against dogmatic utterances. However, here too, European experience offers useful ideas.

Thoroughness is, of course, not identical with proficiency equal to the native's. Nevertheless, it may aid us to consider limiting concepts. In Europe there are several polyglot, or at least bilingual, areas; and we have all heard about persons who could speak three or four languages equally well. However, I attach more importance to the testimony of that great philanthropist, musician, and physician Albert Schweitzer, who as an Alsatian has spoken both French and German from childhood, in accordance with family tradition always corresponded with his parents in French, and composed some of his books in that language. Nevertheless, he regards only German as his mother tongue. It is, according to Schweitzer, self-deception if a man believes himself to have two mother tongues. The error is exposed as soon as the claimant is asked in which medium he does his sums, in which he is best able to recite the words for kitchen crockery or for the tools in a carpenter's kit. Schweitzer has never found a single individual able to pass this test for absolute bilingualism.⁴

My own experiences unqualifiedly bear out Schweitzer's contention, except that I consider the matter more complex. For the implication that one or the other language must be *uniformly* dominant does not hold. A middle-aged Austro-American, e.g., who came to the United States at the age of ten, still does arithmetic most spontaneously in German, but has to recall the German equivalents for "isosceles," "equilateral," etc. He dreams in both languages, has lapses of memory in both: once he simply could not recollect the word "puddle" until after he had successively thought of *Pfütze*, *Tümpel*, *Lache*. Naturally increments of vocabulary have occurred in one or the other language at a time. But being bilingually minded the subject has an irrepressible urge to complement at once any newly acquired vocable by its equivalent in the other language. *Heckraddampfer* must be added to his vocabulary after he has travelled in a Canadian stern-wheeler; and *Schmalspurbahn* after a trip on a Western narrow-gauge line. The process is Sisyphean; he cannot imagine any one going through it with a third, let alone a fourth language.

⁴ Albert Schweitzer, *Aus meinem Leben und Denken*, (Leipzig, 1932). p. 51f.

Naturally, a lesser acquaintance suffices for ethnographic work, with the same proviso that holds for sinologues, students of Spanish civilization, etc., viz., that they must be able to participate in a real sense in the social life of the people they investigate. If we adhere to the proportion

Ethnographer: Native Culture: : Sinologue: Chinese Civilization, we shall not lose sight of "all the important considerations."

The purely practical point is how long it takes to acquire an adequate knowledge—comparable to that which a good American teacher of German has of *his* subject. Evidently it takes several years of intensive study. But what about individual differences? They are to be reckoned with, but with some regard to past human experience. Having seen eight-foot circus freaks, we credit accounts of seven-foot Wahuma chiefs—not of the twenty-foot Polynesians reported by some early travellers. So I cannot bring myself to believe on the basis of my experience that even an unusually gifted person could achieve thoroughness in less than approximately a year. It seems to me the absolute limit for *Homo sapiens* as I have known him.

The specious plea that some languages are easy seems to me unworthy of discussion. They may lack difficult phonemes, paradigmatic refinements, involved construction, but invariably generations of non-rational human beings have thrown monkey-wrenches into the beginner's task. On the basis of pathetic efforts at French, Spanish, the Scandinavian languages, Shoshone, Crow, Greek and Latin, I lay down the postulate: *No language is easy*. Danish lacks the Swedish tones, but instead it has glottal catches. Crow is without the noun-incorporation of Iroquois, but what contractions!

Few of us are permitted by circumstances to settle with a tribe for several years merely in order to acquire the language and then to set about for the serious task of studying the culture. And there are many tribes to be studied in the immediate future. Most of us, then, not from choice but from necessity, shall have to compromise and do the next best thing: learn what we can and "use" it; record as many texts as we can; and for the rest model our procedure on that of our professors of comparative literature. They cannot, as a rule, add Russian and Chinese to the conventional linguistic equipment—they use the best translations available. We use interpreters, not because we like to, but because we have no other choice.

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