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AMERICAN LANGUAGES,
AND WHY WE SHOULD
STUDY THEM

Daniel Brinton
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Daniel G. Brinton

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AMERICAN LANGUAGES, AND WHY WE SHOULD STUDY THEM

Mr. President, etc.:

I appear before you to-night to enter a plea for one of the most neglected branches of learning, for a study usually considered hopelessly dry and unproductive, – that of American aboriginal languages.

It might be thought that such a topic, in America and among Americans, would attract a reasonably large number of students. The interest which attaches to our native soil and to the homes of our ancestors – an interest which it is the praiseworthy purpose of this Society to inculcate and cherish – this interest might be supposed to extend to the languages of those nations who for uncounted generations possessed the land which we have occupied relatively so short a time.

This supposition would seem the more reasonable in view of the fact that in one sense these languages have not died out

among us. True, they are no longer media of intercourse, but they survive in thousands of geographical names all over our land. In the State of Connecticut alone there are over six hundred, and even more in Pennsylvania.

Certainly it would be a most legitimate anxiety which should direct itself to the preservation of the correct forms and precise meanings of these numerous and peculiarly national designations. One would think that this alone would not fail to excite something more than a languid curiosity in American linguistics, at least in our institutions of learning and societies for historical research.

Such a motive applies to the future as well as to the past. We have yet thousands of names to affix to localities, ships, cars, country-seats, and the like. Why should we fall back on the dreary repetition of the Old World nomenclature? I turn to a Gazetteer of the United States, and I find the name Athens repeated 34 times to as many villages and towns in our land, Rome and Palmyra each 29 times, Troy 58 times, not to speak of Washington, which is entered for 331 different places in this Gazetteer!

What poverty of invention does this manifest!

Evidently the forefathers of our christened West were, like Sir John Falstaff, at a loss where a commodity of good names was to be had.

Yet it lay immediately at their hands. The native tongues supply an inexhaustible store of sonorous, appropriate, and

unused names. As has well been said by an earlier writer, "No class of terms could be applied more expressive and more American. The titles of the Old World certainly need not be copied, when those that are fresh and fragrant with our natal soil await adoption."¹

That this study has received so slight attention I attribute to the comparatively recent understanding of the value of the study of languages in general, and more particularly to the fact that no one, so far as I know, has set forth the purposes for which we should investigate these tongues, and the results which we expect to reach by means of them. This it is my present purpose to attempt, so far as it can be accomplished in the scope of an evening address.

The time has not long passed when the only good reasons for studying a language were held to be either that we might thereby acquaint ourselves with its literature; or that certain business, trading, or political interests might be subserved; or that the nation speaking it might be made acquainted with the blessings of civilization and Christianity. These were all good and sufficient reasons, but I cannot adduce any one of them in support of my plea to-night; for the languages I shall speak of have no literature; all transactions with their people can be carried on as well or better in European tongues; and, in fact, many of these people are no longer in existence. They have died out or amalgamated with others. What I have to argue for is the study of the dead

¹ H. R. Schoolcraft.

languages of extinct and barbarous tribes.

You will readily see that my arguments must be drawn from other considerations than those of immediate utility. I must seek them in the broader fields of ethnology and philosophy; I must appeal to your interest in man as a race, as a member of a common species, as possessing in all his families and tribes the same mind, the same soul. It was the proud prerogative of Christianity first to proclaim this great truth, to break down the distinctions of race and the prejudices of nationalities, in order to erect upon their ruins that catholic temple of universal brotherhood which excludes no man as a stranger or an alien. After eighteen hundred years of labor, science has reached that point which the religious instinct divined, and it is in the name of science that I claim for these neglected monuments of man's powers that attention which they deserve.

Anthropology is the science which studies man as a species; *Ethnology*, that which studies the various nations which make up the species. To both of these the science of Linguistics is more and more perceived to be a powerful, an indispensable auxiliary. Through it we get nearer to the real man, his inner self, than by any other avenue of approach, and it needs no argument to show that nothing more closely binds men into a social unit than a common language. Without it, indeed, there can be no true national unity. The affinities of speech, properly analyzed and valued, are our most trustworthy guides in tracing the relationship and descent of nations.

If this is true in general, it is particularly so in the ethnology of America. Language is almost our only clue to discover the kinship of those countless scattered hordes who roamed the forests of this broad continent. Their traditions are vague or lost, written records they had none, their customs and arts are misleading, their religions misunderstood, their languages alone remain to testify to a oneness of blood often seemingly repudiated by an internecine hostility.

I am well aware of the limits which a wise caution assigns to the employment of linguistics in ethnology, and I am only too familiar with the many foolish, unscientific attempts to employ it with reference to the American race. But in spite of all this, I repeat that it is the surest and almost our only means to trace the ancient connection and migrations of nations in America.

Through its aid alone we have reached a positive knowledge that most of the area of South America, including the whole of the West Indies, was occupied by three great families of nations, not one of which had formed any important settlement on the northern continent. By similar evidence we know that the tribe which greeted Penn, when he landed on the site of this city where I now speak, was a member of one vast family, – the great Algonkin stock, – whose various clans extended from the palmetto swamps of Carolina to the snow-clad hills of Labrador, and from the easternmost cape of Newfoundland to the peaks of the Rocky Mountains, over 20° of latitude and 60° of longitude. We also know that the general trend of migration in the northern

continent has been from north to south, and that this is true not only of the more savage tribes, as the Algonkins, Iroquois, and Athapascas, but also of those who, in the favored southern lands, approached a form of civilization, the Aztecs, the Mayas, and the Quiche. These and many minor ethnologic facts have already been obtained by the study of American languages.

But such external information is only a small part of what they are capable of disclosing. We can turn them, like the reflector of a microscope, on the secret and hidden mysteries of the aboriginal man, and discover his inmost motives, his impulses, his concealed hopes and fears, those that gave rise to his customs and laws, his schemes of social life, his superstitions and his religions.

The life-work of that eminent antiquary, the late Mr. Lewis H. Morgan, was based entirely on linguistics. He attempted, by an exhaustive analysis of the terms of relationship in American tribes, to reconstruct their primitive theory of the social compact, and to extend this to the framework of ancient society in general. If, like most students enamored of an idea, he carried its application too far, the many correct results he obtained will ever remain as prized possessions of American ethnology.

Personal names, family names, titles, forms of salutation, methods of address, terms of endearment, respect, and reproach, words expressing the emotions, these are what infallibly reveal the daily social family life of a community, and the way in which its members regard one another. They are precisely as

correct when applied to the investigation of the American race as elsewhere, and they are the more valuable just there, because his deep-seated distrust of the white invaders – for which, let us acknowledge, he had abundant cause – led the Indian to practise concealment and equivocation on these personal topics.

In no other way can the history of the development of his arts be reached. You are doubtless aware that diligent students of the Aryan languages have succeeded in faithfully depicting the arts and habits of that ancient community in which the common ancestors of Greek and Roman, Persian and Dane, Brahmin and Irishman dwelt together as of one blood and one speech. This has been done by ascertaining what household words are common to all these tongues, and therefore must have been in use among the primeval horde from which they are all descended. The method is conclusive, and yields positive results. There is no reason why it should not be addressed to American languages, and we may be sure that it would be most fruitful. How valuable it would be to take even a few words, as maize, tobacco, pipe, bow, arrow, and the like, each representing a widespread art or custom, and trace their derivations and affinities through the languages of the whole continent! We may be sure that striking and unexpected results would be obtained.

Similar lines of research suggest themselves in other directions. You all know what a fuss has lately been made about the great Pyramid as designed to preserve the linear measure of the ancient Egyptians. The ascertaining of such measures

is certainly a valuable historical point, as all artistic advance depends upon the use of instruments of precision. Mathematical methods have been applied to American architectural remains for the same purpose. But the study of words of measurement and their origin is an efficient auxiliary. By comparing such in the languages of three architectural people, the Aztecs of Mexico, the Mayas of Yucatan, and the Cakchiquel of Guatemala, I have found that the latter used the span and the two former the foot, and that this foot was just about one-fiftieth less than the ordinary foot of our standard. Certainly this is a useful result.

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