

1 The language landscape

1.1 Introduction

Historically, a conventionalized and linguistically enriched signed language emerged as a means of communication between various American Indian language groups – a signed **lingua franca**. In order to better understand how signed language came to function this way and serve as a widespread alternative to spoken language communication among North American Indian nations, I will first review some of the geographical, historical, and cultural contexts involved. The linguistic diversity, various naming practices and preferences of indigenous groups are also considered.

Today, fewer native individuals are learning to speak American Indian languages, including the traditional ways of signing. Consequently, most American Indian spoken and signed languages are now endangered. This chapter provides an overview of North American Indian Sign Language, its widespread use in former times, present status as an endangered language, and potential for revitalization in the future.

1.2 The expanse of Native North America

The North American continent was once an area of extreme linguistic and cultural diversity, with hundreds of distinct and mutually unintelligible languages spoken by the native populations. In contrast to Europe, which has only three **language families** (Indo-European, Finno-Ugric, and Basque), the North American language families number over fifty, varying in size and extent. For example, the Algic or Algonquian linguistic family of approximately thirty languages spans most of the east coast of North America westward to the Pacific. Zuni, a **language isolate**, has no known relatives at all and is found only in the Southwest. The vast majority of the known North American languages are located west of the Rocky Mountains and Great Plains (see Mithun 1999/2001: 1).

The native groups of the Great Plains geographic area also used the sign language variety that is the focus of this volume. Although members of these

2 Hand Talk: Sign Language among American Indian Nations



Figure 1 Map of cultural areas of Native North America, from D. H. Ubelaker (ed.), *Handbook of North American Indians (HNAI)*, vol. 3: *Environment, Origins, and Population* (2006: ix). By permission of the Smithsonian Institution, National Anthropological Archives

groups have been identified as the most adept users of sign language, it was also documented in several other language families outside (although in contact with) the Great Plains area, such as, the Plateau/Great Basin and Southwestern cultural areas (Davis 2006a,b, 2007).

1.3 Endangered languages

Even the world's leading historical linguistic scholars of North American Indian languages (most notably, Campbell 2000, Goddard 1996a, and Mithun 1999/2001) do not know exactly how many Native American languages there are all together, nor how many there have been that have now vanished. Many native languages have disappeared and many others are endangered – i.e., they will become extinct without revitalization. At the same time, many of the surviving native languages are still known, used, and learned by people of all ages. Estimates from respected linguists about the number of previous (extinct) and

surviving (extant) Native American languages have ranged from as few as 400 prior to the arrival of Europeans to more than 2,500 (reported in Campbell 2000: 3).

Mithun (1999/2001: 2) writes that some of the native languages are “spoken skillfully by people of all ages.” For example, there are more than 100,000 speakers of Navajo, although fewer children are learning Navajo every year. However, most American Indian languages are endangered, with over a third spoken at the time of initial European contact gone and another quarter now only remembered by a few elderly speakers. By the end of the twenty-first century nearly all are likely to disappear (Mithun 1999/2001). For additional linguistic descriptions of North American Indian languages and language families, see Campbell (2000), Goddard (1996a), and Mithun (1999/2001).

1.3.1 *Language dominance and loss*

Across North America, a vast number of place names – states, counties, cities, towns, rivers, mountains – bear witness to the original native inhabitants and to their many languages. For example, the names of most US states and major geographical sites are Indian toponyms. Paradoxically, the US, once host to so many different native languages, is now a predominately English-speaking country and is relatively monolingual compared to other nations of the world.

Unfortunately, Native American languages, signed and spoken, have often-times been ignored and neglected, and even actively discouraged through policies and practices that prohibited the use of one’s native language in educational and employment settings. Consequently, we find that most native languages are currently classified as endangered or that they have actually vanished over time. Mithun (1999/2001: 2) clearly spells out what it means to lose a language:

When a language disappears, the most intimate aspects of culture can disappear as well: fundamental ways of organizing experience into concepts, of relating ideas to each other, of interacting with other people. The more conscious genres of verbal art are also usually lost: traditional ritual, oratory, myth, legends, and even humor. Speakers commonly remark that when they speak a different language, they say different things and even think different thoughts. The loss of a language represents a definitive separation of a people from its heritage. It also represents an irreparable loss for us all, the loss of opportunities to glimpse alternative ways of making sense of the human experience.

1.4 **Issues of naming**

Evan Pritchard, descendent of the Micmac people of the Algonquin Nations and author of *Native New Yorkers: The Legacy of the Algonquin People of New York*, has written: “By naming something, we take possession of it; by losing that name, we lose possession of it” (2002: 15). Although naming should be the

4 Hand Talk: Sign Language among American Indian Nations

province of the native groups themselves, native communities have different naming practices and preferences, and scholarly accounts sometimes present different terminology and labeling conventions, often specific to each academic discipline. The following section addresses some naming practices and preferences (in-group, out-group, and between-groups) characteristic of multi-lingual/multicultural communities, and the terminology generally followed in American Indian Language studies (see Campbell 2000; Goddard 1996a, and Mithun 1999/2001).

1.4.1 Native nomenclature

Various terms are used in the literature to refer to the indigenous peoples of the Americas. “Native American” may be considered politically correct by some; however, members of these groups generally call themselves *Indians* (cf. Karttunen 1994). The term “North American Indian” is sometimes necessary to distinguish the indigenous peoples of North America from those of Central and South America. The specific tribal affiliation or cultural-linguistic group is acknowledged whenever possible, e.g., Assiniboine, Blackfoot, Eastern Cherokee, Inuit, Lakota, Northern Cheyenne, etc.¹

One also finds different labeling conventions according to a specific community, orientation, or discipline. Naturally, it’s best to ask the individuals themselves what their naming preferences are, and to respect the traditional practices of native groups. Campbell (2000: 6) points out that “in a growing number of Native American groups, the preferred self-designations, or ‘native’ names, differ from those ingrained in the popular and professional literature,” and he recommends taking a balanced approach to describing and classifying native languages. While it is essential to accurately reference the traditional names of groups and languages found in the original historical writings and research literature, the newer self-designations of native groups are used whenever possible.

1.4.2 First Nations

In the preface to the *Encyclopedia of Native American Tribes*, Waldman (2000: vii) writes that “many contemporary Native Americans prefer the term *nation* rather than *tribe*, because it implies the concept of political sovereignty, indicating that their people have goals and rights like other nations.” The term “First Nations” is an official designation of Canadian Indian language and cultural groups. The terms *nation* and *culture* are generally preferred over *tribe*, which refers to one village or clan. The justification for sovereign American Indian groups to be considered *nations* has been maintained into the twenty-first

century by leaders and members of native communities. The case has been well stated by Stuart (1987: 3):

American Indian communities have a unique political relationship to the United States, enjoying what has come to be called a “government to government” relationship with the federal government. They are sovereign entities, which enjoy some, if not all, of the attributes of sovereignty. They are also distinct cultural communities, identifying themselves as separate political and national communities within the United States. Thus, American Indian communities can truly be viewed as “nations within a nation.”

In recognition of the historical sovereign status of American Indian groups, the term “nation” is used in the title of this book.

The issue of naming, a recurring theme in the study of Native American cultures and languages, is complicated for a variety of reasons. First, for each language there are likely to be several names, one given in each neighboring language, including European colonial languages. Second, many language names are either non-uniquely descriptive (e.g., “black feet” or “principal people”) or marked by confusion about tribal and cross-cultural relationships, so one name may be applied to what are in fact multiple languages. Third, there has been a recent trend among native communities to establish new names for their languages (e.g., what had historically been called *Navajo* is now called *Diné*). In part this is due to the typically pejorative nature of the historical names used to label language (e.g., “foreign” or “gibberish”). If these confounding factors were not confusing enough, there is the additional factor of inaccurate and imprecise scholarship in historical documents, including misidentification of languages and tribes and a wealth of alternate and archaic spellings. Due to the inaccuracy or vagueness of some naming conventions found in some historical accounts, it is often difficult and sometimes impossible to maintain a high degree of certainty in language identification, description, and classification based on some accounts. In writing this book, I have aimed to respect and promote the interests and wishes of native groups, while maintaining historical and linguistic accuracy.

1.5 North American Indian signed language

Depending on cultural and historical contexts, American Indian signed language has been called Hand Talk, Sign Talk, Indian Sign Language, and the Indian Language of Signs. These sign language varieties are sometimes collectively referred to as “North American Indian Sign Language.”² Wurtzburg and Campbell (1995: 160) defined this variety of sign language as “a conventionalized gesture language of the sort later attested among the Plains and neighboring areas.” Historically, sign language emerged in these contexts as a way to make communication possible between individuals speaking many

6 Hand Talk: Sign Language among American Indian Nations

different mother tongues. Sign language also served various social and discourse functions within native communities. Anthropologists and linguistic scholars have reported that sign language was used to varying degrees across the major cultural areas of Native North America (see Campbell 2000; Davis 2005a, 2006a,b, 2007; Davis and Supalla 1995; Farnell 1995; McKay-Cody 1997; Mithun 1999/2001; Taylor 1978, 1981, 1996; Umiker-Sebeok and Sebeok 1978; West 1960).

1.5.1 *The language corpus*

The language corpus of this book is based on documentation and description of sign language among American Indian groups from historical and contemporary sources, including my own ethnographic fieldwork and archival research. This collection of historical and contemporary data demonstrates that sign language has been documented within at least one dozen distinct North American Indian spoken language families – *representing forty different linguistic groups*. Certainly, signing may have been used by members of more distinct spoken language groups than these, but the use of sign language has been documented in at least these American Indian groups. The sources of historical and current documentation of North American Indian Sign Language are presented in table 1.1.

For current descriptions of North American Indian sign language varieties listed in table 1.1, see also Davis (2005, 2006a,b, 2007), Davis and McKay-Cody (2010), Davis and Supalla (1995), Farnell (1995), Goff-Paris and Wood (2002), Kelly and McGregor (2003), and McKay-Cody (1997).

1.5.2 *Plains Indian Sign Language*

Although sign language was evidently used across the major North American Indian cultural areas, the best-documented cases involved members of the Great Plains Indian cultural groups and the native groups bordering the Great Plains geographic area. *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*, 15th edition (Gordon 2005) classifies the sign language variety used within the Plains cultural and linguistic groups of the United States and Canada as *Plains Indian Sign Language* (PISL hereafter). Traditionally, PISL served various social and discourse functions both within and between native communities of the Great Plains cultural areas.

While signed language functioned as an alternative to spoken language, it was also learned as a primary language by some deaf members of these native communities (Davis 2005a, 2006a,b, 2007; Davis and Supalla 1995; McKay-Cody 1997). I will describe the circumstances that led to the widespread use of PISL, which was documented for at least several generations of Indian signers,

Table 1.1 *Historic and current sign language use among North American Indians*

Language phyla and group	Published sources
I. ALGIC = ALGONQUIAN FAMILY	Campbell (2000: 153), Mithun (1999/2001: 327) Davis (2005a, 2006a, 2007)
1. Arapaho = Atsina	Clark (1885), Mallery (1880b, 1881), Scott (1934)
2. Blackfoot = Blood = Piegan	Mallery (1880b, 1881), Sanderville (1934), Scott (1934), Weatherwax, 2002
3. Cheyenne	Burton (1862), Mallery (1880b, 1881), McKay-Cody (1997), Scott (1934), Seton (1918)
4. Cree	Long (1823), Mallery (1880b, 1881), Scott (1934)
5. Fox = Sauk-Kickapoo	Long (1823), Mallery (1880b, 1881)
6. Ojibwa = Ojibwe = Chippeway	Hofsinde (1956), Long (1823), Mallery (1880b, 1881)
7. Shawnee	Burton (1862), Harrington (1938)
II. ATHABASKAN-TLINGIT FAMILY	Campbell (2000: 111), Mithun (1999/2001: 346) Davis and Supalla (1995)
8. Navajo = Diné	Fronval and Dubois (1985), Hadley (1891), Harrington (1938), Mallery (1880b, 1881), Scott (1934)
9. Plains Apache = Kiowa-Apache	(Mallery 1881)
11. Apachean	Mallery (1880b, 1881)
12. Chiricahua-Mescalero	Scott (1934)
13. Sarcee = Sarsi	
III. SIOUAN-CATAWBAN FAMILY	Campbell (2000: 140), Mithun (1999/2001: 501)
14. Crow	Burton (1862), Mallery (1880b, 1881), Scott (1934)
15. Hidatsa = Gros Ventre	Mallery (1880b, 1881), Scott (1934)
16. Mandan	Scott (1934)
17. Dakotan = Sioux = Lak(h)ota	Burton (1862), Farnell, 1995; Long (1823), Mallery (1880b, 1881), Seton (1918), Tomkins (1926)
18. Assiniboine = Stoney = Alberta	Farnell (1995), Mallery (1880b, 1881), Scott (1934)
19. Omaha-Ponca	Long (1823), Mallery (1880b, 1881)
20. Osage = Kansa	Harrington (1938), Long (1823)
21. Oto = Missouri = Iowa	Long (1823), Mallery (1880b, 1881)
IV. CADDOAN FAMILY	Campbell (2000: 142), Mithun (1999/2001: 369) Harrington (1938)
22. Caddo	Harrington (1938), Mallery (1880b, 1881)
23. Wichita	Burton (1862), Harrington (1938), Mallery (1880b, 1881), Long (1823)
24. Pawnee	Mallery (1880b, 1881), Scott (1934)
25. Arikara = Ree	
V. KIWAN-TANOAN FAMILY	Campbell (2000: 138), Mithun (1999/2001: 441)
26. Kiowa	Fronval and Dubois (1985), Hadley (1891), Harrington (1938), Mallery (1880b, 1881)
27. Tonoan = Tewa = Hopi-Tewa = Tano	Goddard (1979), Mallery (1880b, 1881)

(cont.)

Table 1.1 (*cont.*)

Language phyla and group	Published sources
VI. UTO-AZTECAN FAMILY	Campbell (2000: 134), Mithun (1999/2001: 539)
28. Shoshone = Shoshoni	Burton (1862), Mallery (1880b, 1881), Scott (1934)
29. Comanche	Harrington (1938), Mallery (1880b, 1881)
30. Ute = Southern Paiute	Burton (1862), Mallery (1880b, 1881)
31. Northern Paiute = Bannock = Banak	Mallery (1880b, 1881)
VII. SAHAPTIAN FAMILY	Campbell (2000: 120), Mithun (1999/2001: 477)
32. Nez Perce = Nimipu = Chopunnish	Scott (1934)
33. Sahaptian	Mallery (1880b, 1881)
VIII. SALISHAN FAMILY	Campbell (2000: 117), Mithun (1999/2001: 485)
34. Coeur d' Alene	Teit (1930)
35. Flathead = Spokane = Kalispel = Séliš	Davis (2005a, 2006a, 2007), Scott (1934)
36. Shuswap, British Columbia	Boas (1890/1978)
IX. ESKIMO-ALEUT FAMILY	Campbell (2000: 108), Mithun (1999/2001: 400)
37. Inuit = Iñupiaq-Inuktitut	Hoffman (1895)
X. IROQUOIAN FAMILY	Campbell (2000: 151), Mithun (1999/2001: 418)
38. Huron-Wyandot	Mallery (1880b, 1881)
XI. ZUNI (language isolate)	Campbell (2000: 139), Mithun (1999/2001: 583)
39. Zuni = Zuñi	Mallery (1880b, 1881)
XII. KERESAN = KERES	Campbell (2000: 138), Mithun (1999/2001: 438)
New Mexico Pueblo varieties	
40. Laguna Pueblo	Goldfrank (1923)
Keresan Pueblo	Kelly and McGregor (2003)

who were mostly hearing. The prolonged and intensive language and cultural contact between the indigenous peoples of these areas resulted in a unique range of sociolinguistic consequences, which are further discussed in chapters 6 and 7. The linguistic features of PISL are described in chapter 8. Cross-**modality** effects and other outcomes of language contact are described in chapter 9. First, I will consider the environment in which PISL – the best-documented case of indigenous sign language – emerged and flourished across North America.

1.5.3 The environment

The Great Plains cultural area was centrally located on the North American continent and spanned over one and a half million square miles (4.3 million square kilometers), an area similar to that of the European Union’s twenty-seven member states combined. This enormous geographic expanse stretched

north to south for more than two thousand miles from the North Saskatchewan River in Canada to the Rio Grande in Mexico. The east–west boundaries were approximately the Mississippi–Missouri valleys and the foothills of the Rocky Mountains.

At the same time, it should be pointed out that the placement of cultural-linguistic boundaries generally recognized by linguists and anthropologists is based on numerous cultural, linguistic, and historical factors. The boundaries do not imply the existence of only a few sharply distinct ways of life on the continent. On the contrary, in the *Handbook of North American Indians*, Washburn (1988: viii) writes that “in reality, each group exhibits a unique combination of particular cultural features, while all neighboring peoples are always similar in some ways and dissimilar in others.”

Along similar lines, Waldman (2000: 32–33) points out that the modern cultural areas “are not finite and absolute boundaries, but simply helpful educational devices” and “that tribal territories were often vague and changing, with great movement among the tribes and the passing of cultural traits from one area to the next; and that people of the same language family sometimes lived in different cultural areas, even in some instances at opposite ends of the continent.” Thus, it was this environment of linguistic and cultural diversity, and prolonged language contact that led to the development of lingua francas (Campbell 2000; Goddard 1996a; Mithun 1999/2001; Taylor 1981, 1996).

1.5.4 Sign language as an Indian lingua franca

The use of sign language among native groups was so prevalent and widespread in previous times that it served as a lingua franca. For example, Campbell (2000: 10) writes that “the sign language as a whole became the lingua franca of the Great Plains, and it spread from there as far as British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba.” In a comprehensive study of Indian lingua francas, Taylor (1981: 175) writes:

When persons speaking mutually unintelligible languages are in more or less permanent contact, some means is always found to bridge the communication gap. The most straightforward solution is for some or all of the parties to learn the language of the other parties to the contact. In this case, communication is effected through the bilingualism of some or all of the participants. Speakers of mutually unintelligible American Indian languages also often either adopted or developed a third language used largely or only to mediate contact. Such a language is called a lingua franca.

Based on documented longevity and geographic spread, Taylor (1981) identified and described three major Indian lingua francas: Mobilian (a variety of Choctaw-Chickasaw) of the Southeast, Chinook of the Northwest, and Plains Sign Language.³ Goddard (1979, 1996a) and Taylor (1996) have distinguished

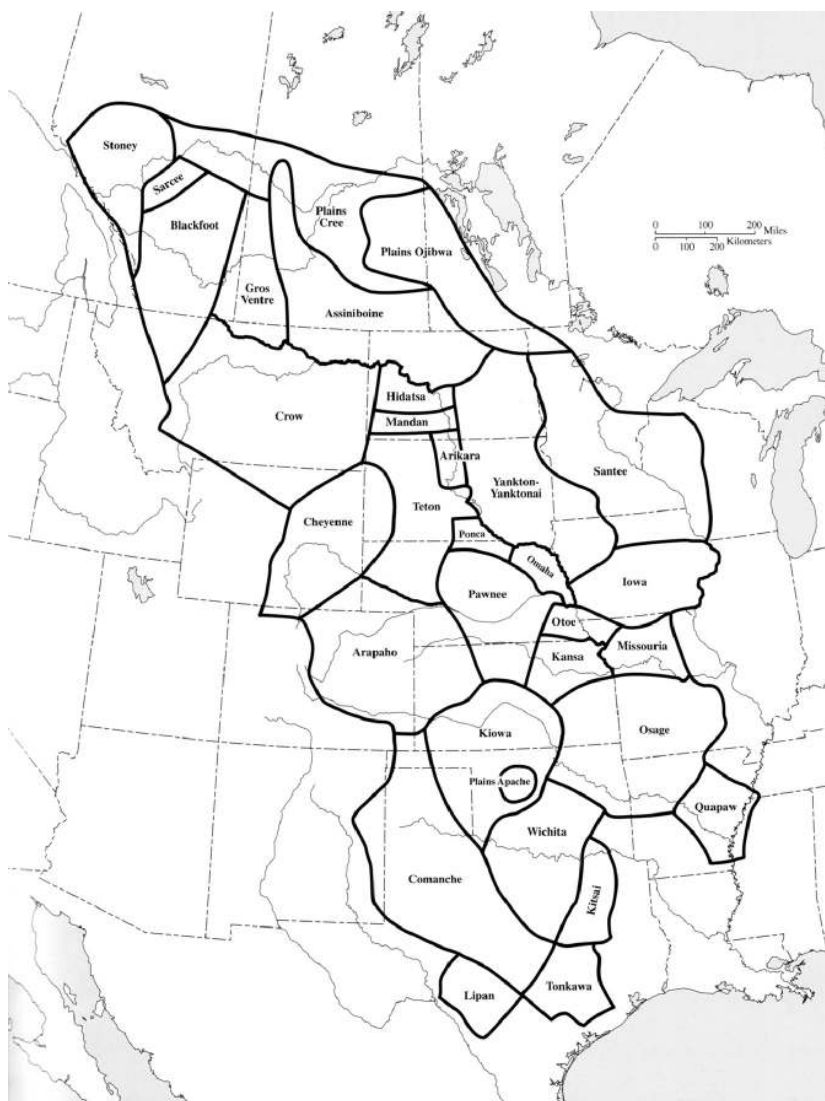


Figure 2 Key to Plains tribal territories, from W. C. Sturtevant (ed.), *HNAI*, vol. 13, *Plains* (2001: ix). By permission of the Smithsonian Institution, National Anthropological Archives

Note: The Teton region of North and South Dakota is predominately Dakotan/Lakhotan (see Mithun 1999/2001: map 5).