

**Native American Languages**, indigenous languages of the native peoples of North, Middle, and South America. The precise number of languages originally spoken cannot be known, since many disappeared before they were documented. In North America, around 300 distinct, mutually unintelligible languages were spoken when Europeans arrived. Of those, 187 survive today, but few will continue far into the 21st century, since children are no longer learning the vast majority of these. In Middle America (Mexico and Central America) about 300 languages have been identified, of which about 140 are still spoken. South American languages have been the least studied. Around 1500 languages are known to have been spoken, but only about 350 are still in use. These, too are disappearing rapidly.

### **Classification**

A major task facing scholars of Native American languages is their classification into language families. (A language family consists of all languages that have evolved from a single ancestral language, as English, German, French, Russian, Greek, Armenian, Hindi, and others have all evolved from Proto-Indo-European.) Because of the vast number of languages spoken in the Americas, and the gaps in our information about many of them, the task of classifying these languages is a challenging one.

In 1891, Major John Wesley Powell proposed that the languages of North America constituted 58 independent families, mainly on the basis of superficial vocabulary resemblances. At the same time Daniel Brinton posited 80 families for South America. These two schemes form the basis of subsequent classifications. In 1929 Edward Sapir tentatively proposed grouping these families into superstocks, 6 in North America and 15 in Middle America. In 1987 the American linguist Joseph Greenberg hypothesized that all of the languages of the Americas could be further grouped into just three super-families: Eskimo-Aleut, Na-Dene, and Amerind (containing the majority of languages, arranged in 11 branches).

Several kinds of work have shown that these hypothesized remote relationships must be reconsidered. More has been learned about the languages themselves. Progress has been made in distinguishing similarities which are due to borrowing of vocabulary and grammar (contact among speakers) from similarities due to inheritance from a common original ancestor. Methods of classification have been refined. The classification most scholars support today has about 55 independent language families in North America, 10 in Middle America, and about 115 in South America, that is, about 180 distinct language families. Some of these families may in the future be shown to be remotely related to each other, but such ancient relationships are not yet demonstrable on the basis of evidence currently available.

### **Language Families in the United States and Canada**

Moving from east to west in North America, we see increasing genetic diversity. While there are just 3 major families in the east, there are 20 in California alone. The Algic family (which includes the large Algonquian branch) stretches from Labrador (Micmac) south into present North Carolina (Pamlico) and west across the Plains into Alberta and Montana and ultimately into California (Wiyot, Yurok). Because they were among the first encountered by Europeans and recorded, Algonquian languages are among the better known languages of North America, including also

Maliseet-Passamaquoddy, Eastern and Western Abenaki, Massachusetts, Narragansett, Mohegan, Mahican, Munsee Delaware, Unami Delaware, Nanticoke, and Powhatan in the east; and Shawnee, Fox-Sauk-Kickapoo, Potawatomi, Ojibwa, Cree, Menominee, Cheyenne, Arapaho-Atsina, and Blackfoot on the Plains. Another major family in the Northeast is Iroquoian, with Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Susquehannock, Cayuga, Seneca, Huron, and Tuscarora in what is now New York, Quebec, and Ontario; and Cherokee in North Carolina and Oklahoma. In the southeast is the Muskogean family, with Choctaw-Chickasaw, Alabama, Koasati, Apalachee, Hitchiti-Mikasuki, and Creek. In the 19th century, many Muskogean speakers, as well as several others such as Yuchi, and Cherokee, were forced from their southeastern homelands to Oklahoma.

Language isolates of the east, not known to be genetically related to any other languages, include the extinct Beothuk of Newfoundland, the Gulf languages Natchez, Atakapa, Chitimacha, and Tunica, and Timucua in Florida.

On the prairies are languages of the Siouan family, which extends from modern Alberta and Saskatchewan south from Montana and the Dakotas into Arkansas and Mississippi, with some members in the Carolinas. Among the Siouan languages are Crow, Hidatsa, Mandan, Sioux (Dakota, Lakota), Assiniboin, Stoney, Winnebago, Chiwere, Omaha-Ponca, Kansa, Quapaw, Tutelo, Ofo, Biloxi, Tutelo and Catawba. Yuchi, perhaps remotely related to Siouan, is in Oklahoma. Another major family of the Plains is Caddoan, with Caddo, Wichita, Kitsai, Pawnee, and its dialect Arikara. The Kiowa-Tanoan languages (Kiowa, Taos, Picuris, Southern Tiwa, Tewa, Jemez) are spoken in Oklahoma and New Mexico pueblos. The Keresan dialects Acoma, Laguna, Zia, Santa Ana, San Felipe, Santo Domingo, and Cochiti, are all in New Mexico as well, as is the isolate Zuni. Several languages, now all extinct, were first encountered in Texas, among them Tonkawa, Coahuilteco, and Karankawa.

The Uto-Aztecan languages are spoken over a wide area from Oregon in the northwest (Northern Paiute) to Central America in the south (Pipil in Guatemala and El Salvador, Nicarao in Nicaragua), and from Oklahoma in the east (Comanche) to the California coast (Luiseño). Among the other languages in the family are Mono, Northern Paiute, Panamint, Comanche, Kawaiisu, Ute, T batulabal, Kitanemuk, Serrano, Gabrielino, Cupeño, Cahuilla, Hopi, and O'odham (Papago, Pima), as well as several in Mexico, such as Tarahumara, Cora, Huichol, and Nahuatl, also called Aztec.

Stretching across the north from Greenland, over northern Canada into Alaska, the Aleutian Islands, and finally Siberia, is the Eskimo-Aleut family. The Athabaskan-Eyak-Tlingit family extends from Alaska to New Mexico. Eyak and Tlingit are in Alaska. Within the Athabaskan branch, the largest and most diverse group of languages, spoken in Alaska and western Canada, includes Ahtna, Babine, Beaver, Carrier, Chilcotin, Chipewyan, Dogrib, Gwich'in, Han, Ingalik, Kaska, Kolchan, Koyukon, Sarcee, Sekani, Slavey, Tagish, Tahltan, Tannacross, Tanaina, Upper Tanana, Lower Tanana, and others. The Pacific Athabaskan languages, now mostly extinct, are in western Oregon and California and include Coquille, Upper Umpqua, Tututni, Galice, Chasta Costa, Cetco, Tolowa, Chilula, Hupa, Whilkut, Mattole, Lassik, Wailaki, Sinkiyone, and Kato. The Apachean branch, in the southwest, includes Navajo, Kiowa Apache, Western Apache, Jicarilla, Lipan, and Mescalero-Chiracahua. The classification of Haida, spoken in British Columbia and Alaska, is disputed; it is probably an isolate.

Other major families of the Northwest Coast region are Tsimshian, Wakashan (Kwawala, Nootka, and others), Chimakuan (Quileute, Chemakum), and Salishan (Bella Coola, Comox, Pentlatch, Sechelt, Squamish, Halkomelem, Nooksack, Northern Straits, Clallam, Lushootseed, Twana, Quinault, Lower Chehalis, Upper Chehalis, Cowlitz, Tillamook, Lillooet, Thompson, Shuswap, Columbian, Okanagan, Kalispel, and Coeur d'Alene, as well as the isolate Kutenai. Along the Columbia River is the Chinookan family, and in Oregon are Takelma, Kalapuya, Alsea, Yaquina, Siuslaw, the Coos languages Miluk and Hanis, Klamath, Cayuse, Molala, and the Sahaptian languages Nez Perce and Sahaptin. In California are a number of families, including Shastan, Palaihnihan, Yanan, Wintun, Maidun, Pomoan, Miwok-Costanoan (Utian), Yokuts, Chumashan, and Yuman (which extends from the coast around San Diego south into Mexico and eastward into Arizona), in addition to the Karuk, Chimariko, Washo, Yukian (Yuki and Wappo), Esselen, and Salinan languages.

North American languages with the largest numbers of speakers include Navajo with around 100,000, Cree (nearly 70,000), Inuit (75,000), Ojibwa (nearly 50,000), Central Alaskan Yup'ik (20,000), Sioux (nearly 20,000), Creek (nearly 18,000), Tohono O'odham (nearly 15,000), and Choctaw (11,000). Of all the languages native to North America, only the West Greenlandic dialect of Inuktitut is not endangered. Even Navajo is being learned by a sharply declining proportion of children every year. The majority of North American languages are spoken only by elderly persons, often no more than a handful.

### **Language Families in Mexico and Central America**

Some 15 families of languages are native to Mexico and Central America, though some of these lap over into North America, such as Uto-Aztecan, and South America, such as Chibchan and Maipurean.

Otomanguean is a very old family with about 30 languages, extending from Chichimeco in northern Mexico to the now extinct Subtiaba and Mangue in Nicaragua. Branches of the family include Oto-Pamean (containing Otomi and others), Chinantecan, Subtiaba-Tlapanec, Chiapanec-Mangue, Popolocan, Zapotecan, and Mixtecan. The most widely spoken Otomanguean languages are Mixtec with 250,000 speakers, Otomi with 300,000, and Zapotec with 300,000.

The Mixe-Zoquean family is of special importance in prehistory, since the Olmecs, bearers of the first great civilization of the area, appear to have spoken a Mixe-Zoquean language. Mixe-Zoquean speakers were the inventors of the Central American calendar and were involved in the development of the hieroglyphic writing systems of the area. The dozen or so Mixe-Zoquean languages are spoken in southern Mexico.

The Mayan family contains 31 languages spoken principally in Guatemala, southern Mexico, and Belize. The Mayan homeland is believed to have been in the Cuchumatanes Mountains of Guatemala, where Mayan was unified until about 4200 years ago. The principal Mayan subfamilies are Huastecan, Yucatecan, Cholan, Tzeltal-Tzotzil, Q'anjob'alan-Chujean, and K'ichean-Mamean. Chol was the main language of Classic Maya civilization, joined later by Yucatec Maya. While two of the Mayan languages are extinct (Cholti and Chicomuceltec), and some others have very few speakers, several have some of the largest numbers of speakers in the Americas, such as K'iche'

with 675,000, Yucatec Maya with 600,000, Mam with 400,000, and Kaqchikel with 375,000. There are in fact more speakers of these individual languages than of all the native languages of Canada and the U.S. combined.

The Misumalpan languages are Miskito, Sumu, Cacaopera, and Matagalpa in various locations in Central America.

There are also a number of smaller families and isolates in Middle America. The families Tequistlatecan (Chontal of Oaxaca), Totonacan, and isolates Seri, Huave, Tarascan, and Cuitlatec are found in Mexico. The Xincan family is in Guatemala, Jicaque in Honduras, Lencan in Honduras and El Salvador.

The Southern branch of Uto-Aztecan languages is found in Mexico, while the Northern Uto-Aztecan languages are spoken mostly north of the U.S. border. Nahuatl, with over 1,000,000 speakers today, was the language of the Toltecs and the Aztecs, and as such was very important in the prehistory and early colonial history of Middle America. Others include Cora, Huichol, Tubar, and several others. Several Chibchan languages are spoken in lower Central America, including Paya, Rama, Bribri, Guaymi, and others, while other Chibchan languages are found in northern South America.

### **Language Families in South America**

The classification of South American languages presents several challenges. The approximately 1500 languages known are grouped in 118 distinct families and isolates. While much has been learned in recent years, considerable descriptive and historical research remains to be done for a clearer understanding of the classification of these languages.

Some of the better known families are the following.

The Maipurean (or Arawakan) family covers the widest area in the New World, with languages spoken throughout the Antilles, in Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua, in Argentina, and from the Andes to the mouth of the Amazon River. It has representatives in all South American countries except Uruguay and Chile and comprises some 65 languages, of which 31 are now extinct. Languages of the family include Baniva (Venezuela), Maipure (Colombia, Venezuela), Arawak or Locono (Guyana, Surinam, French Guiana, Venezuela), Garifuna or Black Carib (Belize, Guatemala, Honduras), Amuesha (Peru), and Piro (Brazil, Peru). The now extinct Taino, spoken earlier in the Caribbean, was the first language encountered by Columbus; it contributed many words to Spanish and ultimately also to most European languages.

Quechua, the language of the Incas, is the best known language of South America. The Quechuan family has two main branches, each with numerous members, spoken throughout the Andes region in Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, and Argentina. The family has more speakers than any other in the Americas, with around 8,500,000 in all, more than half in Peru. Some of the better known varieties of Quechuan are Ancash (Huaylas), Cajamarca, Ayacucho, Cuzco, Chinchay, and Inga.

The Aymaran family, formerly called Jaqi, contains Aymara (with some 1,500,000 speakers in Bolivia, Chile, Argentina) and a smaller branch with Jaqaru and Kawki (both in Peru).

Puquina or Pukina, an isolate in Bolivia, was an Andean language of high prestige in colonial times.

Another large, well-known family is Chibchan, which stretches from Central America into northern South America. Among the Chibchan languages are Tiribi (nearly extinct, Costa Rica), Bribri (Costa Rica), Boruca (few speakers, Costa Rica), Guaymi (Panama), Paya (Honduras), Rama (nearly extinct, Nicaragua), Cuna (Panama, Colombia), Cagaba (or Kogi, Colombia), and the extinct Muisca (or Chibcha), the language of an advanced pre-Columbian civilization in Colombia.

The extensive Tupian family contains some of the better known languages of South America. The Tupi-Guarani branch alone contains about 30 languages, spoken in Brazil, Bolivia, Paraguay, Argentina, Venezuela, Colombia, and Peru. Paraguayan Guarani, with more than 3,000,000 speakers, is an official language of Paraguay along with Spanish -- while 95% of the population speaks Guarani, only 50% speaks Spanish. The Guaranian branch of the family consists of 9 other languages, spoken in Paraguay, Argentina, Bolivia, and Brazil. Tupi was important in colonial times and has contributed a good number of words to the vocabulary of Spanish and other European languages.

Another large family is Cariban, consisting of about 45 languages, 15 extinct and several others severely endangered. The earliest references to Cariban speakers are from Columbus' journal; the Arawakan peoples Columbus first encountered spoke of the fierce *Caniba* or *Canima*, their term for 'Caribs', the source of our word *cannibal* 'people-eater'. Among the Cariban languages are Cariña, also called Carib or Galibí (Venezuela, Surinam, French Guiana, Guyana, Brazil), Carijona (Colombia), Hixkaryana (Brazil), Pemon (Venezuela, Brazil, Guyana), Wayana or Ouayana (Surinam, French Guiana, Brazil), Bakairí (Brazil), and Panare (Venezuela).

It is now generally accepted that the two families, Panoan and Tacanan, belong to a larger Pano-Tacanan family. There are some 27 attested Panoan languages, ten of them extinct, in Peru and Brazil. There are 6 Tacanan languages, one of them extinct, in Peru and Bolivia. The Ge family (also known as Je, Géan, or Jéan) is old and large, including many languages from distant areas of Brazil. A few representatives are Kayapo, Shavante, and Shoc Leng. Tucanoan is a family of some 15 languages spoken in Colombia, Peru, and Brazil. The Jivaroan family of Ecuador and Peru contains Jivaro or Shuar and Aguaruna. The Yanomaman family consists of four languages not very distantly related to one another, spoken in Brazil and Venezuela. Chon, earlier called Patagonian, is a small family of four languages of Tierra del Fuego and Patagonia which includes the nearly extinct Tehuelche and the extinct Ona or Selknam. The Yagan or Yamana language, an isolate at the extreme end of Tierra del Fuego, is very nearly extinct. Mapudungu, also called Araucano and Mapuche (Chile, Argentina), with some 300,000 speakers, is the best known language of the area.

### **Traits of Native American Languages**

Because there are so many languages and language families in the Americas, there is tremendous diversity in their structures. Some have relatively few distinct sounds, such as Mohawk with just 15, while others have a great number, such as Tlingit with 49. Many, including Tlingit, Athabaskan

languages, Salishan, Pomoan, Chumash, Siouan, Caddoan in North America and Mayan, Xincan, Quechuan, Aymaran in Latin America, have sets of sounds called ejectives or glottalized consonants (such as  $p'$  or  $k'$ ), pronounced by building up air pressure in the mouth that escapes with a pop. Some, again including Tlingit and Salish languages, distinguish consonants pronounced with rounded lips ( $k^w$ ) from those with unrounded lips ( $k$ ). Many, including Tlingit, Eskimoan, Pomoan, Uto-Aztec, and Chumash languages, contain uvular sounds ( $q, \chi$ ) made further back in the mouth than English  $k$ . Some, particularly in California, distinguish  $t$ , made with the tip of the tongue against the teeth as in Spanish or French, from  $ʈ$ , made with the tongue further back, as in English or retroflex, as in Hindi. Some languages have distinctive tone, so that the pitch of a syllable can affect the meaning of a word, as in Mohawk *oká:ra* 'story' versus *okà:ra* 'eye'. Some have simple syllable structures, consisting of just one consonant plus one vowel (CV), while others may have extremely complex syllables, as in Bella Coola Salish *ksn* 'shoot', *tqnk* 'be underneath', or *spk<sup>w</sup>n* 'have a meeting'.

Many Native American languages are of a type called polysynthetic: their words are typically composed of many meaningful parts. The Barbareño Chumash word *kiysa'iliqipuswun* 'we will quietly lock them up', for example, contains 7 parts: *k-iy-sa'-ili-qip-us-wun*. The first prefix *k-* represents first person, that is, the speaker. (If the subject were 'you', the prefix *p-* would be used; for 'he, she, or it' the prefix *s-* would be used.) The second prefix, *-iy-* is a plural, indicating that three or more people are involved. (If there were only two, the dual prefix *-iš-* would be used.) Together *k-iy-* means 'we'. The third prefix *-sa'* adds future tense. The fourth prefix *-ili-* is a diminutive, often used to indicate small actions, but in this case adding the meaning 'quietly'. The root *-qip-* means 'lock'. The suffix *-us* is a benefactive, indicating that the locking affects someone. The final suffix *-wun* signals a plural object 'them'.

A number of the languages have a structure known as noun incorporation, whereby a noun stem may occur inside of a verb stem to qualify the verb. An example can be seen in Cayuga. The verb *akatranaw'ətó'kt'aoh* 'I have run out of sugar' consists of the prefix *ak-* 'I' (in the patient case, indicating that I am not in control), the middle prefix *-at-* indicating that it is my own, the noun stem *-řenawə't-* 'sugar', the verb root *-o'kt-* 'be out of', an inchoative *-a'* 'become' (*-o'kt-a'* 'come to be out of') and a perfect suffix *-o* 'have', indicating a current state (sugarless) that resulted from an earlier event (running out). (The glottal stop ' moves around within the word when the parts are combined.)

A wide variety of meanings are encoded in the prefixes and suffixes of many Native American languages. Some, particularly on the Pacific coast, show elaborate distinctions pertaining to direction and location. Nisgha, a Tsimshian language of Alaska, has a vast number of prefixes with such meanings as 'inside', 'outside', 'into', 'through', 'upward', 'downward', 'uphill', 'downhill', 'upriver', 'downriver', and even 'emerging from woods' and 'deep in the woods, not visible from the village'. A number of other languages contain prefixes indicating the manner of motion or use of an instrument, such as in Central Pomo, of California. The verb *madíw*, with prefix *ma-* 'by kicking', is used for kicking something over, like a chair; *dadíw* is to push something over (*da-* 'pushing'); *čadíw* means to crowd someone off a bench by sitting too close (*ča-* 'by sitting'); *hdíw* means to knock something over by jabbing at it, as with a pole (*h-* 'by poking'); *hdíw* is to knock something over by shooting at it (*h-* 'by shooting'); *p<sup>h</sup>díw* means 'fly away' (*p<sup>h</sup>-* 'by soaring'); *qadíw* is 'overeat' (*qa-* 'by biting'), and *badíw* means to get the best of someone in an argument,

overpowering them with words (*ba-* ‘orally’).

Some languages, like those of the Chumash family, categorize participants grammatically much as in English, as subjects and objects. A number of North American languages show a different organization, among them those of the Iroquoian, Muskogean, Siouan, Caddoan, and Pomoan families. In these languages participants who are actively in control, instigating events, are classified as agents, while those who are not in control but only affected are classified as patients. In Cayuga (Iroquoian), if I eat, the pronoun ‘I’ is expressed with the agent prefix *k-*: *i:-k-e:s* ‘I eat’. The same agent pronoun is used in *k-atę:kye*’s ‘I leave’, *k-atatrihoyanih* ‘I am reading’, and *k-atkėhęhs* ‘I get up’. If something happens to me, however, and I am no longer in control, instigating an action, the patient prefix *ak-* is used: *ak-áh*’*aoh* ‘I got full’, *ak-átehęh* ‘I was ashamed’, *ak-athowinyose*: ‘I have a cold’. The patient prefix is also used if something is done to me: *t-ak-yénawa*’s ‘Help me!’ In addition to the subject/object and agent/patient classifications, other ways of categorizing participants can be seen in various North American languages, among them the ergative systems of Eskimoan languages, Tsimshian languages, and Nez Perce, and the inverse systems of Algonquian, Kutenai, and certain Tanoan languages.

The languages of the Americas show a tremendous array of grammatical possibilities, many rarely encountered in Europe or Asia, some not at all.

### **Native American Writing Systems**

A number of Native American languages have been written by their speakers. Some of their writing systems are syllabaries, in which each symbol represents a whole syllable (usually consonant + vowel). These systems include the Cherokee syllabary developed by the Cherokee Sequoya before 1820; Cree syllabics, developed in the late 1830s by the Methodist missionary James Evans and used by Cree and Ojibwa speakers; the Eskimo syllabary, based on Cree syllabics and used by the Inuit of the Canadian Arctic; the Western Great Lakes syllabary, also called the Fox syllabary, used by Fox, Sauk, Kickapoo, Potawatomi, Winnebago, and some Ojibwa speakers; and Micmac syllabics. Many other systems are alphabetic, with separate symbols (letters) for each consonant and each vowel. Some were developed quite early; the Bible was published in Massachusetts, in an alphabet devised by John Eliot, in 1663. Others have been devised more recently, as communities have worked to document their languages and to produce teaching materials.

The several hieroglyphic writing systems of Middle America were developed long before the arrival of Europeans. These scripts are named for the groups who used them: Aztec (Nahuatl speakers), Mixtec, Zapotec, Epi-Olmec (Mixe-Zoquean speakers), and Mayan. These writing systems were based on logographic signs, symbols which stand for whole words or roots. The Mayan writing, however, is a mixed script. Signs could be augmented by rebuses, a kind of pictorial punning in which the sign for one word is used to represent another that sounds like it. In English, for example, a picture of an eye could be used to symbolize the pronoun *I*. In Mayan, a depiction of a torch (Cholan *tah* ‘pine, torch’) was used to represent the word *ta* ‘in, at’. From these, phonetic signs developed which had the syllabic value of a consonant plus a vowel (CV). The typically CVC Mayan roots could be “spelled” with two of these syllabic signs (CV-CV), with the last vowel understood to be silent. The hieroglyphic texts largely contain histories of rulers and their births, offices, marriages, and deaths.

### **Native America Pidgins and Trade Jargons**

A number of trade languages based on Native American languages developed in the New World. Some of the better known are Eskimo Trade Jargon; Mednyj Aleut, a mixed Aleut-Russian language; Chinook Jargon, once widely spoken throughout the Northwest Coast area; Michif (also called Metchif, Metis, and French Cree), a mixed language in which most nouns are French in origin but verbs are from Plains Cree; Delaware Jargon, used between Delaware River whites and Indians in the 17th century; Mobilian Jargon, a trade language based primarily on Western Muskogean languages and used in the lower Mississippi Valley and the Gulf coast. Examples in South America include, among others, Callahuaya, a language used only in curing ceremonies, which is based on vocabulary from Puquina but Quechua grammar, and Nheengatu or Lingua Geral Amazonica, a simplified version of Tupinamba that developed in Northern Brazil as a lingua franca for communication among people of native, European and African origin.

### **American Indian Sign Language**

The Plains sign language used for intertribal communication in North America is familiar from movies and popular accounts. Not all Plains tribes were equally proficient in its use. The Kiowa are renowned as excellent sign talkers, while in the northern Plains the Crow are credited with spreading sign language to others. Sign language became a lingua franca of the Plains and from there spread as far as British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba.

### **Effects of European and Native American Languages on One Another**

American tongues have contributed to the vocabularies of European languages, in particular placenames and terms for plants, animals, and items of native culture. The name *Canada* comes from the now extinct Laurentian Iroquois *kançtaiaj* 'settlement'; *Mississippi* is from an Algonquian language, probably Ojibwa or Cree, *mi zsi* 'big' + *si pi* 'river'; *Alaska* comes from the Aleut for the Alaskan Peninsula, *alakhskhakh*; *Minnesota* is from the Dakota *mni* 'water' + *sota* 'clear'; *Nebraska* is from the Omaha name for the Platte River, *nibdhathka* 'flat river'; *Oklahoma* was coined from the Choctaw term for Indian Territory, *okla* 'people, nation' + *homa* 'red'; *Tennessee* is from the Cherokee *tanasi*, their name for the Little Tennessee River. *Texas* is from the Caddo *tçyóaj* 'friend', an area where allied tribes were living. The names *Mexico*, *Guatemala*, and *Nicaragua* are all from Nahuatl.

The largest number of nouns borrowed into English from native terms come from various Algonquian languages, the earliest to be encountered by English speakers. Among these are *caribou*, *chipmunk*, *hickory*, *hominny*, *Manitou*, *moccasin*, *moose*, *mugwump*, *opossum*, *papoose*, *pemmican*, *persimmon*, *powwow*, *raccoon*, *sachem*, *skunk*, *squash*, *squaw*, *tammany*, *terrapin*, *toboggan*, *tomahawk*, *totem*, and *wickiup*. Eskimo languages contributed such words as *igloo*, *kayak*, and *muckluck*, from a term for 'bearded seal'. The term *teepee* or *tipi* is from the Sioux *tʰipʰi* 'dwelling'. Navajo has contributed *hogan*. From Salishan languages come *coho* and *sockeye*, kinds of salmon, and *sasquatch*. Chinook Jargon contributed such words as *cayuse* [originally European], *muckamuck*, and *potlatch*. From a Costanoan language near San Francisco comes *abalone*.

From Nahuatl come *avocado*, *cacao*, *cocoa*, *chicle*, *chile/chili*, *chocolate*, *coyote*, *metate*, *ocelot*, *peyote*, *tamale*, *tomato*, and many others. From Cariban we have *cannibal*, and from Tupinamba

*jaguar, cashew, manioc, tapioca, tapir, and toucan.* Quechua has given us *alpaca, coca, condor, guano, jerky, llama, pampa, puma, and quinine.* Maipurean (Arawakan) is the source of *barbecue, potato, canoe, guava, hammock, hurricane, iguana, maize, manatee, mangrove, and papaya.*

In turn, words have been borrowed into Native American languages from European languages, bearing witness to contact among speakers. Russian loans appear in languages from Alaska to California, such as Central Alaskan Yup'ik *kass'aq* 'Whiteman' from Russian *kazak* 'Cossack', and Kashaya Pomo *pítlqa* 'broken glass' from Russian *butylka* 'bottle'. Spanish loans appear extensively in languages throughout California, the Southwest, and Latin America, such as Central Pomo *sómle:lu* 'hat' from Spanish *sombrero*. French loans can be seen in languages of eastern Canada, such as Mohawk *rakaréns* 'barn' from *la grange*. The Mohawk *takó:s* 'cat' is from the Dutch *de poes*. Possible loans from Basque have even been discerned in languages of the Canadian Maritimes, due to early contact with fishing vessels. Of course English loans are common in many languages throughout North America, as are Spanish loans in Latin America.

Words have also been shared among Native American languages. A term for 'buffalo', for example, appears in languages from several different families in the southeastern United States. We see it in the Muskogean family in Choctaw *yanis*, Alabama-Koasati *yanasa*, Hitchiti *yanas-i*, and Creek *yanasa*. It appears in Cherokee, a language of the Iroquoian family, as *yahns*. It is represented in the Siouan family by Catawba *yanas* and Biloxi *yanasa*'. It also appears in language isolates of the area: Natchez *yanasah* and Tunica *yanisi*. Because these sets of languages have not evolved from a single common ancestral language, the word cannot be a common inheritance; it must have been adopted as a loanword by people in contact with each other.

Loan words among Middle American languages also reveal much about culture history. The Mixe-Zoquean languages, for example, have contributed much early loan vocabulary to other languages of the area. These loans are seen as evidence for the identification of the Olmecs (1200-400 B.C.), the first highly successful civilization of the region, as speakers of Mixe-Zoquean languages.

### **Language Endangerment**

The future facing Native American languages is an alarming one. Of the approximately 300 languages spoken at contact in North America, only 187 remain, but of these, 149 are no longer being learned by children. Few will survive far into the next century. Many will be gone within a generation. The danger of massive language extinction is no less serious in Latin America. The prospect is a tragedy for us all. Each language is the product of centuries, even millennia of evolution to meet the needs of its speakers, to convey the thoughts they choose to express. Each shows us a unique way of understanding experience. The extinction of a language represents the irretrievable loss of a portion of our own humanity, and a loss of all that could have been learned through study of that language: of human values, verbal art and oral literature, history, human cognition, and more.

Marianne Mithun  
Lyle Campbell