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REVIEWS

Cultural Contact and Linguistic Relativity among the Indians of Northwestern California

Sean O'Neill
Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008
xix + 354 pp., 24 illustrations, $50.00 (cloth)

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The traditional culture of northwestern California has long been recognized as unique within native North America. Aboriginal groups were sedentary hunter-gatherers who shared a common material culture and way of life, with similar religious views and ceremonials. Despite these parallels, northwestern California is also one of the most linguistically diverse places on the planet, with only a handful of areas such as Papua New Guinea and the Caucasus Mountain region in Eurasia rivaling the cacophony of languages spoken here.

The great linguist Edward Sapir was among the first to highlight this apparent paradox in his book *Language* (1921), in which he pointed out that despite striking cultural similarities between the Hupa, Karuk, and Yurok, their languages were completely alien to one another and belonged to three major linguistic stocks widely distributed over the North American continent: Athabascan, Hokan, and Algonquian. Sapir's theoretical stand was revolutionary at a time when language was commonly viewed as an outgrowth of a society's "national character." Several decades later Harry Hoijer, a student of Sapir's, addressed "the principle of linguistic relativity" in his famous 1953 article entitled "The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis." Simply put, the basic premise is that the structure of a particular language affects how its speakers see the world. Areas such as northwestern California were viewed as providing a prime testing ground for the principle, since culture could be held as the constant and language as the variable in the comparative analyses Hoijer promoted. Since then, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis has been hotly debated by generations of scholars and studied by countless students of anthropology.

Despite scientific interest, surprisingly little scholarly research has addressed the question of linguistic relativity in northwestern California. Sean O'Neill addresses this gap in his book *Cultural Contact and Linguistic Relativity among the Indians of Northwestern California*, in which he explores theoretical issues of language contact (how languages change when groups come into contact) and linguistic relativity (how language affects human cognition). His data are drawn from a broad comparative analysis of traditional Hupa, Karuk, and Yurok language and culture, distilled from his 2001 UC Davis Ph.D. dissertation research, which focused on how space and time are expressed in these three speech communities.

The book includes eleven chapters divided into five parts. Part I, "Language, Culture, and the Principle of Linguistic Relativity," introduces the concept of linguistic relativity and the intellectual roots of the idea. The middle three parts are data-rich comparative treatments of a variety of conceptual linguistic and cultural categories.

Part II, "The Spatial World," addresses spatial concepts in language and culture. Here we learn that the Hupa, Karuk, and Yurok share a common cosmological vision of the universe and a geographical orientation to the world, based not on the cardinal directions but on the upriver/downriver direction of rivers and surrounding mountains. However, the specifics of how the universe is conceptualized (in folklore and mythology) and how geographical and directional categories are expressed (in everyday speech and grammatical systems) are often radically different between each speech community.

Part III, "The Realm of Time," demonstrates that while concepts of time (near and distant future, the concept of ancient time) are generally very similar, some temporal categories "are restricted to a particular tradition, such as the complex aspectual system of the Hupa language and the distal future of Yurok language. In the end, each language imposes a different system of categories onto the realm of time, encompassing both everyday activities and those distant historical events reported in narrative and preserved in storytelling" (p. 175).

Part IV, "Classification and Cultural Meaning," considers taxonomy and vocabulary in everyday speech and narrative. O'Neill explains that specialized classificatory systems are especially elaborate in northwestern California, and while Hupa, Karuk, and Yurok all have similar categories for words based on their shape or animacy (e.g. round, long or straight and rope-like objects, filled containers), how these categories are divided is strikingly unique to each language. O'Neill adroitly weaves language and culture in the second chapter of this section (Chapter 9), which is a fascinating treatment of the deeper cultural meaning of words. The reader truly comes to understand what Sapir (1921) meant when he likened single Algonquian words to "tiny imagist poems," where even common nouns may evoke profound images from mythology and folklore.

In the final section, "From Language Contact to Linguistic Diversity," O'Neill reexamines the data, concluding that—despite centuries of contact—the Hupa, Karuk, and Yurok people speak languages that remain structurally quite unique in terms of their vocabularies, grammars, and phonologies. As for the principle of linguistic relativity, the study suggests that it "is inherent to the human condition, emerging from ongoing intellectual differences among neighboring speech communities" (p. 307).

O'Neill posits that although many aspects of Hupa, Karuk, and Yurok culture became more similar after a thousand or so years of contact, their languages, in fact, grew increasingly distinct. This stands in stark contrast to the oft-cited case of Kupwar village in India, where contact and multilingualism has led to linguistic convergence (Gumperz and Wilson 1971). O'Neill's explanation was succinctly described by Aram Yengoyan: "Propinquity breeds inversion" (p. 285). In other words, when groups come into close contact they will often, consciously and unconsciously, increasingly emphasize differences in certain aspects of their identity, including language.

Why convergence at Kupwar but inversion in northwestern California? This question is addressed in the second to last chapter, where O'Neill explores the evolutionary concepts of variation and drift as they apply to languages and their development through time. The discussion of linguistic ecology explores what social and environmental conditions might contribute to linguistic diversity when groups come into contact over long periods of time. In northwestern California, people often spoke several languages fluently. There were many multilingual speakers, but how did the languages remain distinct? Explanations remain complex but key factors appear to be resource abundance and the autonomous nature of socio-political groups, circumstances that certainly apply to northwestern California. I found this chapter to be the most provocative in the book, but found myself wanting more—I am an archaeologist after all, and we *do* tend to like explanations—but I was left with a lot to consider.

Here are a few general comments about the book. The nuances of linguistic categories and grammar are elegantly explained throughout the text so that the non-specialist may follow technical points with relative ease. O'Neill demonstrates his impressive understanding of northwestern California mythology and worldview, illustrating his points with copious examples, many garnered from creation stories and myths, so that the reader picks up many fascinating details about both language and culture.

The 24 figures include a map of northwestern California ethnographic groups and illustrations of the linguistic models and classificatory systems discussed in the text. The figures are helpful in that they boil concepts down to a visual level. However, a few well-chosen photographs and illustrations, perhaps of early ethnolinguists and consultants, major dances, village life, etc., would have enormously enhanced the text, particularly for readers not familiar with the area.

Although O'Neill's points are well argued and explained in the text, a summary table or series of tables comparing major characteristics of each language would have been enormously helpful. Which group has the overwhelming focus on directional markers (Karuk)? Which group includes spherical objects as "round objects" (Hupa) and which includes disk-shaped objects (Yurok)? Tabulating the data would have provided a handy reference for readers as they returned to these points several times in the text, and (perhaps more importantly) would have succinctly illustrated one of the author's major points—that these languages are, at their core, fundamentally different from one another.

Cultural Contact and Linguistic Relativity among the Indians of Northwestern California is an impressive work that takes on one of the most debated issues in linguistic theory and complements it with a nuanced view

of local culture. This book will interest both Californianist anthropologists and scholars interested in linguistic relativity among world-wide languages. I would also encourage any archaeologist working in northwestern California to read this book. Historical linguistics has been enormously influential in terms of developmental models addressing the prehistory of the region, and though O'Neill does not address archaeology *per se*, his lucid explanations of how linguists have established the ancestry of Athabascan, Hokan, and Algonquian languages through comparative studies are extremely useful. If nothing else, the reader will be left with a deep appreciation for the complicated and unique nature of the Hupa, Karuk, and Yurok languages, "as profoundly different as any three unrelated tongues spoken on earth—say, Hebrew, Hindi, and Korean, for instance" (p. 26). I for one was left with even greater respect for native northwestern California speakers and scholars, many of whom were and are multilingual, and for the native communities that are working hard to revitalize their languages.

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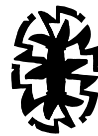

Once & Future Giants: What Ice Age Extinctions Tell Us About the Fate of Earth's Largest Animals

Sharon Levy
New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. xvi, 255 p. : ill., map, 24.95 (paper)

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If one can imagine stepping into a prehistoric world occupied by giant animals (such as mammoths, mastodons, camels, Shasta ground sloths, giant short-faced bears, Brea lions, and saber-tooth cats, known collectively as megafauna), and then can further imagine the introduction of the relatives of some of these species into the modern day wilderness, this well-written book by Sharon Levy will be a joy to read. Levy, an excellent science writer, succinctly reviews two of the main hypotheses for the extinction of some of these beasts near or at the end of the last Ice Age (Late Pleistocene), and then addresses the issue of rewilding, which is the introduction of comparable taxa, when possible, into selected environments in order to re-establish ecosystems that are reinvigorated, have greater biodiversity, and more closely reflect the trophic levels prior to megafaunal extinctions.

Many forces, some external and others internal, that could trigger extinctions are evident in Earth's history. Proposed explanations for Late Pleistocene extinctions have included climate change and its effect on the environment, the ecological shock of human arrival, nutrient shortages, disease, and even the possibility of a meteor strike, among many others. Levy chooses to place the emphasis in her review of extinction causes on the two main hypotheses—climate change and anthropogenic causes—with the focus on the latter. Both causes have been argued for many decades; however, there is little reason to believe that only one of these hypotheses accounts for all of the species disappearances worldwide. As a result of Levy's anthropogenic focus, much of the discussion is on the extinction of megafauna in Australia and North America. The natural history of wooly and Columbian mammoths in North America and