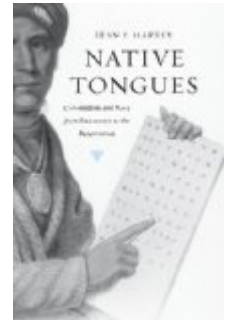


Sean P. Harvey. *Native Tongues: Colonialism and Race from Encounter to the Reservation.* Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2015. 352 S. ISBN 978-0-674-28993-2.



Reviewed by Hanno Scheerer

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Sean P. Harvey's "Native Tongues. Colonialism and Race from Encounter to the Reservation" adds a unique contribution to a growing body of literature on the interconnections between knowledge production and colonialism. Studying European and Euro-American thinking about North American Indian languages from the seventeenth to the late nineteenth century, Harvey analyzes how knowledge of the colonial subjects' languages helped European colonizers maintain and exert control. Similar arguments have been made before by Bernard S. Cohn, *The Command of Language and the Language of Command*, in: Ranajit Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies IV: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, Delhi 1985, pp. 276–329; James J. Errington, *Linguistics in a Colonial World*, Malden, MA 2008. A similar project has already been pursued by Edward G. Gray in "New World Babel". Edward G. Gray, *New World Babel. Languages and Nations in Early America*. Princeton, NJ 1999. Yet whereas "New World Babel" remains a purely intellectual history, "Native Tongues" merges intellectual with social and political history. Similar to Gray, Harvey's main focus are the writings of European and Euro-American

elites, but he makes a much stronger case for the practical importance of these writings, aiming to understand how "ideas about language" produced "racial notions about [North American] Indians," and how these ideas influenced "the administration and experience of colonialism" in the United States (p. 7). Harvey is much more mindful of Native American agency by pointing to the importance of Indian-European face-to-face interaction for the process of knowledge gathering and production.

Interaction initially involved traders, missionaries, and colonial and imperial officials, who all communicated regularly and frequently with the indigenous population and commented on Indian languages in the process. As Harvey demonstrates, language quickly became an important marker of intellectual difference and superiority. Colonists complained about the "poverty" and "deficiency" of indigenous languages, which allegedly lacked words and grammar to express abstract European concepts. By the middle of the eighteenth century, European philosophers had integrated the linguistic information gathered in

these early language encounters into broader savagery discourses that defined Indians as uncultivated. Indian languages were seen as expressions of an Indian “savage mind” due to their lack of a written tradition, their harsh sounds, few words, and simple grammar. Yet philosophers generally assumed that savagery could be overcome once Indians had progressed to a higher stage of civilization.

The savagery and deficiency discourse remained important for the colonizers’ “civilization” efforts, but, according to Harvey, late Enlightenment philosophers also turned their interest towards a different aspect of language. Gathering linguistic data in vocabularies and building upon etymological research, scientists tried to use language to solve the puzzle of Indians’ ancestry and relatedness. Two conflicting interpretations emerged, epitomized by Thomas Jefferson and the American naturalist Benjamin Smith Barton. Jefferson argued that Indian languages, although probably sharing a common ancestor, had drifted radically apart long ago and had lost any resemblance to one another. He took the rich diversity of Indian languages as proof that the American continent was older than Asia, and assumed that Asia had been settled by indigenous Americans rather than vice versa. Barton, on the other hand, firmly believed in the popular notion that America had originally been settled by Asian migrants. Although he did detect differences in the several Indian languages, his research convinced him that all of them were closely related and shared common features.

Harvey convincingly shows how Jefferson’s and Barton’s ideas evolved into complex linguistic explanations of Indian ancestry in the nineteenth century. The philosopher and linguist Peter Stephen du Ponceau figures prominently in Harvey’s narrative, although his writings had but limited influence upon U.S. Indian policy. In 1819, du Ponceau advanced three “propositions” or “questions,” which he tried to prove through extensive

linguistic and etymological research. First, Indian languages were “rich in words and grammatical forms,” had complicated constructions, and, once studied, revealed “order, method, and regularity.” Second, all American languages shared these complicated constructions. Third, American languages were fundamentally different from those of the old world (p. 97). Du Ponceau’s propositions posed serious questions with practical relevance for United States Indian policy. If indigenous languages were not inferior to English, should they be preserved and used for instructing Indians “in the habits and arts of civilization” through educational programs offered to Indians in their native tongues? This expression was used in the 1819 Civilization Fund Act. If Indian languages shared common grammatical structures, could linguistic affiliation be used to classify Native Americans and simplify land cession negotiations and removal into reservations? If Indian languages differed fundamentally from those of the old world, were they not an expression of an “Indian mind” inherently and naturally different from the minds of Europeans, rather than of an alterable “savage mind”?

Harvey shows that answers to these questions remained ambiguous. Linguistic theories oscillated between essentialism and universalism. Politicians saw the value of linguistic research for their colonial designs, but efforts to group tribes according to linguistic affiliation remained futile, partly due to Native American resistance. Ethnologists who stressed the existence of biological, unalterable races distinguishable by bodily features increasingly challenged some philologists’ convictions that language served as a marker of ancestry, or even of race. Frontier officials such as Lewis Cass generally disregarded Du Ponceau’s research and reverted to deficiency discourses to justify Indian removal.

Sean Harvey’s carefully crafted narrative fully exposes this large amount of uncertainty and ambiguity in Euro-American thinking on indige-

nous languages. Harvey never falls prey to a uni-dimensional focus by demonstrating how arguments developed, were refuted, and ultimately resurfaced again in modified form. Yet while Harvey's sensible discussion of primary sources is one of the book's greatest strengths, it is also a weakness. Harvey presents a muddle of overlapping, contradicting, and fluctuating discourses and ideas. This chaos may accurately reflect the doubt with which nineteenth-century scientists tackled questions of indigenous ancestry, race, and language, but Harvey would have done well to offer clearer guidance. Chapter headings lack dates, making it difficult to track the book's loose chronological structure. The short summaries included at the end of each chapter could have commented more explicitly on the meaning and larger significance of linguistic ideas for American colonialism and the construction of race in general.

Yet these are only minor points of criticism. "Native Tongues" features an original argument, extensive footnotes, an excellent index, and a thorough analysis of an extraordinary wide range of primary and secondary sources. It will not replace "New World Babel", but rather complement it as the second key work on Euro-American thinking about indigenous languages. Together, the two studies open up exciting new avenues for further research on the relationship between language and colonialism in North America.

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