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HISTORICAL SOCIOLINGUISTICS AND NATIVE AMERICAN STUDIES: PROSPECTS AND PERSPECTIVES

1. Introduction

In the new millennium scholarly investigation has taken a more encompassing approach to the study of English historical linguistics. First of all, after long years in which studies concentrated on earlier stages of the language, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have finally taken center stage in linguistic analyses;¹ in addition, new attention paid to historical pragmatics and historical sociolinguistics has shed new light on a range of genres which previously had been underinvestigated, such as travelogues, diaries, correspondence² and even schoolbooks.³ Within this framework, this paper aims to outline some of the ways in which Native American studies can contribute useful interdisciplinary approaches to the investigation of vocabulary, educational material, and the representation of linguistic and cultural variation in Late Modern times. The preliminary work conducted by Dossena (2013 and 2015) will form the basis for further assessment of what connections may be made between the study of language description and that of materials available in different but contiguous areas, especially as far as history and art history are concerned – see Cartosio (2016); in particular, the greater or lesser relevance of ideologically-marked representations will be taken into account both on a linguistic and an extra-linguistic level.

2. New perspectives on the histories of Englishes

The turn of the 21st century will probably be remembered in histories of English linguistics as the years in which scholarly investigation finally began to look beyond Old, Middle, and Early Modern English. Perhaps paradoxically, although the 18th and 19th centuries have contributed very significantly to global history, both on a social and on a scientific level, they had elicited relatively little interest in their own linguistic features and indeed in the contribution they have given to the shape of 20th-century English. In relation to powerful ideas concerning correctness and politeness, for example, they gave origin to well-established concepts which present-day users and (above all) learners come across in daily usage, especially as far as supposedly prestigious forms are concerned. These presuppositions, or in fact “myths” (Watts 2011), can be shown to trace their roots back to the years in which lexicographers, grammarians and orthopedists codified usage and prescribed or, very frequently, proscribed choices at all levels.

To name only the most famous cases as far as vocabulary is concerned, Samuel Johnson’s dictionary, published in 1755, and, later, the ancestor of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the *New English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, became both milestones and guiding lights for generations of users. At the same time, another lexicographer, this time in the newly-established United States of America, attempted to codify American English as an independent variety (Webster 1828, Preface, unnumbered pages): his name was Noah Webster, and his surname would become a short-hand term for American dictionaries even to this day.

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¹ See for instance Bailey (1996), Dossena and Jones (2003), Beal (2004), Kytö, Rydén and Smitterberg (2006), Beal, Nocera and Sturiale (2008), and Tieken-Boon van Ostade and van der Wurff (2009), in addition to a growing number of journal articles and book chapters dealing with various aspects of Late Modern English.

² See Bannet (2005), Dossena and Fitzmaurice (2006), Poster and Mitchell (2007), and Dossena and Del Lungo Camiciotti (2012).

³ See Anderwald (2012) and Dossena (in preparation).



Increased academic interest in Late Modern English is also seen in the growing number of relevant computerized corpora that have recently been or are being compiled for the study of syntax, morphology, vocabulary and even pragmatic strategies.⁴ However, especially large corpora tend to rely exclusively on printed documents, which nonetheless only represent a fraction of actual usage. It is true that manuscript sources are much more time-consuming to collect and prepare for computer-assisted processing, but they often represent the usage of people who would otherwise be “hidden from history” (Rowbotham 1973, Titlepage): women and men whose texts were never published because they were private journals or familiar correspondence (and/or whose level of education may have been minimal), but also business agents, clerks, or entrepreneurs, whose documents were not expected to become public unless it was in specific business and/or judicial circumstances. Such texts are now deposited in or belong to public and private archives and are actually becoming available as digital resources through crowdsourcing initiatives promoted by both libraries and historical societies (Dossena 2016), but historical linguists have only just begun to tap into them.

However, as Putnam (2016, 391) correctly reminds us, “we are going to have to work actively so those systematically less present in printed sources do not fall out of view.” For this reason, a more encompassing approach to different genres and sources should be pursued, especially in relation to documents that may facilitate and simultaneously profit from interdisciplinary studies. Among these, Native American studies can offer excellent opportunities for more in-depth analyses of important phenomena. Not least on a linguistic level, the Native American contribution to English vocabulary, and indeed to contemporary culture is undeniable: nowadays readers of international newspapers are sadly familiar with *tomahawk missiles*, in which the pre-modifier evokes the Native American war-axe whose name is first recorded in the OED in 1612; also references to *wampum* (in the sense of currency) and to the *powwow* (as a ceremony or council) date from the 17th century, thus indicating that the lexical items have been in fairly constant use for almost four centuries. The persistence of such uses can be explained with the impossibility to translate the items, thus requiring their maintenance in the original form, and also with the value they could have in metaphorical contexts, such as in the case of warfare.

In addition, the impact that Native American culture has had on the creation of literary and film works, regardless of their greater or lesser historical accuracy, does not need to be discussed here, but it is certainly very prominent (Cartosio 2016 and Rosso 2016). An interdisciplinary approach to texts may therefore provide fruitful results which can go beyond academia and reach out to broader audiences, thus favouring the kind of public engagement that facilitates knowledge dissemination. In the next section, a few instances of such possibilities will be illustrated in relation to the study of vocabulary, of teaching materials, and of cultural representations. It is assumed that these three broad categories may shed more light on the ways in which the relationship between Native American studies and English historical linguistics may result in innovative insights and findings.

3. Native American studies and innovative approaches to the history of English

3.1 English and its many sources

The OED is an invaluable source of information on how English vocabulary has changed over the last millennium and beyond: its website allows users to study timelines, see what languages have contributed what lexical items at what point in time, what sources are quoted, how many provide the first occurrence of a new word or the first occurrence of a new meaning. More refined searches enable users to combine such data, for instance to see what languages contributed vocabulary in what century or indeed in what decade. It is always fascinating to see how significantly the English lexicon expanded in the 19th century, and within this framework the varying contribution of both European and Non-European languages bears linguistic witness to the historical events of the time, whether concerning what would become the British empire or America. For instance, only in the first half of the 19th century from Austronesian languages English got 354 lexical items, including *aloha* and *amok*, *dugong* and *gamelan*; from Indian Subcontinent languages it borrowed 585 items, such as *avatar*, *basmati*, *burka*, and *chutney*; finally, from Native American languages over the century English imported 543 lexical items referring to place names, flora, fauna and local cultures (Cutler 1994).

⁴ For an overview of such studies and corpora see Dossena (2015a, 4-6).



More specifically, the OED timelines indicate a rise in acquisitions in the first half of the 17th century, followed by a relative decline in the 18th century and then a peak in acquisitions in the first half of the 19th century, although numbers decrease again after 1850 and fall very sharply in the 20th century. This suggests that, as far as vocabulary is concerned, the 19th century is indeed the time when Native and Euro-American contacts were most fruitful, at least from a quantitative point of view: in addition to anthropological names such as *Dakota* and *Shoshone*, first recorded in 1804 and 1805 respectively, thanks to quotations derived from the journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, there are *toboggan* (1829), *potlatch* (gift) (1844), and *peyote* (1849). However, the lexical items that even ordinary readers of popular literature are (and were) likely to recognize and understand, such as *tomahawk*, which was mentioned above, are first recorded in earlier times: see for instance *sachem* (1622), *wigwam* (1624), and *squaw* (1634).

A fruitful field of enquiry may thus concern the fate of such new additions to the English lexicon: did they become viable in everyday usage (as in the case of *sequoyah*)? Did they become assimilated as place names, or did they become restricted to specific contexts as so-called “wigwam words” (Lepore 2001), meant to add a flavour of authenticity to different texts? Or did they fall quickly out of use, becoming obsolete relics of a distant past? This, however, is only a first step in the examination of the link existing between Native American studies and linguistics; educational materials can provide an even richer field of investigation.

3.2 Educational materials

Teaching materials are extraordinary sources of information on both linguistic features and on ideologies of language representation and understanding through time. As far as Late Modern English is concerned, whether we are looking at grammar books, letter-writing manuals, textbooks, usage, spelling and pronunciation guides, or monolingual and bilingual dictionaries, we are always looking at documents from which linguistic variation (both in a geographical and in a sociological sense) has typically been ironed out, in order to present a supposedly prestigious model derived from what is found in the usage of ‘the best speakers.’ Clearly the identification of such speakers had both a gender and a class bias, as they were normally understood to be educated and therefore, by definition, to be at least upper-middle class males. This profile could be rather constraining for learners who nonetheless aimed to attain that kind of competence in order to improve their social status. For learners to whom such a model was imposed, instead, it could result in a very serious threat to their own cultural background. This is precisely the case of materials meant for mission and reservation schools, in which Native children were taught to acquire the skills that were deemed to be fundamental by the institutions that ran them, and in which the first step was actually to rename the children, so as to attribute a new identity to them, though often in patronizing when not actually in sniggering terms. Descriptions of reservation schools are both in the journals of visitors and indeed in the annual reports of the Commissioners of Indian Affairs; especially the latter discuss such schools in relation to their effectiveness as far as the ‘civilization’ of the pupils is concerned: they provide accurate figures concerning the number of schools that have been established in a certain area and how many pupils attend, and they also comment on the provisions that are made for the support of such schools, often arguing that more ought to be provided, not least because if Native children adjust to the educational and productive expectations of the Euro-American government they are less likely to cause trouble. It would be anachronistic to judge these schools from the point of view of our 21st-century approach to education; however, they have since been acknowledged to have been so nefarious that in 2008 the Canadian Prime Minister, “delivered a formal apology in the House of Commons to former students, their families, and communities for Canada’s role in the operation of the residential schools” and a Truth and Reconciliation Commission was set up,⁵ while in the USA the Bureau of Indian Education today also includes tribally-operated schools.

On the other hand, Native Americans could feature in textbooks as stereotypical “Vanishing Indians” (Dixon 1913) – i.e. people whose inexorable fate was to disappear as the Euro-American kind of social, economic, and political organization spread west. They were supposed to be the authors of nostalgic poems on the sunset of their races, standing at the graves of their fathers, and mourning their passing as progress

⁵ See www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/index.php?p=3 (last visited March 13, 2017).



advanced fatefully and inexorably.⁶ *Osgood's Progressive Fifth Reader* (1858), for instance, included Lesson XLVI. "Hymn of the Cherokee Indian," by one J. McLellan, which reads:

1. Like the shadows in the stream,
Like the evanescent gleam
Of the twilight's failing blaze,
Like the fleeting years and days,
Like all things that soon decay,
Pass the Indian tribes away.
2. Indian son, and Indian sire!
Lo! The embers of your fire
On the wigwam-hearth burn low,
Never to revive its glow!
And the Indian's heart is ailing;
And the Indian's blood is failing.
3. Now the hunter's bow's unbent,
And his arrows all are spent;
Like a very little child
Is the red man of the wild:
To his day there'll dawn no morrow;
Therefore he is full of sorrow.
4. From his hills the stag is fled,
And the fallow deer are dead;
And the wild beasts of the chase
Are a lost and perish'd race;
And the birds have left the mountain,
And the fishes the clear fountain.
5. Indian woman, to thy breast
Closer let thy babe be press'd,
For thy garb is thin and old',
And the winter wind is cold';
On thy homeless head it dashes,
Round thee the grim lightning flashes.
6. We, the rightful lords of yore,
Are the rightful lords no more;
Like the silver mist we fail,
Like the red leaves in the gale
Fail like shadows when the dawning
Waves the bright flag of the morning.
7. By the river's lonely marge
Rotting is the Indian barge;
And his hut is ruin'd now
On the rocky mountain-brow;
The fathers' bones are all neglected,
And the children's hearts dejected.
8. Therefore, Indian people, flee
To the farthest western sea;
Let us yield our pleasant land
To the stranger's stronger hand;
Red men and their realms must sever:
They forsake them, and forever!

An earlier book, John Frost's *The American Speaker* (1845), included the following texts: "22. The Grave of the Indian Chief," and "107. An Indian at the Burying-Place of his Fathers," a much longer poem attributed to "Bryant;" below the former is quoted in full, while only excerpts are given of the latter.⁷

⁶ This emotional view was shared by several artists, as shown by Cartosio (2016); indeed, the 'hymn' in Osgood's book evokes Asher Durand's 1847 painting, *The Indian's Vespers*.



22. The Grave of the Indian Chief

They laid the corpse of the wild and brave
On the sweet fresh earth of the new day grave,
On the gentle hill, where wild weeds waved,
And flowers and grass were flourishing.

They laid within the peaceful bed,
Close by the Indian chieftain's head,
His bow and arrows; and they said,
That he had found new hunting grounds;

Where bounteous nature only tills
The willing soil; and o'er whose hills,
And down beside the shady rills,
The hero roams eternally.

And these fair isles to the westward lie,
Beneath a golden sunset sky,
Where youth and beauty never die,
And song and dance move endlessly.

They told of the feats of his dog and gun,
They told of the deeds his arm had done;
They sung of battles lost and won,
And so they paid his eulogy.
And o'er his arms, and o'er his bones,
They raised a simple pile of stones;
Which, hallow'd by their tears and moans,
Was all the Indian's monument.

And since the chieftain here has slept,
Full many a winter's winds have swept,
And many an age has softly crept
Over his humble sepulchre.

PERCIVAL⁸

[...]
This bank, in which the dead were laid,
Was sacred when its soil was ours;
Hither the artless Indian maid
Brought wreaths of beads and flowers,
And the gray chief and gifted seer
Worshipp'd the God of thunders here.

But now the wheat is green and high
On clods that hid the warrior's breast,

⁷ Both texts are available in the *Nietz Collection of Nineteenth-century Schoolbooks*, at <http://digital.library.pitt.edu/n/nietz/> (last visited March 10, 2017).

⁸ This is the Wisconsin poet and geologist James Gates Percival, see www.wisconsinhistory.org/Content.aspx?dsNav=N:4294963828-4294963788&dsRecordDetails=R:BA208 (last visited April 2, 2017).



And scatter'd in the furrows, lie
The weapons of his rest;
And there, in the loose sand, is thrown
Of his large arm the mouldering bone.

Ah little thought the strong and brave,
Who bore their lifeless chieftain forth;
Or the young wife, that weeping gave
Her first-born to the earth,
That the pale race, who waste us now,
Among their bones should guide the plough

They waste us — ay — like April snow
In the warm noon, we shrink away;
And fast they follow, as we go
Towards the setting day, —
Till they shall fill the land, and we
Are driven into the western sea. [...]

Although attributed to Native Americans, these materials were actually authored by Euro-Americans pretending to “give voice” to the people depicted in these desolate circumstances. As a result, the poems have no linguistic value as potential witnesses of different cultures, but they are in fact valuable witnesses of widespread cultural attitudes in Euro-American circles. In the titles and in the texts there are no references to individual Nations: the subjects are always “Indians,” a generic label from which specificity is erased (see Saum 1963 and Goddard 2005); all Native Americans are supposed to be the same, and the multiplicity of their languages is ignored. It is an entirely different approach to their very existence from what we would expect today, but which is in fact still frequent: change is represented in mythical terms of hardly any viability, and although much change was actually brought about with often harsh deliberation, its inevitability is construed in almost epic terms.⁹

3.3 Eloquence and imperialist nostalgia

In 19th-century schoolbooks what was construed as instances of “good American English” comprised a range of sources: these could in fact be English or Scottish.¹⁰ In addition, the speeches of Native chiefs delivered in historic circumstances could be included. The praise of Native eloquence (Sorber 1972 and Dossena 2015b) contrasted sharply with the stereotypical representation of Native speech in travelogues and indeed in literature: while the former was powerful, the latter was often represented as ungrammatical; besides, eloquence was associated with the speeches of sachems, while broken English was the language of poor (and poorly educated) people – compare the following examples:

The ground on which we stand is sacred ground. It is the dust and blood of our ancestors. On these plains the Great White Father at Washington sent his soldiers armed with long knives and rifles to slay the Indian. Many of them sleep on yonder hill where Pahaska—White Chief of the Long Hair—so bravely fought and fell. A few more passing suns will see us here no more, and our dust and bones will mingle with these same prairies. (Dixon 1913, 188)

⁹ More extensive commentary of these and other literary texts of a similar nature is beyond the scope of this paper; however, they will be the object of specific study within a recently-launched research program funded by the Italian Ministry for Education, University and Scientific Research (PRIN 2015TJ8ZAS) and aiming to focus on the language of discovery, exploration, and settlement in a diachronic perspective, as the branch of the project concerning nineteenth-century documents envisages both literary and linguistic approaches.

¹⁰ The popularity of Walter Scott's novels was such that snatches from his works featured in numerous schoolbooks and readers: indeed, Scott is the third most frequently quoted source in the OED, following *The Times* and, perhaps predictably, William Shakespeare.



Spouse mebbe you give me some flour. Take pity on squaw? I eat my last breakfast this mornin'
[...] Take pity on squaw, give me some flour, I eat my las' breakfas' this morning.
(Behne 2010, 35)

The 'savages' of many novels, short stories, and later comic books and films were powerful orators and/or the protagonists of "graveyard poetry" dictated by what might be seen as "imperialist nostalgia" (Sorensen 2000), but none of these representations could be assumed to have any claim to exact accuracy and authenticity: speeches were translated and poems were written in accordance with Euro-American rhetorical *clichés*, and the 'savage' quality of certain types of behavior could be emphasized for argumentative purposes of political propaganda.¹¹ For this reason, in this context, Native American studies would provide a very valuable framework within which to study the relationship between historical and anthropological realities and their linguistic and literary representations, as the latter were often adaptations meant to cater for the presupposed expectations of the envisaged readership.

Indeed, beyond literature, stereotypical features of Native life-styles represented in emigrants' guides, captivity and conversion narratives led to the creation of persistent although inaccurate icons in which cultural specificities were deliberately ignored. The case of "Indian Peter" is emblematic in this sense: kidnapped in 18th-century Aberdeen and sold as an indentured servant in the American colonies for £16,¹² Peter Williamson then returned to Scotland after living through the French and Indian war, an experience he described in his 1757 book *French and Indian Cruelty*,¹³ which is in fact a text of anti-French propaganda, in addition to being a hardly reliable captivity narrative (Bennet Nolan 1964). Even so, Williamson greatly relied on his "Indian" experience to advertise his book and indeed his coffee-house business, to the point that even Robert Fergusson mentioned him as "Indian Peter" in one of his poems, "The Rising of the Session." In such popular forms of (somewhat superficial) knowledge dissemination, only the elements that would prove most striking for general audiences were selected and 'performed': for 'Indian Peter' it was "Indian" outfits and a war whoop; for Buffalo Bill's Wild West show, a century later, it would be the re-enactment of the Little Bighorn battle with the staging of Custer's last stand, saved as a concluding act meant to leave a very deep impression on audiences on both sides of the Atlantic.

For most of the 20th century the film industry perpetuated such stereotypes (Rosso 2016): as a result, audiences assumed that teepees were the only form of Native American housing, that Native languages were all guttural and based on signs, and that all fur traders wore beaver hats like Davy Crockett. The cultural complexity of a large continent that was undergoing extremely fast and very dramatic change was oversimplified to the point that it may be quite difficult to dispel such myths even to this day.

4. Concluding remarks

In order to ensure that as accurate representations as possible are provided both to expert and to non-expert audiences, an interdisciplinary approach to problems and issues is indispensable. This will require increased attention to intercultural connections, not least in a transatlantic perspective, as that is a central point in any discussion of how Native American studies can contribute to studies in other domains. So far, English historical linguistics has taken a rather distant approach to Native American languages and their relationship with English; scholars have studied lexical borrowings into English, but the impact of English-language schools, grammars, and other teaching materials has only been studied in connection with the cultural

¹¹ On literary representations and their mythical and romanticized qualities see Bickham (2005), Fulford (2006), Calloway (2008) and Cartosio (2008). In particular, Calloway (2008) shows that the idea of "imperialist nostalgia," i.e. of granting noble elegance to the object of otherwise deliberate destruction, makes the predicament of Native Americans not unlike that of Scottish Highlanders; especially after 1746, when the last Jacobite uprising was defeated, the latter had also been pushed further and further away from their territories, isolated, and/or forcibly assimilated, but then they had been idealized in literature. For a discussion of how former enemies came to be represented as formidable warriors see Clyde (1994).

¹² The first chapters in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Kidnapped* (1886) are actually based on similar real-life stories: see www.aberdeencity.gov.uk/planning_environment/planning/green_townscape/green_thi_booklet/green_trail_barn_williamson.asp (last visited March 14, 2017).

¹³ See the 1757 edition at <https://archive.org/details/frenchindiancru00will> (last visited March 13, 2017).



outcomes to which such forms of education led: how Native languages may have changed as a result of contact with English appears to have always fallen beyond the scope of English language studies.

In addition, English historical linguists would certainly profit from greater attention being paid to materials which so far have only elicited the interest of historians. Nowadays a growing quantity of documents is becoming available in the digital collections of libraries and archives, which even promote crowdsourcing projects for the transcription of handwritten materials, such as diaries, correspondence, and even ledgers (Dossena 2016). The importance of such documents is undoubted: not only can they shed light on authentic, possibly vernacular usage, but they can also contribute to the history of text types and registers, to name only some of the numerous possible contexts in which they could be studied. However, such documents are only just beginning to be included in computerized corpora aimed at linguistic investigations: although one such project is currently under way at the University of Bergamo, much more needs to be done before reliable findings may be offered. And yet, it is in this very framework that the contribution of Native American studies is going to be particularly valuable: the accessibility of documents concerning the Bureau of Indian Affairs in the USA and of Mi'kmaq resources in Nova Scotia are just two examples of materials that could usefully be considered in an analysis of how 19th-century English has expressed evaluations, attitudes, and ideological stance. Also the plethora of materials available to genealogists and family historians on how the Irish and Scottish diaspora unfolded in America, not least in territories where tensions with Native Americans were greater, is bound to be of remarkable interest in the field of historical sociolinguistics, where access to background information on the informants whose texts are analyzed is invaluable, but which may be difficult to obtain on account of the relative obscurity of such informants from a historical point of view: how is it possible to acquire metadata concerning age and level of education, for instance, if the document under discussion was authored by a highly mobile emigrant, prospector, soldier, (self-educated) homesteader, or all of these at different points in his biography?

It is undoubted that the road ahead is bound to be very long and not without difficulties; nonetheless, it is a road that needs to be undertaken if new insights are to be gained on language history, on how concepts were conveyed, and on how world views changed as new ones were formed. Beyond idealization of what has been lost and stigmatization of how it was lost, scholars will certainly profit from a multidirectional approach to investigations in apparently distant domains; if greater awareness is to be gained about complex fields of study, greater cooperation is required. Besides, the involvement of larger audiences in crowdsourced projects will highlight the relevance of academic endeavors, facilitating public engagement and promoting the kind of good practice from which valuable results can be obtained.

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