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SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION—BUREAU OF ETHNOLOGY

INTRODUCTION

TO THE

STUDY OF SIGN LANGUAGE

AMONG THE

NORTH AMERICAN INDIANS

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ILLUSTRATING THE GESTURE SPEECH OF MANKIND

By GARRICK MALLERY

BREVET LIEUT. COL., U. S. ARMY

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Eleven years ago ethnographic research among North American Indians was commenced by myself and my assistants while making explorations on the Colorado River and its tributaries. From that time to the present such investigations have been in progress.

During this time the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution placed in my hands a large amount of material collected by its collaborators relating to Indian languages and other matters, to be used, in conjunction with the materials collected under my direction, in the preparation of a series of publications on North American Ethnology. In pursuing this work two volumes have already been published, a third is in press, and a number of others are in course of preparation.

The work originally begun as an incident to a geographical and geological survey has steadily grown in proportions until a large number of assistants and collaborators are engaged in the collection of materials and the preparation of memoirs on a variety of subjects relating to the North American Indians. The subject under investigation is of great magnitude. More than five hundred languages, belonging to about seventy distinct stocks or families, are spoken by these Indians; and in all other branches of this ethnic research a like variety of subject-matter exists. It will thus be seen that the materials for a systematic and comprehensive treatment of this subject can only be obtained by the combined labor of many men. My experience has demonstrated that a deep interest in Anthropology is widely spread among the educated people of the country, as from every hand assistance is tendered, and thus valuable material is steadily accumulating; but experience has also demonstrated that much effort is lost for want of a

proper comprehension of the subjects and methods of investigation appertaining to this branch of scientific research. For this reason a series of pamphlet publications, designed to give assistance and direction in these investigations, has been commenced.

The first of the series was prepared by myself and issued under the title of "Introduction to the Study of Indian Languages;" the second is the present, upon Sign-Language; and a third, by Dr. H. C. Yarrow, United States Army, designed to incite inquiry into mortuary observances and beliefs concerning the dead prevailing among the Indian tribes, will shortly be issued. Other publications of a like character will be prepared from time to time. These publications are intended to serve a somewhat temporary purpose until a manual for the use of students of American Anthropology is completed.

J. W. POWELL.

INQUIRIES AND SUGGESTIONS

UPON

SIGN-LANGUAGE AMONG THE NORTH AMERICAN INDIANS.

BY GARRICK MALLERY.

INTRODUCTORY.

The Bureau of Ethnology of the Smithsonian Institution has in preparation a work upon Sign-Language among the North American Indians, and, further, intended to be an exposition of the gesture-speech of mankind thorough enough to be of suggestive use to students of philology and of anthropology in general. The present paper is intended to indicate the scope of that future publication, to excite interest and invite correspondence on the subject, to submit suggestions as to desirable points and modes of observation, and to give notice of some facilities provided for description and illustration.

The material now collected and collated is sufficient to show that the importance of the subject deserves exhaustive research and presentation by scientific methods instead of being confined to the fragmentary, indefinite, and incidental publications thus far made, which have never yet been united for comparison, and are most of them difficult of access. Many of the descriptions given in the lists of earlier date than those contributed during the past year in response to special request are too curt and incomplete to assure the perfect reproduction of the sign intended, while in others the very idea or object of the sign is loosely expressed, so that for thorough and satisfactory exposition they require to be both corrected and supplemented, and therefore the coöperation of competent observers, to whom

this pamphlet is addressed, and to whom it will be mailed, is urgently requested.

The publication will mainly consist of a collation, in the form of a vocabulary, of all authentic signs, including signals made at a distance, with their description, as also that of any specially associated facial expression, set forth in language intended to be so clear, illustrations being added when necessary, that they can be reproduced by the reader. The descriptions contributed, as also the explanation or conception occurring to or ascertained by the contributors, will be given in their own words, with their own illustrations when furnished or when they can be designed from written descriptions, and always with individual credit as well as responsibility. The signs arranged in the vocabulary will be compared in their order with those of deaf-mutes, with those of foreign tribes of men, whether ancient or modern, and with the suggested radicals of languages, for assistance in which comparisons travelers and scholars are solicited to contribute in the same manner and with the same credit above mentioned. The deductions and generalizations of the editor of the work will be separate from this vocabulary, though based upon it, and some of those expressed in this preliminary paper may be modified on full information, as there is no conscious desire to maintain any preconceived theories. Intelligent criticisms will be gratefully received, considered, and given honorable place.

PRACTICAL VALUE OF SIGN-LANGUAGE.

The most obvious application of Indian sign-language will for its practical utility depend, to a large extent, upon the correctness of the view submitted by the present writer, in opposition to an opinion generally entertained, that it is not a mere semaphoric repetition of traditional signals, whether or not purely arbitrary in their origin, but is a cultivated art, founded upon principles which can be readily applied by travelers and officials so as to give them much independence of professional interpreters—a class dangerously deceitful and tricky. Possessing this art, as distinguished from a limited list of memorized motions, they would accomplish for themselves the desire of the Prince of Pontus, who begged of Nero an accomplished pantomimist from the Roman theater, to interpret among his

many-tongued subjects. This advantage is not merely theoretical, but has been demonstrated to be practical by a professor in a deaf-mute college who, lately visiting several of the wild tribes of the plains, made himself understood among all of them without knowing a word of any of their languages; nor would it only obtain in connection with American tribes, being applicable to intercourse with savages in Africa and Asia, though it is not pretended to fulfill by this agency the schoolmen's dream of an oecumenical mode of communication between all peoples in spite of their dialectic divisions.

Sign-language, being the mother utterance of nature, poetically styled by LAMARTINE the visible attitudes of the soul, is superior to all others in that it permits every one to find in nature an image to express his thoughts on the most needful matters intelligently to any other person, though it must ever henceforth be inferior in the power of formulating thoughts now attained by words, notwithstanding the boast of Roscius that he could convey more varieties of sentiment by gesture alone than Cicero could in oratory.

It is true that gestures excel in graphic and dramatic effect applied to narrative and to rhetorical exhibition; but speech, when highly cultivated, is better adapted to generalization and abstraction; therefore to logic and metaphysics. Some of the enthusiasts in signs have, however, contended that this unfavorable distinction is not from any inherent incapability, but because their employment has not been continued unto perfection, and that if they had been elaborated by the secular labor devoted to spoken language they might in resources and distinctness have exceeded many forms of the latter. GALLAUDET, PEET, and others may be right in asserting that man could by his arms, hands, and fingers, with facial and bodily accentuation, express any idea that could be conveyed by words. The process regarding abstract ideas is only a variant from that of oral speech, in which the words for the most abstract ideas, such as law, virtue, infinitude, and immortality, are shown by MAX MÜLLER to have been derived and deduced, that is, abstracted from sensuous impressions. In the use of signs the countenance and manner as well as the tenor decide whether objects themselves are intended, or the forms, positions, qualities, and motions of other objects which are suggested, and signs for moral and

intellectual ideas, founded on analogies, are common all over the world as well as among deaf-mutes. Concepts of the intangible and invisible are only learned through percepts of tangible and visible objects, whether finally expressed to the eye or to the ear, in terms of sight or of sound.

It will be admitted that the elements of the sign-language are truly natural and universal, by recurring to which the less natural signs adopted dialectically or for expedition can, with perhaps some circumlocution, be explained. This power of interpreting itself is a peculiar advantage, for spoken languages, unless explained by gestures or indications, can only be interpreted by means of some other spoken language. There is another characteristic of the gesture-speech that, though it cannot be resorted to in the dark, nor where the attention of the person addressed has not been otherwise attracted, it has the countervailing benefit of use when the voice could not be employed. When highly cultivated its rapidity on familiar subjects exceeds that of speech and approaches to that of thought itself. This statement may be startling to those who only notice that a selected spoken word may convey in an instant a meaning for which the motions of even an expert in signs may require a much longer time, but it must be considered that oral speech is now wholly conventional, and that with the similar development of sign-language conventional expressions with hands and body could be made more quickly than with the vocal organs, because more organs could be worked at once. Without such supposed development the habitual communication between deaf-mutes and among Indians using signs is perhaps as rapid as between the ignorant class of speakers upon the same subjects, and in many instances the signs would win at a trial of speed.

Apart from their practical value for use with living members of the tribes, our native semiotics will surely help the archæologist in his study of native picture-writing, the sole form of aboriginal records, for it was but one more step to fasten upon bark, skins, or rocks the evanescent air-pictures that still in pigments or carvings preserve their skeleton outline, and in their ideography approach the rudiments of a phonetic alphabet. Gesture-language is, in fact, not only a picture-language, but is actual writing, though dissolving and sympathetic, and neither alphabetic nor phonetic.

Though written characters are in our minds associated with speech, they are shown, by successful employment in hieroglyphs and by educated deaf-mutes, to be representative of ideas without the intervention of sounds, and so also are the outlines of signs. This will be more apparent if the motions expressing the most prominent feature, attribute, or function of an object are made, or supposed to be made, so as to leave a luminous track impressible to the eye, separate from the members producing it. The actual result is an immaterial graphic representation of visible objects and qualities which, invested with substance, has become familiar to us as the *rebus*, and also appears in the form of heraldic blazonry styled punning or "canting." The reproduction of gesture-lines in the pictographs made by our Indians seems to have been most frequent in the attempt to convey those subjective ideas which were beyond the range of an artistic skill limited to the direct representation of objects, so that the part of the pictographs, which is still the most difficult of interpretation, is precisely the one which the study of sign-language is likely to elucidate. In this connection it may be mentioned that a most interesting result has been obtained in the tentative comparison so far made between the gesture-signs of our Indians and some of the characters in the Chinese, Assyrian, Mexican, and Runic alphabets or syllabaries, and also with Egyptian hieroglyphs.

While the gesture-utterance presents no other part of grammar to the philologist besides syntax, or the grouping and sequence of its ideographic pictures, the arrangement of signs when in connected succession affords an interesting comparison with the early syntax of vocal language, and the analysis of their original conceptions, studied together with the holophrastic roots in the speech of the gesturers, may aid to ascertain some relation between concrete ideas and words. Meaning does not adhere to the phonetic presentation of thought, while it does to signs. The latter are doubtless more flexible and in that sense more mutable than words, but the ideas attached to them are persistent, and therefore there is not much greater metamorphosis in the signs than in the cognitions. The further a language has been developed from its primordial roots, which have been twisted into forms no longer suggesting any reason for their original selection, and the more the primitive significance of

its words has disappeared, the fewer points of contact can it retain with signs. The higher languages are more precise because the consciousness of the derivation of most of their words is lost, so that they have become counters, good for any sense agreed upon; but in our native dialects, which have not advanced in that direction to the degree exhibited by those of civilized man, the connection between the idea and the word is only less obvious than that still unbroken between the idea and the sign, and they remain strongly affected by the concepts of outline, form, place, position, and feature on which gesture is founded, while they are similar in their fertile combination of radicals. For these reasons the forms of sign-language adopted by our Indians will be of special value to the student of American linguistics.

A comparison sometimes drawn between sign-language and that of our Indians, founded on the statement of their common poverty in abstract expressions, is not just to either. Allusion has before been made to the capacities of the gesture-speech in that regard, and a deeper study into Indian tongues has shown that they are by no means so confined to the concrete as was once believed.

Indian language consists of a series of words that are but slightly differentiated parts of speech following each other in the order suggested in the mind of the speaker without absolute laws of arrangement, as its sentences are not completely integrated. The sentence necessitates parts of speech, and parts of speech are possible only when a language has reached that stage where sentences are logically constructed. The words of an Indian tongue being synthetic or undifferentiated parts of speech, are in this respect strictly analogous to the gesture elements which enter into a sign-language. The study of the latter is therefore valuable for comparison with the words of the speech. The one language throws much light upon the other, and neither can be studied to the best advantage without a knowledge of the other.

ORIGIN AND EXTENT OF GESTURE-SPEECH.

It is an accepted maxim that nothing is thoroughly understood unless its beginning is known. While this can never be absolutely accomplished for sign-language, it may be traced to, and claims general interest from,

its illustration of the ancient intercommunication of mankind by gesture. Many arguments have been adduced and more may be presented to prove that the latter preceded articulate speech. The corporeal movements of the lower animals to express, at least, emotion have been correlated with those of man, and classified by DARWIN as explicable on the principles of serviceable associated habits, of antithesis, and of the constitution of the nervous system. A child employs intelligent gestures long in advance of speech, although very early and persistent attempts are made to give it instruction in the latter but none in the former; it learns language only through the medium of signs; and long after familiarity with speech, consults the gestures and facial expressions of its parents and nurses as if to translate or explain their words; which facts are important in reference to the biologic law that the order of development of the individual is the same as that of the species. Persons of limited vocabulary, whether foreigners to the tongue employed, or native, but not accomplished in its use, even in the midst of a civilization where gestures are deprecated, when at fault for words resort instinctively to physical motions that are not wild nor meaningless, but picturesque and significant, though perhaps made by the gesticulator for the first time; and the same is true of the most fluent talkers on occasions when the exact vocal formula desired does not at once suggest itself, or is not satisfactory without assistance from the physical machinery not embraced in the oral apparatus. Further evidence of the unconscious survival of gesture-language is afforded by the ready and involuntary response made in signs to signs when a man with the speech and habits of civilization is brought into close contact with Indians or deaf-mutes. Without having ever before seen or made one of their signs he will soon not only catch the meaning of theirs, but produce his own, which they will likewise comprehend, the power seemingly remaining latent in him until called forth by necessity. The signs used by uninstructed congenital deaf-mutes and the facial expressions and gestures of the congenitally blind also present considerations under the heads of "heredity" and "atavism," of some weight when the subjects are descended from and dwell among people who had disused gestures for generations, but of less consequence in cases such as that mentioned by Cardinal WISEMAN of an Italian blind man who, curiously

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