Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

*Investigating Obsolescence: Studies in Language Contraction and Death* by Nancy C. Dorian

Peter Trudgill


Stable URL:

http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0025-1496%28199012%2925%3A4%3C722%3AIOSILC%3E2.0.CO%3B2-Y

*Man* is currently published by Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland.

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at http://www.jstor.org/journals/rai.html.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

---

The JSTOR Archive is a trusted digital repository providing for long-term preservation and access to leading academic journals and scholarly literature from around the world. The Archive is supported by libraries, scholarly societies, publishers, and foundations. It is an initiative of JSTOR, a not-for-profit organization with a mission to help the scholarly community take advantage of advances in technology. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.
by her investigation of Pittsfield and could be used more forcefully.

ACHSAH CARRIER

University of Virginia


This book is a brilliant, erudite analysis of the interaction of Indians and Europeans during the first four centuries of the conquest and colonisation of north-eastern South America. Its focus is on the Carib Indians, one of the most prominent indigenous groups involved in the process. The analysis is based on extensive study of original sources, many unpublished and never examined before by scholars. The book is well written and organised, with helpful cross-references between the chapters. Every assertion is well-documented, and there are many telling quotations from the sources. A rich compendium of notes adds other important information.

The author's analytical approach is a refreshing departure from the antiquarian approach to ethnohistory, which attempts to glean ethnographic information from early documents to reconstruct what Indian societies were like before the conquest. Instead, Whitehead depicts the chaos and dynamism of the early colonial period, when many pre-colombian societies either became extinct or were transformed into new ethnic and political entities. The conquest was destructive to many native societies and populations, especially the more populous, sedentary chiefdoms, but it also gave temporary opportunities for development and expansion to others, such as the Caribs.

Whitehead begins by characterising traditional Carib society, settlement, and political and military modes (chs. 1-3) and shows how these influenced Europeans' strategies and were in turn influenced by them. The sections on the Spanish conquest and missonisation of the Orinoco (chs. 5 and 6) and the Dutch operations in Guyana (ch. 7) constitute original contributions to the history of the conquest, giving blow-by-blow accounts of the process by which the intruders initially gained a foothold, expanded, and finally took over Indian lands. He details the relationship of the Caribs with different European and Indian groups through time, showing how the Caribs at first successfully held off the Europeans, then took advantage as mercenaries and traders when Europeans expanded, and were ultimately defeated, decimated and displaced as the process of colonisation matured. Particularly interesting is the complex relationship between Indian, Dutch and Spanish interests and the role of the Carib in the red slave trade and conquest of other Indian groups. The analysis of events is illuminated by Whitehead's references to the changing positions, goals and attitudes of the various native and European groups.

The insights to be gained from books like this one are sorely needed in Amazonian anthropology. Despite routinely acknowledging the substantial changes in the historical backgrounds of the native peoples we study, we rarely integrate the implications of these changes into our explanations of people's present characteristics. Instead, present demography, cultural forms and belief systems are treated as primateval adaptations either to inherent, universal sociopolitical or psychological needs or to the limitations of the tropical environment. Present lifeways are thus presented as representative of precolombian societies, as if native Amazonian societies had not changed over the millennia. Native Amazonians are held up as examples of sociocultural homeostasis — survivals from an earlier stage of human evolution.

However, the cultures of ethnic groups in Amazonia cannot be explained solely as adaptations to the environment and universal exigencies of social life if people in the same environment had quite different adaptations at other times. Ethnohistoric research such as Whitehead's is an important part of the evidence for the existence of substantially different cultures and societies at different times in lowland South America. It shows that post-conquest processes of interaction among Europeans, the world system, their pathogens, and the Indians were key factors in the development of present-day ethnic groups.

These findings have implications for anthropology worldwide, for if the patterns of indigenous cultures are to some degree adaptations to the colonial expansion we must reconsider traditional explanatory approaches and acknowledge the great potential of the diachronic fields of ethnohistory and archaeology for testing social anthropologists' interpretations of the nature and origins of 'primitive' societies.

A.C. ROOSEVELT

American Museum of Natural History

Linguistics


Language death is the process by which languages or dialects die out, as a result either of their speakers dying out — as in the case of the genocide of the Tasmanians — or of their speakers shifting through time to some other language — as with the shift from Irish to English in Ireland. Language death is of considerable interest within linguistics, particularly with respect to the structural changes that languages undergo during language shift as their speakers become progressively less efficient. This has important implications for historical linguistics, especially as far as language contact is concerned, and for studies of language learning and acquisition. The study of language death is also, however, one which requires considerable input from the social sciences, since it
is yet not especially well understood which social factors predispose communities to maintain or shift languages, other than in cases of outright repression and murder, such as is reported in this volume to have occurred in the 1930s in El Salvador. The writers of the papers collected in this book, drawing on scenarios from all over the globe, point variously to political power, economic factors, education, communication, and numerous types of social symbolism and other sociopsychological factors in their discussions.

The first ten chapters in this work, which is edited by the pioneering and best-known researcher in this field, are grouped under the heading 'Focus on context', and examine aspects of social and cultural situations which appear to lead to language contraction and death. It is thus the section of the book which will be of greatest interest to readers of this journal. Each chapter deals with a different language or area; languages dealt with include Nubian, Gaelic, Breton, Norwegian in the USA, Albanian in Greece, and French in Newfoundland.

The second section of the book, 'Focus on structure', will be of greater interest to linguists, but the division between the sections is not a clear-cut one, and anthropologists will find interest here too. These chapters examine the linguistic effects on languages of language shift, and relate these to other linguistic processes such as creolisation. Languages dealt with include, amongst others, the Amerindian languages Gros Ventre and Cayuga, the Australian language Warlpiri, Pennsylvania German, Swedish Estonian, Austrian Hungarian, and Ontario French. There then follows a section of five invited commentaries from scholars working in areas such as child language acquisition, aphasia, historical linguistics, creolistics, sociology, and second language learning.

This book is an excellent, state-of-the-art collection that has brought together work by distinguished linguists such as Haugen, Hamp, Hoenigswald, Mi
tn and Romaine. It will undoubtedly have the effect of familiarising experts and non-experts alike with the wide range of current work that is relevant to this topic, some of it till now not very well known, and of stimulating further research of a linguistic-theoretical nature.

It is also to be hoped that it will stimulate an interest, on the part of linguists and anthropologists, in what social conditions favour language maintenance. Each human language, in the words of Sapir, is an example of 'the most massive and inclusive art we know, a mountainous and anonymous work of art'. The fact that so many of the world's languages are being lost – 150 in Australia in the last 200 years, 700 in the Americas since European contact – is an enormous tragedy that should receive much greater publicity. If Albanian dies out in Italy, Bulgaria and Greece, this is undesirable, but at least the language survives in Albania and Yugoslavia. Infinitely more serious would be the total loss, were it to occur, of Gaelic from the face of the earth. Many hundreds of languages are simultaneously under threat – about a quarter of the world's languages, for instance, are spoken in the Pacific area, most by very small and fragile groups of speakers. Languages are windows into the human mind and repositories of cultures. Language differences also form barriers against cultural and political uniformisation, and help preserve the possibility of different societies exploring alternative modes for achieving social and political progress. Barriers to communication, and thus to cultural uniformity, provided by a multiplicity of languages, may be vital for human survival. This timely and thought-provoking book may help to stem the tide that is breaking these barriers down.

Peter Trudgill

University of Essex


A generation ago, few classicists were much concerned about the date and immediate consequences of the invention of the Greek alphabet apart from Homeric specialists, whose studies have for nearly two centuries been indissolubly linked with the question of whether the Greeks could write when the Iliad and Odyssey were composed; in general it was assumed that there was little to be discussed beyond the place, time and circumstances in which Semitic script was modified to fit the Greek language, and speculation about such matters as the proportion of the Athenian citizen body with some modest competence in reading and writing tended to be regarded as merely light relief from serious questions of military and political history.

More or less keeping step with the increasing currency of ‘orality’ (the positive term avoiding the negative connotations of ‘illiteracy’) has come growing awareness of the complexities of the issues involved in the transition to literacy. Archaic Greece was peculiar: with the collapse of Mycenaean civilisation the Greeks forgot the clumsy syllabic script used by the palace scribes and for four centuries were a wholly oral society until alphabetic writing was introduced as a result of contact with the Phoenicians, most probably c. 750 B.C. The impact of literacy was gradual; it did not immediately extend the Greeks’ intellectual horizons by making accessible a range of literature previously barred to them, nor were they sufficiently impressed by the highly developed bureaucracies of the older civilisations of the Near East to emulate without delay their enthusiasm for written records. Distinctions must, in any case, be drawn between one part of the Greek-speaking world and another; but widespread appreciation of the potential of literacy was everywhere slow to develop.

We are better informed about classical Athens in the fifth and fourth centuries than about any other Greek city, and by concentrating on what may be observed here Thomas provides a striking illustration