

Human Migration and Language Diffusion in North America: The Origins of Native American Languages

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We speak of the Pleistocene Ice Age as if it were a long, uninterrupted climactic episode with a thick blanket of snow and ice covering much of North America and northern Eurasia and lasting roughly 100,000 years, ending around 10,000 years ago. In truth, the earth has endured numerous ice ages, which are more accurately called glacial ages, throughout its history. The Huronian, for example, occurred about 2.5 billion years ago and covered most of the planet. The most severe was the Cryogenian Period, which occurred from 850 to 630 million years ago. The Ice Age we associate with Paleolithic human migrations into the New World is the Wisconsin Stage of the Pleistocene, which lasted from about 26,000 to about 11,500 years ago, which includes the end of the Younger Dryas cold spell (about 9,640 BCE). At its peak around 20,000 years ago, much of North America and northern Eurasia was buried under sheets of ice 1.5-3 kilometers thick (deeper in some places). In fact, continental glaciers pushed all the way to the 40th parallel. It is estimated that at much as 30% of the planet was covered by ice. Like all glacial ages, the Wisconsin Stage was characterized by cycles of minor glacial advances

and retreats, affected by brief periods of global or hemispheric warming and cooling. These fluctuations are called *glacials* and *interglacials*, or *stadials* and *interstadials*.

Geologic processes continue today in much the same way as they did in the past. Sea water evaporates forming clouds, which dissipates the moisture as precipitation. If the air is above freezing, the precipitation takes the form of rain; if the ambient temperature is below freezing, the precipitation takes the form of snow. During the Ice Age, temperatures in the northern hemisphere were colder. As a result, snow did not melt as it generally does today, but instead accumulated to great depths, as much as a mile or two deep in places. Imagine a field of slowly moving snow and ice as much as 5,000 to 10,000 feet deep burying most of Alaska, Canada, Greenland, and the northern United States and Eurasia. In fact, the massive ice sheets were so heavy and the downward pressure so immense, that when they eventually melted, the surface of the earth actually lifted upward, relieved of the strain from the great weight. Even today, the land in some places is still rising. Geologists call this emergent motion *isostatic rebound*.

One result of all this unmelting snow and ice was that sea levels actually dropped worldwide, scientists estimate by as much as 120 meters owing to the massive amount of seawater being “locked up” as ice. Whereas snow generally melts to form creeks and rivers, like the Ganges, which eventually return water back to the sea, this process was largely disrupted and, consequently, sea levels dropped markedly, exposing new land and continental shelves previously under water. Imagine how coastlines worldwide must have extended many kilometers out to sea and how islands once submerged became visible. Over time, these exposed land features became populated with vegetation, especially

what we call pioneer plants (grasses, flowers, and eventually trees) as well as with insects, birds, and animals. Nature has a way of taking a foothold on all available land.

One of the results of this lowered sea level was that the bottom of the shallow Bering Sea between Alaska and northern Eurasia (Siberia) became exposed. Scientists call this land feature *Beringia*, or the Bering Land Bridge. But it was not a bridge at all. Instead, this new land was hundreds of kilometers wide in places, hardly a bridge. A similar “bridge” connected Australia and Tasmania, allowing the island to be populated. Rising sea levels later isolated the people remaining on the island, causing the language and culture to differentiate over time.

As mentioned earlier, vegetation quickly took hold on these bridges (grasses at first, then trees), and *megafauna* (mammals, birds, and reptiles) would have expanded their range onto the newly exposed rolling woodland hills and grassy plains. Imagine regions of woolly mammoths and mastodons, as well as woolly bison, small horses, giant sloths, camelids, and other large and small Pleistocene animals living on the lush grasses, followed by hungry carnivores like short-faced cave bears, cave lions, saber-tooth cats (*Smilodon*), dire wolves, and scavengers like giant condors, slowly working their way across the short distance between Siberia and Alaska, never once realizing that they were crossing continents. Imagine, too, the giant flocks of geese, cranes, and other birds that annually migrate to Alaska’s north.

Most importantly, humans also crossed from northern Eurasia into North America hunting the animals, fishing the new streams and rivers, gathering clams and seafood along the newly exposed coastline, mostly in small familial bands. They too were completely unaware that they were moving to a new world; no signs welcomed them to

Alaska. Along with their stone technology, cultures, and religions, they also brought their languages, the very first, or proto-languages, of North America. Thus, Alaska was the all-important gateway into North, Central, and South America. If the Bering Sea had been deeper, the Americas would not be as they are today. If the Bering Sea was deeper than the 120 foot drop in world sea levels, then it would not have been exposed, and migrations probably would not have occurred. The continents of North and South America would have remained unpopulated by humans when discovered by Western Europeans in the late fifteenth century.

Because the interstadial glacial advances and retreats happened many times during the past 100,000 years—exposing land, submerging land, contracting and expanding, opening temporary pathways into the New World—it is important to note that the human migrations were not constant, nor were they of the same cultural group. Instead, many different peoples made their way across Beringia at many different times, all representing diverse cultures and languages migrating into North America. Archaeological dates coincide perfectly with periods of glacial recession, those “windows of opportunity” when glaciers retreated enough to allow human migration.

As groups transmigrated from Asia to Alaska into what is now Canada and down into the region presently known as the United States, they settled in places rich with resources: along rivers, at the confluences of rivers, wherever rivers emptied into the sea, on vast plains full of bison--anywhere food was abundant. It is important to consider that river deltas, estuaries, and bays were not located where they are today. Instead, rivers would have flowed much longer until they finally reached the sea, perhaps dozens of kilometers. Small human communities would most certainly have existed along the

riverbanks, especially at the confluence of river and sea. Other groups coming across Beringia later would compete for those same subsistence resources, likely leading to acts of aggression.

Some things never change.

Thus, these hunters and gatherers were constantly on the move, either because they were in search of resources or because they had been forcibly ejected from a region by a larger, stronger group or groups. Naturally, these various peoples brought their own languages with them.

As the groups moved from their origins, crossing rivers, plains, and mountains, their languages altered over time (as all languages do). In short, over many generations, the New World languages would have grown into distinct dialects, eventually into distinct languages—wholly new, wholly and idiosyncratically distinct systems. No doubt, because of contact with other bands or tribes, *miscegenation* (intermarriage between differing cultural groups) occurred, further complicating the various languages. In addition, slavery was prevalent among pre-contact Native American cultures, including Alaskan cultures. Eventually, Slaves would have learned the language of their captors, some words (and ideas) being shared or borrowed as loanwords.

The population of the New World by humans can best be described as a constant movement eastward and southward, with no awareness whatsoever by the new settlers that they were on a new continent. There were no maps. They only followed the eternal need for food and a place to call home. In a relatively brief period—only a couple thousand years—the pressure to keep moving, to find a niche, led to the human populating of North, Central, and South America, from the northernmost climates all the

way down to Tierra del Fuego. Radiocarbon dating broadly supports this migration pattern, though some ambiguous dates exist, which can be generally explained. Recent DNA findings further support this theory of migration.

While most of the migrating peoples moved eastward and southward, some groups stayed north, keeping to the Arctic coastlines. During the Ice Age, Greenland was also accessible. The descendants of those people are often, and inaccurately, called Eskimo, though they call themselves by a variety of names: Inuit, Yupit, and Inupiat. Over time, their cultures adapted to the Arctic climate. Indeed, they may already have been circumpolar-dwellers *before* they crossed from Siberia, following the northernmost coastline.

Eventually, global temperatures increased, and the thick ice sheets slowly melted, returning sea levels to current depths, closing the door to human migration and drowning future archaeological sites along previously exposed Ice Age coasts. Today, underwater archaeology is a burgeoning field of study.

One effect of the thousands of years of human transmigration into the New World was, as mentioned earlier, the isolation of the languages from their original, pre-Beringia languages. Early on, as humans first crossed into Alaska, many of the languages would have had a good deal in common. Indeed, the thirteen Athabaskan languages of interior Alaska and the additional Athabaskan languages that promulgated southward were all related thousands of years ago. Even today--Navajo, the language of the indigenous people in the region that is called Four Corners (eastern Arizona, western New Mexico, southern Colorado, and southeast Utah)--is a member of the same linguistic family, called Diné. *The Ahtna Noun Dictionary and Pronunciation Guide* (Smelcer, 1998, 2009

revised) includes a small chapter on comparative linguistics, showing words that are similar in neighboring Athabaskan languages. In many cases, the words are nearly the same. For instance, the Ahtna word for lynx (*Lynx canadensis*) is *niduuyi*. In neighboring Tanacross the word is *niidûu*; and in Upper Tanana it is *niduuy*. Similarly, the corresponding words for moose (*Alces alces*) are *deniigi*, *dendîig*, and *denigi*. Noam Chomsky, the world's most influential linguist, graciously provided a foreword to the dictionary.

Time changes everything, even languages. As time passed, the original languages brought over from Eurasia-Siberia transmuted, or changed. All languages change. Every year, in major world languages, dictionaries are published with new words added, some words removed from usage or their original meanings modified. Consider such modern additions as *computer*, *laptop*, *internet*, *thumbdrive*, *floppy disk*, *gigabyte*, *terabyte*, *quarks*, and *mouse*, which used to be exclusively, a small, furry rodent. Given enough time, those early North American languages no longer resembled their proto-linguistic parents. The same can be said of larger aspects of the cultures. They too differentiated.

It is estimated that at the time the first Western Europeans settled in New England (the northeastern coast of America) there were as many as a thousand different languages in North America (excluding Central and South America), each belonging to a unique and distinct culture. Imagine such diversity. The image of Christopher Columbus standing on sandy shores of North America in 1492 holding the flag of Spain with his three ships anchored behind him expresses a ludicrous fallacy. He never set foot on the continent itself. The idea that he "discovered" the New World is equally erroneous. Estimates suggest that tens of millions of people already lived in North America at the

time. They didn't need to be found. Pre-contact population estimates vary widely. In the 1960s, Henry Dobyns estimated that as many as 90-100 million people lived on the continents before 1492. In the 1970s, Woodrow Borah and Sherburne Cook estimated that over 25 million people lived on the pre-contact Mexican plateau alone. Conservative estimates suggest that as many as 60 million people lived in the New World at the moment Columbus "discovered" the New World.

Scientists believe that diseases transmitted by post-Western European contact, killed as much as 80% to 90% of the human population. Epidemics raced across the continent unchecked, decimating pan-American Indians on both continents. Ostensibly, it was the largest accidental ethnocide in history. Other infections were not accidental. Centuries later, in a gesture of friendship, the US government purposefully gave small-pox-infected blankets to Indians. It is arguably one of the first acts of biological warfare. A similar and more recent epidemic occurred during 1918-1920, when a worldwide influenza pandemic hit Alaska, killing more than 60-70 percent of all Alaska Native peoples. Along with people, the diverse cultures and languages were also devastated. Natives still call this period The Great Death.

After four hundred years of colonization (imperialism) by Britain, France, and Spain, only about 175-200 Native American languages are spoken today, most on the brink of extinction. Han, for instance, an Alaska Native language, has four speakers, all over the age of 80. In January 2008, Eyak, another Alaska Native language, went extinct when the last tribal speaker, Marie Smith, died in Anchorage. Anthropologist and linguist John Smelcer studied Eyak with her and attended her funeral service. Smelcer himself is among the last speakers of two Alaska Native languages: Ahtna, the language of the

Copper River Indians; and Alutiiq, the language of Prince William Sound (where the Exxon Valdez ran aground on Bligh Reef in 1989, spilling 11 millions gallons of crude oil).

The policy of the colonizers was simple: Eradicate the original inhabitants and take their land and resources. Ironically, while the American Indians were themselves displaced to make room for the expanding United States, their ancient names for places were largely kept. Nearly half of the names of the fifty states come from Indian words, not to mention many of the names of towns and rivers. It's the same story seen around the world whenever a larger culture dominates an indigenous culture. Similar histories exist in the way the British treated Indian, Australian, Tasmanian, and New Zealand (Maori) Aborigines, and the way the Spanish treated South American cultures. The same can be said in Asia and Africa. In North America, the policy of eradication was best summed up by the words of Headmaster Richard Henry Pratt, his words engraved above the iron gates of Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania, the first boarding school for American Indian children (1879): "Kill the Indian to save the man."

Loosely interpreted, it was the American government's official policy to eliminate everything Indian, slowly but absolutely: their customs, their spiritual beliefs, and most importantly, their languages. Beginning in 1879, school-aged Indian children were forcibly removed from their homes and sent to distant boarding schools. At its peak, the federal government operated over 120 Indian schools. The insidious plan worked. The loss of Native American languages escalated during the eighty years during which those schools turned out generations of Indians who had little or no access to their tribal customs or languages, their language of home. Many of author John Smelcer's relatives

attended such schools, some as far away as two thousand miles from home. Australia had a similar policy regarding Aborigines. Those children were called The Stolen Generation. Both governments ended their practice in the early 1960s. Australia recently apologized to Aborigines. In 1992, the United States government reversed their policy of assimilation with the Native American Languages Act, which provides funding for the preservation of the remaining Native American languages. But it may have come too late.

Coincidentally, the rise of Native American literature began around the same time. African American literature had gained popular foothold decades earlier, especially during what is termed The Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s and 1930s. It is interesting to note that the descendants of slaves were given the right to vote *before* the original people of the nation. Today, Native American/American Indian literature is a canon of its own, widely studied in colleges and universities. The body of writing comes in many forms—poetry, short stories, novels, and drama—and comes from authors from many of the hundreds of recognized tribes. The myths, folktales, and histories of the various tribes inform the literature, which is often about cultural loss and recovery, social injustice, returning home, and finding a place in the world. But the literature is not bound by such topics as contemporary Black writers are not bound to write about slavery or racial segregation or discrimination.

One of the criticisms of American Indian literature is that it takes the literary forms of the colonizer. All the above-mentioned literary genres originate from Western culture. Not only that, but almost all of the published writing is in English, the language of the colonizer. Thus, Navajo, Apache, Kiowa, Creek, Pueblo, and Cherokee Indians are writing in English. Many contemporary American Indian writers will use a Native word

or phrase in their writing from time to time, but because they do not speak their language fluently (almost no one does anymore), they are unable to create an original literature in their original Native tongue. Only a handful of Native American writers (the author of this essay included) regularly publish fully and completely in their Native language.

It took longer than ten thousand years for the indigenous languages of North and South America to evolve. It took only a few centuries to eradicate them.

Suggested Further Reading:

Diamond, Jared. *Guns, Germs & Steel*.

Mann, Charles. *1491: New Revelations of the Americas before Columbus*

Nabokov, Peter. *Native American Testimony: A Chronicle of Indian-White Relations 1492-Present*.

Smelcer, John. *The Ahtna Noun Dictionary* (1998, 2009 Revised) and *The Alutiiq Noun Dictionary* (2009). Click on dictionaries at www.johnsmelcer.com

Online articles:

“Native American Culture: Language” www.ewetribe.com/NACulture/lang.htm

Pleistocene Ice Age. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pleistocene>

Pleistocene Megafauna. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pleistocene_megafauna

Ice Age Animals. www.museum.state.il.us/exhibits/larson/ice_age_animals.html

Death of the Megafauna. www.abc.net.au/science/features/megafauna

North American Extinctions. www.thegreatstory.org/charts/NA-extinctions.html

Bio:

John E. Smelcer is the author of almost forty books, including a dozen books on Alaska Native/Native American cultures. In 1994, he edited the acclaimed anthology, *Durable Breath: Contemporary Native American Poetry*. As one of the last speakers of Ahtna and Alutiiq, he has worked with tribal elders, many of whom have since passed away, to compile and edit dictionaries of both languages. His education includes advanced studies in English at Cambridge and Oxford.