Introduction

The languages indigenous to North, Middle, and South America are both numerous and diverse. Boundaries between these areas are not sharp, since languages and language families often cross political lines, but linguistically North America is traditionally defined as the area north of Mexico, Middle America as Mexico and most of Central America, and South America as parts of the Caribbean, Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and everything south to Tierra del Fuego. During first contacts with Europeans, around 300 distinct, mutually unintelligible languages were spoken in North America, another 350 in Middle America, and perhaps as many as 1,500 in South America. The languages are not all genetically related. In North America, around 58 separate genetic units (families and isolates) are recognized; in Middle America, 18; and in South America, another 118. Large numbers of languages have been lost since contact, and nearly all of those still spoken are highly endangered; few will survive beyond the middle of the 21st century. The languages are also typologically diverse. Many show categories and structures that are rare or only weakly developed elsewhere in the world. Priorities in scholarship have been documentation and description of the languages, on the one hand, and understanding their genetic and areal relationships, on the other.

General Overviews

Introductory surveys tend to focus on one of the three major areas—North, Middle, or South America—or a major subarea within one of them. They usually identify the languages spoken, often their current numbers of speakers, genetic relationships among the languages, and their structural characteristics. Listed here are works that range in length from a few pages to substantial articles.

North America

The scene was set for modern scholarship on languages indigenous to North America, and to a great extent the rest of the Americas as well, by Franz Boas beginning at the end of the 19th century. Boas saw language as an integral part of culture and each language as capable of adding something unique to our overall understanding. This vision was articulated in his 1911 introduction to the multivolume Handbook of American Indian Languages (Boas 1966), still widely read in the early 21st century. The other overviews cited here are appropriate for different purposes: Yamamoto and Zepeda 2004 for beginning students and casual readers, Mithun 1996 and Goddard 1996 for somewhat more scholarly readers, and Mithun 1990 particularly for academic nonspecialists.


The cornerstone of scholarship on languages of the Americas, this classic essay provides an excellent introduction to the languages and the theory and methodological principles behind their description. Appropriate for all audiences. Originally


Useful guide for scholars including a survey of languages with specification of their vitality status as of 1995 (spoken by significant numbers of children, widespread use by adults only, elders only, no speakers), consensus genetic classification, and detailed comparison of the orthographies and transcription systems throughout the history of work.


Survey of foci of research at the time aimed at a scholarly but not necessarily linguistic audience. Points to the importance of structural contextualization of work (consideration of linguistic context beyond the sentence), sociocultural contextualization (work on registers, rhetorical structure, language contact), and diachronic contextualization (a view of language as constantly evolving).


Survey of ranges of features with emphasis on those that differ from languages elsewhere. Sounds and sound inventories, parts of speech, categories expressed in roots and affixes, clause structures, and patterns of clause combining. Somewhat more advanced than Yamamoto and Zepeda 2004, appropriate for both beginning and advanced readers.


Very basic introduction for beginners into special structural characteristics of indigenous languages and how they differ from more familiar European languages. Topics include word order, word formation, and the kinds of information encoded in them.

**Middle America**

In Middle America, Mesoamerica is often singled out, a region extending from the Pánuco River in northern Mexico to the Lempa River in El Salvador and including the Pacific coast of Nicaragua and Costa Rica. Mesoamerica was originally identified as a geographic area over which numerous cultural traits were shared, but it is now also recognized as a linguistic area, where linguistic features have been transmitted through contact among both related and unrelated indigenous languages. Overviews of the languages of Middle America can be found on several sites, particularly the Archive of the Indigenous Languages of Latin America. A general statement about the languages and their relationships is in Kaufman 2007, and a survey of the current status of the languages is in Grinevald 2007.

**Archive of the Indigenous Languages of Latin America. Austin: Univ. of Texas.**

Good, very clearly written introduction in English, appropriate for beginners. Discusses languages and dialects, language relations, numbers of speakers, sounds, grammar, vocabulary, verbal art, and indigenous literature and provides further references.

Survey of the status of languages indigenous to Middle America (numbers of speakers, fluency, age range), current documentation, and preservation and revitalization work by local, national, and regional research institutions.


Good, frequently cited overview.

South America

A few works provide overviews of the languages indigenous to South America. A number of others center on one of three major subareas: Lowland Amazonia, the Highland Andean region, or the Southern Cone. General overviews are in Suárez 2007, Kaufman and Berlin 2007, and Moore 2007. Surveys of the large number of languages in Brazil are in Moore 2006 and Moore, et al. 2009.


Discusses the history of language replacement in Hispanic South America from precolonial times to the present. Indigenous languages of the region have been replaced not only by Spanish since contact with Europeans but also by other, larger indigenous languages, particularly Quechua, the language of the Inca Empire.


Basic, frequently cited overview.


General overview of the more than 150 languages indigenous to Brazil and currently spoken.


Survey of the very large number of endangered languages of Amazonia, highlighting differences in the effects of work by missionary and nonmissionary linguists, particularly in training Native and national linguists.


Overview of the current situation of the indigenous languages of Brazil, 154 of which are still spoken, their genetic relationships.
and the state of documentation. Aimed at the general public. In Portuguese.

Useful, accessible overview.

Reference Works

The most important reference works are the grammars of the languages, dictionaries, and textual material in the languages. These works are much too numerous to be mentioned individually here, and fortunately their number is constantly increasing. Detailed coverage is in the bibliographies of individual language families. References to a number of primary descriptions are in the Anthologies section. Works published on North American languages up to 1999 are listed in Mithun 1999. The publications listed here are substantial overviews of the languages indigenous to North, Middle, and South America.

North America

Article-length, state-of-the art surveys of the history of scholarship on the languages indigenous to North America are in Goddard 1996 and Mithun 1996. A more comprehensive, book-length work on what is known about these languages is Mithun 1999. In North America, California is home to the greatest variety of languages; nearly half of the families indigenous to North America are represented. A detailed treatment of these languages is Golla 2011. The Southeast is also an area of considerable linguistic diversity, much more so than was earlier thought. Goddard 2005 is an excellent survey of the languages of that region.

Detailed history of descriptive work on North American languages from the time of first European contact to the emergence of modern scientific linguistics at the end of the 19th century. Appropriate for academic audiences.

An informative survey of the languages spoken in the southeastern quadrant of the United States at contact. Only a few languages, primarily from the Muskogean and Siouan-Catawba families, had been recognized previously, but this work details evidence of the existence of a large number of small languages, many scarcely documented.

Synthesis of what is known about the seventy-eight languages of California, the most genetically and typologically diverse area of North America. Structural characteristics of the languages are described, all major published and unpublished sources are listed, and what can be learned about the prehistory and culture of speakers is explored.

History of scholarship on the languages through the 20th century. From emphasis on vocabulary collection for genetic

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classification, Boas turned toward deeper grammatical description, with sensitivity to categories that reflect cognitive and cultural categories. Edward Sapir, Bloomfield, Kroeber, Harrington, and others continued and further developed traditions of documentation and description.


State of knowledge at the end of the 20th century. Part 1 describes the ranges of sounds, categories, and structural patterns in North America. Part 2 is a catalogue of all languages with classification. Each family and isolate is described with lists of languages, locations, status, published works, and characteristics.

Middle America

General surveys of scholarship on Middle American languages are in Kaufman 1974 and Suárez 1983.


Survey of work up to that point, description of language families, languages, and dialects; phonological systems, morphological systems, syntactic systems, preconquest literary traditions, prehistory, language contact, language policies, and status of the languages.

South America

Scholarship on the languages indigenous to South America is more recent and is developing rapidly. A number of reference works on these languages are in the Anthologies section. A volume specifically on the Andean region, where excellent new work is underway, is Adelaar and Muysken 2004.


Authoritative survey of the languages of the Andean region of South America, including surveys of the languages and their statuses, their structural characteristics, and their histories.

Textbooks

The study of the languages indigenous to the Americas is not yet a fully textbook science. Knowledge is increasing rapidly in all areas, from documentation and description to analysis and comparison. For the most part, reading lists for courses in American Indian languages consist of sets of individual articles. A notable exception is Silver and Miller 1997. Hinton 1994 was not compiled specifically as a course textbook, but it has proven informative and inspiring to many, including beginning students, members of
Native communities, and the general public.

Series of accessible essays. Not written as a textbook but potentially useful for courses on California or North American languages and for the general public. Includes sections on the languages and families, song, coyote talk, the vocabulary of direction, place-names, counting systems, men's and women's talk, and endangerment and preservation.

Inviting text appropriate for undergraduates with little background in linguistics but sophisticated enough for others. Topics include structure (sound systems, grammatical categories), culture (plant taxonomies, geographic orientation), art (performers and performances), nonlinguistic communication (Plains Sign), and much more. Richly illustrated with data from across North and Central America.

**Anthologies**

Much work on the languages indigenous to the Americas is found in collections of articles on individual languages or issues. One of the more frequently cited collections, which contains works by major scholars on a broad of range topics concerning languages throughout the Americas, is Hinton and Munro 1998.

Rich collection of state-of-the-art works on the phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, lexicon, discourse, poetics, and historical and areal linguistics of North and Middle American languages. Emphasis is on the interplay between description and theory.

**North America**

Much important work on the languages indigenous to North America, particularly during the 20th century, has appeared in anthologies. Some of the more important collections are Boas 1911, Boas 1922, Boas 1933, Sawyer 1971, Sebeok 1976, Shipley 1988, and Goddard 1996. Hardy and Scancarelli 2005 focuses on languages of the Southeast. It is noteworthy for the text-based descriptions of the individual languages.

Important collection of sketches written according to the guidelines laid out by Boas in the introduction. The sketches are based largely on connected speech in texts, which significantly adds to the depth of the description. Languages described are Hupa, Tlingit, Haida, Tsimshian, Kwakiutl, Chinook Maidu, Fox, Lakota, and Inuktut.

Collection of sketches of North American languages written according to the guidelines laid out by Boas in his introduction to Volume 1. Languages described are Takelma, Coos, Siouan (Upper Umpqua), and Chukchee.


Collection of sketches of North American languages written according to the guidelines laid out by Boas in his introduction to Volume 1. Languages described are Tonkawa, Quileute, Yuchi, Zuni, and Coeur d'Alene.


Major state-of-the-art reference work with articles on the history of the field, typological characteristics, place-names, personal names, language and culture, ethnography of speaking, discourse, nonspeech communication, contact, and classification. Sophisticated descriptive sketches of Central Alaskan Yupik, Hupa, Cree, Lakhota, Zuni, Eastern Pomo, Seneca, Wichita, Thompson, Coahuilteco, Sahaptin, and Shoshone.


Introduction to the Southeast as a linguistic area, survey of research on the languages of the southeastern United States, and expert text-based descriptions of the Muskogean languages Alabama, Chickasaw, Choctaw, and Creek; Muskogean historical phonology; and Proto-Muskogean morphology; and the non-Muskogean languages Caddo, Cherokee, Natchez, and Quapaw.


Collection of papers on various aspects of North and Middle American languages, including sound symbolism, imitative, morphological structure, and language change. Languages and families represented include Sahaptian, Yokuts, Tarascan, Athabaskan, Yuman, Pomoan, Malecite-Passamaquoddy, Klallam, and Konkow.


Thirty-six contributions on various aspects of languages indigenous to the Americas, including phonetics, phonology, prosody, reduplication, pronouns, possession, diminutive syntax, valency, passivization, switch reference, onomastics, colors, number, orientation, narrative style, language contact, and genetic relationships.
Middle America

The two major reference works on Middle American languages are McQuown 1967 and Edmonson 1984.

Descriptive sketches of additional languages: Coatlán Mixe, Chichimeco Jonaz, Cholti Maya, Tarascan, and San Luis Potosi Huastec.

Contributions on the history of scholarship on Middle American linguistics, inventory of descriptive materials, inventory of classificatory materials, reconstruction, and descriptions of individual languages, including Classical Nahuatl, Classical Yucatec Maya, Classical Quiche, Sierra Popoluca, Isthmus Zapotec, Huatla de Jiménez Mazatec, Jiilapan Pame, and Huamelultec Chontal, with map.

South America

A large proportion of the languages indigenous to South America are highly endangered. Their loss is due not only to the encroachment of European languages. It also comes from high degrees of intertribal acculturation, which has developed out of long-standing contact among indigenous languages. There has been widespread absorption of smaller languages into larger languages, particularly in Amazonia. In Highland South America, bilingualism in one of two major languages, Quechua or Aymara, is resulting in the replacement of many smaller languages there. In the Southern Cone there are large numbers of languages and isolates but generally with very few speakers. Nearly all of the languages of South America are severely underdocumented, though documentation work is being taken on with vigor. Surveys of the current status of the languages are in Klein and Stark 1985. A number of works deal specifically with languages of the Amazon region. An overview of the statuses, relationships, and grammars of these languages is in Dixon and Aikhenvald 1999; grammatical sketches of a number of them are in Derbyshire and Pullum 1986–1991; and articles on more specialized topics are in Payne 1990, Queixałós and Renault-Lescure 2000, and Gildea and Queixałós 2010.

Grammatical sketches of Apalai, Canela-Krahó, Pirahã, and Urubu-Kapor (Vol. 1), Sanuma and Yagua (Vol. 2), and Macushi and Paumari (Vol. 3) plus studies of syntax in Guajajara and word order in Yagua (Vol. 1) and comparative Arawakan (Vols. 1 and 3) with introductions to each volume. Welcome documentation of little-described, generally endangered languages.

Introduction covering the cultures of speakers, areal features of the languages, and genetic relationships among them followed by chapters describing the grammar of each of the major language families, Carib, Arawakan, Tupí, Tupí-Guarani, Macro-Jê, Tucano, Pano, Makú, Nambiquara, and Arawá, plus small families and isolates.

Describes the nature of ergativity and its widespread distribution in Amazonian languages. Eight papers describe ergative patterns in sixteen languages: six from the Panoan family, three Jê, three Cariban, one Tacanan, one Katukinan, and two isolates. Some are well-established morphological patterns, while others are more recently established syntactic patterns.


Describes situations of indigenous languages of Lowland South America (the Orinoco-Amazon region), the Andean, and the Southern Cone, addressing such topics as history, current status, policy pressures, and areal and genetic relationships.


Collection of articles on historical and comparative studies, stress and pitch-accent systems, characteristic morphological categories and structures (classifiers, incorporation), transitive and grammatical relations, clitics, and particles.

Queixaŀós, Francesc, and Odile Renault-Lescure, eds. 2000. *As línguas amazônicas hoje/Las lenguas amazonicas hoy/Les langues d'Amazonie aujourd'hui/The Amazonian languages today*. São Paulo, Brazil: Institut de Recherché pour le Développement, Instituto Socioambiental, and Museu Paraense Emílio Goeldi.

Twenty-six articles in Portuguese, Spanish, French, and English with a special focus on the social and political issues confronting endangered languages: surveys of languages and what is known about them in various areas, diversity, and language policies.

**Journals and Series**

A large proportion of work on the languages indigenous to the Americas has appeared in journals and other series. Some of the most prominent general outlets are the International Journal of American Linguistics, Anthropological Linguistics, and Amerindia: Revue d’ Ethnolinguistique Amérindienne. Rich resources for specific families are Etudes Inuit Studies for work on Eskimo-Aleut languages and cultures and the Kinkade Collection: The On-line Archive of Papers from the International Conference on Salish and Neighboring Languages for languages of the Northwest Coast of North America. Two publications series, the Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletins and Annual Reports 1897– and the University of California Publications in Linguistics 1943–, are treasure troves of grammars, dictionaries, and texts. For languages of Mexico, lists of publications are at the Summer Institute of Linguistics international website Grammars of Indigenous Languages of Mexico.

**Amerindia: Revue d’ Ethnolinguistique Amérindienne.**

Publishes work on American languages, particularly South American, including primary documentation and texts in the languages as well as linguistic and ethnolinguistic analyses. Issues are often thematic. Articles in French, Spanish, Portuguese, and English. Published by the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, France.

**Anthropological Linguistics.**

Not devoted exclusively to American languages but regularly contains numerous good articles and reviews on the languages of
North, Middle, and South America. Published by the American Indian Studies Research Institute, Department of Anthropology, Indiana University, Bloomington.

Contain monumental works on languages and cultures of North, Middle, and South American peoples. Published beginning in 1879 (Annual Reports) and beginning in 1888 (Bulletins) by the US Government Printing Office Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, respectively.

Études Inuit Studies.
Journal devoted to work on the linguistics, ethnology, politics, archaeology, and history of traditional and contemporary Inuit societies. Includes articles, book reviews, lists of scientific events, and annual reviews of recent theses and articles published in other journals. Published in English and French by Université Laval, Quebec.

Grammars of Indigenous Languages of Mexico.
Includes grammars, dictionaries, and analyzed texts in languages indigenous to Mexico, including Amuzgo, Chatino, Chinantec, Ch'ol, Oaxacan Chontal, Chotal of Tabasco, Cora, Cuicatec, Huarijo, Huasteco, Huave, Mayo, Mazatec, Mixe, Mixtec, Nahuatl, Otomi, Popoluca, Popoluca, Purepecha, O'odham, Seri, Tarahumara, Tepehuan, Tequistlatlec, Tlapanec, Totonac, Triqui, Tzeltal, Tzotzil, Yaqui, Zapotec, Zoque. Some available in electronic format. Maintained by the Summer Institute of Linguistics. See also Dictionaries, Grammars, and Analyzed Texts in Mexican Indian Languages.

Premier journal for articles and reviews of works on all linguistic aspects of the languages of North, Middle, and South America. Published by the University of Chicago Press.

Kinkade Collection: The On-line Archive of Papers from the International Conference on Salish and Neighboring Languages.
Rich collections of papers on languages of the Northwest Coast of North America, primarily from the Salishan, Wakashan, Chimakuan, Tsimshianic, and Athabaskan families. Papers from 1967–1999 are freely downloadable.

Important series of volumes with special focus on indigenous languages of the Americas. Includes numerous grammars and dictionaries as well as some text collections and anthologies. Published since 1943 by the University of California Press in Berkeley and Los Angeles.

Collections

A number of archives house published and unpublished materials on American languages, including field notes, audio and video recordings, and more. Only some are listed here. Others are under development. Particularly rich are the Collections of the National Anthropological Archives of the Smithsonian Institution and the American Philosophical Society Library. There are also...
archives with more specific loci. A particularly important one is the Archive of the Indigenous Languages of Latin America at the University of Texas, Austin, which is growing rapidly. Other projects on these languages include the Mesoamerican Language Texts Digitization Project and the Archivo de Lenguas Indígenas de México. For particular North American languages, there is the California Language Archive, also a hive of activity as more works are added and digitized, the Alaska Native Language Center, and the website First Nations Languages of British Columbia.

**Alaska Native Language Center.**

The archive, housed at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks, is a rich resource for information on the roughly twenty indigenous languages of Alaska. Publications include both research and pedagogical materials on Aleut, Yupik languages, Inupiaq, Alaskan Athabaskan languages, Eyak, Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian. Publications can be found online. There is also a substantial archive of unpublished materials at the center, planned to be added to the website in pdf format.

**American Philosophical Society Library.**

Extensive manuscript collection housed in Philadelphia that contains field notes on American languages, particularly North American, from the 18th century to the present as well as sound recordings. MOLE, the manuscripts online guide, includes fully searchable descriptions of every American Philosophical Society manuscript collection with finding aids.

**Archive of the Indigenous Languages of Latin America.**

The focus of this digital archive, maintained at the University of Texas, Austin, is on recordings and texts of naturally occurring discourse in Middle and South American languages, including narratives, ceremonies, oratory, conversations, and songs, many with transcriptions and translations in Spanish, English, or Portuguese. The collection also contains grammars, dictionaries, ethnographies, research notes, and indigenous literature.

**Archivo de Lenguas Indígenas de México.**

Online pdf descriptions of Mesoamerican indigenous languages, generally in Spanish. Edited by Yolanda Lastra (CELL), Gerardo Aguilar (CELL), and Arturo Frappé (CSC).

**California Language Archive.**

Merger of the Survey of California and Other Indian Languages and the former Berkeley Language Center. The survey, at the University of California, Berkeley, houses 150 linear feet of archival material on around 130 languages, mainly from the western United States, with at least 50 in California. The Berkeley Language Center houses audio recordings. Extremely valuable resource.

**Collections of the National Anthropological Archives.**

More than 650 manuscript and photograph collections acquired before 1996 by the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, many of which are linguistic field notes on American languages. Searchable through the Smithsonian Institution Research Information System (SIRIS), the Smithsonian online catalogue.

**First Nations Languages of British Columbia.**
Information on the status of the more than thirty indigenous languages spoken in British Columbia with bibliography and links to other sites with more detailed information on particular languages and on language maintenance and revitalization. Maintained by the Yinka Déné Language Institute (YDLI).

**Mesoamerican Language Texts Digitization Project.**

Manuscripts from the personal research collections of Carl Hermann Berendt and Daniel Garrison Brinton both missionary linguists in Mexico and northern Central America, particularly grammars, vocabularies, and religious texts. Maintained by the Foundation for the Advancement for Mesoamerican Studies (FAMSI) in collaboration with the libraries of the University of Pennsylvania. See manuscripts currently available online.

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**Language Relationships**

Because the languages indigenous to the Americas are so numerous, an ongoing concern has been their classification, that is, the determination of their relationships to one another. The challenge is heightened by the fact that there are no records of their ancestors comparable to those of Ancient Greek, Sanskrit, or Latin. For the most part, determination of genetic relationships must be based on modern or very recent forms of the languages. The picture is complicated by the effects of language contact, particularly among indigenous languages, which can result in similarities that cannot be taken as evidence of a genetic relationship. While it may be relatively easy to spot loanwords from European languages, it can be difficult to distinguish ancient loans among neighboring languages from cognates shared by remotely related languages. It can be all the more difficult to identify contact effects on grammatical patterns. The most comprehensive survey at present is in Campbell 1997.


A comprehensive survey of what is known about the history of Native American languages, covering South, Middle, and North America. Discusses the history of scholarship, methods, and proposals of distant genetic relationships and evaluates of the methods and results. Also contains a detailed section on linguistic areas.

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**Genetic Classification**

By the end of the 19th century scholars were well on their way to classifications of the languages of the New World. The scheme for North American languages laid out by J. W. Powell of the Bureau of American Ethnology in 1891 is close to the one generally accepted in the early 21st century with fifty-eight families (Powell 1966). Relationships among the languages of Middle America are generally considered well established.

**Powell, John Wesley. 1966. Indian linguistic families of America north of Mexico. Introduction to handbook of American Indian languages, 1. Edited by Preston Holder. Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press.**

Based primarily on similarities in vocabularies collected for the Bureau of American Ethnology, this is the foundation of the modern consensus classification, though it did not go so far as to identify specific sound correspondences. Originally printed in 1891 in *Bureau of American Ethnology Anthropological Records* 7:1–142.

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**North America**
The enormous number of languages indigenous to North America has always prompted curiosity about their relationships. Researchers observed similarities among languages as early as the 18th century. The first major classification was presented in Powell 1966 (cited in Genetic Classification), a classification much like that generally accepted in the early 21st century. During the first half of the 20th century, as more information on individual languages became available, hypotheses were pursued about possible deeper relationships among the Powellean families. Proposals for such "superstocks" were laid out by Edward Sapir in the 1920s (Sapir 1990, Sapir 1949). Further work has validated a few of the proposals (e.g., Algic), but most others have either been abandoned or are still considered no more than hypotheses. Relationships of a depth comparable to that of Indo-European have largely been identified; the possibility of more remote links is in most cases unknowable, first, because of the extreme time depths, at which cognate vocabulary is sparse and no longer recognizable and, second, because of the paucity of data. A good introduction to the issues involved in establishing genetic relationship is in Bright 1984. The state of knowledge in the second half of the 20th century is laid out in Campbell and Mithun 1979. The consensus classification at the end of the century, which differs little, is in Goddard 1996.


A good, accessible introduction to the field of genetic classification with particular reference to the languages of North America and Mesoamerica. Bright reiterates the Boasian admonition that diffusion (contact) is the source of many similarities among languages and care should be taken not to attribute such similarities to deeper genetic relationships.


The most comprehensive survey of the time, detailing the relationships among the languages of North and Middle America with a history of scholarship followed by contributions by individual authors on major families and areas as well as hypotheses of deeper relations. Considered a major resource.


Excellent, detailed history of work on classification of North American languages from the earliest 17th- and 18th-century observations culminating in John Wesley Powell's 1891 classification, through proposals for reduction to superstocks by Kroeber, R. M. W. Dixon, Edward Sapir, and others, to later refinements. Contains a large map of the current consensus classification.


Reduces the fifty-eight Powellean families to six "superstocks" largely by typological similarities. Sapir considered many of the superstocks simply working hypotheses, but unfortunately many were adopted, especially by nonspecialists, as established units. Originally appeared in Encyclopaedia Britannica, 14th ed., Vol. 5 (1929), 138–141.


Two-page preliminary proposal to reduce the fifty-eight language families of North America identified by John Wesley Powell to just six groups. Sapir was careful to mention the fragmentary nature of data available and the possibility of resemblances due to borrowing. Originally appeared in Science 54 (1921): 408.
Middle America

Middle America contains a very large number of languages and shows considerable typological diversity, but genetic relationships are now considered well established. These are laid out in Campbell 1979.


Surveys the languages of Middle America and the generally accepted classification as well as proposals of deeper genetic relationships and assessments of their likelihood. Extinct languages are listed. Phonological inventories of the protolanguages are given, reflexes of the sounds in the daughter languages, and in many cases cognate sets.

South America

Establishment of genetic relationships in South America has been held back by the lack of documentation of many of the languages, though the same year (1891) that John Wesley Powell published his classification of North America (see Powell 1966, cited in Genetic Classification), Daniel Brinton published his classification of all languages of the Americas (Brinton 1891). This work was the foundation of subsequent classifications of South American languages (Mason 1950, Loukotka 1968, Kaufman 1990, Kaufman 2007), but discoveries continue to be made as more data become available. Rowe 1954 and Kaufman 1990 discuss the challenges presented by the languages and their state of documentation for classification work.


Classifications of North and South American languages, though Brinton had limited access to data from North America. His classification of South American languages, based on both lexical and grammatical correspondences, was the foundation of modern work. Reprinted, New York: Gardners, 2007.


State-of-the-art classification, described under Kaufman 1994. Points to the need for extensive, accurate documentation, since most of the languages still spoken will be gone within fifty years, and for rigorous methodology in comparison, reconstruction of ancestral languages, and tracing of subsequent developments in their descendants.


Surveys the families and isolates of South America, including lower Central American and the Antilles (Middle America without Mesoamerica), arriving at a grouping of languages into 118 genetic units (48 clear families and 70 isolates) with the note that some of these may be related at a deeper level.

Loukotka, Čestmír. 1968. Classification of South American Indian languages. Los Angeles: Latin American Studies Center, Univ. of California.
Culmination of thirty years of work. General classification of South American languages based on comparisons of larger vocabulary sets from more languages than those available to Daniel Brinton. While Campbell 1997 (cited in Language Relationships) finds Loukotka's methods flawed, Terrence Kaufman finds the classification quite accurate.


A frequently cited work at the time. Mason sought to identify deeper genetic relationships and reduce the number of genetic units.


Evaluates work on genetic relations among South American languages up to that time and suggests directions for future research, particularly more documentation and careful use of the comparative method.

The AmerInd Proposal

Greenberg 1967 proposed that all of the languages indigenous to the Americas could be grouped into just three genetic units, reflecting three migrations from Siberia. The units were Eskimo-Aleut (universally recognized as a separate family), Na-Dene (Haida, Tlingit, Eyak, and Athabaskan), and AmerInd, consisting of all other languages in the New World—perhaps as many as two thousand languages, generally agreed to comprise nearly two hundred distinct groups. The work was examined seriously by a good proportion of the specialists in the field and received an essentially unanimous negative response. It was found to be seriously flawed on all levels: empirical grounding, handling of the data (bookkeeping), grammatical analysis, semantic analysis, overall methodology, and judgments of similarity. It is generally agreed that the method of simply perusing vocabulary lists from a number of languages can be a first step toward hypothesis formation, but even if the data, analysis, and judgment were accurate, that method would not establish genetic relationship. Numerous reviews have appeared in print, nearly all strongly negative. Among the most frequently cited are Adelaar 1989, Campbell 1988, Chafe 1987, Matisoff 1990, and Rankin 1992. Each of these brings a slightly different point of view to the task because of the varied expertise of the authors on languages in different areas of the Americas and beyond.


Commentary by a respected Andeanist.


Commentary by a respected historical linguist with expertise in Mesoamerican and South American languages.


Commentary by a respected North Americanist with expertise in languages of the Iroquoian, Caddoan, and Siouan families.

Proposes that the two thousand or so languages indigenous to the Americas comprise only three genetic groups based on naive inspection of large numbers of vocabulary lists for apparent similarities. Contains no references to sources of the data.

Commentary by a respected general historical linguist with expertise in a number of areas outside the Americas, particularly Asia and Europe.

Commentary by a respected North Americanist with expertise in languages of the Southeast and those of the Siouan family.

A Possible Siberian Link

There has long been curiosity about possible links between the peoples and languages of Siberia and the Americas. Work by Edward Vajda, a specialist in Ket, a language of the Yeniseian family in Siberia, has raised the possibility of a very remote connection between that family and the Tlingit-Eyak-Athabaskan family of North America. (Haida is not included in Na-Dene here.) Certain similarities in vocabulary and word structure have been presented, but it is generally agreed, including by Vajda himself, that the possibility of a genetic relationship is still only a working hypothesis and far from established. If there is such a connection, it would be very remote, on the order of ten thousand years or more, a time depth generally acknowledged to be beyond the reach of the standard comparative method in historical linguistics. A conference was held in Alaska in 2008 pulling together experts in various disciplines and subdisciplines and various languages of the families involved. The result was the collection of papers in Kari and Potter 2010.


Contains papers from a 2008 symposium on the possibility of a Dene-Yeniseic relationship. A substantial article by Edward Vajda presents intriguing preliminary linguistic evidence for a possible connection. The other seventeen papers provide a reconstruction of Na-Dene phonology and positive and negative evaluations of archaeological, genetic, kinship, and folklore similarities.

Linguistic Areas

There is ever-increasing awareness of the profound effects of contact not only on vocabulary but also on the morphology (word structure), syntax (sentence structure), and discourse (text structure) of languages. A linguistic area, also called a convergence area, diffusion area, or Sprachbund, is a geographical region in which different languages share features that are not the result of common inheritance. There are a number of regions in the Americas in which speakers of indigenous languages have long traditions of multilingualism, precisely the situation that can give rise to the copying of features from one language into another: language contact takes place primarily in the heads of multilingual speakers. Some of the best-known linguistic areas are the Northwest Coast, California, and the Southeast of North America; Mesoamerica in Middle America; and Amazonia, the Andes, and the Southern Cone in South America. There are numerous other large and small linguistic areas throughout the Americas where vocabulary and structural traits can be seen to be shared among languages that are not due to common inheritance. These areas are said to vary in strength, from those where languages share just a few, relatively superficial features to those where languages show pervasive and deep similarities. But the investigation of contact in the Americas presents challenges: it requires in-depth knowledge about multiple indigenous languages, in many cases languages that are no longer spoken or are
scantily documented. Understanding patterns of contact is of course crucial for sorting out genetic relations among the languages. Particularly in some parts of the Americas, languages have been in intense contact for such a long time that it is very difficult to distinguish ancient loans and structural effects from common inheritance. The investigation of contact in the Americas has much to offer our general understanding of the mechanisms and potential effects of contact and sheds light on the histories and cultural relationships among speakers. A synopsis of current knowledge about linguistic areas throughout the Americas is in Campbell 1997.


Detailed discussion of the linguistic areas, large and small, identified in the Americas, with maps. Critically discusses previous proposals, identifies areas and subareas, and details shared strong and weak features and authors who discovered them. Excellent brief state-of-the-art survey.

North America

Discussions of the possibility of similarities due to contact, and their consequences for the establishment of genetic relationships among North American languages, were frequent through the 20th century, beginning with avid exchanges among Franz Boas, Edward Sapir, and others on the possibility of copying of grammatical structures in the context of work on establishing deep genetic relations. Some work looks at the impact of encroaching languages on indigenous languages, such as Dozier 1956 and Bright 1973. Later in the century Sherzer and Bauman 1972 and Sherzer 1973, examining shared linguistic features within culture areas, brought renewed attention to this area of inquiry. A fine example of the kinds of features that can define a linguistic area, in this case the Northwest Coast of North America, is in Thompson and Kinkade 1990. Traits shared among languages in the Southwest are examined in Bereznak 1995. A survey of what was known about contact effects in North America at the end of the 20th century is in Silverstein 1996.


Considers shared traits among the five genetically distinct language groups of the Southwest: the Tanoan languages (Kiowa-Tanoan family), Zuni, Keresan, Hopi (Uto-Aztecan family), and the Apachean languages (Athabaskan family).


 Discusses bilingualism and linguistic acculturation among indigenous languages of North America and between indigenous and European languages (English, Spanish, French, and Russian). Points out that most work to that time had focused on borrowed vocabulary and that more attention should be given to the ongoing processes as they occur.


Notes that cultures differ in their tendency to copy aspects of other languages and proposes that the amount of transfer is mainly determined by sociocultural factors rather than by linguistic structures. Examples are drawn from languages of the Southwest.

Surveys the history of areal-typological studies in North America, discusses the notions of culture area and linguistic area, and presents evidence for major linguistic areas north of Mexico in comparison with the culture areas. The implications of these results for genetic classification are then considered.


This work developed from Sherzer's dissertation, which takes as a point of departure the culture areas identified in North America and seeks to determine whether languages within these areas share certain typological traits.


Makes the point that evidence of linguistic contact points to communicative contacts among groups and can help in the exploration of the nature of this contact.


Survey of contact situations from earliest contacts with Europeans, Indian-European contact jargons and pidgins (Souriquois Jargon, Pidgin Delaware, Apalachee-Spanish, Mobilian Jargon, Chinook Jargon, Pidgin Eskimo, Trader Navajo); contact with French, Spanish, Russian, English.


Survey of languages and language families and areal features that define the Northwest Coast of North America as a linguistic area, though many of the features extend into the Plateau, California, or Subarctic culture areas. The Northwest Coast is recognized as one of the major linguistic areas of the world.

Middle America

The major work on linguistic areas in Mesoamerica is Campbell, et al. 1986.


Landmark article identifying Mesoamerica as a linguistic area that coincides with the earlier recognized culture area. Lists languages involved and their genetic affiliations and details areal traits.

South America
In the late 20th and early 21st centuries it has become ever clearer that South America provides an unusually rich terrain for the study of language contact. Especially interesting material for our understanding of processes of contact in general is coming out of the Amazon. Frequently cited works on languages of this area are Miglaza 1985, Aikhenvald 2002, and Epps 2009.

Describes effects of contact on languages from different language families in Amazonia. Detailed discussion of sociolinguistic parameters of contact and which features are likely to be copied, with attention to phonology, pronominal systems, nominal categories, verbal categories, syntax, and discourse. Discussion of code switching, code mixing, and language obsolescence.

Amazonia contains some large families and languages distributed widely over the region but also dozens of tiny localized families and isolates. Distributions of lexical, phonological, and grammatical features suggest strong areal influences. Considers implications for the reconstruction of prehistory, current distribution of the languages, and the nature of contacts.

Provides evidence, particularly in the form of typological characteristics, that the Northern Amazon culture area also constitutes a linguistic area. Originally appeared in *Antropológica* 53 (1982): 95–162.

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