

UC Merced

The Journal of California Anthropology

Title

J. P. Harrington - California's Great Linguist

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0qw7g2qf>

Journal

The Journal of California Anthropology, 2(2)

Author

Callaghan, Catherine A

Publication Date

1975-12-01

Peer reviewed

J. P. Harrington – California's Great Linguist

CATHERINE A. CALLAGHAN

... and anybody who knows anything about figures can tell you exactly when the last Kanaka will be in Abraham's bosom and his islands in the hands of the whites. It is the same as calculating an eclipse . . .

— Mark Twain

Mark Twain was referring specifically to the Hawaiian Islands, but his remarks apply equally well to the California Indians, whose way of life was being similarly destroyed by the time-honored combination of missionaries, merchants, and settlers.¹ But unlike Hawaii, aboriginal California supported several diverse culture areas and at least 100 distinct languages. The devastation was so rapid that the synthesis of native and Spanish structure characteristic of Latin American Indian languages did not take place. As a result, there was a whole generation of older Indians in the early part of the twentieth century who remembered their language when it was largely in its precontact form.

Such a situation could easily have provided full-time careers for 200 trained investigators, but funds were available for only a few at a time. Since most scholars also led normal lives, they were forced to choose between rapid surveys of many languages, like Alfred L. Kroeber, or absorption in a single language family, like L. S. Freeland.²

Since adequate recording equipment was unavailable, field workers relied on their ears. The concept of the phoneme had not yet evolved. Consequently, linguists strove for accurate, narrow transcription. But the result was usually an over-emphasis on details that are functionally important in familiar languages. This was most evident in their rendering of vowels, which abounded with fine qualitative distinctions and often omitted length. Unfortunately, many California Indian languages had small inventories of vowel phonemes in which length was lexically and morphologically significant. Retroflexion and aspiration of consonants were likewise often neglected.

Under such circumstances, the only person who could accurately preserve large numbers of exotic languages would be someone with an extraordinary ear who was physically robust and willing to devote 18 hours a day to data collection, and who cared so little for academic prestige that he would not spend the time necessary to prepare his material for publication. In addition, he would have to find an institution that would support him.

Americanists can thank the gods for providing them with such an impossible combination in the person of John Peabody Harrington.³

Harrington was born at Waltham, Massachusetts April 29, 1884, and his immediate family was of modest means, despite his middle name. He graduated from Stanford University



John Peabody Harrington, 1927.

in 1905, having specialized in classical languages and anthropology. He attended summer school at the University of California at Berkeley in 1903, where Alfred L. Kroeber and Pliny Earle Goddard introduced him to California Indian languages.

During this period, he gave evidence of a natural gift for phonetics. He translated Russian for the Immigration Service and tutored students in French and German. His associates testified to his fluency and the accuracy of his pronunciation.

In 1905, he went to Germany and pursued his studies of linguistics and anthropology at the Universities of Leipzig and Berlin. He was apparently an excellent student, but he left after two years, without a degree, to continue his field work.

He taught modern languages from 1906 to 1909 at Santa Ana High School, and his princi-

pal rated him as excellent. Yet, he spent all his spare time working with Chumash, Yuman, and Mohave Indians. Between 1909 and 1915, he worked as an ethnologist under Edgar L. Hewitt at the Archaeological Institute of America at Santa Fe, but he did not stop teaching. He gave several courses at the University of Colorado and the University of Washington and went on one lecture tour through Colorado.

There is little evidence at this point of the isolation that characterized his later life. This appears to have been a gradual development that started after his appointment with the Bureau of American Ethnology at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. in 1915.

Matthew Stirling, one of Harrington's few professional friends, believed that his behavior resulted from ever-increasing anxiety as he watched the last speakers of numerous languages approach old age. When Stirling chided him for his secretiveness with his colleagues, Harrington explained that he did not want to waste precious time in argumentation. Mrs. Stirling sometimes invited him to dinner. Eventually, Harrington requested through a friend that she not do so in the future, since he felt that he did not have the time to spare from his work.⁴

He likewise had no time for Government reports and would often spend his own money for transportation rather than fill out the proper form. He was equally inattentive to his personal appearance, and on at least two occasions he was questioned by the District police, who thought he was a prowler.⁵

But he was noted for his generosity to the Indians and unexpected gifts to his other friends. His general kindness may have partly accounted for another recurrent difficulty with his colleagues, that of breaking his promises. Not liking to refuse a request, he would agree and then disappear when pressed to keep his commitments.

During my graduate years at Berkeley, Harrington had already become a legend. He



John Peabody Harrington and Cahuilla informants F. Echeveria and Angel and Juan Chutnikat, left to right, photographed at the mouth of Palm Canyon, Colorado Desert. Courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

had retired from the Bureau and was then infirm and still a recluse, living in Santa Barbara. He ignored overtures by colleagues, partly because he resented the fact that they were primarily interested in his data. On our part, we were justifiably apprehensive over what would become of his material after his death. We knew that he had extensive recordings of extinct languages. The more pessimistic of us feared he might order his notes burned.⁶

Harrington died in October, 1961, and a few months later, I went to work for the Bureau of American Ethnology on a temporary ap-

pointment to sort his material. But the wildest legends did not prepare me for what I found.

It was Harrington's custom to record his data on specially cut oversized sheets of heavy paper, often one word per sheet. He used a set of abbreviations that would have to be deciphered before the language could be identified. After filling up a room through this space-consuming process, he would have the entire contents stored and start over. As a result, personal letters, old shirts, and other paraphernalia were included in his storage boxes.

On my arrival, stacks of his material were

piled in the Smithsonian itself and in two warehouses. Additional bundles started arriving from remote parts of the country. I estimate that I sorted six tons of material that spring, and we have no assurance that it has all been located even today.

Only a fraction of the material was original data. Harrington was obsessed with collector's mania. He copied every manuscript he could find on American Indian languages. In addition, I found literature on atheism, politics, and weird theories of the universe, to mention a few topics. He even stored a case of prune juice in one warehouse. It exploded years later, fortunately before I began working there.

Yet the survey was not without a tragic dimension. I watched Harrington's strong handwriting waiver in his later manuscripts as Parkinson's disease set in, which, in those days, was a slow death sentence.

There were projects in every stage of completion from rough draft to galley proofs, which Harrington had abandoned along the way. Not all of them involved American Indian languages. He wanted to retranslate the *Rubiyat* of Omar Khayyam, to cite one example, and left behind several binders of notes, including a copy of the Persian manuscript.⁷

Even his original data must be carefully evaluated. For example, he had several packets labelled "Island Chumash," a language thought to be extinct even in Harrington's day. But I was unable to determine whether he had elicited the material from someone who knew the language, or had merely read an old Island Chumash word list to a speaker of another Chumash language, hoping to trigger some response.

His publication list is long, but it consists largely of short pieces.⁸ According to Matthew Stirling (personal communication), he worked continuously on a single line of research until his curiosity was satisfied, then proceeded to a new challenge. He never returned to a cold project.

Harrington paid a heavy price for his isolation, both professionally and personally. He ignored theoretical advances in linguistics, and his publications were dated early in his career. His marriage to Carobeth Tucker ended in divorce, apparently because he was unwilling to make any accommodation to domestic life.⁹

Yet, despite his idiosyncracies, or more probably because of them, we now have information on almost a dozen extinct coastal languages. Both A. L. Kroeber and Edward Sapir attested to his phonetic accuracy, and a comparison of his Karok material with modern recordings substantiates their judgement.¹⁰ Under the circumstances, it will be possible to perform the phonemic and morphological analyses necessary to compile grammars and dictionaries.

I will conclude this account with my most unexpected discovery. On his death bed, Harrington claimed that he had recorded a language no one knew existed and gave some name ending in -eno (Awona Harrington, personal communication). He was probably referring to several packets labelled "Choch" (Chochefño), which turned out to be the Niles dialect of East Bay Costanoan. It is ironic that even the aboriginal language of what is now Berkeley, California was ultimately salvaged by this little-known ethnologist from Washington, D.C.

Ohio State University
Columbus, Ohio

NOTES

1. Add American oil interests to this unholy trio and one has a picture of what is currently underway in remote areas of South America ("Pacifying the Last Frontiers," *North American Congress on Latin America's Latin America and Empire Report* 7:15-31, Dec., 1973).

2. Preparation of *Language of the Sierra Miwok* required 11 years (L. S. Freeland, personal communication). It is extremely accurate phonetically.

3. Unless otherwise indicated, the biographical details were taken from M. W. Stirling's "John Peabody Harrington," *American Anthropologist* 65: 370-381 (1963).

4. Carobeth Laird (personal communication) claimed that Harrington never liked teaching and had always been penurious.

5. Bureau of American Ethnology staff, personal communication.

6. Roland B. Dixon is reputed to have set such a precedent.

7. Paradoxically, he was similarly engaged in re-translating the Bible.

8. Two notable exceptions are "Exploration of the Burton Mound at Santa Barbara, California," Bureau of American Ethnology *Annual Report* 44:23-168 (1928), and "Vocabulary of the Kiowa Language," Bureau of American Ethnology *Bulletin* 84 (1928).

9. Carobeth Laird has written an account of their years together in *Encounter With an Angry God*, Malki Museum Press, Banning (1975).

10. His transcription of Lake Miwok was somewhat less accurate, possibly because of lack of time.

