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Mary Haas as a Historical Linguist

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Author

Shipley, William

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Mary Haas as a Historical Linguist

William Shipley
University of California at Santa Cruz

I would like to talk about Mary's brilliant contributions to historical linguistics. Not only did she do outstanding work in proto-language reconstruction, she also, in her later years, wrote more extensively and coherently on the general subject of the prehistory of Native American languages than any other Americanist.

Mary got her bachelor's degree at Earlham College in her home town of Richmond, Indiana, with a major in music. She has told us that she was browsing at random in the college library one afternoon in spring when she came upon Henry Sweet's seminal work on phonetics as well as a book on comparative phonology, the name of which she could not, later, remember. In her 1984 Hoskins lecture for the American Council of Learned Societies, she recalled that time as a kind of epiphany. She said: "I sat by a window, looking out on the beautiful green of the campus, read these books, and quite unexpectedly found the key to my own career of learning." This event was remarkably heuristic since two main areas of linguistics studies in which she came wonderfully to excel were articulatory phonetics and historical reconstruction. Interestingly enough, even before her conscious awareness of how fundamental her interest in language actually was, she had already studied Latin for seven years, as well as some Greek and Anglo-Saxon.

As we all know, Mary started her graduate career at Chicago, having first gotten a second bachelor's degree there. She soon thereafter followed her great mentor, Edward Sapir, to Yale, where she got her doctorate in 1935, with a dissertation on the Tunica language. A couple of years later, she was provided with funds to work on Natchez in Eastern Oklahoma. As it turned out, as her Natchez informant knew hardly any English, but did know Creek, she had to use a Creek speaker who also spoke fluent English as an intermediary.

She said, in her Haskins lecture: "In the period from 1935 to 1941, I collected a very large amount of material on Creek, some on Koasati, a few vocabularies of Choctaw, Alabama, and Hitchiti (which has since become extinct)."

These, of course, were all Muskogean languages, originally spoken in what is now the Southeastern United States. I'll not go into any of the details about them since Pamela Munro's much more knowledgeable thoughts on Mary's work with Muskogean and its possible extended genetic relationships is also included in this volume.

Another of Mary's dramatic and pivotal contributions to American Indian historical linguistics had to do with the famous Sapir-Michaelson controversy over Sapir's proposal, in 1913, that Yurok and Wiyot are related to Algonkian -- a proposal which Michaelson vehemently rejected. The matter remained unresolved for half a century until, in the late 1950's, Mary brought together a brilliantly analyzed set of nearly a hundred etymologies, providing totally convincing consonantal correspondences as well as insightful proposals on vocalization and morphology, thus clearly establishing a genetic relationship among Yurok, Wiyot and Proto-Algonkian. I would like to point out here that Mary's 1958 paper adumbrated an observation which she made in her distinguished monograph, "The

Prehistory of Languages," published ten years later: "The most challenging way in which new insight into reconstruction can be achieved comes about when one protolanguage is compared with another protolanguage, or, as often happens, when a protolanguage is compared with a single language lacking near relatives. This type of comparison can truly be said to be one of the most important new frontiers of historical and comparative linguistics."

In fact, Yurok and Wiyot are more or less as distant from one another as they are from Proto-Algonkian; thus her second alternative applies in this specific case.

In addition to various research papers on comparative issues, Mary published two seminal monographs on the general topic of American Indian genetic relationships. Let me first mention her long article which appeared in volume 10 of *Current Trends in Linguistics* entitled "American Indian Linguistic Prehistory." This work is a very detailed and circumstantial review of all the work which had been done on Native American linguistic relationships up to about 1970, covering more than a century of various attempts, successful and unsuccessful, to achieve some kind of classificatory order among the welter of North American languages.

Mary wrote a more interesting monograph a few years earlier which was published as No. 57 of the *Jamua Linguarum* series minor, with the title: "The Prehistory of Languages." This immensely interesting and carefully written work, revised from an earlier essay, resulted from her year as a Fellow in residence at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioural Sciences. With its fascinating and detailed essays on various aspects of genetic research combined with presentations of very sophisticated analyses of her own voluminous historical data, this monograph is a beautiful distillation of her vast and varied experiences in historical linguistic research.

At the end of her Haskins lecture, Mary put into her characteristically plain words just what, for her, a life of learning was all about. She said: "It is a life for enthusiasm for learning, for the pursuit of goals which can never be reached, at least not in one lifetime. But the joy, after all, comes in the pursuit."

REPORT 10

**SURVEY OF CALIFORNIA AND
OTHER INDIAN LANGUAGES**



**THE HOKAN, PENUTIAN &
J.P. HARRINGTON CONFERENCES
And
THE MARY R. HAAS
MEMORIAL**

**June 28-29, 1996
University of California at Berkeley**

Leanne Hinton, Editor

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This volume is dedicated to the memory of

MARY R. HAAS

Professor emeritus of Linguistics

at the University of California at Berkeley

INTRODUCTION

This volume of the Survey Reports is the Proceedings of the Hokan, Penutian and J.P. Harrington Conferences, held at the University of California at Berkeley on June 28-29, 1996. Part I includes five of the papers that were presented at that conference, and also a paper by George V. Grekoff, who was unable to attend the conference but arranged in advance to submit an article for inclusion in the Proceedings. During the conference, a memorial session was also held for Mary R. Haas, who died a month before the conference. Part II of this volume consists of the presentations that were made about her life and research.

We gratefully acknowledge grants from Joseph Cerny, Vice Chancellor for Research and Dean of the Graduate Division, and William Simmons, Dean of Social Sciences, that helped make this conference possible.

Leanne Hinton
Volume and Series Editor

THE HOKAN, PENUTIAN AND J.P. HARRINGTON CONFERENCES

and the

MARY R. HAAS MEMORIAL SESSION

June 28-29, 1996
University of California at Berkeley, Alumni House

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