
[57] ***Precursors of sociolinguistic typology: On the contribution of Ludvig Kristensen Daa (1809–1877) to the study of North American languages***

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This paper examines the contribution of the Norwegian historian, politician and ethnologist Ludvig Kristensen Daa (1809–1877), professor of history from 1866, to the study of the indigenous languages of North America. In particular, we focus on his account of sound systems in Daa (1856, 1857) in the context of contemporary descriptions of ‘exotic’ languages and recent research on the role of external factors in the development of phonetic inventories.

Daa’s linguistic contribution has, until now, remained completely unknown to linguists, as he is exclusively associated with the study of history and ethnology. His ethnological studies undoubtedly led to an interest in North American languages, and to his highlighting features from these languages which he found could be explained by certain traits of native American tribal culture.

Based on assorted examples from Eskimo-Aleut, Algonquian, Iroquoian, Siouan and Northwest Coast languages, Daa argues that North American languages are characterized by greater linguistic diversity and a faster rate of language change. More specific traits include small consonant inventories and gaps in inventories, e.g. absence of labials in Iroquoian; unusual sounds, e.g. ejectives and lateral affricates in the Northwest Coast area; and indistinct pronunciation of consonants. Daa attributes these features to the use of the languages in small isolated communities characterized by exogamy and close social ties as well as distinct customs, where, e.g. the ‘disfigured’ pronunciation of labials in Nez Perce (Penutian) is attributed to the practice of wearing shell ornaments in the septum.

In this, Daa’s account anticipates more recent discussions in which the degree of linguistic complexity is attributed to social and demographic factors. Admittedly, some of his claims reflect methodological shortcomings of pre-20th-century phonetic study, including the lack of understanding of phonemic contrasts and the filtering effect of more familiar languages. However, the factors which according to Daa shape languages spoken in isolation are analogous to the parameters now examined by typologists, thus providing a sense of continuity across centuries in the links sought between structural diversity among languages and external factors.

References

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