

Keys to the Language of America: Algonquin Words and Divine Truth

Psalms, Bibles, Indian Primers, and Indian Grammars printed in Algonquian in seventeenth-century Massachusetts have long been considered instruments of colonization, integral to a technology designed to erase Massachusetts political autonomy, language, and culture in order to spread Christianity throughout the New World. This paper proposes a different set of implications structuring this massive effort to transform Algonquin from an oral to a written language and then to translate Christian texts into Algonquin for an audience that included natural philosophers, ministers, and missionaries as well Massachusetts converts whose new faith depended on their ability to read and write in their own native tongue. I show that those engaged in this translation effort of listening to, recording, and learning Algonquian, sought to uncover ancient and sacred truths that they believed could be revealed through a new language, newly discovered in America.

Inspired by the universal language movement that included philosophers from Jan Comenius to Cave Beck to John Wilkins, who imagined that language could be restored to a state of semiotic perfection, missionaries compared the languages of Native North Americans to Egyptian, Chinese, and Hebrew. As translators and grammarians, they viewed their work as directed towards the construction of a lexical system that would reveal divine truth. Contemporaries of the seventeenth-century Anglo missionary movement, universal linguists promoted the philosophy that words could attain a relationship of semiotic perfection with nature and would then have the capacity to unlock the divine truths hidden in the natural world. The mysteries of the invisible world would be revealed through a linguistic key if only language could recover from the irreparable damage caused by the fall of Babel. Missionaries in New England attributed this sacred, linguistic potential to an indigenous American tongue, one spoken by a population that some believed to have descended from the ten lost tribes but who exhibited such a fallen state that their sacred essence had to be unlocked through the concerted efforts of John Eliot, Thomas Shepard, and John Mayhew. Indian Grammars could reduce the fallen and depleted state of the Algonquian tongue to its sacred essence. By translating sacred, Christian texts into Algonquian, Eliot would restore the sacred and ancient capacity of Algonquian to reveal new knowledge of God. My paper shows how the display of Indian Grammars across a range of Christian texts promoted this ideal of an American language as wielding sacred potential. Believed by some to be an avenue for arriving at this language, Algonquian facilitated what I call Christian translation, a complex process of locating the power of Christian, scriptural authority in the “heathen” other and then reclaiming this authority as an ancient, sacred essence unfolding within the present.