

**INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY
OF SIGN LANGUAGE AMONG
THE NORTH AMERICAN INDIANS
AS ILLUSTRATING THE GESTURE
SPEECH OF MANKIND**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649346813

Introduction to the Study of Sign Language Among the North American Indians as illustrating the gesture speech of mankind by Garrick Mallery

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GARRICK MALLERY

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U.S.-
SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION—BUREAU OF ETHNOLOGY

INTRODUCTION

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BREVET LIÉUT. COL., U. S. ARMY

WASHINGTON
GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE
1880

SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION,
BUREAU OF ETHNOLOGY,
Washington, D. C., February 12, 1880.

Eleven years ago ethnographic research among North American Indians was commenced by myself and my assistants while making explorations on the Colorado River and its tributaries. From that time to the present such investigations have been in progress.

During this time the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution placed in my hands a large amount of material collected by its collaborators relating to Indian languages and other matters, to be used, in conjunction with the materials collected under my direction, in the preparation of a series of publications on North American Ethnology. In pursuing this work two volumes have already been published, a third is in press, and a number of others are in course of preparation.

The work originally begun as an incident to a geographical and geological survey has steadily grown in proportions until a large number of assistants and collaborators are engaged in the collection of materials and the preparation of memoirs on a variety of subjects relating to the North American Indians. The subject under investigation is of great magnitude. More than five hundred languages, belonging to about seventy distinct stocks or families, are spoken by these Indians; and in all other branches of this ethnic research a like variety of subject-matter exists. It will thus be seen that the materials for a systematic and comprehensive treatment of this subject can only be obtained by the combined labor of many men. My experience has demonstrated that a deep interest in Anthropology is widely spread among the educated people of the country, as from every hand assistance is tendered, and thus valuable material is steadily accumulating; but experience has also demonstrated that much effort is lost for want of a

proper comprehension of the subjects and methods of investigation appertaining to this branch of scientific research. For this reason a series of pamphlet publications, designed to give assistance and direction in these investigations, has been commenced.

The first of the series was prepared by myself and issued under the title of "Introduction to the Study of Indian Languages;" the second is the present, upon Sign-Language; and a third, by Dr. H. C. Yarrow, United States Army, designed to incite inquiry into mortuary observances and beliefs concerning the dead prevailing among the Indian tribes, will shortly be issued. Other publications of a like character will be prepared from time to time. These publications are intended to serve a somewhat temporary purpose until a manual for the use of students of American Anthropology is completed.

J. W. POWELL.

INQUIRIES AND SUGGESTIONS

UPON

SIGN-LANGUAGE AMONG THE NORTH AMERICAN INDIANS.

BY GARRICK MALLERY.

INTRODUCTORY.

The Bureau of Ethnology of the Smithsonian Institution has in preparation a work upon Sign-Language among the North American Indians, and, further, intended to be an exposition of the gesture-speech of mankind thorough enough to be of suggestive use to students of philology and of anthropology in general. The present paper is intended to indicate the scope of that future publication, to excite interest and invite correspondence on the subject, to submit suggestions as to desirable points and modes of observation, and to give notice of some facilities provided for description and illustration.

The material now collected and collated is sufficient to show that the importance of the subject deserves exhaustive research and presentation by scientific methods instead of being confined to the fragmentary, indefinite, and incidental publications thus far made, which have never yet been united for comparison, and are most of them difficult of access. Many of the descriptions given in the lists of earlier date than those contributed during the past year in response to special request are too curt and incomplete to assure the perfect reproduction of the sign intended, while in others the very idea or object of the sign is loosely expressed, so that for thorough and satisfactory exposition they require to be both corrected and supplemented, and therefore the coöperation of competent observers, to whom

this pamphlet is addressed, and to whom it will be mailed, is urgently requested.

The publication will mainly consist of a collation, in the form of a vocabulary, of all authentic signs, including signals made at a distance, with their description, as also that of any specially associated facial expression, set forth in language intended to be so clear, illustrations being added when necessary, that they can be reproduced by the reader. The descriptions contributed, as also the explanation or conception occurring to or ascertained by the contributors, will be given in their own words, with their own illustrations when furnished or when they can be designed from written descriptions, and always with individual credit as well as responsibility. The signs arranged in the vocabulary will be compared in their order with those of deaf-mutes, with those of foreign tribes of men, whether ancient or modern, and with the suggested radicals of languages, for assistance in which comparisons travelers and scholars are solicited to contribute in the same manner and with the same credit above mentioned. The deductions and generalizations of the editor of the work will be separate from this vocabulary, though based upon it, and some of those expressed in this preliminary paper may be modified on full information, as there is no conscious desire to maintain any preconceived theories. Intelligent criticisms will be gratefully received, considered, and given honorable place.

PRACTICAL VALUE OF SIGN-LANGUAGE.

The most obvious application of Indian sign-language will for its practical utility depend, to a large extent, upon the correctness of the view submitted by the present writer, in opposition to an opinion generally entertained, that it is not a mere semaphoric repetition of traditional signals, whether or not purely arbitrary in their origin, but is a cultivated art, founded upon principles which can be readily applied by travelers and officials so as to give them much independence of professional interpreters—a class dangerously deceitful and tricky. Possessing this art, as distinguished from a limited list of memorized motions, they would accomplish for themselves the desire of the Prince of Pontus, who begged of Nero an accomplished pantomimist from the Roman theater, to interpret among his

many-tongued subjects. This advantage is not merely theoretical, but has been demonstrated to be practical by a professor in a deaf-mute college who, lately visiting several of the wild tribes of the plains, made himself understood among all of them without knowing a word of any of their languages; nor would it only obtain in connection with American tribes, being applicable to intercourse with savages in Africa and Asia, though it is not pretended to fulfill by this agency the schoolmen's dream of an oecumenical mode of communication between all peoples in spite of their dialectic divisions.

Sign-language, being the mother utterance of nature, poetically styled by LAMARTINE the visible attitudes of the soul, is superior to all others in that it permits every one to find in nature an image to express his thoughts on the most needful matters intelligently to any other person, though it must ever henceforth be inferior in the power of formulating thoughts now attained by words, notwithstanding the boast of Roscius that he could convey more varieties of sentiment by gesture alone than Cicero could in oratory.

It is true that gestures excel in graphic and dramatic effect applied to narrative and to rhetorical exhibition; but speech, when highly cultivated, is better adapted to generalization and abstraction; therefore to logic and metaphysics. Some of the enthusiasts in signs have, however, contended that this unfavorable distinction is not from any inherent incapability, but because their employment has not been continued unto perfection, and that if they had been elaborated by the secular labor devoted to spoken language they might in resources and distinctness have exceeded many forms of the latter. GALLAUDET, PEET, and others may be right in asserting that man could by his arms, hands, and fingers, with facial and bodily accentuation, express any idea that could be conveyed by words. The process regarding abstract ideas is only a variant from that of oral speech, in which the words for the most abstract ideas, such as law, virtue, infinitude, and immortality, are shown by MAX MÜLLER to have been derived and deduced, that is, abstracted from sensuous impressions. In the use of signs the countenance and manner as well as the tenor decide whether objects themselves are intended, or the forms, positions, qualities, and motions of other objects which are suggested, and signs for moral and

intellectual ideas, founded on analogies, are common all over the world as well as among deaf-mutes. Concepts of the intangible and invisible are only learned through percepts of tangible and visible objects, whether finally expressed to the eye or to the ear, in terms of sight or of sound.

It will be admitted that the elements of the sign-language are truly natural and universal, by recurring to which the less natural signs adopted dialectically or for expedition can, with perhaps some circumlocution, be explained. This power of interpreting itself is a peculiar advantage, for spoken languages, unless explained by gestures or indications, can only be interpreted by means of some other spoken language. There is another characteristic of the gesture-speech that, though it cannot be resorted to in the dark, nor where the attention of the person addressed has not been otherwise attracted, it has the countervailing benefit of use when the voice could not be employed. When highly cultivated its rapidity on familiar subjects exceeds that of speech and approaches to that of thought itself. This statement may be startling to those who only notice that a selected spoken word may convey in an instant a meaning for which the motions of even an expert in signs may require a much longer time, but it must be considered that oral speech is now wholly conventional, and that with the similar development of sign-language conventional expressions with hands and body could be made more quickly than with the vocal organs, because more organs could be worked at once. Without such supposed development the habitual communication between deaf-mutes and among Indians using signs is perhaps as rapid as between the ignorant class of speakers upon the same subjects, and in many instances the signs would win at a trial of speed.

Apart from their practical value for use with living members of the tribes, our native semiotics will surely help the archæologist in his study of native picture-writing, the sole form of aboriginal records, for it was but one more step to fasten upon bark, skins, or rocks the evanescent air-pictures that still in pigments or carvings preserve their skeleton outline, and in their ideography approach the rudiments of a phonetic alphabet. Gesture-language is, in fact, not only a picture-language, but is actual writing, though dissolving and sympathetic, and neither alphabetic nor phonetic.