# Linguistic Areas of the Native Americas

Linguistic areas (also called convergence zones or *Sprachbünde*) of the native Americas are established by discovering sets of structural similarities between various languages that are usually not in the same LANGAGE FAMILY *and* can be associated with a specific geographical location. Linguistic areas are formed by the development of linguistic innovations due to *contact*, *borrowing*, and *diffusion* of linguistic traits between languages in a geographical location.

## Basics of Linguistic Areas

Providing evidence for establishing a linguistic area is a related, but distinct, process from establishing a language family. It is commonly called areal linguistics and is a sub-discipline of comparative-historical linguistics. While all languages must belong to a family, not all languages belong to a language area, which is defined by a set of shared language traits that may cross over family boundaries. For example, the ZUNI language belongs to the Zuni family but is also part of the Pueblo linguistic area and the Pueblo cultural area of the PUEBLO INDIANS. Language areas are associated with the geographical areas in which they reside and in many cases overlap with cultural areas, but there is no definitive relation between culture area and language area. Some language areas of the Americas include the Amazonian and Andean in South America, the Mesoamerican in Central Mexico and Central America, and the Northwest Coast in the United States. The association between shared linguistic traits and geographical locations is due mainly to the fact that speakers of languages in geographical contact can borrow words, sounds, and parts of grammar across family boundaries. The borrowed

traits then diffuse, or spread, throughout the area by way of language speaker contact. *Borrowing*, *contact* and *diffusion* are important concepts for the comparative establishment of language areas.

Proposals for language areas can be controversial because the evidence used for establishing them is often debated by linguists. Many hypotheses for language areas in the Americas have been proposed, revised, and disproved. Furthermore, the methodology for determining what kinds of shared features count as defining a language area has been a point of debate since the beginning of comparative linguistic science.

**How to Define a Linguistic Area**

The defining characteristic of a linguistic area is the existence of a set of structural similarities between various languages that are not usually in the same language family *and* can be associated with a specific geographical location. This definition is broad and in practice can create problems for determining exactly what counts as a proper geographical location and what counts as a proper set of structural relations. In practice, one wants to find structural similarities that are unique enough to distinguish some languages from other languages across family boundaries. For example, arguing that a group of languages spoken by SOUTHWEST INDIANS all have nouns does not sufficiently distinguish those languages from others in the area (all human languages have nouns or noun-like elements). However, if one noticed that a group of languages in the American Southwest shared a set of certain sounds, words, or grammatical traits that other languages in the Southwest did not, then one may have found a language area. And in fact, the Pueblo Area is just such an example. It is made up of the language families KERESAN and Zuni, the Tanoan branch of the KIOWA-Tanoan family, and

various languages of the APACHE branch of the ATHAPASKAN family such as NAVAJO. These languages generally share a special set of sounds, vocabulary, and grammar (e.g. glottalized consonants, tones, final devoicing of vowels and sonorants, and dual number distinction) that other languages spoken by Southwest Indians do not. Additionally, the languages do not all belong to the same language family, nor does the unique set of traits they share belong to one family only. The inventory of linguistic traits that define language areas as distinct from language families can be very complicated and may overlap with familial traits and cultural areas. For more information on the Pueblo linguistic area see references in suggested further reading, especially work by Lyle Campbell, Marianne Mithun, and references cited in those works.

One explanation for why language areas share linguistic traits (sounds, words, and pieces of grammar) is because the speakers of the languages that make up that area live near one another – for example the Pueblo area speakers live mostly in parts of Arizona and New Mexico. The Pueblo languages are said to be in *contact* with each other. When languages are in contact they are more likely to *borrow* or share sounds, words, and even parts of grammar that can *diffuse* throughout the geographical area. *Diffusion* is when a linguistic trait spreads from one language to another in a particular region. *Diffusion* occurs in geographical areas, but a geographical area does not define the diffused trait. In other words, it is the spread of linguistic traits that defines a language area, and this area is associated with a geographical location. *Diffusion* is a very important concept for establishing language groups and it is closely related to the concepts of *contact* and *borrowing*.

In cases where it is difficult or impossible to know who borrowed what from whom, the unique set of shared language traits is assumed to come from *contact* and *borrowing*. This does not hinder the process of establishing a language area. For example, in the Pueblo language area it is important to know if speakers of Navajo (from the Apache branch of the Athapaskan family) borrowed the trait of glottalized nasals from speakers of ACOMA (from the Keresan family). But this knowledge about borrowing is not necessary to establish the fact that both Acoma and Navajo share this trait. The fact that these two languages share this trait places them in a grouping of languages that share similar language traits—the Pueblo area languages share glottalized consonants in general—in exclusion to other languages in the area.

It is important to note here that the method of defining a language area begins first with looking at common linguistic traits of languages that are in contact. In other words, a language area is *associated* with a geographical location but not defined by a geographical location. The real defining criterion for a language area is the set of unique linguistic traits that the group of languages has in common. This unique set is a collection of linguistic innovations due to *contact* between languages that are usually not in the same language family.

For example, the proposed Plains linguistic area of North America includes the well-defined geographical and cultural areas of the PLAINS INDIANS. Some of the languages hypothesized to constitute the areal grouping include ARAPAHO and BLACKFOOT from the ALGONQUIAN branch of the Algic family, KIOWA APACHE and LIPAN APACHE from the Athapaskan family, COMANCHE and WIND RIVER SHOSHONE from the Uto-Aztecan family, as well as many others. However, these languages do not share many linguistic traits that can be shown to come from *contact* and *borrowing*.

Additionally, the traits they have in common are found widely in languages outside of the proposed 'area.' While the geographical and cultural area of the Plains Indians is well-defined and widely accepted, there is no evidence that this constitutes a language area. This is because structural linguistic similarities and linguistic innovations due to contact between the various languages cannot be adequately established.

**Examples of Linguistic Areas in the Native Americas**

The Amazonian Area, in northern South America, is a language area that many linguists accept even though the technical details need to be worked out. It is clear that there must be something like an Amazonian linguistic area, but because of the lack of native Indian speakers and documentation of languages in that area, progress on determining exactly which languages and what language traits define the area are still a matter of investigation. One issue under consideration is if common linguistic traits are due to familial similarities, or if these common linguistic traits emerged as innovations due to *contact* and *borrowing*. Families assumed to constitute this area include ARAWAKAN, Arauan, Cariban, Chapacuran, Ge, Panoan, Puinavean, Tacanan, Tucanoan, and Tupian.

The Andean Area, in the Highland Andes in South America, includes the families Aymaran, Callahuaya, Chipaya, QUECHUAN, and may possibly include more. This area is recognized and accepted by many linguists but needs much more work in order to define it properly.

The Clear Lake Area, near San Francisco Bay in North America, is a well-defined language area including the languages Eastern Pomo, Lake Miwok, PATWIN, Southeastern Pomo, WAKASHAN, and Wappo.

The Northwest Coast Area, associated with the NORTHWEST COAST INDIANS in North America, is well-defined and includes a number of families such as Eyak, HAIDA, SALISHAN, TLINGIT, TAKELMA, some Athapaskan languages, and others not mentioned here. It is probably the best known area of all the North American language areas.

The Mesoamerican Area, from central Mexico to northern Central America, is arguably the most well established language area to date. It coincides closely with the Mesoamerican cultural area and includes the families MAYAN, Mixe-Zoquean, Xincan, Huave, AZTECAN (from the Nahua branch of Uto-Aztecan family), and others.

The Southeast Area, well associated with the SOUTHEAST INDIANS cultural area in North America, as it is currently defined contains the families Atakapan, CHITIMACHA, Muskogean, NATCHEZ, TUNICA, YUCHI, the SIOUAN languages Biloxi and Ofo, and many others. It is a fairly well-defined area but may actually be part of a larger grouping that includes the badly defined Plains language area as well as large parts of eastern North America.

I have only listed a small number of proposed language areas in the Americas. For more details, specifically language traits that define these areas and other areas of the Americas, see sources in suggested further reading, especially the work of Lyle Campbell, Marianne Mithun, and references cited in those works.

See Acoma, Algonquian, Apache, Arapaho, Arawak, Athapaskan, Aztec, Blackfoot, Comanche, Chitimacha, Haida, Kiowa, Kiowa Apache, Keresan, Language Family, Lipan Apache, Maya, Natchez, Navajo, Northwest Coast Indians, Patwin, Plains Indians,

Pueblo Indians, Quechuan, Salishan, Siouan, Southwest Indians, Takelma, Tlingit, Tunica, Wakashan, Wind River Shoshone, Yuchi, Zuni.

Suggested further reading:

Alexandra A. Aikhenvald and R. M. W. Dixon (eds.), *Areal Diffusion and Genetic Inheritance: Problems in Comparative Linguistics* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001); Lyle Campbell, *American Indian Languages: The Historical Linguistics of Native America* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997); Lyle Campbell, *Historical Linguistics: An Introduction* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 2004); Ives Goddard (ed.), *Handbook of North American Indians* (Washington, DC, Smithsonian Institution, 1997); Hans Henrich Hock, *Principles of Historical Linguistics* (The Hague, Mouton de Gruyter, 1991); Roger Lass, *Historical Linguistics and Language Change* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997); Marianne Mithun, *The Languages of Native North America* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999); Ian Roberts, *Diachronic Syntax* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007); Edward Sapir, *Language: An Introduction to the Study of Speech* (New York, Dover, 1921/2004); and Sarah G. Thomason, *Language Contact: An Introduction* (Washington, DC, Georgetown University Press, 2001).

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