Origins of the Navajo Code Talkers

While the Navajo code talkers from the Pacific Theater of World War II are the best-known Native American code talkers in American military history, the use of Native American language as a means of obscuring military communications had antecedents in the first World War. In World War I, fourteen Choctaw soldiers deployed together in the 36th infantry division of the American army underwent training to aid in communications in Choctaw.[1] The Choctaw code talkers operated effectively in several victories during the Meuse-Argonne offensive, precipitating the later creation of code talker divisions speaking other Native American languages in World War II.

Before the start of World War II, the German government sent a team of anthropologists to the United States to study Native American languages in order to prepare for code talkers in a future conflict.[2] But preparedness for Native American code talkers was an ambitious goal: consider the diversity of native languages in the United States and, for some of them, the sparsity of documentation. Code talkers speaking Comanche were deployed among American forces in the European Theater[3] as early as 1941 and were in operation at Normandy.[4] Comanche belongs to the

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[1]
https://web.archive.org/web/20080509165525/http://www.uwm.edu/~michael/choctaw/code.htm

[2] https://sploid.gizmodo.com/how-native-americans-were-crucial-to-defeat-the-nazis-a-1563439317

[3] http://navajopeople.org/navajo-code-talker.htm

[4] 4 https://sploid.gizmodo.com/how-native-americans-were-crucial-to-defeat-the-nazis-a-1563439317

Uto-Aztecan language family whereas Choctaw, the language discussed from World War I, is Muskogean. Thus, the diversity of Native American languages in the United States must have made decipherment by German code breakers very difficult. Indeed, the Comanche code talkers remained in operations in the European Theater until the end of the war. The Comanche code talkers have since received military awards from both the French and American governments.[5]

A man named Philip Johnston who had grown up speaking Navajo originally proposed using Navajo for code talking in the Pacific Theater in 1942.[6] The choice to use Navajo again capitalized on the linguistic diversity of the Native American languages in the United States since Navajo is a member of the Na Dene language family. Not only is this a different family from Choctaw and Comanche, but most of the other languages in the family are located in the Pacific Northwest of Canada and Alaska. This means that Navajo bears similarity to few other Native American languages of the continental United States. In his reports to the Marine Corps, Johnston emphasized Navajo's lack of both proximal relatives and documentation by linguistic anthropologists.[7]

Advantages and Characteristics of Navajo Code Talk

One of the advantages of the Navajo code talking was its speed of use. Relying on their linguistic competence in Navajo and English, code talkers to transmit a message very quickly, which had incredible practical use in a battlefield setting. Indeed, during the first demos the code talking,

[5] https://web.archive.org/web/20120217104802/http://www.armyhistory.org/ahf2.aspx?pgID=877&id=332&exCompID=56

[6] http://www.sjsu.edu/faculty/watkins/navajocodetalk.htm

[7] http://navajopeople.org/navajo-code-talker.htm

Marine Corps officers were amazed that a message could be encoded and transmitted in only a matter of seconds.[8] At the same time, the army team attempting to decode the Navajo encoding commented that it "seemed foolproof".

The encoding system used by the Navajo code talkers was more complicated than simple translation. To make communication simpler, words were repurposed to refer to new concepts that would be relevant in a military setting but did not have a native Navajo equivalent.[9] In addition, a clever convention was developed for representing names and other sensitive information in the code. Rather than simply embedding names into the Navajo text, each alphanumeric character in the name would be encoded as one word.[10] Specific words were always used to represent the same letter, but each letter could be represented by more than one word. As an analogical example, "ABA" might be encoded as "Air Bridge Antelope". This system was very powerful because inferring where a name ended and began would be a trivial task for a speaker of Navajo but near impossible for non-speakers. Thus, code talkers could easily work backwards to figure out the keywords, but code breakers would have no way of doing so.

Decipherment Attempts

During the war, the Japanese were able to learn that the American code talkers were speaking Navajo.[11] At one point, the captured a Navajo-speaking American soldier. However, they were still not able to break the code since that soldier claimed to not be able to read the encodings

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[8] http://navajopeople.org/navajo-code-talker.htm
[9] http://navajopeople.org/navajo-code-talker.htm
[10] http://navajopeople.org/navajo-code-talker.htm
[11] http://www.sjsu.edu/faculty/watkins/navajocodetalk.htm

when he was interrogated under torture.[12] There are two possible interpretations of this: first, that the soldier was resolved not to give away military secrets, and second, that he genuinely was not able to read much of the message because of the word-for-letter system used for encoding names and other keywords.

Conclusion

The Navajo code talkers are relevant for Voynich studies because they illustrate how an unfamiliar language with neither Rosetta text nor known relatives can obscure text more effectively than a cipher. Thus, if the Voynich manuscript is written in some European language isolate, we should expect to be as stuck on its decipherment as the Japanese code breakers working on Navajo.

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[12] http://www.sjsu.edu/faculty/watkins/navajocodetalk.htm