Translation and Interpreting on the American Frontier: Incidents and Issues

By Eric A. Bye

In the early centuries of this country, interpreters and translators played a crucial role wherever the expanding colonial settlements brought European Americans into contact with Native American culture. American Indian nations belonging to different linguistic groups also employed interpreters in their dealings with one another. Translating and interpreting on the frontier sometimes posed challenges scarcely imaginable in today’s work environment. Those providing language services had no formal training, only hard-won skills that were often gained through captivity, imprisonment, or adoption and acculturation. There were drastic differences between the languages spoken by Native Americans and those of the European American colonists (who, at that time, were principally English, Dutch, and German). The “highly symbolic and poetic character of the Indian languages” also complicated interpreting and translating. Not surprisingly, much of the work of these early linguists has been lost and their identities obscured by time. Still, some fascinating remnants survive.

Fleeting Glimpses

Despite the fact that the work of early interpreters and translators often vanished once a parley concluded, even cursory research turns up references to these linguistic pioneers. For instance, there was Paxinosa, an 18th-century Shawnee chief and interpreter for the Delawares; Sam, son of Essapenawick; Wowler, a Mohawk interpreter in Maryland; Arnout Cornelissen Viele, an early resident of Albany, New York, who interpreted for the Shawnee; Edward Farmar, who, in May of 1712, interpreted the terms of an Indian treaty for several prominent Delaware chiefs, including Chief Scollitchy; and Eleazer Wiggan, who resided among the Cherokee in eastern Tennessee and acted as an interpreter for them in 1716. In May of 1728, Peter Bezaillion, a French Canadian fur trader, served as an interpreter with Nicholas and John Scull at an Indian conference in Philadelphia. I also found a Mr. Blondo (or Blondeau), who was an interpreter for the Sac and Fox Indians in the 1830s. Further details about these interpreters and their work may be hard to come by.

Other references preserve slightly more information. Martin Chartier (?-1718) came to Pennsylvania and Maryland in 1691, and worked as a trader and interpreter. For a time, he was a coureur de bois (a woodsman and explorer) with the French explorer Robert de La Salle, and lived among the Shawnee, for whom he interpreted at Indian conferences in Conestoga, Pennsylvania, in the early 1700s. Chartier lived in present-day Illinois from 1684-1690, and was the agent for the treaties William Penn (founder of Pennsylvania) drew up with the Indians of the Susquehanna. At one point he was accused of being a French spy and imprisoned. Chartier’s son Peter also worked as an interpreter.

In 1659, Jacob Young was an interpreter in New Amsterdam, New York (now Albany) and in Maryland. Maryland Lieutenant Governor Colonel Henry Coursey wrote to Maryland Governor Thomas Notley in 1677, saying: “I … find a necessity to carry Jacob Young along with me, without whom I can do nothing, and what truth is to be had is from
him and none else.”11 Young was also esteemed as a leader and peacemaker. He spoke Susquehannock and Delaware fluently, and was the only one qualified to act as an interpreter for Maryland authorities. Despite his indispensable skills, he was accused of inciting Susquehannocks to kill Christians, charged with treason, and imprisoned. The Susquehannocks won Young’s release by threatening to attack colonial settlements. Tragically, the Susquehannocks were decimated by intertribal wars, diseases, and raids by colonial militia. The tribe and language became extinct around 1763.

**Interpreting on the Journey of Discovery**

Often the trail from source to target language was filled with twists and obstacles. Consider, for example, the language issues on Meriwether Lewis and William Clark’s famed Journey of Discovery (1804-1806), the first transcontinental expedition to the Pacific Coast to prepare the way for the extension of the American fur trade and to advance geographic knowledge. George Drouillard, an interpreter and hunter for the expedition, was doubly valuable because he was fluent in French, English, and more than one Indian language. He was also a master of sign language.12 Another crew member, Pierre Cruzatte, knew French, English, and a little Sioux.

Most significantly, during their first winter at Fort Mandan in North Dakota, Lewis and Clark met Toussaint Charbonneau, a French Canadian who offered to join the expedition. He was welcomed aboard principally because one of his wives—the acclaimed 15-year-old Sacagawea—was a native speaker of Hidatsa, the language of a mountain tribe that the expedition would later meet. She conversed with the tribe and interpreted to Charbonneau in Hidatsa. Charbonneau then relayed the message in French to Drouillard or to René Jessaume, another French-speaking expedition member. Jessaume finally delivered the message to Lewis and Clark in English. This process was reversed when the expedition leaders had something to communicate. It was made even more cumbersome by the continual arguing of Charbonneau and Jessaume over the meaning of the French words they used.13 Francis Labiche, another crew member who knew French and English, was also recruited for the French-to-English and English-to-French link in this interpreting chain. After the explorers’ return to the East, Meriwether Lewis recommended extra pay for Drouillard and Labiche for their service.14

Pierre Dorion (1740-1810) was another interpreter with the Journey of Discovery. He had lived with the Yankton Sioux in what is now South Dakota, and translated into their language Lewis’s “Children Speech.” Lewis used this address multiple times to impress the Indian tribes with the might and benevolence of the expanding colonies. It consists of some 25 paragraphs, most of which began in the same way as this excerpt:

*Children — It gives us much pleasure to have met you here this day in council. We salute you as the children of your Great Father the great Chief of the Seventeen Great Nations of America. We see around us a number of the Old and experienced, the wise men and women of the Soues [sic] nation.*15

The precise content of this speech was unknown until 2003, when a complete text in William Clark’s handwriting was discovered in a private collection.

**A Historic Misinterpretation**

Not surprisingly, convoluted interpretations of the type described above sometimes led to misunderstandings. In 1832, a number of trappers and fur traders gathered at a site known as Pierre’s Hole in present-day Idaho for a summer rendezvous—an opportunity to sell the beaver pelts they had harvested and to stock up on supplies for the next trapping season. They became engaged in a pitched gun battle with Gros Ventre warriors who had taken refuge in dense cover. During a pause in the battle, one of the chiefs was heard to declaim in his language:

*So long … as we had powder and ball we fought you in the open field: when those were spent, we retreated here to die with our women and children. You may burn us in our fort; but stay by our ashes, and you who are so hungry*
for fighting will soon have enough. There are four hundred lodges of our brethren at hand. They will soon be here—their arms are strong—their hearts are big—they will avenge us!16

This speech was relayed between languages by a tag team of Nez Percé tribe and Creole interpreters among the trappers. By the time it reached intelligible English, it was taken to mean that the trappers’ camp at the other end of the valley was already under attack. Some trappers hastened to investigate and found that all was safe. By the time they returned to the battle scene the next day, the forted-up Indians had made their escape under cover of darkness.

George Washington’s Only Surrender, and a Matter of Interpretation

Central to the next story are some serious blunders by then-Lieutenant Colonel George Washington. In the prelude to this surrender on May 28, 1754, a British force commanded by the 22-year-old Washington surrounded a wilderness encampment of French soldiers and ambushed them in the early morning without provocation, killing a dozen, wounding two, and capturing 21. One of the slain was Joseph Coulon, Sieur de Jumonville, a diplomat.

Shortly after, Washington erected Fort Necessity in southwestern Pennsylvania to defend his soldiers from the expected French reprisal and to claim the region for the British. The French quickly assembled a superior retaliatory force and attacked Washington at Fort Necessity. The British under Washington fought valiantly, but their situation was unenviable: their earthworks filled with rainwater, and during the nine-hour battle they were sitting ducks for the enemy forces.

French commander Captain Louis Coulon de Villiers, brother of the slain de Jumonville, offered capitulation terms to the beleaguered fort. Washington’s troops included only two men who understood French: Ensign La Peyroney, who was seriously wounded, and a Dutch-born interpreter named Jacob Van Braam. These two men proceeded to the French lines to negotiate for peace. La Peyroney fainted from his wounds, so Van Braam had to handle all of the interpreting, as well as the task of translating the articles of surrender for Washington. The weather was very wet and the penmanship under field conditions was poor, so Van Braam may have relied on memory as he subsequently translated the articles of surrender for Washington. In the process, he translated the source’s reference to the earlier assassination of de Jumonville simply as his death, thereby overlooking or concealing the connotation that painted Washington as a wanton murderer. Ignorant of the surrender document’s sinister implications, Washington signed it, secured a cease-fire, and withdrew from the field with his troops and most of their possessions.

Upon demand by the French, two British hostages were left behind. One was Van Braam, who then spent six years in captivity in Canada, returned to fight for the British during the Revolutionary War, and eventually moved to France. He never told his side of the interpreting controversy.

Washington’s initial attack on the unsuspecting French force had international repercussions, for it was a catalyst in the French and Indian...
War (1754-1763). He was also in hot water for admitting to the assassination of de Jumonville. He attempted to foist responsibility for this misunderstanding onto Van Braam:

That we were willfully, or ignorantly, deceived by our interpreter in regard to the word assassination, I do aver, and will to my dying moment; so will every officer that was present. The interpreter was a Dutchman, little acquainted with the English tongue, therefore might not advert to the tone and meaning of the word in English; but whatever his motives were for so doing, certain it is, he called it the death, or the loss of Sieur de Jumonville. So we received and so we understood it, until to our great surprise and mortification we found it otherwise in a literal translation.

It has been suggested that since the Dutch language, in contrast to French and English, did not make the crucial distinction between assassination and death (at least in 1754), Van Braam may have routed his translation through the Dutch in his head on its way to the English version. Unfortunately, all of the blame he received for the rendering of one word overshadowed the credit given him previously for his good work.

Villainous Characters

At least two famous frontier interpreters have come down to us as scoundrels and traitors. Edward Rose (1780-1833) had been a river pirate before moving inland to work as a trader and interpreter. He had a reputation as a violent, fearless brawler and a strident companion. Still, in the early 1800s, his interpretation of the Crow and Arikara languages was helpful to major American fur trade figures such as William Ashley, Colonel Henry Atkinson, and Andrew Henry. In chapter 24 of Astoria, Washington Irving’s history of the fur trading colony in the American Northwest, he paints Rose as treacherous and dishonest.

Simon Girty (1741-1818) was reputed to be the most hated man on the frontier. A renegade interpreter who rejected European American culture to side with the Native Americans, he was considered a literal embodiment of traduttore traditore. A contemporary who met him described him as follows:

… his dark shaggy hair, his low forehead; his brows contracted and meeting above his short flat nose; his gray sunken eyes, averting the ingenuous gaze; his lips thin and compressed, and the dark and sinister expression of his countenance, to me seemed the very picture of a villain. He wore the Indian costume, but without any ornament; and his silk handkerchief, while it supplied the place of a hat, hid an unsightly wound in his forehead. On each side, in his belt, was stuck a silver-mounted pistol, and at his left hung a short knife.

Girty, who was born in Pennsylvania, had been captured and adopted by the Senecas. As an adult, he served as an interpreter for the Continental Congress. He spoke Seneca well, along with Delaware and Shawnee. He interpreted at Fort Pitt in Pittsburgh, and served the British in their dealings with the Iroquois Confederation (the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca, and Tuscarora nations). He was present at most Native American conferences in the Detroit Region during and after the Revolutionary War. He translated the famous lament that Mingo Chief James Logan (Native American name: Tahghajute), a leader of the Native Americans on the Ohio and Scioto Rivers, prepared in response to the murder of his entire family by Virginians. The speech was also written as a letter to Lord Dunmore, the last royal governor of Virginia. Logan declaimed this lament to an audience under an elm that stood until 1964. The following is reported to be Girty’s translation into English:

I appeal to any white man to say, if he ever entered Logan’s cabin hungry, and he gave him not meat; if he ever came in cold and naked, and he cloathed him not. During the course of the last long and bloody war Logan remained idle in his cabin, an advocate for peace. Such was my love for the whites, that my countrymen pointed as they passed and said, “Logan is the friend of white men.” I had even thought to have lived with you, but for the injuries of one man … Colonel Cresap, the last spring, in cold blood, and unprovoked, murdered all the relations of Logan,
not even sparing my women and children. There runs not a drop of my blood in the veins of any living creature. This called on me for revenge. I have sought it; I have killed many; I have fully glutted my vengeance; for my country I rejoice at the beams of peace. But do not harbor a thought that mine is the joy of fear. Logan never felt fear. He will not turn on his heel to save his life. Who is there to mourn for Logan? Not one.19

Girty is credited with having translated the most striking speech delivered on the frontier. It should be noted that the authenticity of the speech and the identity of the orator are disputed by some. Thomas Jefferson memorized the lament and reproduced it in his Notes on the State of Virginia in 1781. About it he wrote, “I may challenge the whole orations of Demosthenes and Cicero, and of any more eminent orator, if Europe has furnished more eminent, to produce a single passage superior to it.”20

Incidentally, Jefferson, the motive force behind the Journey of Discovery, had more than a passing interest in indigenous languages. He hoped Lewis and Clark would bring back linguistic evidence supporting the conjecture that North American Indians were descended from the lost tribes of Israel.

Not Forgotten
The pioneer interpreters and translators who facilitated trade, negotiations, war, and peace on the American frontier are largely invisible today—just as their modern counterparts sometimes vanish behind the successful products of their work. Still, even if their utility is not conspicuously acknowledged, their fingerprints are visible on important events, and some messages they made accessible will long be remembered.

Notes
3. Ibid., 100.
4. Ibid., 103.
5. Ibid., 141.
6. Ibid., 101.
11. Hanna, 64.
13. Ibid., 187.
20. Ibid., 188.