The study of the language of the Sioux Indians has been undertaken by many non-Indians for various reasons. In the early 19th century missionaries studied and learned the language of the Sioux tribes in Minnesota and Dakota Territories as a necessary prerequisite to their work. About the turn of the century, the federal government recognized the need for accurate scientific information about the lives, customs, beliefs and languages of the Indian tribes inhabiting the Great Plains and the West. Congress, through the Bureau of American Ethnology, commissioned a number of scholars to study these diverse tribes and to publish their findings in a series of bulletins and annual reports. After the 1930's when English clearly became the dominant language on the reservations, language research became the province of university trained scholars in field or applied linguistics.

The Siouan language family, as outlined by J. W. Powell in 1917, covered a large territory with speakers as far east as North Carolina, as far south as Biloxi, Mississippi; west to the Rocky Mountains; and north into Canada. Sioux tribes residing in North Dakota and South Dakota speak one of the three dialects belonging to the Siouan family. Nakota, or the N dialect, is spoken by the Yankton on the Yankton Reservation; the Yanktonai on the Standing Rock Reservation, the Lower Crow Creek Reservation, and the Fort Totten Reservation. Dakota, or the D dialect, is spoken by the Mdewakantonwan on the Flandreau Reservation; the Sisseton on the Sisseton and Fort Totten Reservations; and the Wahpeton at Sisseton, Flandreau, and Fort Totten. The L dialect, Lakota, is spoken by the largest group, the Teton or western Sioux. The bands are the Hunkpapa, and the Sihasapa (Blackfoot) at Standing Rock; the Minneconjou, the Sihasapa, the Oohenonpa (Two Kettle), and Sans Arc at Cheyenne River; and the Brule and Oglala at Rosebud; the Brule at Lower Brule Reservation; and the Brule and Oglala at Pine Ridge. There are only slight differences in pronunciation and vocabulary. A Lakota speaker will have no difficulty conversing
with a Dakota speaker.

There are two major periods of language study of Dakota/Lakota language though they are closely related and somewhat overlapping. The first studies were the publications of the missionaries to the Santee in the later part of the nineteenth century. The second group of publications dealt mainly with the Teton and were sponsored by the Bureau of American Ethnology (1890 - 1932).

Missionaries began their work among the Santee living in Minnesota in the 1820's and 1830's. Joseph Renville, of French and Indian descent, established a trading post at Lac qui Parle on the Minnesota River in 1826. As was happening throughout the frontier, the traders were soon followed by the missionaries. In 1834 Samuel Pond and his brother Gideon left their Connecticut village to settle among the Sioux for the purpose of converting them to Christianity. Even though they lacked the support of any church group, they set out for Minnesota Territory. Encountering the Sioux at Prairie de Chien, the Ponds began their language study by asking Dakota words for objects. Later, when they settled at Lake Calhoun, they also used the word lists made up by army officers in the area. In 1836 Gideon Pond went to Renville's post at Lac qui Parle where he met Dr. Thomas Williamson, a physician and Episcopal missionary. A year later Rev. Stephen Return Riggs joined the "Dakota Mission". The Pond brothers assisted both Williamson and Riggs in learning Dakota. They began by translating hymns and simple Bible stories. Their most ambitious project was translating both the New Testament and Old Testament into Dakota.

Ella Deloria, the daughter of Episcopal minister Philip Deloria, gives this description of how the work proceeded:

'It is a log house, ample and many roomed, for it is the home of the French and Dakota trader. Renville, a man of keen intellect, though without any schooling to speak of and without any facility of English. In a bare room with flickering candlelight he sits hour on hour of an evening after a hard day of manual work. Dr. Riggs and his helpers are across the table from him. They are working on the translation. It is a blessing incalculable for all Dakota missions that Dr. Williamson and Riggs are scholars. One of them reads a verse in Hebrew, if it is from the Old Testament; or in Greek, if from the New. He ponders its essence, stripped of idiom, and then gives it in French. Renville, receiving it thus in his father's civilized language, now thinks it through very carefully an at length turns it out again, this time in his mother's tongue. Slowly and patiently he repeats it as often as needed while Dr. Riggs and the others write it down in the Dakota phonetics already devised by the Pond brothers.'

Riggs and Williamson worked together for five years (1835 -1840). Their work was supported in part by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions and the Historical Society of
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Grammar, Texts, and Ethnography was published by the U. S.
Geographical and Geological Survey in 1893. Listed as story tellers
were three Dakota speakers: Michael Renville, the son of Joseph
Renville; David Grey Cloud, a Presbyterian preacher; and James
Garvie, a teacher at the Nebraska Indian School established by Rev.
Alfred Riggs, the son of Stephen Return Riggs. The inclusion of these
stories was significant because it marked the first printing of native
speakers telling their own stories in their own language rather than
Dakota translations of English stories.

John Williamson, the son of Dr. Thomas Williamson,
accompanied the Santee, who were forced out of Minnesota
following the uprising of 1862 to their reservation at Crow Creek.
He stayed at Crow Creek for seven years giving them instructions in
religion and writing their language. His dictionary was reprinted in
1868, 1886, and 1902.

There can be no doubt that the dictionaries, grammars, and
translations were of great value to the many missions in the Dakotas.
The books continued to be used for a number of years. However, the
purposes of Riggs and his colleagues were not to preserve the culture
and language of the Dakota, but to use it as a vehicle for bringing
about the transition to English and non-Indian customs.

In his, "Ethnography," Riggs wrote:

"Let a well-arranged severity be enacted into law, and Indians be
guaranteed civil rights as other men, and they will soon cease to be Indians. The
Indian tribes of our continent may become extinct as such; but if this extinction
is brought about by introducing them into civilization and Christianity and
merging them into our great nation, which is receiving accretions from all
others, who will deplore the result? Rather let us labor for it, realizing that if by
our efforts they cease to be Indians and become fellow citizens it will be our
glory and joy."

Other missionaries worked among the Lakota, or Teton Sioux.
For example, Rev. Eugene Buechel, a native of Germany, began his
ministry at the Holy Rosary Mission on the Pine Ridge Reservation
in 1907 under the auspices of the Catholic Church. For nearly forty
years he collected Lakota words for a dictionary. He published a
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dictionary of Lakota, which is the best source currently available, was published in 1970.

Valuable as these scholarly works are, they do have limitations in the linguistic study of Dakota/Lakota language. Dr. Franz Boas of Columbia University commented on Buechel's work: "The analysis of Dakota in Buechel's Grammar is based on the theory that every syllable has a meaning. The arrangement is that of an English Grammar with Dakota equivalents. Since much of the material is based on Bible translations and prayers, many unidiomatic forms occur." Because the same is true of the Riggs' work, these sources must be used with care.

Following the Civil War, the U. S. government again turned its attention to the problems of the western territories. For purposes of treaty-making and administration, the government needed to locate, identify, and classify the various western tribes under some sort of central system. For fifty-four years (1878-1932) this work was undertaken by the Bureau of American Ethnology of the Smithsonian Institution. Congress authorized the publications of a series of bulletins and annual reports. The Bureau ultimately produced 48 volumes of ethnic papers, some of which were contributed by the U. S. Geographical Survey Commission. The last volume, a comprehensive index, was published in 1932.

One of the first publications of the Bureau of American Ethnology was the "Indian Linguistic Families of America North of Mexico" compiled by J. W. Powell in 1891. With comparatively few changes Powell's outline has continued to hold up to scholarly investigation to the present time. James Owen Dorsey's Study of Siouan Cults was published by the Bureau in 1891. Dorsey was a missionary to the Ponca Indians in Nebraska from 1871 to 1873. He did comparative studies of the languages of the Ponca, Omaha, Kansa, Winnebago, and Biloxi. Unlike other missionaries, Dorsey adopted an objective approach to language and legends. By his own experience he discovered a principle that Franz Boas of Columbia University was to stress with his linguistic students. That is, "It is safer to let the Indian tell his own story in his own words than to endeavor to question him in such a manner as to reveal what answers are desired or expected." Although Dorsey did not include the Dakota/Lakota texts, he cites as his native informants John Bruyier, a Dakota speaker; George Bushotter, and George Sword, Lakota speakers.

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In 1917, the American Museum of Natural History, published
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nor speak English, he wrote pages and pages in old Lakota using the
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of the Tetons before white contact is derived from the Sword
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methodological principles which demonstrate the inadequacy of the old methods and point to new paths of research which were to lead to impressive results." Basically Boas stressed that thorough knowledge of the language was the key to understanding everything else: "... we must insist that a command of the language is an indispensable means of obtaining accurate and thorough knowledge, because much information can be gained by listening to conversations of the natives and by taking part in their daily life, which to the observer who has no command of the language, will remain inaccessible." Boas was conversant in Dakota/Lakota, but he trusted more to the authority of the native speaker than to the linguist working through translation. In 1929, Boas invited Ella Deloria to accept a position as Dakota language researcher in ethnology and linguistics in the Department of Anthropology at Columbia University. It was certainly a logical choice.

Ella Deloria was born in 1888. She was raised at St. Elizabeth's Mission on the Standing Rock Reservation where her father, the Rev. Philip Deloria, was the Episcopal priest. She grew up in a large circle of relatives and friends, speaking the Dakota dialect of her parents and the Lakota dialect of the Hunkpapa. The Riggs and Williamson books were her first textbooks. As teachers arrived from the east, she also learned to speak and write in English. She was intelligent, eager to learn, and had a natural facility for language learning. After completing secondary school at All Saints School in Sioux Falls, Deloria studied at Oberlin College and finally at Columbia University (1913-1914).

Deloria had been trained in linguistic theory, research methods, and phonetics. For nearly twelve years she continued working with Boas. The general arrangement was that she spend half her time on the Sioux reservations collecting stories and verifying accounts and the other half in New York editing and transcribing the manuscripts of Busbotter, Sword and others.

Deloria's work differs from those who preceded her in two important ways. Unlike the non-Indian missionaries who learned Dakota/Lakota as adults working through translations, Deloria knew the nuances and subtle shades of meaning accessible only to one who has grown up in the culture. Unlike the native informants like Sword, she was proficient in English as well. The results of her work are two remarkable volumes. *Dakota Texts,* published in 1932, is a collection of 64 tales and legends recorded directly and exactly from Lakota storytellers from Standing Rock, Pine Ridge, and Rosebud. One tale "The Deer Woman" is in Nakota dialect from her
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Dakota Grammar (1941) is the most complete
and detailed grammar. This grammar describes the language in
terms of its own structure and uses categories as they function in
Lakota language rather than applying the categories of Latin,
German, or English.
Ella Deloria continued her research through the 1960’s. Her
manuscript for a Lakota-English dictionary remained incomplete at
the time of her death 1971. This manuscript and others are in the
Ella Deloria Collection at the University of South Dakota.
During the present decade there has been a revival of interest in
language study. Many young Indian college students, desiring to
maintain their tribal identity and cultural partipation, sought to
learn the languages of their grandparents. The demand for written
texts by students and scholars has resulted in reprinted and facsimile
reproductions of many of earlier works described in this essay.

Standing Rock Community College

NOTES

1. Ethel Norum. Picture The Modern North Social Sciences and Behavioral Culture. Minneapolis: University of
Norwood Press, 1964, pp. 293


4. Ibid., p. 4


6. Stephen Robert Riggs, Dakota Grammar. Dell and American Indian, Dakota, and


9. Ibid., p. 272-273


11. P. Walker. Introduction to “The Ghost Dance and Other Ceremonies of the Oglala Sioux of the Tonk

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