Sapir's Yahi Work: An Historical Perspective

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In 1984, Edward Sapir's centennial year, plans were laid for the republication, in a standard edition, of the complete corpus of Sapir's work.¹ Fifteen volumes are currently planned, with a sixteenth volume devoted to biographical materials and a comprehensive index. All of Sapir's published monographs, papers, essays, and reviews will be included, as well as selections from his correspondence and many of his poems. Early along, the decision was made to include as well a number of Sapir's unpublished manuscripts. Among these were three large collections of Athabaskan texts (Sarcee, Kutchin, and Hupa); a significant body of Nootka textual and ethnographic data; a small corpus of Yurok linguistic material, including three texts; a 100-page manuscript on Southern Paiute ethnography; valuable lexical data on Chimariko; and a comparative Wakashan vocabulary.²

Probably the most interesting of these unpublished materials were the texts and other linguistic notes Sapir collected from Ishi, the famous Yahi Indian, in the summer of 1915. Ishi's story hardly needs retelling here. He was "discovered" in 1911, the last survivor of his group, and from then until his death in 1916 he lived at the Museum of Anthropology of the University of California (then located in San Francisco), where he was the subject of ethnographic investigation by A. L. Kroeber, T. T. Waterman, and others.

Sapir's name does not figure prominently in the literature about Ishi, but in truth he was the scholar most qualified by previous work to explore Ishi's traditional culture. In 1907-08, as a Research Associate in Anthropology at the University of California, he had studied both the Northern and Central Yana in the field. His collection of Yana Texts was published in 1910, he had an ethnographic sketch of the Yana in an advanced state of preparation, and he had extensive files on Yana grammar and lexicon. Ishi's language, Yahi, was closely related, apparently a divergent dialect of Southern Yana, and as soon as Kroeber and his colleagues recognized this they were in contact with Sapir. Sapir, for his part, was eager to work with Ishi, but his commitments in Canada (where he was Chief of the Anthropological Division at the National Museum) made a visit to California difficult to arrange. After a number of delays and false starts, he was able to commit the entire summer of 1915 to the project.

In a plan that he worked out with Kroeber, Sapir received a summer appointment at Berkeley, where he taught one undemanding course and lived at the Faculty Club. Ishi was brought across the Bay to live for the summer with the Watermans, where Sapir was able to spend several hours each day with him. The arrangements were convenient, but the actual work of linguistic elicitation from Ishi was, as Sapir later wrote to Kroeber, "by far the most time-consuming and nerve-wracking that I have ever undertaken." As Sapir described him, Ishi was far from being the perfect informant:
At first the task seemed perfectly hopeless [and] I despaired for a while of being able to get text from him at all....The difficulty was not so much in writing down Ishi's words, as in getting him to interpret them. As a matter of fact, what success I have had is due almost entirely to brute memory of stems and grammatical elements familiar to me from Northern and Central Yana. A considerable amount of grammatical material was obtained from Ishi also by suggesting Central Yana forms and getting his Southern Yana equivalents, where possible....Ishi's imperturbable good humor alone made the work possible, though it also at times added to my exasperation (Golla 1984:194).

In spite of these obstacles, the summer's work proved remarkably successful. Sapir obtained over 200 notebook pages of texts, a collection approximating in size his Northern and Central Yana collections of 1907-08. In addition, he obtained a very thorough set of Yahi kinship terms, got valuable new data on Yana classificatory verbs, and compiled a respectable Yahi lexicon. Unfortunately, early in August, Ishi began to show symptoms of tuberculosis, and on August 22 he was taken back to San Francisco for treatment at the UC Hospital. His work with Sapir had to be prematurely terminated, and as a consequence a considerable portion of the text material he had dictated was left without a translation. Sapir hoped to be able to resume the work during a later visit. This, however, was not to be. Ishi's condition steadily worsened during the fall and winter, and he died the following March.

Sapir did relatively little with his Yahi data. He drew on the remarkably complete set of kinship terms that he had elicited from Ishi for data for a paper on the levirate (1916), and he later published the full terminology in a study of Yana Terms of Relationship (1918). Otherwise Sapir's only publication on Yahi was a short excerpt from one of Ishi's texts, "A Story of Lizard," with grammatical analysis (1923:282-94). This text analysis, published together with analyses of representative Northern and Central Yana texts, was prepared at Kroeber's suggestion, and was understood to be in lieu of a more substantial treatment of the material (Golla 1984:340, 360-1). By the mid-1920's Sapir's interest in Yana, or in California Indian languages generally, had waned, and there is no indication that he subsequently returned to the Ishi material after publishing the analyzed text fragment. He lectured on Yana at Yale in the spring of 1934 in his course on "Primitive Languages," but Stanley Newman's class notes show that Sapir cited few Yahi forms. Sapir also added no Yahi data to his ethnographic manuscript, which was completed and published after his death by Leslie Spier (Sapir and Spier 1943).

After Sapir died in 1939, all of his Yana linguistic notes were returned to the Department of Anthropology at Berkeley. Kroeber placed them in the departmental files, where they rested, apparently undisturbed, for a quarter of a century. Carbon copies of the file slips Sapir had typed (mostly of his Northern and Central Yana materials, but with some Yahi included) were separately deposited in the Franz Boas Collection of the American Philosophical Society,
Philadelphia, and these formed the basis of the Yana Dictionary that Morris Swadesh compiled in the 1950's and published, under his and Sapir's names, in 1960. During the later stages of work on the Yana Dictionary an attempt was made to locate Sapir's original Yahi notebooks at Berkeley, but they could not be found (Sapir and Swadesh 1960:10). In the late 1960's, when the Berkeley Anthropology department's archives were thoroughly catalogued by Dale Valory, the Yahi materials again came to light. Together with the rest of the departmental archives, these were transferred to the Bancroft Library about 1970. Over the course of the next 15 years, though accessible, the Yahi notebooks and files were consulted only briefly by scholars, and no comprehensive assessment of their contents was made until the inception of the current editing project in 1984.

The editorial board of The Collected Works of Edward Sapir approached the Yahi materials with some wariness. Sapir's descriptions of the difficulties he had encountered in working with Ishi forewarned us that editing the texts would not be an easy job. This was confirmed by a close inspection of the notebooks. There are six of these, each containing 50 pages. All pages are filled, except in the last notebook, where only 22 pages are filled. The first 44 pages of the first notebook contain individual words and paradigms; the remainder of the corpus consists of dictated texts with (partial) interlinear glossing. The Yahi is in a close phonetic transcription throughout.

So far, so good. Sapir's handwriting is something of an obstacle for the uninitiated, but while tiny it is always precise. The real difficulty with these materials lies in the translations -- or rather, in the lack of them. Two entire notebooks (nos. 2 and 3) contain nothing but Yahi text, with no interlinear glossing whatever. Approximately 35 pages in the other notebooks are similarly unglossed. Out of a total of 206 pages of text material, only 70 are even partially supplied with interlinear glossing. We may presume that the unglossed material largely represents texts that Sapir intended to go over with Ishi towards the end of their work, but was prevented from doing so when Ishi became ill. It appears, in fact, that most of the untranslated pages in notebooks 2 and 3 contain a single, very long, text -- or perhaps a series of episodes strung together with no clear boundaries.

The material that is glossed presents its own problems. On many pages glossed forms are separated by numerous forms -- sometimes even several lines -- that lack glossing. Our guess was that these unglossed stretches contained repetitions of words and phrases occurring earlier in the text. Fortunately, this has turned out to be correct, and we have been able to supply a good many of the missing glosses through a search of the material. A more serious problem is posed by the numerous question marks scattered among the glosses, indicating uncertainty on Sapir's part that he had been able to deduce the correct translation from the problematic metalinguistic communication he had established with Ishi. Here is how Sapir himself described the situation:

Ishi's English was of the crudest. "Him's no good" did duty for "He (or it) is bad" or "That is not correct," while "sista" might mean equally "sister"
or "brother." Ishi was perfectly willing to dictate and to interpret; the difficulties followed unavoidably from the circumstances. In going over his texts for interlinear translations...I endeavored to use every tittle of evidence that I could muster, Ishi's "explanation" of the single words, his accompanying gestures, the context of the myth itself, and, most important of all, the analogies of the northern dialects (Sapir 1923:264).

Given the nature of the material, it was decided that no attempt would be made to compile a complete edition of the Yahi texts, but only those texts for which the glossing was complete enough to allow the text to be understood as a literary product. We were quite prepared for the eventuality that the editable corpus would prove to be only one or two short texts or text-fragments.

As the work has shown, we were overly cautious in making this assessment. To some degree we underrated Sapir's capabilities as a field linguist, even in such unpromising circumstances. More significantly, we underestimated the degree to which the intelligent use of modern data processing technology can aid philological work. We were fortunate, above all, to have the advice of two linguists with considerable expertise both in Californian linguistics and in computer-aided text processing -- Bruce Nevin and Kenneth Whistler. With Nevin's help we were able to assemble a proposal that convinced the National Science Foundation that there was an interesting and feasible piece of work to be done with these materials. With Whistler's text-processing software (KWICMAGIC), tailored by him specifically for this project, we have been able to automate data storage, cross-referencing, and analysis. We now have almost all of the glossed portions of the Yahi material in data files. Ishi's texts are well on their way to publication.

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1. This edition, which carries the general title, *The Collected Works of Edward Sapir*, is being published by Mouton de Gruyter. The project is under the direction of an editorial board that includes Philip Sapir (Editor-In-Chief), William Bright, Regna Darnell, Victor Golla, Eric Hamp, Richard Handler, and Judith Irvine. The first volumes are to appear early in 1988.

2. Preparation of manuscript material for publication is being supported, in part, by awards from the National Science Foundation (grant # BNS-86-09411) and the Wenner Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research.
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Abbreviations

AA American Anthropologist (new series)
UCPAAE University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology
UCPL University of California Publications in Linguistics
Occasional Papers On Linguistics

Papers from the 1987 Hokan-Penutian Languages Workshop and Friends of Uto-Aztecan Workshop, Held at University of Utah, Salt Lake City, June 18-21, 1987.

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PREFACE

For the first time, The Hokan-Penutian Languages Workshop and the Friends of Uto-Aztecan Working Conference met together as a single conference, at the University of Utah, Salt Lake City, June 18-21, 1987. In the past, the conferences usually met back to back; the Uto-Aztecan meeting usually ended one or two days before the Hokan-Penutian meeting began, which gave people just enough time to travel from one location to the other. Since a number of people attend both meetings, it is hoped that these joint meetings can occur more often.

All the papers except the last one were given in a slightly different form at the meeting in Salt Lake City. The last paper was given at the 1986 Hokan-Penutian meeting, which met as a section the Haas Festival at Santa Cruz. The papers are given in the order they appeared at the meeting at the University of Utah.

The participants of the conference gratefully acknowledge all the work done by Professor Wick R. Miller, other faculty members, and the students at the University of Utah, which made the conference run so smoothly and enjoyably.

The 1988 Hokan-Penutian Languages Workshop will meet at the University of Oregon, Eugene, June 16-18, 1988.

James E. Fedden, Editor
Carbondale, March 1986
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