

Gladys Reichard's ear

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Abstract: The first scientific grammar of a Salishan language was written by Gladys Amanda Reichard (1893–1955). As this year the International Conference on Salish and Neighbouring Languages celebrates its fiftieth anniversary, the author wishes to acknowledge the sixtieth anniversary of Reichard's death in simultaneous tribute.

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1 Introduction

Sixty years ago this summer Professor Gladys Reichard was not in Salish country when death came knocking. She was living in the southeast corner of Diné Biyékah, the Navajo homeland, within sight of the snow-tipped San Francisco peaks on the wooded campus of the Museum of Northern Arizona in Flagstaff. Since 1939, Reichard had made MNA, a privately funded center for the study of the archaeology, biota, and cultures of the Colorado Plateau region, her institutional summer home. She loved MNA and Flagstaff well enough that she had already selected one of four homesites being developed on MNA property on which to build a house. She was three years away from retirement from Barnard College where she had been the only tenured faculty member (and chair) in the department of Anthropology for over thirty years.

The first stroke hit the day after her sixty-second birthday. She was rushed from the tiny Washington Matthews cabin where she customarily stayed to nearby Flagstaff Medical Center. With her sister Lilian at her side, Reichard died there a week later on July 25, 1955. Carl Voegelin, past president of the Linguistic Society of America and first successor to Franz Boas as editor of the *International Journal of American Linguistics*, was one of Reichard's pallbearers. Florence "Flo" Voegelin, founder and editor of *Anthropological Linguistics*, joined other of the American Southwest's anthropological royalty at Reichard's graveside. Today Reichard's modest headstone faces skyward in the broad expanse of grass that is Citizen's Cemetery. It is safe to say that none of the students who casually cut through the cemetery on their way to the eastern flank of Northern Arizona University's Flagstaff campus have any idea of its existence.

Because Reichard herself did not stand on ceremony, it matters not that few linguists who have benefitted directly from her pioneering work on North American Indian languages know or care about the location of her physical remains. On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the International Conference

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on Salish and Neighboring Languages, it *is* appropriate to recognize—and clarify—the intellectual contributions Reichard made to the study of Salishan and other North American Indian languages lest we be tempted to take them for granted.

2 Hardly a bed of roses

Melville Jacobs (1940) states plainly and accurately that Reichard's grammar of Coeur d'Alene (1938) was "the first full length portrait of a Salish language," predicting that her "excellent" contribution to the third volume of the *Handbook of American Indian Languages* would serve as "the foundation upon which most future researches and analyses of the Salish languages may be conducted" (p. 98). As guest editor of *IJAL*, Larry Thompson dedicated the first issue of volume 46 (1980) to Reichard in recognition of her extensive writings on Amerindian languages and cultures. In that same issue Herbert Landar (1980) provides an annotated list of Reichard's linguistic publications arranged by date and extending to the six posthumous articles on comparative Salishan which Flo Voegelin saw into print. Gary Witherspoon opens his contribution to the memorial issue with the words "Gladys Reichard was an extraordinary ethnologist and an exceptional linguist" (1980, p. 1). Years later Ivy Doak pronounced Reichard's work on Coeur d'Alene "outstanding" (1997, p. 4). Falk (1999) traces Reichard's career in North American Indian linguistics in detail, arguing that despite her dedication, talent, and immense productivity, Reichard has been largely overlooked in the history of American linguistics due to a bias in favor of the "great man" theory of history, which argument is not less persuasive in 2015. Falk quotes M. Dale Kinkade as saying of early Salishan linguistics, "It's too bad there weren't more Reichards" (p. 140). Ray Brinkman, on staff at the Coeur d'Alene language program for over a decade, credits Reichard as much for her resourcefulness in recording enough Coeur d'Alene data in the first half of the 20th century on which to base a language revitalization effort in the second as for introducing Lawrence Nicodemus to the study of linguistics (R. Brinkman, personal communication, October 25, 2013).

Virtually all of Reichard's linguistic publications were met during her lifetime with the roar of male disapproval. She refused to observe the absolute partitioning of form from meaning, of method from circumstance then in vogue and she paid with her reputation for her nonconformity. Hockett (1940) panned Reichard's grammar of Coeur d'Alene. Harry Hoijer discredited Reichard's work on Navajo for the better part of three decades, culminating in his splenetic review in *IJAL* of her four-hundred page *Navaho Grammar* which he declared "wholly inadequate" and without value to modern linguistics (1953, p. 83). George Trager subsequently piled on, writing in his review of the same book for *American Anthropologist* that Reichard had wasted two decades and the precious funds of the American Ethnological Society on its publication (1953, p. 429). Even after her death certain linguists were so galled by Reichard's refusal to adopt their terminological prejudices that they all but completed the task of erasing her from American linguistics. Mary Haas asserted that her student Karl

Teeter had been forced to write his dissertation on Wiyot from “an entirely clean slate” based on information from a single 80-year-old speaker because grammatical descriptions prior to 1930—including Reichard’s dissertation on Wiyot grammar (1925)—were “noncommensurate” with the structuralist “plane” Haas favored. Teeter himself told Falk that Reichard “had a poor ear for phonetics” which made the hundreds of pages of fieldnotes, texts, and analyses of Wiyot she left to posterity at the University of California Berkeley “too inaccurate” and “unreliable” for use (Falk 1999, p. 143).

Falk (1999) does a fine if understated job of tracing the animosity expressed by Reichard’s most vocal critics to Edward Sapir. Sapir with A.L. Kroeber had expected Reichard’s grammar of Wiyot to support Sapir’s California Algonquian hypothesis. When he couldn’t convince Reichard to accept his evidence for a historical relationship between Wiyot, Yurok, and the eastern Algonquian family (a relationship which would not be fully accepted by Amerindianists for another fifty years), he wrote her off, permanently. As Falk suggests, Sapir’s persistent, behind-the-scenes attempts to sabotage Reichard’s career until his death in 1939 were as much an outlet for his frustrations with Boas’ higher standards of evidence and methodological pluralism as they were an expression of his well-documented contempt for professional women. Try as he might to eclipse Boas along with the women he encouraged, the best Sapir could do was inspire his students to mistake intolerance for scientific judiciousness. It might be argued that Sapir’s “my way or the highway” approach to scholarship is his most pervasive legacy in the culture of American linguistics. The battles he and his students waged against responsible colleagues like Reichard continue to divide us counterproductively along lines of gender, age, cultural identity, and disciplinary approach.

Accusations that Reichard had a poor ear or was deaf to phonemic theory are easily laid to rest now that we see in Salishan linguistics alone the rich array of dissertations, masters theses, books, and countless articles that are based on, refer to, or take issue with Reichard’s published and unpublished Salishan materials. Even her largely forgotten work on Wiyot is bearing new fruit. Lynnika Butler, the linguist recently hired by the Wiyot Tribe to provide technical expertise for their language revitalization program (the last speaker of Wiyot died in 1962), told me recently that she relies more heavily on Reichard’s records for their phonetic detail than on transcriptions made by Kroeber and Teeter (L. Butler, personal communication, January 31, 2014). In fact, Reichard had far more training in phonetics and grammatical analysis than most linguists realize. A Classics major at Swarthmore College, Reichard did not enter Columbia in 1919 with a background in philology or anthropology. Yet she was quickly captivated by Amerindian linguistics in Boas’ infamously rapid-fire linguistics seminar. Rather than complain as did so many others that Boas did not offer a course in field methods to prepare students for the challenges of fieldwork, Reichard prepared herself. When in 1922 she opted to do linguistic fieldwork and produce a grammar with texts for her dissertation, she made a choice that no other of Boas’ female students made before or since.

Even after she graduated, Reichard continued to refine her perception of speech sounds. During her Guggenheim fellowship year of 1926-27 in Germany, Reichard spent her weekends testing her phonetic judgments against a Rousselot apparatus as a lab for a course in phonetics she audited that was taught by one of Rousselot's star students, Giulio Panconcelli-Calzia, at the University of Hamburg. In addition to cultivating her hearing Reichard also engaged in sight-training. Before linguistic fieldwork she read all the old sources by missionaries, explorers, and contributors to the Bureau of American Ethnology, taking the volumes into the field with her to check the data they contained with living speakers. No matter how unsophisticated or flawed many of these materials were by contemporary standards, she appreciated even the smallest pinpoint of light they could throw on a linguistic topic that interested her. Still more important were the conversations such materials precipitated with her language consultants, who she preferred to call 'interpreters'. She approached Native speakers as a student who wished to learn to speak the local language and adopted the role of teacher only so as to teach interested interpreters how to write in a phonetic orthography.

Reichard was keen also to use the latest technology available to her. In her first field season studying Coeur d'Alene in 1927, she arranged for a physician in Spokane to make x-rays of Pascal George pronouncing ten Coeur d'Alene sounds. Handy with a Brownie camera since college, Reichard learned to shoot and edit film in the early 1930s when movie cameras were not yet standard field equipment. She also recorded hours of Navajo speech on wax cylinders for later transcription. Her hands-down favorite tool for fieldwork was the automobile. Once she realized the independence and mobility it gave her in Indian country she valued it as highly as a Navajo man does his horse. Reichard did not invent linguistic field methods but without question she perfected them to meet her needs.

Considering how difficult Sapir made Reichard's work on Wiyot and Navajo there is a kind of poetic justice in the fact that he was indirectly responsible for Reichard's entry into Salishan linguistics. When Boas wrote Reichard in Germany to say he had earmarked funding for her summer research through the Linguistics Committee of the Council of Learned Societies she wrote back saying she would like to use it to return to California to extend her study of Wiyot, plus Yurok. Boas demurred, intimating that Kroeber and Sapir were still sensitive over the Wiyot-Yurok flap. "My wish would be that you should take up the Coeur d'Alene with the idea of getting the whole interior Salish," Boas replied, "We ought to get, then [,] somebody else to take up the coast Salish because the whole field is altogether too vast for one person (F. Boas 1927, May 7 [Letter to Gladys Reichard]). He had no qualms about trusting Reichard with a project of Boasian proportions. "The field that you would gradually have to cover would embrace about eight dialects; some of them fairly divergent and certainly not mutually intelligible. The country to be covered reaches from the Columbia River over to Montana, taking in a considerable part of southern interior of British Columbia. Of course the idea would be that the work would extend over a number of years." Boas expressed

interest in “mythological materials,” i.e. texts. Reichard knew without asking that a synchronic descriptive grammar and dictionary would be concomitant products of her investigations.

From that fateful summer on, Interior Salishan linguistics became a peaceful refuge from the crowded, highly competitive, and increasingly combative arena of Navajo studies. Reichard spent just two summers, those of 1927 and 1929, collecting data on the Coeur d’Alene reservation but her fieldwork did not end there. She kept in touch by mail with Julia Antelope, Nicodemus’ mother, and Nicodemus spent two winters (1935 and 1936) at Columbia as Reichard’s student. In 1935 Reichard holed up in a tiny hamlet in northwest New Mexico for eight weeks compiling a dictionary of Coeur d’Alene in advance of writing the grammar. She and Julia Antelope wrote to each other in Coeur d’Alene throughout. Reichard was so immersed in the exchange that she remarked to Boas, “I really think I am beginning to think in the language” and declared Coeur d’Alene both “grand” and a joy to analyze (G. Reichard 1935, July 7. [Letter to F. Boas]).

The following year Reichard finished her grammar for the third volume of the *Handbook of American Indian Languages* making public the fact that Salishan linguistics was a significant component of her burgeoning research portfolio. Her pace of publication on Salishan languages appears slow to us only if we are unaware of how diverse, ambitious, and accomplished her lifetime bibliography is. Ultimately Reichard wrote or edited authoritative monographs that bespoke technical expertise in disciplines that included art history, ethnography, folklore, oral poetics, and religious studies, in addition to linguistics. She was also interested in ethnobotany, language pedagogy, psychoanalysis, race relations, and semiotics. Moreover, Reichard was active as a public intellectual. She championed tribal autonomy from missionary and federal rule in the popular press and applied her vast erudition toward defeating negative stereotypes of American Indians through her writing, radio interviews, public-speaking at museums and universities, and membership in humanitarian organizations that promoted educational opportunities for Native Americans as well as underprivileged women. She reached nearly two generations of college students at Barnard and Columbia through innovative courses in Native art, culture, and psychology, all aimed at countering the racist, assimilationist strains that racked her society. She tried but had to abandon an attempt to establish a department of linguistics at Barnard after Boas’ death; her administrative, teaching, and civic duties combined with her enormous scholarly commitments absorbed the time needed to found a second department. That she tried to do so was one of many overlooked signs that she came to distinguish anthropology from linguistics as the two disciplines diverged in focus.

3 Unfinished business

Two things are abundantly clear from my close reading of Reichard’s published and unpublished writings, correspondence included, over the last several years. First, she had no intention of dying prematurely. Collected in her papers at MNA are a dozen or more drafts of new books and articles related to Navajo

studies that attest to her expectation of much more time to come. The boxes of file slips, notebooks, and drafts on Interior Salish that fell into Flo Voegelin's capable hands represented a labor of love interrupted. Second, a constant element of Reichard's nature was a healthy skepticism of labels, whether they were attached to people or phenomena. As a highly-trained scientist she created and used technical vocabulary with ease but she did not value cultural or linguistic terminology as an end in itself. The reputation for disdain theory ascribed to her by her critics was in reality a suspicion of "catch words" and trendy dogma that defined an intellectual soapbox that the loudest linguists insisted others stand on in order to have a voice in "their" discipline. But Reichard ranked intellectual freedom high above prestige. She chafed at "presets" and premature conclusions enshrined as absolutes. To her, languages bubbled with accident and variation in company with the reassuring, melodic rule. Cautious and selective as she was about emerging concepts, if they facilitated open-ended insights into languages and their speakers she adopted them. It was a matter of personal integrity to her to think about language and culture on a plane as far removed from her received bias as her humanity allowed. She would tell her rapt audiences, "There is no such thing as 'The Navajo,'" which was no less profound (or heretical) a statement for an anthropologist to make in Reichard's time than was Noam Chomsky's doubt that language exists in ours (1984, p. 26). Witherspoon (1980) interprets Reichard's resistance to one-sidedness as holistic saying,

Although some of her writings—such as *Navajo Grammar* and the encyclopedic *Navajo Religion*—contain a certain amount of unconjoined information, always there is a vision that there is a core, where all things connect, and according to which all things make sense and all details derive their place and meaning. Such a vision is never easily grasped by an outsider, much less articulated in a way that the totally uninitiated can grasp it with any degree of clarity. Most people shrink before such a task, deluding themselves with the convenient view that the visions other peoples hold need not be learned but merely need to be catalogued by or transposed into someone else's vision. (p.1)

Witherspoon's distillation may not increase Reichard's appeal to linguists who aim to extricate language as cleanly as possible from its social context. Even so the wellspring of Reichard's polymath temperament is deeper and more humane than his praise implies. Underlying every act of Reichard's public speech was a woman in constant contact with her social conscience. Her decision-making was accordingly pragmatic rather than ideological, her choice of research topics based on what she deemed useful to the people she wrote about and for. It was consistently courageous in light of the unforgiving demands made by her elite contemporaries. She was one to be more affected by Pascal George's mocking of her Coeur d'Alene grammar as obscurely technical

and therefore patronizing to Indians than she was by a dressing-down emanating from the Ivory Tower.

Sixty years after her death we are no closer to definitive answers about whether Reichard was “really” a victim of sexual discrimination, a linguist, a feminist, or just a stubborn “daughter” of Boasian linguistics. The more we learn about her performance and competence as a scholar, the less reducible to category she becomes. What can be said is that Gladys Reichard’s ear was exquisitely alive to the human condition. May she be remembered by students of Salishan and neighboring languages fifty years hence for defining our enterprise as a rigorous one, where respect for honest effort and diverse approaches to our complex tasks call the tune.

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