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THE SOCIETY FOR THE STUDY OF THE INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES OF THE AMERICAS

*** SSILA BULLETIN ***

An Information Service for SSILA Members

Number 12: December 26, 1994

CONTENTS:

- 12.0 EDITOR ON HOLIDAY
- 12.1 REMAKE OF "BEFORE BABEL" TO BE SHOWN ON PBS TOMORROW NIGHT
- 12.2 CALL FOR 1995 AAA SESSION PROPOSALS
- 12.3 ENDANGERED LANGUAGES CONFERENCE AT DARTMOUTH IN FEBRUARY
- 12.4 REVISED SCHEDULE FOR MIT WORKSHOP SESSIONS
- 12.5 RECREATIONAL READING FOR WINTER NIGHTS

12.0 EDITOR ON HOLIDAY

Your editor will be on holiday for the next three weeks, for the most part incommunicado. (He will surface on January 13 for a talk at the University of Amsterdam on "Linguistic Extinction and Preservation in North American Indian Communities." If you're in the vicinity, stop by.) As a consequence, the January issue of the SSILA NEWSLETTER will be somewhat delayed, although it should reach most members early in February. The 1995 MEMBERSHIP DIRECTORY will be distributed in the same mailing.

12.1 REMAKE OF "BEFORE BABEL" TO BE SHOWN ON PBS TOMORROW NIGHT

SSILA members might be interested in a "Nova" program that will air on December 27 on many public television stations in the United States. It's called "In Search of the First Language" and documents recent work on extremely remote linguistic relationships, including Proto-World.

This is a revised version of the BBC program "Before Babel" that appeared a year or two ago, featuring Vitaly Sheveroshkin, Aharon Dolgopolsky, Colin Renfrew, Joseph Greenberg, Luca Cavalli-Sforza, and especially Merritt Ruhlen. Don Ringe was the only skeptic. The revised version is said to be less one-sided. It has added commentary by Jim Matisoff as well as some footage of the Flathead Indians of northwestern Montana, speaking their language and working with a linguist (SSILA member Sally Thomason).

12.2 CALL FOR 1995 AAA SESSION PROPOSALS

Although the next general meeting of SSILA will be with the Linguistic Society of America, in January 1996, the Society will also sponsor one or more sessions at the 1995 AAA meeting in Washington, DC. These sessions will be focused on specific topics, and will be initiated by individual members rather than by the SSILA program committee.

One such session has already been proposed, a follow-up to the session "Does the Category Irrealis Exist?" at the Atlanta meeting. Laurel Watkins and Harriet Klein have volunteered to organize and chair this session, and can be reached at <lwatkins@cc.colorado.edu> or <klein@apollo.montclair.edu>.

Other similarly focused session proposals are solicited at this time. Although prospective participants will be asked to correspond directly with the session organizers, a general call for papers for all SSILA-sponsored sessions will be sent out either with the January issue of the SSILA NEWSLETTER or sometime in February. It should be noted that the arrangement between the AAA and SSILA regarding the sponsorship of sessions at the AAA Annual Meeting is still in force, and that the AAA program committee will schedule up to five SSILA-sponsored sessions at non-conflicting times.

12.3 ENDANGERED LANGUAGES CONFERENCE AT DARTMOUTH IN FEBRUARY

Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire, will host a conference on Endangered Languages on February 3 to 5, 1995. The focus of the conference will be on areal problems of endangered languages and prospects for their survival. The preliminary schedule is:

Friday, February 3
8:00pm Keynote address: Michael Krauss, University of Alaska, Fairbanks

Saturday, February 4
9:30-12:00 Panel on (Northern) Native American Languages:
Lenore Grenoble (Dartmouth), moderator
Leanne Hinton (UC-Berkeley)
Marianne Mithun (UC-Santa Barbara)
Ofelia Zepeda (U of Arizona)
2:00-4:30 Panel on (Southern) Native American Languages:

John Watanabe (Dartmouth), moderator
Colette Craig (U of Oregon)
Nora England (U of Iowa)
Ken Hale (MIT)

Ken Hale (MIT)

Sunday, February 5

9:00-11:30 Panel on Alaskan/Siberian Languages:
Sergei Kan (Dartmouth), moderator
Michael Krauss (U of Alaska)
Nikolai Vakhtin (Russian Academy of Science, St. Petersburg)
Anthony Woodbury (U of Texas, Austin)

1:00-3:30 Panel on African Languages:
Lindsay Whaley (Dartmouth), moderator
Eyamba Bokamba (U of Illinois)
Matthias Brenzinger (U of Cologne)
Carol Myers-Scotton (U of South Carolina)

Fees: \$10 for students, \$20 for faculty. For information regarding registration and accommodations, contact:

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12.4 REVISED SCHEDULE FOR MIT WORKSHOP SESSIONS

The timetable for the Workshop on Endangered Languages and the Maintenance of Linguistic diversity, hosted by the Dept of Linguistics and Philosophy at MIT, has been revised. The new timetable is given below. Anyone is welcome to attend any or all of the sessions, which will not be "lectures" so much as a chance to discuss the issues and address the topic of "what works" in language maintenance. No knowledge of linguistic theory is required. All meetings will take place in MIT room 66-154

Thursday, January 12

1:00 pm Introduction: General issues including - what is endangerment, why maintain linguistic diversity. Led by Jonathan Bobaljik and Rob Pensalfini.

2:30 pm The United States. Led by Wayne O'Neil.

Thursday, January 19

1:00 pm Central America. Led by Wayne O'Neil.

2:30 pm South America. Led by Luciana Storto

Thursday, January 26

1:00 pm Australia. Led by Rob Pensalfini.

2:30 pm Ireland. Led by Andrew Carnie.

Thursday February 2

1:00 pm The far North. Led by Jonathan Bobaljik.

2:30 pm Conclusion: focus on what works. Led by Ken Hale.

Any questions or comments should be directed to <rjpensal@mit.edu>.

12.5 RECREATIONAL READING FOR WINTER NIGHTS

If you're looking for an absorbing but undemanding book to curl up with on these long winter nights, here are two recommendations from your SSILA colleagues:

* SMILLA'S SENSE OF SNOW, by Peter Hoeg, has been recommended by several SSILA members -- and your editor, having just finished the book, can add his voice to the chorus of praise. Originally published in Danish in 1992, the somewhat lame English translation may put you off for the first dozen pages or so. But you will soon get swept up by Hoeg's (o is slashed-o) multicultural narrative. Smilla -- short for Smillaaraq -- is a half Danish, half Greenlandic glaciologist. She is determined to find out who is responsible for the death of an Inuit child who fell (or was pushed) from the roof of a block of flats in Copenhagen. From the child's tracks in the rooftop snow, to the thin ice of Copenhagen harbor, to the floes off West Greenland, snow and ice are the leitmotifs of Smilla's quest. Inevitably, a number of the dreaded Eskimo Words For Snow make their appearance, but spelled and translated with seeming accuracy, and all somehow a propos.

Hoeg seems curiously well informed about linguistics in general, although it's not clear where he picked it up (the jacket tells us he's been a professional dancer, an actor, a sailor, a fencer, and a mountaineer"). One of the minor characters (alas, he gets bumped off early along) is a blind Eskimologist who once studied with Hjelmslev and can do a mean imitation of his mentor.

SMILLA's the kind of light reading that intellectuals love, with just enough of a patina of erudition to make us feel that we haven't totally frittered away our time. But it's on paperback racks everywhere and it's easy to see why. Underneath the Inupik snow lexicon and the symbolic ice it is really just another thriller, with all the classic elements of the genre -- escaping Nazis, oriental drug runners, and cynical cops with a heart. But linguist or not, Hoeg is a fine craftsman. The suspense builds inexorably, arctic mile after arctic mile, as events move like drift ice towards their denouement in the icy fog of Davis Strait.

* Nicholas Ostler, meanwhile, recommends Christopher Evans' AZTEC CENTURY, published in Britain by Victor Gollancz (Cassell), 1993. He writes:

I was immediately arrested by the theme as declared on the cover, the conquest of modern-day Britain by the Aztec Empire. An encounter between these two civilizations has not been allowed by the history of the world as we have known it, but what if Montezuma had followed the advice he was given by some of his counsellors, and slaughtered the Spaniards at once when he still had them in his power? As we know from the post-colonial success of at least one "contacted" culture (Japan), things might ultimately have developed not necessarily to Europe's advantage.

This is the idea that sparked Evans's book, and his development of it is masterly. The alternative 400 years of history emerge only gradually, as if they were quite what everyone has learnt at school. The linguistic and cultural details are meticulously correct, as far as I can check them, even to the extent of calling the principal character Extepan, a Nahuatl variant of a Spanish name (his mother had been a Spanish infanta) - this

casual accuracy almost unnoted in the text.

But this punctilio has not inhibited a gripping development of plot and character. And interesting questions are broached, and answered. How, for instance, would Aztec attitudes to warfare have accommodated possession of atomic weapons? Could they have maintained their sanguinary religion as their empire expanded across the world? And there are even a few little Asimov-like apothegms thrown in: "Truth is whatever you cannot help yourself believing." Declarations of love and affection are always devalued when tendered in the coinage of remorse.

I even found myself regretting, at the end, that we are living in the parallel world where the Aztecs were snuffed out early on. (A bit like my feelings as a child on the return from Narnia at the end of C S Lewis's books.)

In fact, it was so well done that I was surprised I had heard nothing of it before. In a way, it's comparable with Robert Harris's recent "Fatherland" (on Nazi Germany still going strong, and at peace, in 1964), which was lionized. I suppose this disregard in the press was due to a combination of AZTEC CENTURY's classification as science fiction, and the fact that the Aztecs are not a civilization that the reviewing classes in England (commonly known as "the chattering classes") know or care anything about.

Unfortunately, American publishers have not got round to issuing a US version. Perhaps this will only come after Mexican publishers bring it out in Spanish!

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