

An Eighteenth-Century Linguistic Borderland

In the eighteenth-century Pennsylvania backcountry, English, Scots-Irish, and German colonials and immigrants met Iroquoian, Algonquian, and Siouan speakers pushed by European settlement or pulled by the Six Nations to buffer Iroquoia. They created a complex, and at times confusing, linguistic landscape. Racial and ethnic diversity was audible, but language was also a permeable boundary. The journals of the Quaker trader James Kenny (1758–59, 1761–63), in manuscript at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania and published in this journal nearly a century ago, are remarkable sources that provide insight into intercultural communication and multilingualism amid the overlapping ethnic revitalizations of the Great Awakening and prophetic nativism, pervasive rumors of violence, and warfare.

Among his first orders of business, Kenny set “about making a dictionary of ye names of goods in ye Delaware tongue” and, as his proficiency grew, he found that Delawares were “mightly pleas’d” when he “preferr’d their Tongue in learning most of it so that I can converse with them a little.” In his “considerable dealings” with native people, skins and cloth, pelts and wares changed hands, but Kenny and his customers also traded in information. Even as the Delaware prophet Neolin urged Indians “to quit all Commerce with ye White People,” native visitors frequently “Inform’d” Kenny of things in the region, “report’d” what transpired at councils, and sometimes “confess’d” their opinions. They also “quried” [*sic*] him on people and events in the province and empire. Kenny’s multilingualism was not unique. Native people could frequently speak more than one Native American language, and Kenny encountered more than one Delaware who “talks English well.” European or colonial captives acquired linguistic skills involuntarily, and others found “having ye Languages” in their interest, whether they pursued trade, political intrigue, or missionary work. The “conversation” and “discourse” that circulated news between Indian country and colonial settlements was the lifeblood of the backcountry.¹

¹ John W. Jordan, ed., “James Kenny’s ‘Journal to ye Westward,’ 1758–59,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 37 (1913): 395–449, at 420, 423; John W. Jordan, ed., “Journal of James Kenny, 1761–1763,” *ibid.*, 1–47, 152–201, at 169, 188, 157, 37, 10, 12, 37, 18, 12. See also *ibid.*, 40, 42, 154–55, 191. On this linguistic borderland, see Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (Cambridge, 1991), 186–89; James H. Merrell, *Into the American Woods: Negotiators on the Pennsylvania Frontier* (New York, 1999); Elizabeth A. Perkins, “Distinctions and Partitions amongst Us: Identity and Interaction in the

Beyond allowing communication, language and linguistic behaviors also signified other forms of difference. Scots-Irish Presbyterians and German Moravians engaged Kenny in “sober conversation,” “bigotted . . . censures,” and the occasional “Argument.” Missionaries facing native people “prejudiced” against them realized that communicating the Word rested on linguistic expertise. This was especially true for Moravians such as Christian Frederick Post. His linguistic virtuosity could be of “Great Service to ye English Intrest,” but his variance from Quaker belief and practice—toasting health, using honorifics, and being open to religious images—made him seem dangerous. Once, Kenny dreamt that “ye Devil . . . appear’d to have Frederick Posts ficognomy [physiognomy] & Dress.” Kenny declared that the “Prayers & Singing” of non-Quaker Europeans and Indians were equally “Abominations.” Nativist Indians attracted to Neolin’s message of racial separation and cultural purification used these to send their “petitions” to the “Great Being,” who was “too High & mighty to be Spoke to” directly. Divergent speechways marked another linguistic divide that made social interaction and cultural exchange fraught.²

Indian affairs, from Kenny’s perspective, depended upon linguistic mastery. Problems pivoted on communication. Officials “Spoke” to Indians too “timorously,” making them “Bolder, & more insulting,” those “most conversant” with Indians were usually “Base” men, and Friends’ “private Council with ye Indians” was a source of tension with non-Quakers. Kenny possessed “Influence with ye Indns,” as other colonists believed, but frequently he had to accept “churlish” or “impudent” words that stemmed from native recognition that the language barrier offered Englishmen an opportunity to “deceive.” Yet there was always the hope that a “friendly Conference with ye Indians” would preserve native “regard,” and Kenny believed that “well affect’d Subjects, Protestants,

Revolutionary Ohio Valley,” in *Contact Points: American Frontiers from the Mohawk Valley to the Mississippi, 1750–1830*, ed. Andrew R. L. Cayton and Fredrika J. Teute (Chapel Hill, NC, 1998), 219–24. On interpreters, pidgins, and multilingualism generally, see Michael Silverstein, “Dynamics of Linguistic Contact,” in *Handbook of North American Indians*, vol. 17, *Languages*, ed. William C. Sturtevant and Ives Goddard (Washington, DC, 1996). For intimate intercourse, see Laura J. Murray, “Fur Traders in Conversation,” *Ethnohistory* 50 (2003): 285–314. Peter Silver, *Our Savage Neighbors: How Indian War Transformed Early America* (New York, 2007), 3–31, stresses unease over diversity.

² Jordan, “James Kenny’s Journal,” 404; Jordan, “Journal of James Kenny,” 191, 46, 155, 170–71, 191, 9, 5, 193, 172. See also *ibid.*, 46–47, 172, 182, 191–93. John Smolenski, *Friends and Strangers: The Making of a Creole Culture in Colonial Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 2010), 92–94, stresses the importance of speechways to Quaker identity and understanding of difference.

should have a free access to heare ye same." It was not always clear, however, what "subtile & Politick" Native American speakers were "Signifying." Public and private meetings required difficult maneuvering through Shawnee "perswasions," the "Lyes" of Mingos and former captives alike, Delawares who "Prognosticate . . . Two or Three Good Talks & then War," and the "Frightful" and "frequent rumours" that flew from all sides.³

In this polyglot place, people even discussed linguistic similarity and difference itself. "Dutch" boys, taken captive in war, who could "Only talk Shawana" were noteworthy. Sharing knowledge of his people's linguistic relations, one Lenape man informed the trader that there was "a Nation of Inds. settled over ye Missipi . . . who talks ye Delaware Tongue." More strikingly, in December 1762 a man named Old Indian told Kenny that several years earlier, he had journeyed to heaven in a dream. There, the "Great Creator" had chastised him, proclaiming that "Indians did not do right in giving such particular Names to Creatures." Opening a door, the "Almighty being Called all Species of Creatures One after another with a mighty Sound, & each kind of Creatures appeared & took notice of their name when called." Left with the instruction that the "General Name was Enough for Each Species," the dreamer awoke. Those divine admonitions paralleled the criticisms of Native American languages by some missionaries, who may have shared their frustrations with the pace of language learning with their native tutors. As Kenny reflected, "dreams often come from ye Idies or thoughts that are prevalent in ye mind." Although philosophers speculated that linguistic poverty defined the "savage" state, Moravians repeatedly complained that Indians possessed a wealth of words, abounding with names for distinct trees, animals of different sex or ages, and actions performed in different ways, while lacking generic terms that encompassed all varieties. Communicated to the learned, this emerged as a dominant understanding of Native American languages and thought in the nineteenth century. Crossing the language line could, itself, produce new ideas of difference.⁴

³ Jordan, "Journal of James Kenny," 187, 182, 167, 46, 424, 201, 10, 31, 171; Jordan, "James Kenny's Journal," 423–24, 426–27. On rumor, see Gregory Evans Dowd, "The Panic of 1751: The Significance of Rumors on the South Carolina-Cherokee Frontier," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 53 (1996): 527–60; and Tom Arne Midtrød, "Strange and Disturbing News: Rumor and Diplomacy in the Colonial Hudson Valley," *Ethnohistory* 58 (2011): 91–112.

⁴ Jordan, "Journal of James Kenny," 178, 177, 176–77. Cf. Carla Gerona, "Imagining Peace in Quaker and Native American Dream Stories," in *Friends and Enemies in Penn's Woods: Indians*,

Historians have seized on traders' accounts and official records for social interactions and ethnographic information, but these documents also provide details about the texture of communication that allow us to recover something of eighteenth-century Pennsylvania's language frontier.

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Colonists, and the Racial Construction of Pennsylvania, ed. William Pencak and Daniel K. Richter (University Park, PA, 2004), 58, which reads this as referencing native ideas of guardian spirits. Thanks to Prof. Kyle Volk for suggesting the phrase "crossing the language line." These linguistic criticisms can be found in Archer Butler Hulbert and William Nathaniel Schwarz, ed., *David Zeisberger's History of the Northern American Indians* (n.p., OH, [1910]), 144; and John Heckewelder, "An Account of the History, Manners, and Customs, of the Indian Nations who Once Inhabited Pennsylvania and the Neighbouring States," *Transactions of the Historical and Literary Committee of the American Philosophical Society* 1 (1819): 316–18. Patrick Erben, *A Harmony of the Spirits: Translation and the Language of Community in Early Pennsylvania* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2012), 301–23, gives the fullest account of Moravians' linguistic endeavors. On "the savage word," see Edward G. Gray, *New World Babel: Languages and Nations in Early America* (Princeton, NJ, 1999), 85–111. Marianne Mithun, *The Languages of Native North America* (New York, 1999), 37–67, gives modern linguistics' description of the functions of Native American words.