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

*** SILSA BULLETIN ***

An Information Service for SILSA Members

Number 12: December 26, 1994

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12.0 EDITOR ON HOLIDAY

Your editor will be on holiday for the next three weeks, for the most part, as we'll be in Anchorage for a couple of weeks. The University of Amsterdam on "Linguistic Extinction and Preservation in Northern Indigenous Communities". If you are a member of the Society, it's for you.

As a consequence, the January issue of the SILSA NEWSLETTER will be sent out by early 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

SILSA 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 "Search of the First Language," and it's a program on remote linguistic relationships, including Proto-World.

12.2 CALL FOR 1995 AAA SESSION PROPOSALS

Although the next general meeting of the Society will be in April, the Society will also sponsor one or more sessions at the 1995 AAA meeting in Washington, DC. These sessions will be specific, and will be initiated by individual members rather than be sponsored by the SILSA program committee.

One such session has already been proposed, a follow-up to the session on "In the Name of the Merchants of the World". The session will be on "In the Name of the Merchants of the World"; and can be reached at <watkins@colorado.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 SILSA-sponsored sessions will be sent out either with the January issue of the SILSA NEWSLETTER or sometime in February. It should be noted that the arrangement between the AAA and SILSA regarding the sponsorship of sessions at the AAA Annual Meeting is still in force, and that the AAA program committee will select up to five SILSA-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 the status of endangered languages and prospects for their survival. The preliminary schedule is:

Friday, February 3
4:00pm Keynote address: Michael Krauss, University of Alaska, Fairbanks

Saturday, February 4
9:30-12:00 Panel on (Northern) Native American Languages:
Lenore Groebel-Turner, moderator
Sue Hinton (UC-Berkeley)
Harry Juneau (Siskiyou-Merced)
Dorothy Zepeda (U of Arizona)
2:00-4:30 Panel on (Southern) Native American Languages:
12.4 REVISITED 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 56-154.

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'Neill.

Thursday, January 19
1:00 pm Central America. Led by Wayne O'Neill.
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 languid 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) multilingual narrative. Smilla — short for Smillaarag — 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 into the roof of a block of flats in Copenhagen. From the child's tracks in the rooftop snow, to the thin ice of the 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, actor, sailor, farmer, and mountaineer!" One of the minor characters ( alas, he gets bumped off early along) is a blind Eskimo linguist 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 flirted away our time. But it's on paperback racks everywhere and it's easy to see why. Underneath the Inuit snow lexicon and the Symbolic Ice it is really another thriller, with all the classic elements of the genre — escaping Nazis, oriental drug runners, and cynical cops with a heart. But for Smilla, 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 know it. But what if Montezuma had followed the advice which he was given by some of his counsellors, and slaughtered the Spaniards at once when he knew of their 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 Tlatelolco, a Nahua variant of a Spanish name (his mother had been a Spanish infant) — 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!