



2016

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Class of 2016

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Fleming, Jenna E. (2016) ""Where We May Oftener Converse Together": Translation of Written and Spoken Communication in Colonial Pennsylvania," *The Gettysburg Historical Journal*: Vol. 15 , Article 4.
Available at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/ghj/vol15/iss1/4>

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"Where We May Oftener Converse Together": Translation of Written and Spoken Communication in Colonial Pennsylvania

Abstract

In this paper I examine the differences between colonists' and Indians' perceptions and use of language in early Pennsylvania. Through consideration of translation challenges in both spoken and written contexts, I conclude that while residents of the region created systems for coping with linguistic issues, basic disparities between native and colonial forms of communication persisted in complicating diplomatic relations. The title of the paper is taken from the August 26, 1758 entry in *The Journal of Christian Frederick Post* and is part of the Pennsylvanian government's proposal for closer relations with Indians.

Keywords

Colonial Pennsylvania, Native Americans, Quakers, Pennsylvania Dutch, William Penn, Pennsylvania

**"Where We May Oftener Converse Together":
Translation of Written and Spoken
Communication in Colonial Pennsylvania**

By
Jenna Fleming



During the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, systems of communication between Europeans and Indians in North America remained in their formative stages. As members of both groups attempted to gauge each other's motives, learn about cultural practices, and establish mutually beneficial relationships, they faced many obstacles to understanding. The most evident of these were differences in language, as the vastly inconsistent backgrounds and structures of European and Indian languages made basic communication difficult for the earliest interpreters. In addition to problems of language learning, translation, and contextual usage that accompanied spoken conversation, written forms of dialogue presented other equally formidable challenges to the peoples of early colonial America. The unique environment of Pennsylvania, established under and governed by Quaker religious ideals, presented a setting in which interactions between Indians and Europeans evolved differently than in other colonies. From William Penn's founding of the

colony and first contact with the area's Indians in 1682, negotiation rather than dominance was instituted as precedent in native relations.¹ While both sides consistently touted aims of peaceful coexistence and enthusiastic cooperation, attainment of these goals was often incomplete at best.

From its seat at Philadelphia, the Pennsylvanian government continually attempted to extend its influence and territorial claims outward. Contact, conflict, and the need for cooperation with different Indian groups posed major challenges in communication, too great for the legislature to handle. Likewise, Indian peoples faced similar difficulties in regard to tribal affiliation, land ownership, and the development of trade with colonial societies. In these situations, specialized representatives acted as messengers, translators, interpreters, negotiators, or in any combination of these roles.² Individuals had an important position within the greater narrative of relations between colonists and Indians, whether they were professionals sponsored by officials or happened upon their duties by chance. English or native, each possessed a singular experience, skill set, and personal views and helped to simultaneously complicate and ease the delicate process of communication between and within their societies.

On every level, perceptions of language played a major part

¹ James H. Merrell, *Into the American Woods: Negotiators on the Pennsylvania Frontier* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), 61.

² *Ibid.*, 56.

in creating the general structure and course of negotiations in colonial Pennsylvania. Personal prejudices, conversational misunderstandings, deft omissions, honest mistakes, and willful mistranslations all functioned as manipulations of language, which intentional or not, had an impact on the people who experienced them. The importance of language is evidenced in a multitude of instances. In 1750, Conrad Weiser's companion Christian Daniel Claus, unable to understand an Indian religious ritual and trusting his own assumptions, made an inaccurate record of the ceremony in his travel journal.³ Though this failure in communication could have proved harmful only to Claus within the context of his education about Indian negotiations, if passed on to others the misunderstanding could have had more widespread negative effects.

The study of communication in colonial Pennsylvania is complicated by two factors: translation and availability of primary sources. Residents of the colony came from a wide variety of backgrounds and spoke many different languages of European and North American origin. Though many prominent negotiators and even some regular citizens had experience in two or more languages, levels of proficiency varied and the lack of standardized forms complicated the situation. While different Indian groups

³ Christian Daniel Claus, *The Journals of Christian Daniel Claus and Conrad Weiser: A Journey to Onondaga, 1750*, trans. and ed. Helga Doblin and William A. Starna (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1994), 47.

were connected by language stocks, many dialects existed, each with their own particularities. The transfer of Indian languages, which did not have a written form prior to European contact, from spoken word to paper, served as another form of translation.

Though it presented a significant contemporary challenge, translation is still an issue for historians of the era, as they attempt to work with sources written in languages they may not be familiar with or in a mixture of dialects. In any context, a translated piece is a step away from the original, and in an historical sense the relationship between the two can be even more intricate. The translations recorded for present-day use were made at different times – some by primary recorders and others years later – and in different circumstances, some rushed and haphazard, others methodical and purposeful. The historian's task is to recognize and consider these factors while evaluating a source for its content.

The general lack of primary written sources left by Indians creates a problem for almost any study of Native American history. The most complete records of Indian communications come from the colonial perspective, through official accounts of treaty negotiations and government councils or personal diaries. Any report of Indian words, documented by white colonists, includes supplementary descriptions and judgments of Indian behavior and conduct. Though these sources can be helpful in providing more information about colonial perceptions and relations between the two groups, it can also be challenging to proceed given the lack of

evidence from the Indian voice.

In spite of these challenges, there is a strong foundation of scholarship on the subject. Some authors have focused on the process of negotiation itself and the people who took part in it, considering their identities and functions within the structure of colonial government.⁴ Others study the importance of oratory and the ways in which it was regarded and utilized by both colonists and Indians.⁵ Studies of specific instances of communication, such as land purchases and trade agreements, also contribute to scholarship on the use of language in colonial America.⁶ As it was a widely influential and pervasive issue, information on communication can be found in many secondary sources on the early history of Pennsylvania.

The fragility and flexibility of language, revealed in a long and complex series of interactions, influenced the course of exchange in early Pennsylvania. Inhabitants of the colony during

⁴ Merrell, *Into the American Woods*; Margaret Connell Szasz, ed., *Between Indian and White Worlds: The Cultural Broker* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994).

⁵ Sandra M. Gustafson, *Eloquence is Power: Oratory and Performance in Early America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Nancy L. Hagedorn, "'A Friend to go between Them': The Interpreter as Cultural Broker during Anglo-Iroquois Councils, 1740-70," *Ethnohistory* 35, no. 1 (Winter 1988), JSTOR.

⁶ Colin G. Calloway, *Pen & Ink Witchcraft: Treaties and Treaty Making in American Indian History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); James H. Merrell, "'I Desire All That I Have Said . . . May Be Taken down Aright': Revisiting Teedyuscung's 1756 Treaty Council Speeches," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 63, no. 4 (Oct., 2006), JSTOR.

the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries had a wide variety of perspectives on language, its abilities, and its proper uses. A significant cultural gulf separated Indians and colonists, yet they remained connected through the vast number of opportunities for communication available to them. At their most fundamental level, these methods of interaction can be divided into two categories: nonverbal and verbal. The first encompasses such diverse themes as behavioral cues, vocal intonation, performance practices, and the creation, distribution, and interpretation of wampum — an especially prominent characteristic of contact between Indians and colonists, and one that functioned as both an asset and a challenge to those involved.⁷ These nonverbal forms of communication, while significant, represent a largely separate, distinct topic with its own background of research, scholarship, and implications. The second, verbal category of communication involves the use of the spoken and written word, allowing for a more concrete examination of the disparities and parallels between native and English cultures, languages, and constructions. Issues of translation, speech, and text revealed and in some cases caused points of contention between the two peoples of early Pennsylvania. Though colonists and Indians attempted to find common methods of communication, with varying degrees of success, differences added up, contributing to the difficulty of

⁷ Hagedorn, ““A Friend to go between Them,”” 66.

maintaining positive relations between the two groups.

Colonial Pennsylvania was a region of mixed populations and identities: cultural, social, national, religious, and linguistic. Residents came from a variety of backgrounds and were divided along lines much more intricate than those which simply separated Indian and European peoples. Colonists came primarily from England, in a reflection of the colony's founding heritage, but significant German and Scots-Irish populations were also present. The historical establishments of New Netherland and New Sweden accounted for a small but enduring populace of Northern European origins.⁸ Each of these groups naturally possessed its own linguistic tradition, distinguished from European forms of language and influenced by North American interactions. Indian residents of the area experienced a similar diversity of languages. While most native Pennsylvanian languages were derived from one of two major language stocks, the Algonquian or Iroquois, the many differences between individual dialects meant that languages of the same stock could still be mutually incomprehensible. Even when conversing among themselves, Shawnees, Delawares, Piscataways, Nanticokes, and members of the Iroquois Confederacy would likely need translators.⁹ Language was, therefore, a concern that

⁸ Joseph E. Illick, *Colonial Pennsylvania: A History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1976), 28.

⁹ Merrell, *Into the American Woods*, 57.

residents of the region that became Pennsylvania had coped with long before the arrival of William Penn, or indeed any European colonist. By the time of England's conquest of New Netherland in 1664, the Dutch colonists and Delaware Indians in the area had already created the "Delaware Jargon," a pidgin dialect of their respective languages used to further trade and diplomatic relations between officials of the two groups.¹⁰ From his arrival in North America in 1682 onwards, the colonial proprietor William Penn made an effort to establish clear and candid systems of communication with native residents.¹¹ For those who did not share in Penn's benign goals or have access to his resources, translation proved an even greater challenge, placing a significant early demand on those who were proficient in languages.

The role and identity of the translator was a multifaceted and delicate concept, singular to each individual who took on the significant responsibility of mediating between cultures. This position, which James H. Merrell comprehensively examined in *Into the American Woods: Negotiations on the Pennsylvania Frontier*, demanded a high level of linguistic and social skill, a great deal of commitment, and exceedingly good judgment,

¹⁰ William A. Pencak and Daniel K. Richter, eds., *Friends and Enemies in Penn's Woods: Indians, Colonists, and the Racial Construction of Pennsylvania* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), 19.

¹¹ *Articles of Agreement with the Susquehanna Indians* (1701), in *The Papers of William Penn*, vol. 4., 1685-1700, ed. Marianne S. Wokeck et al. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), EBSCOhost eBook Collection, 51.

especially under pressure. Rarely could a person serve in the capacity of a translator alone; inherent differences between European and Indian languages meant that basic, literal translation between the two often produced an unsatisfactory result. Therefore, when moving between languages, translators were required to interpret messages, even on a rudimentary level.¹² Interpretation was a more involved practice than translation, requiring an understanding not only of words' definitions, but also their meanings, connotations, and implications.

The individuals responsible for interpretation consequently required a greater familiarity with their contemporary political and social environment than was possessed by the average citizen. Translators, whether of Indian or colonial origin, were frequently in close contact with their community leaders and kept well-informed of relevant economic changes and military operations.¹³ For most, travel was an innate part of their occupation, as they journeyed within and beyond the colony's established borders to gather information, deliver messages, attend councils, and in some cases prevent misunderstandings that could lead to potential diplomatic disasters. Records of these journeys, such as Christian Frederick Post's account of his 1758 trip from Philadelphia to the

¹² Hagedorn, "'A Friend to go between Them,'" 64.

¹³ Nancy L. Hagedorn, "Faithful, Knowing, and Prudent": Andrew Montour as Interpreter and Cultural Broker, 1740-1722," in *Between Indian and White Worlds: The Cultural Broker*, ed. Margaret Connell Szasz (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press), 1994, 49.

Ohio River and Conrad Weiser's report of his 1750 expedition to Onondaga, emphasize how often the translator or interpreter was called upon to act as a negotiator, whether or not that title had been part of his original job description. Often functioning as the sole speaker or the head of a small party representing his own government and society, the translator faced the difficult responsibility of creating a balance in communicating messages. While accuracy and truthfulness were crucial, professional messengers often took or were given license to edit, alter, and generally improvise in delivery, even and especially in cases of "delicate and inflammatory topics."¹⁴ When dealing with replies from the opposite side and formulating their own responses, mediators were forced to make compromises and concessions, increasing their personal participation in the process and attempting to build their reputations as honest and dependable envoys. Those who worked directly with language translation found their roles and duties expanded as they were eventually identified, subliminally or explicitly, not only as translators but also as interpreters, messengers, negotiators, representatives, and diplomats.

In consideration of language and translation on the Pennsylvanian frontier, one must ask upon what occasions and in what areas specific languages were utilized for cross-cultural

¹⁴ James H. Merrell, *Into the American Woods*, 200.

communication. Government business, land and trade negotiations, military encounters, and more casual contact between civilians all represented very different situations in which a European language, an Indian language, some conglomeration of the two, or an entirely separate method might be chosen as the medium of interaction between two or more individuals. Geography might likewise have a part in determining linguistic habits, with native languages dominating in Indian-controlled or more rural areas and European languages taking precedence in more heavily-settled areas under colonial governance.¹⁵ However, each interaction between Indians and colonists possessed its own unique character and qualities, making generalizations about language usage difficult to determine. The primary governing factor in exchange was the language abilities of those participating in a given conversation; this detail was clearly variable, making the particulars of any interaction dependent upon not only its social or geographical circumstances but also the individuals involved.

Record-keeping, or lack thereof, presents a similar challenge to an analysis of language use. Instances of unofficial or non-governmental relations between natives and colonists would frequently have gone unrecorded, if only due to the prevalence of low literacy rates.¹⁶ Even in cases of military or economic negotiations, cross-cultural conversations and especially the details

¹⁵ Pencak and Richter, eds., *Friends and Enemies*, 108.

¹⁶ Merrell, *Into the American Woods*, 194.

of such were largely seen as so mundane as not to merit documentation. Except in influential, extraordinary, or somehow otherwise important cases, exchanges between Indians and colonists were not remarked upon. This absence of documentation nevertheless provides some information regarding the popular attitude towards issues of language in colonial Pennsylvania. Difficulties in communication, attempts to find common languages, and employment of translators were so common as not to typically draw comment. These challenges, then, can be understood as facts of life for those living on both sides of the Pennsylvania frontier.

Even when documented, references to language are not always easily understood. In his 1758 diary recounting his diplomatic mission to the Delaware, Shawnee, and Mingo Indians at the Ohio River, Christian Frederick Post described interactions with individuals of many different cultural backgrounds, who presumably spoke a variety of languages. Post himself was fluent in or at least comfortable with several languages of European and Indian origin. However, he only occasionally made note of the languages he utilized to communicate with his friends, enemies, and counterparts. On August 10, about one month after his party set out from Bethlehem, Post recorded that “we met three Frenchmen, who appeared very shy of us, but said nothing more than to enquire, whether we knew of any English coming against

Venango.”¹⁷ Just two days later, on August 12, he wrote of a conference with Tamaqua, the brother of his associate Pisquetomen and another Shawnee ally: “In the evening king Beaver came again, and told me, they had held a council, and sent out to all their towns, but it would take five days before they could all come together. I thanked him for his care.”¹⁸ It is probable Post would have needed to deviate from his typical English to communicate with the French or Shawnee, and it is even possible that another translator could have aided in these interactions. However, the author did not find a description of the linguistic path the conversations took relevant to his account of their occurrence, a demonstration of how the content of messages was often prioritized over methods of communication in colonial Pennsylvania. Conrad Weiser, a contemporary of Post who served in a similar capacity, generally provided even fewer details about language when documenting his work. In reference to negotiations with the Iroquois in September 1750, Weiser recorded only that “I Informed them of my Business . . . I told them of the letter I had from the Governor of Carolina about the Catabaws. He [the Oneida

¹⁷ Christian Frederick Post, *The Journal of Christian Frederick Post, from Philadelphia to the Ohio, on a Message from the Government of Pensylvania to the Delaware, Shawnese, and Mingo Indians, Settles There*, in *Early Western Travels*, vol. 1, *Journals of Conrad Weiser, 1748; George Croghan, 1750-1765; Christian Frederick Post, 1758; Thomas Morris, 1764*, ed. Reuben Gold Thwaites (Cleveland, OH: A.H. Clark Co., 1904), *Early Encounters in North America*, Alexander Street Press, 2015 (accessed October 14, 2015), 192.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 193.

representative] told me that the Cat. would never sue for a peace.”¹⁹

It was not only professional negotiators who did not feel the need to explain details of conversations on Pennsylvania’s frontier. Christian Daniel Claus, a young German immigrant who accompanied Weiser in 1750, offered an interesting perspective in his account of the trip. Claus, who was as unfamiliar with his surroundings as he was with Indian customs, functioned more as an objective outsider than an involved participant like Weiser. At the beginning of his journal, he noted his hopes to “to pay good attention — as it recently became evident — to the name of the kingdom or empire wherever he happens to be . . . its regents, statutes, laws, liberties, prerogatives, pretensions, code of arms, ethics, mores, habits, language, commerce and income.”²⁰ His lofty intentions notwithstanding, Claus neglected to record the language of conversation when meeting with representatives of the Mohawks, Oneidas, and other nations. Like the more experienced messengers, he focused on the substance and subject of a communication rather than the features of its delivery. Even, or perhaps especially, in a sensitive and potentially serious situation, when learning of the death of an important ally, Claus said little about the actual communication of the information, writing only “we met an Indian hunter with the message that Canasatego, the

¹⁹ Weiser, *The Journals of Christian Daniel Claus and Conrad Weiser*, 11.

²⁰ Claus, *The Journals of Christian Daniel Claus and Conrad Weiser*, 6.

chief of the 6 Nations, had grown pale in death a few days ago. Mr. W. was alarmed and considered our long journey in vain because in such a case no council would be assembled.”²¹ Once again, the absence of the details illustrated the lack of importance they held for Weiser and Claus; their main concern was obtaining the facts, regardless of how they might be conveyed, and formulating a response that was both respectful and pragmatic.

For men like Post and Weiser, accustomed to communicating in different languages and writing primarily to keep track of their diplomatic successes and failures, actual methods of conversing were secondary in importance to the messages being passed back and forth. They were both in the employment of the provincial council of Pennsylvania and kept mainly English records, though Weiser was the more apt to stray from this convention, occasionally writing about personal matters in his native German.²² When English was clearly not the original language of a speech, both men typically provided a silent translation or interpretation, always keeping in mind the ultimate purpose of their records as reportable to the colonial government.

During the latter half of 1758, Post and his Indian associate Pisquetomen were once again called upon to deliver a message to several groups of Ohio Indians. While conferring with the Shawnee and members of the Five Nations, they encountered

²¹ Ibid., 42.

²² Weiser, *The Journals of Christian Daniel Claus and Conrad Weiser*, 4.

several western Cherokee Indians, whom they likewise informed of the Pennsylvanian governor's offer of peace between the nations. Post later wrote in his journal that "the Cherokees answered and said; 'they should be glad to know how far the friendship was to reach; they, for themselves, wished it might reach from the sun-rise to the sun-set.'" ²³ Though it is doubtful that Post delivered the message in its original English or received the reply in the same, he felt no need to make note of the perhaps multiple translations that were necessary before the parties achieved a mutual understanding. Only in exceptional cases did casual observers or experienced mediators explicitly mention linguistic issues or identify situations in which translation occurred. One example is found in the *Observations* of John Bartram, a naturalist who joined Weiser and his Oneida partner, Shickellamy, on a trip to Onondaga in the summer of 1743. Awakened in the middle of their first night at the Indian settlement by a disturbance outside the home in which they were staying, Bartram, essentially a tourist accompanying the diplomatic mission, was curious as to its cause. He recalled:

I ask'd Conrad Weiser, who as well as myself lay next the alley, what noise that was? Shickalamy the Indian chief, our companion, who I supposed, thought me somewhat scared, called out, lye still John, I

²³ Post, *The Journal of Christian Frederick Post*, 239.

never heard him speak so much plain
English before.²⁴

The mysterious noise turned out to be nothing more than a customary Oneida ritual, but Shickellamy's response is notable for its brevity, as it was evidently the longest English speech Bartram had ever heard the Oneida leader make. Whether Bartram was in truth "somewhat scared," or not, the situation was sufficiently fraught to cause Shickellamy to break his own linguistic habits, drawing from Bartram a rare comment on speech.

Post had a comparable experience early on in his first diplomatic trip of 1758. Finding themselves lost, the party fortunately "met with an Indian, and one that I took to be a runagade English Indian trader; he spoke good English, was very curious in examining every thing."²⁵ Post's considerable surprise at encountering an English-speaking Indian in the mountains twenty miles from Fort Duquesne merited his making a record of the incident. He must have regarded this individual as potentially important, perhaps thinking that he could be an asset to Post's own mission or to Pennsylvanian diplomacy in general. Conversely, the English-speaking Indian and others like him could pose a threat to the colony's interests, should they choose to ally instead with foreign forces.

²⁴ John Bartram, *Observations on a Visit to Onondaga, July – August 1743*, in *The Lancaster Treaty of 1744 with Related Documents*, ed. James H. Merrell (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2008), 93.

²⁵ Post, *The Journal of Christian Frederick Post*, 192.

Weiser typically remarked upon the translation process when he felt that it could be especially relevant to the results of a discussion. Speaking on behalf of the Pennsylvania government at the 1750 council at Onondaga, he was forced to rely upon a Six Nations interpreter. Eager to clarify the particulars of the situation as a way to explain any possible errors, irregularities, or miscommunications, Weiser introduced his customary account of his speech by noting, “the speaker at my request and by my direction spoke again to the following purport and in my behalf.”²⁶ He repeated the qualifying statement several times in his description, later writing that he “gave a Belt of Wampum and desired the speaker to speak as follows.”²⁷ His choice of the word “desired” in this passage is significant, as it indicates the uneasiness and uncertainty he felt, as well as makes an attempt to excuse him from responsibility for a potentially faulty translation. Surely Weiser, who was a prolific and successful interpreter, appreciated the difficulties and complexities of the job his Indian counterpart took on. At the same time, he expressed reservations about allowing someone other than himself to translate his message.

In context, Weiser’s hesitance is understandable; the basic differences between Indian and English modes of speech made

²⁶ Weiser, *The Journals of Christian Daniel Claus and Conrad Weiser*, 18.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 18.

interpretation a difficult task even under the best of circumstances. A major, fundamental disparity between languages of European and North American origin is their utilization and subsequent connotations of figures of speech. For the majority of English-speaking colonists, metaphors functioned as linguistic embellishment and were mostly used in literary settings rather than ordinary, day-to-day conversation.²⁸ They might also carry spiritual overtones, as the strongly Protestant population of Pennsylvania would have been familiar with Biblical proverbs through religious education and church attendance. Conversely for Indians, figures of speech operated as a standard of language, used in a variety of situations including discussion of mundane matters.²⁹ Indians' tendency towards metaphor drew comment and response from colonists on several occasions and ultimately influenced the language of diplomacy between the two.

This feature of Indian speech was documented from the earliest instances of English contact. In 1682 at a treaty signing with William Penn near Philadelphia, the Delaware chief Tammany expressed his hopes that the two nations would "live as brothers as long as the sun and moon shine in the sky."³⁰ Significantly, the records of this meeting indicate Tammany's use of English when speaking with Penn – a notable occurrence,

²⁸ Calloway, *Pen & Ink Witchcraft*, 15.

²⁹ Virginia Irving Armstrong, ed., *I Have Spoken: American History Through the Voices of the Indians* (Chicago: The Swallow Press, Inc., 1971), 13.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

especially so early on in the colony's existence. The chief's willingness and ability to translate his words himself, rather than employing a third party as became customary into the eighteenth century, demonstrated his desire to communicate openly with Penn. However, his words also provide information regarding methods of translation. Rather than attempt to convert Indian metaphors into conventional English phrases, Tammany and other interpreters favored a literal method of translation. The result was a message that came closer to the original Delaware words than a broader translation might have done, but one that required a greater deal of analysis on the colonial side.

References to Indian usage of figures of speech are found in a variety of colonial records. In observing a discussion between the Shawnee and Six Nations factions at Fort Duquesne in November of 1758, Christian Frederick Post noted representatives' mutual, respectful acknowledgment of gifts and appropriate ceremonies: "King Beaver [Tamaqua] addressed himself to the Cayuga chief, and said. . . . you have wiped the tears from our eyes, and cleaned our bodies from the blood; when you spoke to me I saw myself all over bloody; and since you cleaned me I feel myself quite pleasant through my whole body."³¹ This statement was a reference to the At the Woods' Edge ceremony, performed to ready travelers for diplomatic talks, but it also recognized the

³¹ Post, *The Journal of Christian Frederick Post*, 270.

relationship between the two Indian groups.³² In his reply to the Shawnee, the Cayuga speaker made similar use of metaphor in describing the establishment of peace between his people and the colonial government of Pennsylvania. He urged his “cousins” to follow the Six Nations’ example, proclaiming, “We likewise take the tomahawk out of your hands, that you received from the white people; use it no longer. . . . when I came I found you in a moving posture, ready to jump towards the sunset, so we will set you at ease, and quietly down.”³³ The records of these conversations are incomplete and imperfect, a translated version only representative of what Post was allowed to witness and what he chose to document for personal purposes. Nevertheless, they provide evidence of communication between different native groups and the language they used, confirming that by the mid-eighteenth century, inter-Indian relations operated in similar ways as colonial diplomacy did.

Though Indians and colonists were accustomed to differing characteristics of communication, they developed a common method for conducting official business. The text of the Lancaster Treaty of 1744 exemplifies the ways in which Pennsylvanian and native officials came to a linguistic compromise, each adopting elements of the other’s speech to create a discourse somewhere between the literal and metaphorical. At the opening of the treaty

³² Merrell, *Into the American Woods*, 22.

³³ Post, *The Journal of Christian Frederick Post*, 270.

conference on June 25, Governor George Thomas addressed representatives from Virginia, Maryland, and the Six Nations, announcing to the Indians that the three united colonial governments were “come to enlarge the Fire, which was almost gone out, and to make it burn clearer; to brighten the Chain which had contracted some Rust, and to renew their Friendship with you.”³⁴ In this part of his speech, Thomas made reference to a council fire, an important feature of negotiations for Indians and one to which the Six Nations attendees would have been accustomed. Despite the absence of an actual fire at the Lancaster courthouse, the governor recognized the suggestion of one as a polite gesture towards his audience. After setting the tone for discussion, Thomas went on to describe in more concrete terms Pennsylvania’s wishes for peace between the Indians and English colonies.³⁵

The Six Nations delegation, aware of the differences between conversing with a seasoned interpreter like Weiser or Post and the colonial commissioners, made similar alterations in their methods of address. Tachanoontia, the Indian speaker, made repeated allusions to geography during his response to the Virginia coalition on June 27. He spoke of hills, mountains, and roads in a tangible sense, mixing the literal with the metaphorical tradition of

³⁴ James H. Merrell, ed., *The Lancaster Treaty of 1744 with Related Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2008), 47.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 47.

the Iroquois language. Describing the broken terms of an earlier treaty, Tachanoontia lamented that “We had not been long in the Use of this new Road before your People came, like Flocks of Birds and sat down on both Sides of it . . . we are now opening our Hearts to you, we cannot avoid complaining, and desire all these Affairs may be settled.”³⁶ At Lancaster in 1744, as at other councils that followed, colonists and Indians operated within an increasingly integrated system of interactions, blending elements from their own cultures to create a new type of diplomatic protocol. Linguistic features represented only part of this combined culture, which developed further into the mid-eighteenth century.³⁷

Though members of both parties generally worked towards the goal of mutual comprehension, in some situations errors were unavoidable. Whether in informal or formal settings, at times individuals did not want to understand others or to be understood themselves. The deliberate failure to comprehend was not restricted to either native or colonial representatives. There were any number of motivations for willful misunderstandings, each unique to the situation in which it occurred and the characters involved. In his account of his 1750 journey to Onondaga in the company of Conrad Weiser, Christian Daniel Claus recorded an instance in which the group, once again lost in the woods, was caught in a rainstorm with nightfall quickly approaching. Luckily,

³⁶ Merrell, ed., *The Lancaster Treaty of 1744*, 61.

³⁷ Hagedorn, ““A Friend to go between Them,”” 61.

“we finally encountered 2 Indians. . . . Mr. Weiser inquired from them whether this path led to Cornet Johnson’s but they did not want to understand any of this.”³⁸ Weiser and his group were eventually able to convince the Indians to provide directions to Fort Hunter, but their initial reluctance could have stemmed from several sources. Perhaps they were wary of the strangers and, as they were outnumbered, feared for their personal safety. They might have had previous unpleasant encounters with colonists and hoped to avoid a repeat. If they were familiar with the colonial representatives and their mission, they might have even had a greater motivation in attempting to delay negotiations in any way possible. Conversely, their confusion may have been entirely genuine, as Claus was inexperienced in communication with Indians and could have easily misjudged the situation.

Willful misunderstandings did not always ensue from chance encounters, as evidenced in Witham Marshe’s *Journal of the Treaty Held with the Six Nations, June – July 1744*. Marshe, who served as scribe for the conferences and secretary to the Maryland Treaty Commissioners, noted in his personal papers Conrad Weiser’s directions for colonists who had the opportunity to interact with the Iroquois representatives.³⁹ The interpreter advised against outward remarks on Indians’ habits, speech, or

³⁸ Weiser, *The Journals of Christian Daniel Claus and Conrad Weiser*, 34.

³⁹ Witham Marshe, *Journal of the Treaty Held with the Six Nations, June – July 1744*, in *The Lancaster Treaty of 1744*, ed. James H. Merrell, 108.

physical appearance, warning that the Indians would take offense since “most of them understood English, though they will not speak it when they are in treaty.”⁴⁰ The Iroquois present at Lancaster chose not to utilize their knowledge of the English language within the context of the treaty negotiations, opting instead to operate in their native tongue. They might have been hesitant about their own abilities and fearful of misspeaking, but it is likely that custom had at least some part in their decision. In Indian tradition, an appointed speaker often acted on behalf of elders or officials to communicate a ruling to the group at large. This individual might be particularly oratorically gifted or practiced in the art of speech delivery.⁴¹ Additionally, as Nancy Hagedorn noted in her study of Indian interpreters as cultural intermediaries, at a conference “Protocol entitled each party to speak in its own language so all speeches had to be translated into the language of the listeners by an interpreter.”⁴² In this way, a willful misunderstanding among Indians stemmed from traditions and served not as an obstacle but as a mark of respect for all involved and for the significance of the situation.

Just as listeners sometimes consciously chose which words they would understand, speakers could be selective about those they wanted to communicate. When interpretation was necessary,

⁴⁰ Ibid., 111.

⁴¹ Gustafson, *Eloquence is Power*, 116.

⁴² Hagedorn, ““A Friend to go between Them,”” 63.

mediators had the responsibility and opportunity to alter and edit a message for content before conveying it to the intended audience. At times like these, the linguistic and cultural knowledge possessed by those like Weiser, Montour, and Post became essential. Through an interpreter's intervention, representatives could avoid issues ranging from a simple slip in etiquette to a potential diplomatic disaster.⁴³

Putting their common interests ahead of personal gain, translators worked together under fractious conditions. Post noted this kind of cooperation in 1758 when he witnessed Tamaqua's rejection of a dispatch from an English general. The Shawnee directed that the messenger "'should go back over the mountains; we have nothing to say to the contrary.' Neither Mr. Croghn [sic] nor Andrew Montour would tell Colonel Bouquet the Indians' answer."⁴⁴ Post and his negotiator colleagues George Croghan and Andrew Montour met with colonial aggravation at their refusal, but nevertheless seemingly felt justified in their decision to do what they could in order to avert outright contention. Sir William Johnson expressed a similar outlook in a 1757 letter, writing that while he occasionally found he needed to amend exchanges, he attempted to do so "without deviating from their meaning, because I found them rather more animated than they often are, or than I

⁴³ Ibid., 71.

⁴⁴ Post, *The Journal of Christian Frederick Post*, 283.

desired.”⁴⁵ Most often, selective communication occurred in the interest of preserving positive relations, rather than to further personal interests. The potential for abuse by interpreters did exist, emphasizing the need to identify reliable, trustworthy, and competent individuals to serve in this capacity.⁴⁶

Selectivity in translation was not a quality restricted to those in the employ of Pennsylvania. There was a strong historical basis for this practice, dating to the mid-seventeenth century in land arbitrations between the governors of New Sweden and the Delaware Indians living in what would become Eastern Pennsylvania.⁴⁷ The legacy of this diplomacy became clear as Post conferred with Pisquetomen and other native companions in preparation to depart Easton for Kuskushking on November 12, 1758. The interpreter requested the Indians’ cooperation as he attempted to portray the Pennsylvania Provincial Council and English military forces in as favorable a manner as possible. He recollected a situation in which the roles were reversed, remembering that “when I left Alleghenny I dropt all evil reports, and only carried the agreeable news.”⁴⁸ The Delaware recognized the influence a messenger could have in providing an account that

⁴⁵ Sir William Johnson to Lord Hillsborough, 1757, *The Documentary History of the State of New-York*, vol. 2., ed. E. B. O’Callaghan (Albany, NY: Weed, Parsons & Co., Public Printers, 1849), 946, in Hagedorn, “‘A Friend to go between Them,’” 65.

⁴⁶ Merrell, *Into the American Woods*, 280.

⁴⁷ Pencak and Richter, eds., *Friends and Enemies*, 19.

⁴⁸ Post, *The Journal of Christian Frederick Post*, 246.

came from an optimistic perspective or one that merely minimized the likelihood of igniting controversy. These abridged reports were not deliberately or maliciously misleading or incomplete; rather when put in context, these were situations in which participants felt the ends justified the means. In reference to his appeal for assistance, Post recorded that his Indian allies “took it very kindly,” signifying the atmosphere of solidarity that pervaded among those in negotiating roles.⁴⁹ Regardless of mediators’ good intentions and cross-cultural efforts to ease communication difficulties, some incongruities posed even greater challenges.

A basic discrepancy between Indian and colonial cultures was their usage and treatment of the written word. The effects of this fundamental difference were pervasive, as evidenced in the organization of a 1757 meeting between Six Nations Indians and colonial officials. George Croghan, negotiator, translator, and coordinator of the conference, described his preparations to the Iroquois leaders, recalling that in order to contact Indian and colonial participants, “I dispatched Messengers up Sasquehannah, and to Ohio, and I wrote to your Brother, Sir William Johnson.”⁵⁰ This twofold planning process, while involved, was necessary in

⁴⁹ Ibid., 247.

⁵⁰ George Croghan, *Minutes of Conferences, Held with the Indians, at Harris’s Ferry, and at Lancaster, in March, April, and May, 1757, in Benjamin Franklin, Pennsylvania, and the First Nations: the Treaties of 1736-62*, ed. Susan Kalter (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), JSTOR, 229.

order to properly observe the conventions of each culture, one relying upon written and the other strictly verbal communication.

Residents of Pennsylvania, descended from the Western European tradition, depended on textual records for a wide variety of purposes. While literacy was far from universal, writing had an important part in many spheres of colonial life and served as an important channel of communication.⁵¹ Authors could maintain contact with individuals and groups both near and far through mediums including private letters, public missives, newspapers, pamphlets, and books. Additionally, official messages and treaties, as well as personal accounts, journals, and letters by eyewitnesses specifically addressed issues of intercultural relations and translation between English and Indian languages.

Prior to contact with Europeans, most Indians were unfamiliar with the concepts of alphabetical texts, since oral tradition took precedence in their cultures. Indians had corresponding concerns to those of colonists, and similarly needed to keep records of legislative, organizational, religious, and familial matters, among others. Native accounts were preserved verbally, rather than in writing, and transferred between individuals through a careful and involved process of learning and memorization.⁵² It is important to note that a lack of written language did not make Indians strictly illiterate – use of this term

⁵¹ Gustafson, *Eloquence is Power*, 159.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 259.

carries a negative connotation and implies a type of inadequacy as it indicates one's inability to read and write. It is more accurate to characterize the native speakers of Algonquian and Iroquois languages as nonliterate, a term which Nancy Hagedorn uses to suggest that they simply had no need for reading or writing.⁵³

The preservation of records, messages, and news in an oral sense clearly placed a considerable demand upon one's memory. The individuals entrusted with these responsibilities were called upon to act as speakers at councils and other events when their knowledge was pertinent. At such conferences, Indian listeners placed great value on accuracy, freely expressing confirmation of facts in support of an orator or vocalizing doubts when information was disputable.⁵⁴ Colonial representatives on several occasions noted the aptitude of Indian speakers, expressing surprise and admiration at the extent of their capabilities. Claus, whose inexperience in Indian ways once again inspired a frank and informative report, noted that during the 1750 council at Onondaga:

a speaker was chosen among these councilors, who had to recite the articles mentioned before in the public assembly in the form of an oration. . . . He had to learn the different points verbatim by heart and when he had nothing further to

⁵³ Hagedorn, "'A Friend to go between Them,'" 63.

⁵⁴ Gustafson, *Eloquence is Power*, 34.

hand out, he continued to recite until all the articles were read.⁵⁵

Veteran mediators like Weiser and Post were accustomed to Indian practices of documentation, but for those like Claus it must have been somewhat jarring to observe an Indian representative deliver a lengthy recitation on detailed terms of negotiation entirely from memory. Colonists generally saw Indian nonliteracy as a sign of incompetence and questioned the accuracy of the messages they delivered. Their opinions drew different responses from Indians, some expressing reinforced confidence in their cultural traditions and others beginning to doubt the legitimacy of oral recordkeeping, especially in comparison to the advantages of written language.

In the spring of 1757, Indians attending a conference with colonial representatives from Pennsylvania and New York had the latter response. Over a month after the meetings began, an Oneida sachem named Thomas King, along with his Mohawk allies, prepared to deliver a response to the Pennsylvanian governor's proposals of the previous day. George Croghan noted that King prefaced his speech by offering an anticipatory apology to his audience, requesting their understanding if the Indians "should make any Blunders, or have forgot any Part of the Speech . . . as they could not write; therefore were obliged to keep every Thing in

⁵⁵ Claus, *The Journals of Christian Daniel Claus and Conrad Weiser*, 44.

their Memory.”⁵⁶ This statement was atypical of general sentiment among Indians but shows the effects interaction with doubtful colonists had upon some of them. Susan Katler, editor of Croghan’s *Minutes of Conferences*, postulated that King’s self-deprecation stemmed from his interactions with Christian missionaries who voiced misgivings about the Iroquois’ entirely verbal methods of recordkeeping and communication.⁵⁷ Regardless of the basis for his uncertainty, King’s comments are an example of how cultural exchange, reactions, and responses on the Pennsylvania frontier shaped attitudes and habits about language use.

Mistrust of unfamiliar linguistic practices was not restricted to colonists. Native Americans, who were by the late seventeenth century largely acquainted with the concept of written English, nevertheless remained cautious regarding its reliability. Very few Indians could read, and as a result their opinions on writing were complex and easily misinterpreted, even by those as well-informed as Christian Frederick Post.⁵⁸ Twice in his 1758 journal, the interpreter remarked at the “jealousy” Indians exhibited at colonists’ abilities to read and write. However, Post

⁵⁶ Croghan, *Minutes of Conferences*, in *Benjamin Franklin, Pennsylvania, and the First Nations*, 238.

⁵⁷ Susan Katler, endnote in *Minutes of Conferences, Held with the Indians, at Harris’s Ferry, and at Lancaster, in March, April, and May, 1757*, in *Benjamin Franklin, Pennsylvania, and the First Nations: the Treaties of 1736-62*, ed.

Susan Katler (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), JSTOR, 254.

⁵⁸ Post, *The Journal of Christian Frederick Post*, 252.

additionally observed that when he was called upon to compose a letter to an English general on behalf of the Shawnee, “they were afraid I would, at the same time, give other information, and this perplexed them.”⁵⁹ While Post’s Indian allies may have been “jealous” of his literacy, if only because they desired to write their messages themselves, it is also significant that they were also both “afraid” and “perplexed.” This mixed response demonstrates their general wariness towards the written word and colonists’ use of it. Unable to authenticate public or private communications or legal documents on their own, Indians found themselves at a disadvantage to literate colonists as they were forced to rely completely on translators who displayed varying degrees of trustworthiness.

Consequently, despite feeling uneasy about the topic, some Indians expressed a desire to learn about and adopt written language for diplomatic purposes. During a 1742 meeting with colonial officials at Philadelphia, Six Nations delegates represented both approaches.⁶⁰ The Iroquois insisted that the agreements reached at the council be summarized in a signed document, as they felt this option was more certain than a reliance solely on colonial memory. However, in a subversive moment during negotiations, Canassatego, an Onondaga sachem, reproached the Maryland commissioners for their failure to honor a land deed

⁵⁹ Ibid., 201.

⁶⁰ Gustafson, *Eloquence is Power*, 132.

signed over fifty years previously.⁶¹ The Indian representatives clearly recognized the functions and importance of written text, but their inability to fully access or enforce its contents complicated the situation.

This conflicted attitude dated back to the first decades of Pennsylvania's existence. Indian concerns were justified, as illustrated by a conflict that arose in the spring of 1700 between colonists and native residents living outside Lancaster.⁶² In May, Shawnee leaders Connoodaghtoh and Meealloua contacted William Penn to protest the actions of colonial vigilantes in imprisoning four unidentified Indians, who were possibly runaway servants of families in New York. The Indians accused that the previous fall, two colonists "produced a paper with a large Seale and pretended ~~indeed~~ it was a warrant From the gover^r For to require them to deliver the said Indians." Suspicious of these credentials and unwilling to abandon those under his protection, Meealloua demanded further proof that Penn had given permission for the arrests. Returning later with reinforcements, including one man who claimed to be second in command to Penn, the colonists "produced another paper with a large seale and againe demanded the said Indians in the governours name."⁶³ The Indians remained

⁶¹ Ibid., 133.

⁶² Connoodaghtoh and Meealloua to William Penn, May 1, 1700, *The Papers of William Penn*, vol. 3., 1685-1700, ed. Marianne S. Wokeck et al. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), EBSCOhost eBook Collection, 600.

⁶³ Ibid., 600.

unconvinced; their continued refusal to cooperate led to an atmosphere of tension and threats of violence that inspired their appeal to the proprietor.

The contents of this source are telling, demonstrating that Indians who worried about being taken advantage of through counterfeit documents or inaccurate translations, as mentioned in Post's account, were justified in their apprehensions. However, the existence of the source itself offers an opportunity for interpretation. The fact that two native representatives chose to contact Penn in writing just two decades after the colony's establishment shows Indian recognition of the medium's consequence early on. Unfortunately, there is little evidence available concerning the composition of this message. It seems unlikely that it was physically penned by the leaders themselves, as the letter closes with a note referring to "Conodahto marke" and "The marke of Meealloua" rather than the men's signatures, suggesting that they, like most Indians, were nonliterate.⁶⁴ The clerical mistakes, grammatical inconsistencies, and lack of standardized spelling within the document hint that the writer was not highly skilled or well-practiced as a scribe.

With no direct mentions of language, it is unclear whether the English words were chosen by Connoodaghtoh and Meealloua or by an anonymous translator on their behalf.⁶⁵ Still, the pair

⁶⁴ Ibid., 601.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 601.

were aware of the immediacy of their situation and understood that alerting Penn with a written document was a viable and efficient option. They therefore accessed what resources they had in order to produce the letter. Their actions make them an example of the group of Indians who, regardless of their personal feelings about English written text, chose to adopt and employ this colonial practice for their own ends, contributing to the larger systems of linguistic exchange occurring at the time.

Indians attempted to use English writing for different reasons and with varying results. Some might have seen acceptance of the system as a way to increase their status or credibility in colonial opinion. For others, it was less a matter of choice – if they hoped to be able to fully understand English law, terms of treaties, and correspondence, they would have to assent and conform to foreign standards.⁶⁶ An example of the inconsistent situation Indians faced, as well as their varying responses, can be gathered from different accounts of the signing of the Lancaster Treaty of 1744. Within the official, published account of the conferences, the Six Nations deputies are depicted as cautious of written text and vigilant of its documentation, yet willing to invoke it in support of their cause. When the governor of Virginia made reference to a letter of several years earlier that authorized the sale of Indian land, the Onondoga delegation responded with a demand

⁶⁶ Pencak and Richter, eds., *Friends and Enemies*, 105.

to see the letter itself, as well as to be provided information on its supposed authors and interpreters.⁶⁷ Though unable to read the letter, the Six Nations officials were clearly both skeptical of its origins and aware of its importance. Determined not to let a lack of information harm their chances of reaching a fair settlement with the colonies, they took what steps they could to authenticate the Virginian claims with textual evidence.

In both official and informal settings, Indians who began to make the shift toward usage of written language demonstrated engagement with texts and eagerness to understand them, tempered with a concern for accuracy in interpretation and honesty from colonial officials. Outwardly, these interests were not always apparent, as in 1744 at Lancaster. Observing a land transfer, Witham Marshe, the young Maryland secretary, commented in his journal that “several chiefs, who had not signed the deed of release . . . did now cheerfully, and without any hesitation.”⁶⁸ To casual observers like Marshe, it might have seemed as though the Iroquois did not grasp the significance of signing the deed, or that they were unconcerned with the particulars of the agreement. Behind the scenes, however, the process was more complicated, as Indians were careful to keep themselves informed and consulted with those colonists they knew well and trusted before committing to any written document. Conrad Weiser, one such individual,

⁶⁷ Merrell, ed., *The Lancaster Treaty of 1744*, 59.

⁶⁸ Witham Marshe, *Journal of the Treaty Held with the Six Nations*, 124.

described Indians' interest in physical documents in his account of a 1743 journey to Onondaga. Carrying messages from the Pennsylvanian and Virginian governors to the Six Nations, Weiser was somewhat surprised when approached by a small group of Indian leaders, who asked him to explain the messages rather than only delivering them to the council in the traditional form of presentation, so that they might better understand and form a response.⁶⁹ This exchange represented another instance in which an interpreter acted as a resource to Indians, serving not only as a translator but as a cultural mediator, in this case specifically on linguistic issues.⁷⁰

Indians increasingly expressed the desire to gain familiarity with written language into the mid-eighteenth century. A few even learned how to read and write themselves, demonstrating the extent of their knowledge of the English language. At a treaty council between Delawares and Pennsylvanian colonists held at Easton in 1756, the Indian interpreter John Pumpshire worked with Teedyuscung, the notorious Delaware representative, among others. Pumpshire, also known as Cawkeeponen, merited acclaim for his skills from both participating groups. His interpretation abilities were not restricted to the spoken word, as on July 1, he wrote a letter to an English captain at Fort Allen on behalf of

⁶⁹ Conrad Weiser, Report on the Council Proceedings at Onondaga, July – August 1743, in *The Lancaster Treaty of 1744*, ed. James H. Merrell, 99.

⁷⁰ Hagedorn, "Faithful, Knowing, and Prudent," 46.

Captain Newcastle, a representative for the Iroquois.⁷¹

By writing this letter, Pumpshire personified the contemporary cultural exchange in written language between Pennsylvania's Indians and colonists. Through his communication of the message for Newcastle, Pumpshire echoed Indian oratorical traditions that identified performance and the use of a secondary speaker as conventional symbols of respect. In his use of the English language, written text, and even the physical materials used to compose the letter such as paper and ink, the Delaware implemented elements of colonial culture, whether consciously or not. At the close of the message to the English officer, Pumpshire signed his name, while the nonliterate Newcastle provided his mark.⁷² The actions of these Indians were a tangible demonstration of the ways in which individuals, languages, and cultures converged to influence communication in colonial Pennsylvania.

This letter and the method of its composition exemplified, albeit on a small scale, the attempts at unification of Indian and European linguistic customs, written and spoken, that was taking place across Pennsylvania at the time. Both natives and colonists recognized the authority of and opportunities that a new system of communication, distinct from those that had existed previously,

⁷¹ Merrell, "I Desire All That I Have Said," 791.

⁷² Ibid., 792.

could offer. ⁷³ Despite the efforts of notable figures, respected mediators, and individuals determined to convey their thoughts and opinions to those of different cultural backgrounds, basic disparities in language created momentous challenges to the development of a common form of interaction. Motivated by necessity, residents of the colony found flawed ways to manage issues of interpreting spoken and written language. Ultimately, the incongruence between Indian and colonial methods of communication was a major contributing factor to the diplomatic difficulties these two cultures experienced.

⁷³ Pencak and Richter, eds., *Friends and Enemies*, 112.

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