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## THE LANGUAGE OF THE TAËNSA

By JOHN R. SWANTON

The Taënsa were a small tribe settled in the earliest times of which we have any certain record on Lake Saint Joseph in what is now Tensas parish, Louisiana. They are often spoken of as constituting a single town, but this comprised from six to eight subordinate villages. Very early they allied themselves with the French, thus incurring the hostility of the Chickasaw and the Yazoo, whose threatening attitude induced them in 1706 to abandon their ancient seats and take refuge in the town of the Bayougoula, at a place which still bears the name of the latter tribe. Soon afterward they rose upon their fellow townsmen and killed nearly all of them. Between 1706 and 1715 they successively occupied several villages along the lower Mississippi, but in the latter year removed to Mobile bay by invitation of the French, and were established not far from Fort Louis. Subsequently they crossed to the eastern side and settled on what is now Tensaw river. In 1764, after the cession of Mobile to Great Britain, concluding that Spanish control was preferable to that of their new masters, they migrated west of the Mississippi again and established their village on Red river, a short distance below the junction of the main stream with the Rigolet de Bon Dieu, Louisiana. A few years before the acquisition of this territory by the United States, they, in conjunction with the Apalachee, sold their lands to Messrs Miller and Fulton and moved south to Bayou Bœuf. Not long afterward they parted with this land also, but continued to occupy the neighboring country at least as late as 1814, at which time they were reduced to a few families and disappear from written history. Nevertheless it is known that a remnant continued in existence and drifted southward to a small bayou at the head of Grand lake, which came to bear their name. Here they were on intimate terms with the Alibamu, Attacapa, and Chitimacha, especially the latter. They intermarried with these, and the

father of the oldest surviving Chitimacha woman was of Taënsa extraction. The rest of the tribe has now entirely slipped from sight.

Three early French travelers state that this tribe was a branch of the Natchez and spoke the same language. The declaration was never contradicted by any of their contemporaries, even by implication, and was consequently assented to by all later students, so that the Taënsa would have played a no more conspicuous part among American races than that of an insignificant division of a fairly famous tribe had it not been for the publication in France, in 1880, 1881, and 1882, of linguistic material purporting to be in their language but differing entirely from the recorded speech of the Natchez. This material appeared at first in the form of an article entitled "Notes sur la Langue des Taensas," in the *Revue de Linguistique et de Philologie Comparée*, in 1880, and was supposed to be taken from a manuscript found among the papers of a M. Haumonté of Plombières, Vosges, by his grandson, J. Parisot. The following year seven songs from the same source, without translations, but purporting to be in the Taënsa language, were printed at Épinal under the title *Cancionero Americano*. They were accompanied by an introduction in very bad Spanish. A copy of this pamphlet having fallen into the hands of Lucien Adam, editor of the *Bibliothèque Linguistique Américaine*, that eminent philologist opened communication with M. Parisot, and received a manuscript from him, the contents of which are printed as volume ix of the *Bibliothèque* under the title "Grammaire et Vocabulaire de la Langue Taensa avec Textes Traduits et Commentés par J.-D. Haumonté, Parisot, L. Adam." This was furnished with an introduction by Adam and another by the eminent American philologist, Dr A. S. Gatschet, and, thanks probably to such sponsors, was received at first without question and acclaimed as a notable addition to American linguistics. Dr D. G. Brinton copied one of the shorter songs into his *Aboriginal American Authors* (Philadelphia, 1883), and remarked upon their Ossianic character.

A further examination of this work, however, entirely altered Dr Brinton's views regarding it, and in *The American Antiquarian* for March, 1885, he came out against it with a direct charge of forgery. His attack on the supposed Taënsa songs was so telling

that Adam did not attempt to defend them as aboriginal productions. He did, however, continue to champion the genuineness of the grammatical portion, and published three successive pamphlets the same year with the object of establishing it. One of these was a partial endorsement by Friedrich Müller who had made an examination of the material at his request. To *The American Antiquarian* for September, Brinton contributed a rejoinder, and the discussion attained sufficient notoriety to receive notice in the *Kansas City Review* (vol. ix, no. 4, p. 253, col. 2, to 254, col. 1). One of the best résumés of the whole question, however, was made by Julien Vinson in the *Revue de Linguistique* for April, 1886, in an article entitled "La Langue Taënsa." Although the very man who had first introduced the material to the public, he took sides with Brinton, at least in holding that it had as yet failed to exhibit proper scientific credentials. In the *Revue* for January, 1888, Brinton again touched upon the grammar in connection with certain differences of opinion between himself and Dr Gatschet, and this brought forth a rather heated reply from the Washington savant which formed the leading article in the July number of the same journal. Brinton answered in a short letter published in the October issue, but declined to carry the argument regarding Taënsa further, and there it rested.

In the course of this discussion the opponents of the grammar had scored a number of important points. In the first place they had asked for the original manuscript that it might be examined by competent students, and M. Parisot either could not or would not produce it. Next they had shown that considerable discrepancies existed between the earlier and later statements of that gentleman, in regard both to the condition of the manuscript itself and the material which it contained. Thirdly, they had demonstrated that the references to climatic and economic conditions in the songs were inconsistent with known facts, and, fourthly, that the grammar contained a suspiciously large number of features which, even separately, are rare among American tongues. To this could be added the unanimous agreement of the three writers above referred to regarding the affinity of the Taënsa language with Natchez. Practically the only argument of an affirmative character that could be

brought forward on the other side was the fact that two or three grammatical features, such as the presence of a sex gender and particularly a sex gender in pronouns of the second persons, existed nowhere else in the southern part of the United States except in Tunica, which was spoken by a neighboring people and had been collected after the appearance of the work in question. Therefore, although the grammar was now uniformly rejected from scientific use, the evidence for its spurious character just failed of a satisfying completeness. It must still be regarded as embodying a possibility, and so long as such was the case the ethnography and ethnology of the lower Mississippi were bound to remain under a cloud. Most of the languages of this region could be assigned to certain types which bore an organic relation to one another; but if a tribe existed in the very midst with a language of the independent character of that contained in this grammar, a disturbing element was introduced, practically another race of people had to be reckoned with, and this meant a new reading of the history of the region which might be fraught with enormous consequences to both ethnology and archeology. The absolute genuineness of the material itself was not and is not of so much consequence to us as to determine satisfactorily what language the Taënsa actually spoke. If this be done we may leave to European linguists the determination of the sources from which the grammar was derived, and it is because evidence practically absolute on the former point has just come to hand that the writer has temporarily rewarmed the ashes of this controversy of a quarter of a century ago.

There are two possible ways in which the linguistic affinities of the Taënsa Indians might be determined, first, and most satisfactorily, by discovering some Taënsa or other Indian who remembers a few words of the language, and secondly through statements in manuscripts as yet unpublished.

According to Sibley there were in 1806 as many Taënsa as Tunica, and since the latter still retain enough of their language for purposes of identification it was hoped that something of Taënsa still existed. In April, 1907, therefore, during the writer's visit to Louisiana to investigate the tribal remnants there, he made an effort to locate members of this tribe. At Charenton, where lives the

remnant of the Chitimacha, he elicited the information already given anent their former intimacy with the Taënsa, whom they know as *Chō'sha*, and was told that the old woman referred to had formerly been able to speak her father's tongue. Every effort was made, therefore, to stimulate her memory into the resurrection of at least a word or two of that speech, but in vain. Her memory is now beginning to leave her, and too long a period has passed since she heard it spoken. Had Gatschet, when at Charenton in 1881 and 1882, inquired closely, he could probably have obtained sufficient material to nip the whole controversy in the bud, but it now seems too late to settle it in that manner. One small glint of evidence however, was obtained in the statement that *ki'pi*, which signifies 'meat' in Chitimacha, "meant something else in Taënsa." This is sufficiently indefinite, to be sure, but it so happens that one of the commonest Natchez suffixes used in the formation of nouns is *-kip*, *-kipi*, *-kup*, *-kupi*. Now, it is not impossible that the sound, being of very common occurrence, had impressed itself on the memory of my informant just long enough to survive without the meaning having survived with it. At any rate *ki'pi* is a combination of sounds not conspicuous — if indeed it is existent — in Parisot's "Taënsa grammar."

The second source of information has fortunately yielded better results. The three French writers cited above as authority for the Natchez affinities of Taënsa were the missionaries De Montigny and Gravier, writing in 1699 and 1700,<sup>1</sup> and Du Pratz, whose information dates from 1718 to 1734.<sup>2</sup> The reply which Gatschet made to the evidence of these men was that none of them was personally acquainted with both of the tribes under discussion, and that they might have assumed a linguistic relationship on account of the recognized similarities of the two in manners and customs. Thus De Montigny had visited the Taënsa in 1698, but not the Natchez; Gravier had obtained his information from St Cosme, then missionary to the Natchez, but it was not known that the latter had visited the Taënsa at that time, while Du Pratz knew the Natchez well but may never have seen a Taënsa, the Taënsa being in his time

<sup>1</sup> Shea, *Early Voyages on the Mississippi River*, pp. 76, 136, 1861.

<sup>2</sup> Du Pratz, *Histoire de la Louisiane*, vol. II, p. 213, 1758.

near Mobile. The material just discovered, however, which also emanates from De Montigny and St Cosmè, discounts this argument completely. To understand the matter properly, the following facts must be premised.

After descending the Mississippi river in 1698 as far as the Taënsa, De Montigny returned to the Quapaw country and there wrote the letter cited above. Early in 1699, however, he and another missionary priest, Father Davion, descended the great stream once more, and the latter established himself among the Tunica Indians of Yazoo river while De Montigny passed on to the Taënsa. In June they made a joint trip farther down, visited the Natchez and Houma, and went as far as the new French fort at Biloxi, which they reached July 1. On his way back about the middle of the same month De Montigny effected a peace between the Natchez and Taënsa tribes. In March, 1700, Iberville reached the Taënsa villages on his second ascent of the Mississippi, and De Montigny, who had long meditated changing the seat of his mission to the Natchez, seized this opportunity to do so. In May, however, for what reason we know not, he abandoned this post also, descended to Biloxi, and returned to France with Iberville. The Natchez field was, nevertheless, not deserted, for the very same year, possibly before De Montigny's departure, St Cosme came down from the Illinois country and took his place. Here he was in November, at any rate, when the Jesuit Gravier made his ethnologically important journey to the ocean, and he continued at his post for about six years, i. e. until 1706, when he was killed by a Chitimacha war party while on his way to Biloxi. After this latter date no missionary work was done in either tribe except incidentally in connection with French congregations. It is evident, therefore, that from these two men, De Montigny and St Cosme, the most conclusive evidence might be derived if it had been committed by them to paper at any time and were preserved to our day. Now, as already intimated, this evidence most fortunately does exist, and we are indebted to M. l'abbé Amédée Gosselin of Laval University that it has at last been brought to light.

At the Fifteenth Congress of Americanists, held at Quebec in 1906, Professor Gosselin presented a paper entitled "Les Sauvages du

Mississippi (1698-1708) d'après la Correspondence des Missionnaires des Missions Étrangères de Quebec" (pp. 31-51 of the first volume of transactions). The information contained in these is drawn partly from the originals of documents published by Shea, but in greater part from letters which still remain in manuscript as they were sent by the missionary priests to their superior, the Bishop of Quebec. From these most valuable information is adduced regarding the population, languages, religion, Government, warfare, and character, manners, and customs of the tribes of that region. The only reference to the language of the Taënsa, however, is to the effect that "the Tonicas, the Taënsas, and the Natchez spoke the same language, but it differed from that of the Chicachas [Chickasaw] and that of the Akansas [Quapaw]." As authority for this statement the letters of De Montigny of January 2 and August 25, 1699, are cited.

Knowing that the coupling of Tunica with the other two languages was at variance with statements in De Montigny's letter of January 2, and so far as Tunica and Natchez are concerned at variance with known facts, the writer supposed that the missionary must have expressed different views in his unpublished letter of August 25. In order to determine this fact, and if possible to elicit further information regarding the linguistic position of the tribes under discussion, he addressed a letter to Professor Gosselin, calling attention to the matter and asking for any excerpts relating to the language of the Taënsa which the unpublished letters might contain. Professor Gosselin very kindly and promptly replied to his request. He explained that the erroneous statement was the result of an unfortunate confusion in his own notes and did not exist in the originals. In answer to the second query he enclosed several extracts in the original which are of the utmost value and contain the decisive information alluded to. It is to be hoped that the whole of the originals of these letters will ere long be given to the public. Following is a rough translation of the extracts in question.

*From the letter of De Montigny, written August 25, 1699, page 6 :*

The 12th [of June] we reached the Natchez, or, as others call them, the Challaouelles, who are almost twenty leagues from the Taënsas . . . They were warring at that time with almost all the nations which are on



the Mississippi . . . and out of consideration for us, although they were at war with the Taënsas, they gave those [Taënsa] who were with us, a very good reception. We told the chief that the black robes like ourselves were not warriors, that we had not come to see them in that spirit, and that on the contrary we exhorted everyone to peace, that they would know it well one day when I should know their language which is the same as that of the Taënsas [*qui est la même que celle des Taënsas*] : and then, after having made them some little presents, we separated very well satisfied with each other.

*From a letter of St Cosme, August 1, 1701 :*

I have passed the winter among the Natchez ; I have applied myself a little to the language and I find myself in a position to compose something of the catechism and prayers. I have made a journey to the Tahensas distant twelve leagues from the Natchez. As this village is much diminished I think no missionary will be needed there, since it now numbers only about forty cabins, but it is necessary to try to draw them to the Natchez, the languages being the same [*n'étant que d'une même langue*]. . . .

*From a memoir without name of author or date, but which goes back to the first years of the 18th century :*

After the departure of Mons. Tonty, M. De Montigny and the two other missionaries pursued their way as far as the Tonicats where they thought it well to make an establishment, and to leave there Mons. Davion and from there to the Tahensas and Natchez which have the same language [*qui ont la même langue*], and are only a day's journey apart. . . .

The last of these may have been based on De Montigny's two letters and would therefore contain secondhand information, but the others can leave no doubt in any rational mind. Before writing the former, De Montigny had visited one tribe in company with members of the other, and had had abundant opportunity to hear the two peoples converse together. Had they been of alien speech they would not have employed Natchez, but the Mobilian jargon, and he would hardly have failed to observe the fact. St Cosme's evidence is yet stronger, since at the time of writing he had had the advantage of one winter's study of Natchez ; nor is it conceivable that he would have made a recommendation to his superior to draw the two into one mission without fully satisfying himself that their

languages were indeed identical. It should be added that in other excerpts from this unpublished correspondence, sent me by Professor Gosselin, occur references to the linguistic affinities and divergences of the Chickasaw, Tunica, Houma, Quinipissa, Osage, Quapaw, Kansa, and Missouri, and in the light of all our present knowledge not a single mistake is made. The information of the priests even extends to the point of determining the closer relationship of Osage, Quapaw, and Kansa to each other than of any of them to the Missouri. If this be true of tribes whose seats were remote from the Mississippi, why should they blunder regarding those with which they had direct personal intercourse?

The conclusion seems to the writer obvious that the ancient language of the Taënsa was practically identical with that spoken by the Natchez, and that consequently the language derived from or through M. Parisot is not Taënsa, and was probably never spoken by any people whatsoever.

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