

## NOTAS INFORMATIVAS

MAURICIO SWADESH (1909-1967) \*

Mauricio (Morris) Swadesh was born January 22, 1909 in Holyoke, Massachusetts. He died in Mexico City on the evening of July 20, 1967 of a sudden massive heart attack while in his fifty-eighth year.

Swadesh became a linguist as a student of Edward Sapir. As an undergraduate at the University of Chicago, where Sapir taught, he concentrated on languages (German and French) with courses in education as well, receiving a Bachelor of Philosophy degree and being elected to Phi Beta Kappa in 1930 at the age of twenty-one. While still an undergraduate he gained his first field experience, spending a summer with Nez Percé under the auspices of the Laboratory of Anthropology and the direction of Melville Jacobs. Swadesh earned his Master of Arts degree in linguistics in one year at Chicago (1931), and when Sapir accepted a call to Yale University as Sterling Professor, Swadesh followed. At Yale he obtained his Doctor of Philosophy two years later (1933) at the age of twenty-four, analyzing the grammatical structure of Nootka from Sapir's texts for his dissertation. From 1931 to 1936 Swadesh was an assistant in linguistics at Yale, and was married for a time to another of Sapir's students, Mary Haas. He taught at City College of New York as an instructor in the summer of 1935, and as an instructor at Yale in 1936-37, going then to the University of Wisconsin as Associate Professor of Anthropology.

The next two years saw the beginning of Swadesh's long and intimate association with linguistic teaching and research in Mexico. He was Professor at the Instituto Politécnico Nacional de México in the Escuela de Antropología (1939-41), directed Cursos de Técnica de Enseñanza para Profesores en Zonas Indígenas and Cursos de Alfabetización para Alumnos Indígenas for the Departamento de Asuntos Indígenas in Pátzcuaro, Michoacán (1939-40), and lectured at the Universidad de Prima-

\* La Bibliografía de Swadesh está en prensa en la obra póstuma del autor titulada *Elementos del tarasco antiguo*, serie de Antropología del Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas (1968).

vera in Morelia, Michoacán (1940). His primary concern was the Tarascan literacy project. From this work in Mexico came his *Orientaciones lingüísticas para maestros en zonas indígenas* (1940) and his first general text in linguistics, *La nueva filología* (1941).

During the Second World War and the months following Swadesh served in the United States Army (1942-46), preparing linguistic analyses and teaching materials in Spanish, Russian, Burmese and Chinese, and teaching courses in these languages. His books on learning Russian (1945) and Chinese (1947) resulted from this work. His great facility as a poliglot contributed to his success, and the work in turn contributed to his grasp of the range of human languages. In 1946-48 Swadesh resumed his research on Nootka language and ethnology, being supported by a fellowship from the Guggenheim Memorial Foundation. Returning to academic life as Associate Professor of Anthropology at City College of New York (1948-49), he was discharged as a result of his support of a student strike. During the ensuing six years he was without regular support. He took courses in anthropology at Columbia University (1949-53) and at the University of Denver (1953-55), and managed to continue his research, working for a time with support of the Phillips Fund of the Library of the American Philosophical Society (Philadelphia).

It was during this period that Swadesh discovered the foundation of modern lexicostatistics and glottochronology, and with them new possibilities of tracing remote genetic relationships among languages. For a few years (1953-55) he lived in Denver, Colorado, partly for reasons of the health of his second wife, Frances. There he launched from the basement of his private home, almost without resources, an ambitious project of research into the prehistory of the native languages of America, in order to fulfill the implications of his new methods and discoveries. During 1954 he began the editing of basic word lists for American Indian languages, issuing them to collaborators in mimeographed form. During 1955 and 1956 he sought support for an Ethnolinguistic Survey of Native America, as a program that would provide the basic data necessary for systematic work of the scope he had envisioned, and that would salvage a usable minimum of information from disappearing languages. The program received encouragement from

anthropologists of the stature of Alfred Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn, but no foundation could be found to support it.

In these years Swadesh made several visits to Mexico for lectures and conferences. In 1956 he moved permanently to Mexico as Research Professor of Prehistoric Linguistics in the Instituto de Historia, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, and as Professor also at the Escuela Nacional de Antropología e Historia. In subsequent years he took active part in the linguistic and anthropological life of Mexico, attending conferences, round tables, and the like, pursuing research, and attracting students to the field. He lectured for brief periods at other Mexican and Latin American institutions (e.g., Universidad San Luis Potosí (1958), Universidad Iberoamericana (1959-61), Universidad Central de Venezuela (1959), Colegio de México (1964). He also was invited to teach at the Linguistic Institute held at the University of Washington (summer 1962), at Columbia University (summer 1964), at Syracuse University (fall 1965), and at the University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada (summer 1966, spring 1967). In early 1965 Swadesh spent several months working on lexicostatistic relationships among West African languages while at the Institute of African Studies, Accra, Ghana, where with his usual energy and enthusiasm he soon had a large cadre of colleagues busily at work assisting him. At the time of his sudden and premature death, several of his colleagues and students were beginning to plan a volume to appear in 1969 in homage to his sixtieth birthday. The volume will now appear as a tribute to his memory.

Swadesh was one of the most original, productive, and provocative linguistic scholars of the century. He helped to initiate the development of American structural linguistics, invented new methods for relating and dating languages, worked on dozens of languages himself, proposed many new hypotheses of relationship, and broached a theory of the relationship and origin of all the languages of man. He was a man of international fame and controversy, who lived simply, worked intensely, and gave constantly of himself to the tasks he saw before him and to those who might help with them. A man of great imagination in setting goals of research, he was also a man of great practical acumen in devising ways of reaching them. No scholar envisioned more comprehensively what prehistoric lin-

guistic research might accomplish, and none was more down to earth in going about the business of making the vision a reality.

To assess Swadesh's work more specifically, one must see it against the background of his experience as a student of Sapir. One has often heard of the "Yale School" of linguistics, in reference to Leonard Bloomfield, who came to Yale as Sterling Professor upon Sapir's death, and whose followers dominated linguistic discussion in the United States during the nineteen-forties and early nineteen-fifties. From 1931 to 1939 an earlier "Yale School" formed around Sapir. The members—Walter Dyk, Mary Haas, Zellig Harris, George Herzog, Stanley Newman, Morris Swadesh, George L. Trager, Carl F. Voegelin, Benjamin Lee Whorf—were of course diverse in background and outlook, and in their subsequent careers. Some knew Sapir as post-graduates (Voegelin from Berkeley, Harris from Pennsylvania), one as a non-academic (Whorf, an inspector for a fire insurance company); two had followed Sapir to Yale from Chicago (Dyk, Swadesh); and two who must be counted as virtual members of the group, being two of Sapir's foremost students (Hoijer, Li), had obtained degrees under him at Chicago before he left. Yet several important traits link these scholars: a commitment to the study of American Indian languages; a concern with both structural analysis and historical reconstruction; a consciousness of an anthropological context for linguistics; a deep sense of the presence of patterning in the phenomena of man.

In the years following 1931 young linguists in the United States, especially those inspired by Sapir, faced several tasks: (1) to develop the methods of structural linguistics, just being born, and to test their application, both to diverse exotic languages, and to one's own language; (2) to extend the scope of linguistic inquiry and linguistic methods to include the various engagements of language in social life expression of personality and role, verbal art, cultural symbolism and patterning, etc; (3) to continue the program of discovery and proof of remote genetic relationships among American Indian languages begun by Sapir; (4) to continue the work of rescuing knowledge of disappearing languages (in part for the sake of (3)); (5) to create a profession of linguistics, for none existed, so far as departments, chairs, and recognition by others of an auto-

mous discipline were concerned. Other possibilities also existed: work in dialect geography in the United States; phonetics; the relating of linguistics to theoretical and philosophical positions (behaviorism, Marxism, psychoanalysis, philosophy of science); but it is among the first five that the direct students of Sapir were to make their choices. Each was likely to see in his or her own subsequent path the carrying out of the perspective of Sapir; certainly it was so with Swadesh.

Swadesh's contributions to the development of the theory and methodology of structural linguistics are significant, but it is noteworthy that they occur in its earlier phase. Once sufficient foundations were laid for the accurate observation and description of languages, his interest turned to the use of the tools of descriptive linguistics and away from their further elaboration. Thus his early article, "The phonemic principle" (1934) was the first explicit statement of phonemic method in the United States and it deservedly became a classic. His article with Voegelin on alternations in Tubatulabal also had methodological importance (Swadesh essentially being the source of the solution to the problem). Both these articles were reprinted by Martin Joos in his collection depicting the history of American descriptive linguistics. Swadesh also took part in the debates over the application of the new methods to the phonology of English, as a participant in Sapir's project for the description of English, and joined in discussion as to the philosophical status of phonological units. All this, however, was essentially in the period at Yale in the nineteen-thirties. After that, Swadesh's energies were never directed to the exploration of descriptive methodology for its own sake (in this respect being like most of Sapir's students), and his philosophical views emerged only rarely (e.g., in "On linguistic mechanism" (1948), a protest against the extreme behaviorism of the followers of Bloomfield). The direction of Swadesh's concern is already apparent in his articles on "A method for phonetic accuracy and speed" (1937). "A condensed account of Mandarin phonetics" (1939), and *Orientaciones lingüísticas* (1940). It is concern for whatever will facilitate description of languages, the presentation of descriptions in clear, usable form, and the use of such results to enable men to understand their past and to meet the needs of their present and future situations. Such concern was to remain a constant feature of his work,

from his first general book, *La nueva filología* (1941) to his latest, *El lenguaje y la vida humana* (1966).

Swadesh did not himself much engage in the direct study of cultural patterns apart from language, nor in attempts to extend linguistic method to the discovery of such patterns. The seeds of the latter effort are to be found in the development of Sapir's thought, but the effort itself did not become a focus of attention until the nineteen-fifties (Trager, Pike, Lounsbury, Goodenough). By that time Swadesh was deeply immersed in his program of prehistoric linguistic research. His work in the analysis and presentation of Nootka texts, Eskimo songs, various bodies of lexical data and other data of cultural significance, however, was invaluable. Like Sapir, and Sapir's other students, he was attentive to cultural data that emerged in the course of linguistic work, and interested in the direct dependence of some linguistic features on cultural patterns of expression. Such materials were not ignored, as they were by more narrow-minded linguists, and Swadesh's articles on verbs of derogation (1931), patterning of the phonetics of bilinguals (1941), obsolescent languages (1948), etc., are permanent contributions. Against this background, it is not surprising that his historical work shows great strength in its attention to cultural meanings and expressive symbolism—the latter being a phenomenon much neglected by American structural linguists. Swadesh's discoveries in these two respects (discoveries of semantic and expressive links between languages) are significant contributions both to linguistics and anthropology.

Since Sapir, probably no one except Kenneth Pike has had first hand knowledge of as many American Indian languages as Swadesh has had. He worked effectively, achieving rapport with informants readily, and amassing data and provisional analyses rapidly. (A year after his Penutian Vocabulary Survey (1953), an old Siuslaw speaker told me warmly of the good times he had with Swadesh during the few days they worked together.) Swadesh's main efforts, however, were not to be directed toward full-scale grammars. There is the Chitimacha sketch (1946), the series on Unaaliq Eskimo (1947), the South Greenlandic Eskimo sketch based on Kleinschmidt (1946), and the syntactic analyses of Nootka (1939, 1948).

In each case his work has gained respect, but none of it is cited today as a pioneering example of abstract formal analysis.

as is the Yokuts grammar of another Sapir student, Stanley Newman. The value of the work is in the admirably clear and cogent delineation of the facts of the language. There is some novelty of method, but it is ad hoc, as dictated by the patterning of the language. For Chitimacha (an extinct language once spoken in Louisiana), Swadesh's work stands as a permanent monument. It is the irreplaceable modern source of knowledge, sharing this distinction with such work as Sapir's Yana, Hoijer's Tonkawa, and Haas' Tunica. And while the Eskimo dialects and Nootka are still spoken, Swadesh's work on them has yet to be superseded.

Swadesh's great skills as a field worker and descriptive analyst came to be directed mainly toward those portions of languages that could be diagnostic of historical relationship. With the development of lexicostatistics this came to mean basic vocabulary and such morphological traits as were essential to a language or were revealing in the light of a general theory of relationships. Swadesh could not be content with the snail's-pace at which data relevant to linguistic prehistory accumulated. There being few field-workers, and many languages for which data was needed, he undertook to obtain the data himself in some cases (as in the Penutian vocabulary survey), and to enlist the aid of anyone and everyone who might be able to supply the wanted lists. Many is the field worker who obtained Swadesh's advice and help and in return accepted one of the well known word lists with a promise to fill it in.

Swadesh's effort was one that should have been sustained by substantial funds over a long period of time. As it was, he accomplished much by dint of effort, energy and commitment. Many scholars have discussed the classification and prehistory of American Indian languages. Of Swadesh it may be said that his work showed him to be the one truly serious man among them, the man who, having accepted the goal, made it his life work to realize it.

Swadesh's contributions to the methodology and results of language classification remain controversial among his colleagues. This is not the place to discuss technical problems in detail. Let me say only that I have expressed reservations here and there, but that I believe his contributions as a whole to be the most significant of anyone since Sapir to an understanding of the linguistic prehistory of the world, rivalled only by

work of Greenberg, with whose procedures his own work has much in common. Without detracting in any way from the merit of Greenberg's work, it is revealing to compare the reception of the classifications of South American languages by the two men. The two classifications agree on the essential unity of the language of the New World, but differ on various groupings. Greenberg's classification was obtained with a list of 30 to 40 glosses, whereas Swadesh's classification was based on lists of 100 glosses (both sometimes obtaining less information for a language than wanted). Greenberg published one result, without supporting data, and thus backed essentially only by personal authority. Swadesh presented explicit accounting of procedures, endeavored to make the data publicly available, and continued to revise his findings in the light of new evidence and research. The work presented without supporting evidence was reprinted in texts and journals in the United States, whereas the work presented as an explicit, revisable scientific enterprise was not.

To some extent the controversy attaching to Swadesh was a product of the style of work and of the man. The anthropological audience for work in linguistic prehistory generally does not want to understand the data and procedures, either as part of a general theory of cultural change and historical inference, or as part of a particular process of inference. This audience wants mainly answers, or authoritative guide-lines. Yet with Swadesh the work was a continuing, constantly-revised process, of which the published results were not authoritative gestures, but progress reports, inviting revision and collaboration. The linguistic audience often wishes to dispute points of detail rather than consider a general case, and to argue for the primacy of some one line of evidence as against others (a habit that clouded understanding of Sapir's work until his approach was clarified by Swadesh (1961)). Sheer proof of relationship is often seen as itself the ultimate goal, rather than as a means to other ends, to more detailed reconstruction and inference, and so is approached quite gingerly. Some want to work where the data is rich and provides more familiar problems, that is, in relationships of little time depth, and so avoid long-range comparison altogether. Some refuse to accept probabilistic inference, or set criteria of proof that exclude long-range relationships. Few (besides Greenberg) see the methodology of

linguistic prehistory as itself a possible object of experimental inquiry, of basic research; many see the methodology as already fixed, needing only to be learned and applied. What was such an audience to make of a man who would sacrifice an occasional point of detail for the sake of a larger mass of evidence, a larger picture; who considered all usable lines of evidence relevant; for whom a proof of genetic relationship was a means to an end; for whom the remotest past of language was in principle accessible; for whom the methodological foundations of linguistic prehistory were indeed a field demanding investigation?

To cite one further point: some linguists have wanted to work narrowly at one level of relationship at a time, as if each level had to be worked out fully before a deeper level of relationship could be broached, and as if the penetration of the linguistic past could be accomplished in an additive, mechanical way. I believe this approach to be demonstrably wrong. Certainly it was not the way of working of Sapir and Swadesh, who moved back and forth between the more immediate and the more remote levels of prehistory, finding the two mutually illuminating. (Sapir's correspondence with Berthold Laufer on the possibility of a Sino-Tibetan connection for Athapaskan is instructive on this score). But just this strength (from the standpoint of discovering significant phenomena) troubled and confused an audience wanting one neatly-wrapped result at a time. In its conception of historical method the dominant outlook of American linguistics was as straightlaced as in its conception of descriptive method; it tended to stick to the surface of things, to be skeptical of deeper underlying relationships, and to want to proceed from the closer to the more remote one step at a time. Thus an audience barely ready to consider evidence for a relationship between New World and Old World languages when the languages in question were near each other (Eskimo and Chukchee) was not ready to have the evidence interspersed with evidence giving a glimpse of the interrelationship of many further languages of Asia and America. In fact the publication of Swadesh's article on "Linguistic relations across Bering Strait" had to omit these glimpses. While necessary in circumstances, such omission deprived readers of a glimpse of Swadesh's most distinctive contribution.

Swadesh's most distinctive contribution, I believe, is the scope of his vision of linguistic prehistory, and the substantive and methodological explorations that were the instrument of that vision. As he himself said of his conception of a world linguistic network, the whole is stronger than the parts. Working at the frontiers of knowledge, he could not always be sure of details, and he sometimes went too far too fast for many of his colleagues. And he died before all could be tightly woven together. Yet he posed the true problem of linguistic prehistory for the world society that is now emerging. He saw clearly that the way in which linguistic prehistory can justify itself to a world society is by addressing itself to the question of the unity of mankind.

When one understands Swadesh's work as that of a pioneer, an explorer of new terrain, one recognizes it as indispensable. His colleagues have often valued more the work of the colonizer, the settler; Swadesh, like Sapir, was more the buccaneer, the trailblazer. His work often troubled more cautious colleagues just because it could not be dismissed; it seemed to go too far, and yet it made substantive discoveries that could not be ignored or explained away, that had to be taken account of. There was just too much evidence that the paths he blazed did go somewhere, that one would eventually have to follow them out. The lexical sets and morphological processes he uncovered as pertinent to world linguistic prehistory are indeed pertinent, even if, by linking both the Old and the New Worlds, they go beyond what we are able to incorporate in ordinary classifications at the present time. (Cf. the examples in "Inter-hemispheric Linguistic Connections", 1960). These data demand explanation, and it is to Swadesh that we are indebted for their discovery and for the first steps toward answering the problems they pose.

Swadesh's work has often been criticized in terms of detail, such as the mistaking of the analysis of a suffix in Tsimshian in the course of showing a relationship between Tsimshian and Chinookan. I happen to care about the relationship between Tsimshian and Chinookan, and their suffixes, because they are languages on which part of my life has been spent. It is too much to expect the world to care, unless some more general question is thereby illuminated. It is Swadesh's great merit that he made many American Indian languages of world impor-

tance through their role in his studies. His work can be corrected on details (as I corrected it as to the Tsimshian suffix). In point of fact, Tsimshian and Chinook *are* related, as he said they were, in the light of the evidence as a whole, much of which he assembled. Moreover, in relating the two languages he brought them into the context of general questions of method and of relationship that extend to the Mayan languages of Mexico and Guatemala, and beyond. (See his contributions to the 1952 International Congress of Linguists, 1956), his article on "Perspectives and Problems in Amerindian Linguistics" in the *Linguistics Today* volume of *Word* (1954), and his article on "Problems of Long-range Comparison in Penutian" in the issue of *Language* dedicated to A. L. Kroeber (1956). Swadesh gave to linguistic prehistory a vision of a substantive contribution to humanity.

Swadesh's methodological explorations have been much discussed in the extensive literature on lexicostatistics and glottochronology. (Cf. references and comments in my *Language in Culture and Society*, New York: Harper and Row, 1964). Here it can only be said that future generations will honor him as one who saw the possibility and necessity of transcending ad hoc controversy and partial views in linguistic prehistory by converting its assumptions into explicit parts of a basic science, one subject to empirical and experimental test. His studies of rates of change, rates of borrowing, lexical vs. grammatical retention and borrowing, basic vocabulary, persistence of similarity in phonological shape, and the like, were not radical innovations in subject matter, but radical only in proposing to treat explicitly and systematically what had usually been treated implicitly and incidentally. Swadesh's methodological explorations tended to be part of the study of a concrete problem (e.g., his paper on "Diffusional Cumulation and Archaic Residue as Historical Explanations" resulted from the need to resolve the confused controversy over the relation of Athapaskan to Tlingit), just as he had put structural linguistics to work in describing languages, rather than concentrate on methodology itself, so he constantly put to work the existing state of knowledge as to lexicostatistics and glottochronology in problems of actual relationship. Once there was something serviceable to use, he used it as the best available, rather than postpone substantive work until methodological problems

were resolved. To be sure, these concrete applications were themselves sources of insight into the problems of method. From the writing of alphabets to the reconstruction of origins, Swadesh always valued practice as much as theory.

One cannot but speculate on the consequences, for Swadesh and for linguistics, if Clyde Kluckhohn had been successful in his efforts to secure Swadesh a professorship at Harvard in 1954. (The efforts were blocked by a man who continued to hold back linguistics at Harvard for some years to come). Certainly there would be in the United States today a far larger complement of specialists in American Indian languages, for, as those who knew him can attest, Swadesh was an active, energetic, organizing man, one who brought those near him into the circle of his interests. This sense of loss to linguistics in the United States betrays a certain ethnocentrism, however. Swadesh is more properly seen as the student of Sapir who effectively broke the barrier of parochialism so characteristic of American Indian linguistics in the United States, in regard to work in Latin American countries and languages. Swadesh was able to help strengthen linguistics in Mexico and to some extent in Latin America generally, and to add a personal link between scholarship in North and Latin America. The opportunity to work continuously in Mexico, reflected in his later publications, was a great one, giving deeper acquaintance with its great language families, and a broader, more secure foundation to his effort to link the languages of the world, and it brought productive collaboration especially with Evangelina Arana.

It is clear that the greatest challenge facing American Indian linguistics today is in Latin America. Only here, for the most part, can new theories and methods be tested with living Amerindian languages. Only from the standpoint of the New World as a whole can the deeper problems of linguistic prehistory be properly posed, and their center of gravity is in Latin America. Teaching and research in linguistics in Latin America is of the greatest importance to the strength of American Indian linguistics as a whole. Swadesh was never a parochial scholar, but Mexico gave him a special opportunity to be a fully cosmopolitan one, to contribute more effectively to a truly international perspective on the linguistic prehistory of the world, to strengthen linguistics in the New World.

We shall not see another scholar like him, but we can hope and believe that the challenge and opportunity expressed in his life work will be fulfilled.

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