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PETER STEPHEN DU PONCEAU AND HIS STUDY OF AMERICAN INDIAN LANGUAGES

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Foreign languages learning is inseparable from learning history and culture of the corresponding language communities. These, as well as the connections existing between them, provide the important insight into the development of the languages and the processes that shaped them. People who contributed to the development of theoretical studies of languages are also of particular importance.

Among the linguists of the 18-19th centuries that made a considerable contribution to the development of language studies a special place should be assigned to Peter Stephen Du Ponceau (June 3, 1760 – April 1, 1844), a French-American linguist, philosopher, diplomat and lawyer. Born Pierre-Étienne du Ponceau in Saint-Martin-de-Ré, France, he left the country at the age of 17 and moved to the revolutionary America as secretary of Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben who was hired as a Continental Army drillmaster. Because of serious illness he had to resign after a brief period of service at the Army headquarters and after his health improved Pierre-Étienne, now Peter Stephen, settled in the new country and dedicated himself to the civil service.

In his research of Du Ponceau's life, William A. Tieck states that throughout his life he maintained a profound avocational interest in the arts and sciences and especially in philology, his contributions to such fields as the languages of the North American Indian and the writing system of the Chinese bringing him international recognition [3, p. 52]. In his later years he served as president of the American

Philosophical Society, was the second president of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, and held membership in about forty-two learned societies in the USA and abroad. Not only were his contributions to the learned and literary life of the new republic outstanding, but his influence in the exchange of culture between the New World and the Old was considerable [3, p. 52].

One of Peter Stephen Du Ponceau's main interests was the study of languages. As the result, he gained considerable recognition as the linguist who was among the first to undertake a complex study of the Native Americans languages. He saw his task in ruining prevalent European misconceptions about the structure and nature of Native American tongues and shared the goal of his colleague John Heckewelder to satisfy the world that the languages of the Indians are not poor, devoid of variety of expression, inadequate to the communication even of abstract ideas, as has been generally imagined [1, p. 35].

He based his research primarily on three languages of North America (Eskimo, Delaware, Iroquois), three languages and dialects of central America (Poconchi, Mexican proper, Tarascan), and two languages of South America (Carib and Arawakan). He insisted they were all polysynthetic in form, that is, in them the greatest number of ideas were comprised in the least number of words [2, p.154]. He considered the American Indian languages rich in words and grammatical forms and stated that there was great order, method and regularity in their complicated construction [2, p.153]. He made further investigations of the Iroquois, Arawak, Chippeway, Cherokee, Chickasaw, Wyandot, Huron and other languages using printed sources and communicating with Indians to prove his theories. In addition, Du Ponceau made a comparative study of the languages with European ones and made a series of conclusions about their differences. He stated that he found a new manner of compounding words from various roots that produced new ideas, a new manner of expressing the cases of substantives by inflecting the verbs that governed them, a new number (a particular plural) applied to the declension of nouns and conjugation of verbs, a new concordance in tense of the conjugation with the verb, the ways of combining pronouns, adjectives, conjunctions, adverbs with the principal part of speech and great variety of tense forms [2, p.154]. He advanced his studies by researching the Algonquian family of languages, discussed their phonology, etymology, ideology, articles, genders, numbers, parts of speech, and compared Algonquian languages with those of other Indians.

Peter Stephen Du Ponceau published the results of the research in his work «Mémoire sur le système grammatical des langues de quelques nations indiennes de l'Amérique du Nord» that was awarded the Volney Prize by the Institute of France (1835) and placed the author among the great linguists of the world [2, p.155]. Although Du Ponceau had relatively limited opportunity to study the American Indian languages and based his research not only on actual observation and communication with Indians of various tribes but on studies of records previously made by others, he was a precursor of all of the subsequent attempts to identify American Indian languages in the 19th century and began a theory of these languages which unified them under one head [2, p.158]. While the new linguists such as Albert

Gallatin and John Wesley Powell, appeared who altered and modified his theories, the name of Peter Stephen Du Ponceau gradually faded in history. The works on him and his legacy are not numerous, which proves that the personality of Du Ponceau, significance of his research and his influence on the subsequent studies of languages require further investigation.

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