

KARL VAN DUYN TEETER

SIEBERT AS ALGONQUIANIST

Karl V. (van Duyn) Teeter learned Japanese as a U.S. Army draftee during the Korean War. Upon his discharge from the military in 1954 he went to Berkeley, majoring in Oriental Languages. He entered Berkeley's linguistics program and did fieldwork with the last speaker of Wiyot, a language indigenous to northern California that has since been demonstrated to be genetically related to all the Algonquian languages. After coming to Harvard in 1959 he studied Maliseet-Passamaquoddy and, for several years, chaired Harvard's linguistics department. He is now Professor of Linguistics, Emeritus at Harvard. What follows is his assessment of Frank Siebert as an Algonquianist.

Frank T. Siebert, Jr., was born April 2, 1912. He had his first exposure to the Penobscot at age nineteen in 1932, and pretty much since then has pursued linguistic field work with the language, having come up with one "last" speaker after another until the death of Madeline Tomer Shay in 1993. Ms. Shay really does seem to have been the last serious speaker of Penobscot.

In a front page illustrated feature article in the *Maine Sunday Telegram* for March 31, 1996, Ives Goddard is quoted as saying of Frank Siebert that he is "clearly the most brilliant and most competent avocational linguist working on native American languages that there has ever been, hands down."¹ This is true, but, in keeping with Goddard's temperament, a bit modest and conservative. It is really not quite adequate to describe

Siebert's interest in a language which he has pursued since age nineteen as merely avocational, although it is true that he has no Ph.D. or *formal* linguistic training. Siebert regularly attended the linguistic seminars given by Franz Boas at Columbia, and later courses of Edward Sapir at Yale, all of this while working to attain his M.D. degree at Penn, which included round-the-clock interning. But Frank himself would attribute his real beginnings as a serious practicing linguist to 1936 and a joint field-work session with my teacher and his old pal, Mary R. Haas of Berkeley.² Mary, who had received her Ph.D. in 1934, traveled to Maine to help Frank study Penobscot in the field. Among other things Mary, a musician with absolute pitch, devised a marking system with musical scales to indicate Penobscot pitch levels. Frank thinks of these two and a half weeks as the equivalent of a two-and-a-half-year course in linguistics. From that time on he began to gain confidence in his own fieldwork ability.

Another direction in which "avocational" understates Siebert's scholarship lies in the fact that he has pursued Algonquian studies for almost as long as his work on Penobscot.³ The scholarly importance of this work qualifies him as *the* leading expert on these languages, the dean of Algonquian linguistics.

His very first forays into Algonquian linguistics clarified the famous basic work of Leonard Bloomfield on Algonquian.⁴ Bloomfield's reconstruction relied crucially on the postulation of a number of consonant clusters with varying reflexes in the surviving languages, and Siebert, in two papers published in 1941 and 1967, managed to add material Bloomfield had missed and greatly advance Bloomfield's picture of Algonquian.⁵

One of Siebert's most substantial works on Algonquian reconstructs and reconstitutes Virginia Algonquian (Powhatan).⁶ Chris Wolfart of Manitoba referred to this paper as "at once a major substantive contribution and a model of methodological clarity".⁷ For this paper, undaunted by the nonexistence of any substantial work on the language, Siebert plows into the antiquated [William] Strachey transcriptions left us from the early seventeenth century and makes systematic sense of them. He derives a plausible phonological system, gives an extensive

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etymological vocabulary that spells out 263 English glosses, and ends with a detailed subclassification of Proto-Eastern Algonquian, locating and naming no fewer than fifty dialects.

Another Siebert masterpiece is "The Original home of the Proto-Algonquian people."⁸ Here Siebert explores the Proto-Algonquian vocabulary of flora and fauna and draws conclusions on the people's place of origin by studying the distribution of the vocabulary and items designated by it. This might be called a premature masterpiece, in that it is now established that there is a larger Algic family, which includes Wiyot and Yurok (both languages of the north coast of California) along with Algonquian. In future it will be necessary to view the problem from a deeper perspective than Siebert does, however impressively.

In all of this brilliant work, Siebert has not neglected the primary object of his study over these many years, the Penobscot language of Maine. He produced a two-volume draft Penobscot dictionary in 1984 (1,235 pages with nearly 15,000 entries, and a 49-page preface with definitions). So, in however few copies, this draft of a truly magnificent Penobscot dictionary does exist. And if only to show that Siebert at age eighty-five is not through being the leading scholar he is, the American Philosophical Society is scheduled this fall to bring out a volume of Penobscot texts he has compiled from his extensive collection. Finally, in regard to descriptive publications on Penobscot proper, Siebert wrote a paper for the Haas Festival Conference on the nature of Penobscot suprasegmentals, a subject he regarded as especially appropriate for this work in honor of Haas since he recalls that it was Haas herself who helped him do this analysis in 1936.⁹

It is not my intention in this paper to go into any detailed analysis, but merely to present the highlights of the vital and important contributions Frank Siebert has made to linguistic anthropology. Even a cursory survey, however, cannot fail to mention his brilliant 1995 etymological paper¹⁰ concerning a Proto-Algonquian word for the massasauga, a pit viper widely distributed in Algonquian territory. Siebert's claim is that a previous etymology offered in the recent Northeast volume of

the Handbook of North American Indians is mistaken.¹¹ Typical of Siebert's work, there is massive documentation, beginning with a detailed foray into herpetology to describe the snake in question.

This paper was intended as a cursory survey of Frank Siebert's work as an Algonquianist. Let me conclude by reiterating that he is not only a brilliant scholar in the field, but the unchallenged leader of us all in Algonquian studies.

NOTES

¹Shoshana Hoose, "Imperiled Language, Uncommon Bond," *Maine Sunday Telegram*, March 31, 1996.

²Personal communication, here and elsewhere.

³Siebert has in fact studied a wide range of native languages, including Delaware, Fox, Montagnais, and Maliseet-Passamaquoddy, in addition to Penobscot. In Siouan languages, he has studied Catawba and Quapaw.

⁴Leonard Bloomfield, "Algonquian," in Harry Hoiijer, ed., *Linguistic Structures of Native America*. Viking Fund Publications in Anthropology no. 6, pp. 85-129. New York: Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research (1946).

⁵Frank T. Siebert, Jr., "Certain Proto-Algonquian consonant clusters," *Language* 17:298-303 (1941); Siebert, "Discrepant Consonant Clusters Ending in *-k in Proto-Algonquian, a Proposed Interpretation of Saltatory Sound Changes," *National Museum of Canada Bulletin No. 214, Anthropological Series No. 78, Contributions to Anthropology, Linguistics I (Algonquian)*, pp. 48-59, Ottawa (1967).

⁶Siebert, "Resurrecting Virginia Algonquian from the Dead: the Reconstituted and Historical Phonology of Powhatan," in James M. Crawford, ed., *Studies in Southeastern Indian Languages*, pp. 285-453. Athens: University of Georgia Press (1975).

⁷See H. Christoph Wolfart, "Another Algonquian Contribution to Historical Linguistics: Siebert's Powhatan," *International Journal of American Linguistics* 43:162-5 (1977), p. 162.

⁸Siebert, *Contributions to Anthropology: Linguistics I (Algonquian)*. Anthropological Series 78, National Museum of Canada Bulletin No. 214, p. 13-47. Ottawa: Queen's Printer.

⁹"The Suprasegmental Phonemes of the Penobscot Dialect of Eastern Abenaki, an Eastern Algonquian Language." In William Shipley, ed. *In Honor of Mary Hass: From the Hass Festival Conference on Native American Linguistics*, pp. 715-63 (1988).

¹⁰This has recently been published as "Proto-Algonquian *na:tawe:wa 'massasauga': Some False Etymologies and Alleged Iroquoian Loanwords," *Anthropological Linguistics* 38:635-642 (1996).

¹¹Bruce G. Trigger, ed., *Handbook of North American Indians*, Volume 15, *Northeast* (1978). Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution.