CALIFORNIA INDIAN LANGUAGES

By Victor Golla (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011, 400 pp., $72.00 cloth, $90.00 eBook)

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Most people who “read” this book will treat it as an encyclopedia of the American Indian languages within California. It can be read from start to finish, but few will do this. Most readers, especially Native peoples of California, will search this book for their particular language community and will find a treasure trove of information. After painstaking research and time, the author includes within his work every Native language spoken within the state. California is a geopolitical structure with odd boundaries that cut across a great diversity of Native groups and their languages. There is no uniformity of languages, cultures, or histories among California’s various Native groups. The author, though, recognizes this and addresses all languages despite the diversity.

Victor Golla divides his work into five parts. The first provides a short introduction with a basic description of the diversity of languages found within California. The second covers a history of the study of languages within the state, including the earliest western descriptions of Native languages (before statehood) and the work of famed ethnologists and anthropologists. Within this section are brief biographies of the principal researchers of California languages.

The third part of Golla’s work constitutes the majority of the book. Each language is discussed within subsections: geography, documentation and survival, linguistic structure, and nomenclature. This segment of the work includes detailed and valuable maps of the language communities, as well as photographs and information about the Native collaborators. Golla deserves credit for this; it is rare even in today’s world that collaborators are identified. This will be of great interest to the Native communities themselves as they move toward language and cultural revitalization. Such transparency is helpful not only to Native communities, but to scholars now and in the future who study those communities.

The fourth part of the book offers a theoretical discussion of how California might exist as a unique linguistic area. This section is written perhaps more for the academician than the general public. The fifth part gives a brief exploration of the prehistoric nature of California Indian languages.

This work can be used by both the academy and community. Although some parts are technical in nature and will be difficult for community people to understand without some formal training in linguistics, each section of the book offers something useful. For the academician, this book can be the starting point for further investigation or provide the information needed for linguistic reference.

BOOKS FOR REVIEW

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