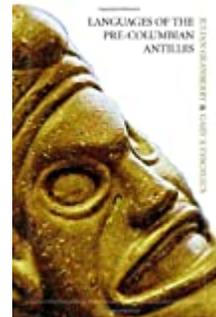


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Julian Granberry, Gary S. Vescelius.** *Languages of the Pre-Columbian Antilles.* Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004. xiv + 153 pp. \$42.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8173-1416-3; \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8173-5123-6.



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## **Following Linguistic Trails across Half a Millennium Provides New Answers to Old Questions**

Not too long ago, only a few Caribbean archaeologists and historians knew who or what the Taino were. Today, hundreds of descendants of these indigenous peoples of the Greater Antilles—a people long said to have been wiped off the face of the earth—are fighting the extinction myth, fighting for recognition of their Taino inheritance and for a deeper understanding of where their ancestors came from, how they lived, and what they believed in. Today's Taino descendants are also attempting to reconstruct as much as possible of their ancestral language. Julian Granberry and Gary S. Vescelius's book helps to accomplish several of these multiple goals. It tracks the immigration of indigenous peoples from the American mainland and their various settlements in the Caribbean via their linguistic traces. In so doing, the authors also provide the most complete Taino/English "dictionary" available anywhere, as well as a list of known words in other indigenous languages of the Caribbean. If it weren't for this, the book would have a very limited audience.

Languages of the Pre-Columbian Antilles is, first and

foremost, a linguistic analysis of the seven different "language communities" that were extant in the Greater Antilles at the time of European contact, which the authors call: Classic Taino (the most widespread of the seven), Ciboney Taino, Macoris (both Lower and Upper dialects), Ciguayo, Guanahatabey, Eyeri or Kaliphuna, and Karina Carib. The authors make extensive use of concepts and terminology that are specific to the field of linguistics, which makes their work extremely heavy reading for non-linguists. This is the book's most significant weakness, along with the fact that it is a mostly-cohesive-but-not-always collection of essays written at different times and for different purposes by either Granberry (who is the Language Coordinator for Florida's Native American Language Services and a prolific author/linguist) or Vescelius (now deceased, he was a state archaeologist for the U.S. Virgin Islands), or sometimes by the both of them together.

The book is far more than just a linguistic analysis, however, for the comprehensive linguistic comparisons within it that focus principally on the three main lan-

guages used by the indigenous peoples of the Greater Antilles (Cuba, Hispaniola, Puerto Rico, the Bahamas, Turks and Caicos, and Virgin Islands), are correlated to historical and archaeological evidence in order to identify the various groups who have been erroneously lumped together as “Tainos” (or previously as “Island Arawaks”); where and when each group originated; where, when, and why they moved about or settled within the islands; and how and why they interacted with each other as well as with the indigenous peoples of the Lesser Antilles. The authors clearly state that their study is not an end in itself, but yet another step, along with archaeological, ethnographic, genetic, biological, and historical studies, that will eventually help correct the many errors that have been made in the past about pre-Columbian Caribbean peoples. Granberry suggests that the study “provides a beginning, not an end, to language and archaeology studies of the pre-Columbian Antilles” (p. 6).

The book’s first chapter, “The Pre-Columbian Antilles, An Overview of Research and Sources,” is one of the most succinct yet complete summaries available. It covers the works of the early Spanish chroniclers, but focuses on the research of those whose interests were sparked by the 400th anniversary of the “encounter” between Europeans and the indigenous peoples of the Caribbean, which corresponded with the first growth spurt of the new science of archaeology (Jesse W. Fewes, Mark R. Harrington, and Sven Loven were among the most prominent of the archaeologists working in the Caribbean at that time) and the work of those archaeologists, anthropologists, and linguists who have followed in their footsteps: Froelich Rainey, Irving Rouse, Douglas Taylor, Samuel Wilson, Antonio M. Stevens-Arroyo, and William Keegan, among others. Chapter 2 explores in depth the often biased information that was left to us by the Spanish chroniclers. Six subsequent chapters ex-

plore and compare the traces of the Arawakan-, Waroid-, and Tolan-based languages of the Native peoples of the Greater Antilles, correlating them with archaeological and historical research as well as with geographical facts—the chapters that deal with place names are particularly interesting. Another chapter deals specifically with “The Languages of the Lesser Antilles and Their Archaeological Correlates,” and there is one chapter (10) that is “A Short Lexicon of Taino Morphemes and Lexical Forms.” Chapter 11 summarizes the indigenous peoples’ migrations to and within the Caribbean.

The book is loaded with excellent maps, which help explain the linguistic-jargon-ridden text, and has twelve tables which, together with chapter 10, combine to provide the comprehensive “dictionary” of Caribbean indigenous words and their English equivalents that were mentioned earlier. In the long run, the “dictionary” may be the book’s most valuable contribution, or at least the element in it most valued by the largest number of readers. A dear friend who is involved in the Taino restoration movement (which aims to restore the Taino to their proper place in the histories and societies from which their supposed extinction has erased them) gave me added insight about this book and its value: “It helps eliminate all the arguments over things like, was Hispaniola’s indigenous name Quisqueya, Haiti, or Bohio? In fact, Granberry and Vescelius show that it bore all three names in three different indigenous languages.” It is insights like this that make *Languages of the Pre-Columbian Antilles* a “must have” for the reference shelf and a thought provoking study for a growing number of people who are interested in finding out all they can about the Taino and other indigenous peoples of the Caribbean, and not just a book for Caribbean linguists, archaeologists, and historians.

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