

The Grammar of Reform: John Eliot, the Vernacular Rebellion, and the Elegancies of Native American Speech

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John Eliot (1604–1690), the head of Indian mission in Massachusetts, was New England’s most prolific translator of evangelical texts into an indigenous tongue. He published a series of devotional manuals in Natick a dialect of Algonquian, the indigenous language family spoken in the colonies. These translations created what is called now the *Indian Library*, a collection of instructional and pedagogical texts, intended to promote both conversion and the ability to read among Native Americans. The monumental translation of the Bible, Eliot’s *Mamusse Wunneetupanatamwe Up-Biblum God* (1663), was his most ambitious work. This paper, examines Eliot’s *Indian Grammar* (1666) published three years after the Natick Bible. This slender folio, barely more than sixty-pages long, represents the first sustained study of the structural organization of a North American tongue. Founding Algonquin philology, Eliot’s grammar expresses the most conscientious colonial assessment of a Native language and presents Natick as an idiom differently organized from European tongues but equally eloquent and complex as them. On the grammar’s last page, Eliot tucks away a commentary that shows his awareness of this pioneering approach. Here he announces that his text has revealed “new ways of Grammar.”

This paper traces the transatlantic politics of speech that allowed Eliot to accommodate the independent logic of Natick. I relate Eliot’s work to the grammar wars of the seventeenth century and in particular to the radical reformer and Huguenot martyr Peter Ramus (1515–1572). Ramus’s focus on spoken vernaculars and grammar reform, I show, helped Eliot describe Natick independent from Latin rules. Like Ramus, Eliot also believed in the complicity between systems of learning, language, and political authority. Indeed, Eliot’s approach to grammar writing, I show, is part and parcel of his ambition to reform society and English spirituality, at large. Eliot’s goal was to divorce knowledge from the false authorities of state, church, and universities in order to realize the equality of all believers and discover the spiritual within the everyday, the realm in which common people handled their words. At its best, Eliot’s grammar finds in the Natick’s linguistic variations and differences a re-articulation of his own spirituality: a voicing of the written, dead letter of Biblical prophecy in the spoken and living elegancies of the Natick word.