

Ideologies of linguistic representation in Late Modern English: The case of James Fenimore Cooper*

Annalisa Scatà

Independent scholar

ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to analyse James Fenimore Cooper's linguistic representations in his works with a particular focus on his most famous novel, *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826). In this novel Cooper depicted the typical contradictions of nineteenth-century American society both in the use of his own language and in the representation of Native American languages. In addition, by adding editorial footnotes to his novels, Cooper explained American customs and historical events to his British readers, but at the same time he supported the need to introduce new words in order to give an accurate representation of American reality.

The language created by Cooper in *The Last of the Mohicans* has often been debated by literary critics: many scholars accused Cooper of giving an idealized and romantic image of Native Americans, while others defended the author affirming that his representation was authentic and coherent with the historical period in which he lived. In fact, the way in which languages are presented bears witness to the ideology of the times, as Cooper created a linguistic hierarchy in which the Edenic language of the Delaware is presented as superior to the fallen and corrupt languages of the English and the French. On the other hand, by showing the destruction of Native American languages and cultures and by celebrating English as the only language understood by everyone, he seems to have implicitly suggested that the advancement of an Anglo-centric civilization was both advisable and inexorable.

Keywords: linguistic representations, ideology, editorial footnotes, Native American languages, linguistic hierarchy.

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1. Introduction

The main purpose of this article is to examine James Fenimore Cooper's linguistic representations in *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), on account of their value as emblematic of Cooper's attitude towards American English, which was distinctively ambivalent: he defended the Americans' need to introduce new words, but at the same time he condemned some linguistic innovations of theirs, while also showing an interestingly nuanced attitude towards native languages. As a matter of fact, his ambivalent attitude was related to the intellectual context of those years, characterised by the linguistic controversy between Samuel Johnson and Noah Webster and in which the development of a new 'American' language was a widely discussed matter. My investigation is based on a close reading of the texts in their historical context. A quantitative investigation of the data is beyond the scope of this study for various reasons: first of all, because my main interest is socio-historical, and secondly because the kind of representations under investigation are not amenable to the methods of corpus linguistics.

The article is structured as follows. In Section 2 I will focus on the linguistic ideas that Cooper expressed in the editorial footnotes that he added to his novels for their British edition. Then, in Section 3, I will examine the sources from which Cooper drew inspiration for his novel, in order to assess whether Cooper's Indians were idealized or authentic. This will enable me to focus on the linguistic hierarchy created by Cooper and on how he depicted the fight for the new world as a linguistic fight between Indian and European languages, where the Edenic language of the Delaware vanishes with the last of the Mohican, while the surviving tribes speak foreign and corrupt languages. Finally, in Section 4, some concluding remarks are presented.

2. Ambivalent attitudes to English and Native American languages

In order to understand Cooper's contradictions, it is important to take into consideration the historical context in which he lived. James Fenimore Cooper was born in 1789 and died in 1851, so his lifetime spans the so-called "Early Republic".¹ At that time, the development of a new language for

¹ "The Early Republic" (1780-1830) was a period of transition during which the Americans established a new government, faced the results of industrialisation, discussed social matters like slavery and extended their boundaries by conquering

the Americans was a widely discussed matter. In Cooper's opinion, it was essential for America to eliminate its mental dependence from England, but this wish for emancipation clashed with the complex problem of a shared language (Schachterle 2011: 37). In *Gleanings in Europe: England* (1837), Cooper commented on this matter writing that "of all the burdens, that of the mental dependence created by colonial subserviency, appears to be the most difficult to remove" (JFC *Gleanings* 1982: 233).

As a matter of fact, the creation of a national language was both a political and a social matter – see Simpson (1986). Conservative intellectuals, like John Witherspoon, condemned some "Americanisms", while some innovators defended American usage. Among the latter was Noah Webster, who promoted the introduction of distinctively American pronunciation, orthography and grammar, as more appropriate for a population that was socially different from the one in Britain. Cooper's main goal was to "create through a distinctive national language the mental independence from English opinion" (Schachterle 2011: 66). As we will see later in his footnotes, Cooper remarked on how French and Dutch contributed to the creation of American words, on how English words, that were obsolete in England, were used by the Americans, and how Native American vocabulary influenced the American one. Nevertheless, although Cooper could be described as a polyglot (he knew Latin and French very well), he didn't actually imagine a multilingual and transnational America; on the contrary, he promoted the creation of a language independent from England that could absorb new words as symbols of a rising national identity (Schachterle 2011: 66). In his works Cooper celebrated the diversity of American ethnic and linguistic communities, but at the same time he hoped that all those ethnic groups would adapt to American English, because the alternative was, as in the case of many Indian tribes and languages, extinction.

Cooper's ambivalence is also present in his representation of Indian languages. In the nineteenth-century, American and European ideas about Native American languages and cultures were closely connected to the image of the savage. First of all, the Indians were called 'savages' because they represented the opposite of 'civilized' Europeans. In addition, being savages was considered an initial stage in man's progress, whereas civilization was assumed to be a more advanced level. For Euro-American colonists this primordial condition of Native Americans must lead inexorably to

Western territories. In addition, in those years new technologies were introduced and uniquely American forms of art and literature were born (Bates 2015: xxxiii).

civilization and must be substituted by it. As Lucy Maddox affirmed, in that period “there were only two options for the Indians: to become civilized, or to become extinct” (Maddox 1991: 24). The Euro-Americans who were in favour of civilization obviously disagreed with those who were comfortable with the idea of extinction; as a result, those who, like Cooper, represented the Indians as noble savages opposed those who, like Francis Parkman, despised them.² However, most Euro-Americans believed that civilization and extinction were the only two options for the future of Native Americans, and hardly anyone was ready to admit that they were actually civilized, but in a different way. For most Euro-Americans, Indian languages provided another proof of their savagery, as reported by Maddox:

White observers consistently concluded that because of the limitations of his or her language, the most complex intellectual maneuver any Indian (of whatever language group) could manage was the construction of a simple metaphor, or occasionally an analogy; the Indian could not speculate about things that have no visible form, nor comprehend notional ideas. (Maddox 1991: 24)

However, some scholars rejected this vision; one of them was John Heckewelder, who is one of the sources from which Cooper drew inspiration for his representation of Native Americans.³ In his work *History, Manners, and Customs* (1818), Heckewelder reported his correspondence with Peter Duponceau, one of the greatest scholars of Indian languages of the time, and in this work they both describe these languages as complex social constructions. Their idea was in contrast with the stereotypical image of the savage, and Heckewelder confirmed that his goal was:

To satisfy the world that the languages of the Indians are not so poor, so devoid of variety of expression, so inadequate to the communication

² Francis Parkman (1823-1893), was a famous American historian who wrote a seven-volume history of France and England in North America, covering the colonial period from the beginnings to 1763 (www.britannica.com/biography/Francis-Parkman, accessed September 2019).

³ John Heckewelder (1743-1823) was a Moravian missionary in the United States. He had been adopted by and lived with the Lenápes (Delawares) for 49 years and he studied carefully the languages, manners, and customs of the Indians. He spent his last years writing numerous accounts of Native American life, notably his *Account of the History, Manners and Customs of the Indian Nations, etc.* (1818). (Johansen – Pritzker 2008: 695)

even of abstract ideas, or in a word so *barbarous*, as has been generally imagined. (Heckewelder 1971: 125)

The contrasting views that characterized linguistic evaluations both in relation to European languages and to Native American ones emerge very clearly in Cooper's works and indeed in the editorial footnotes to his novels, which are carefully examined by Schachterle (2011).

Through an analysis of such footnotes it is possible to highlight how literary texts whose popularity is undoubted could and actually did contribute to the definition of linguistic perceptions that would become both pervasive and long-lasting on both sides of the Atlantic. It is in this framework that Cooper's notes become a valuable object of investigation for historical linguists. Although most of Cooper's novels focus on the Americans before, during and after the Revolution, in 1831, while Cooper was in Europe, he decided with his British editors, Colburn and Bentley, to review seven of his American novels for his growing British public, and to add explanatory notes. In these, Cooper supported the need to introduce new words in order to give an accurate representation of American reality, but at the same time he clarified American customs and historical events for his British readers. Moreover, he made significant comments pertaining to linguistic forms; such footnotes can be divided into two groups: those that defended and those that criticized American usage.

2.1. Defensive footnotes

According to Schachterle (2011), in order to explain the first group of notes, it is necessary to quote a comment from the novel *Satanstoe*, first published in 1845, in which Cooper says why mental dependence from England should be overcome – see excerpt (1):

- (1) "Sleigh," as spelt, is purely an American word. It is derived from "slee," in Dutch; which is pronounced like "sleigh." Some persons contend that the Americans ought to use the old English words "sled," or "sledge." But these words do not precisely express the thing we possess. There is as much reason for calling a pleasure-conveyance by a name different from "sled," as there is for saying "coach" instead of "wagon." "Sleigh" will become English, ere long, as it is now American. Twenty million people not only can make a word, but they can make a language, if it be needed. (JFC *Satanstoe* 1990: 206)

In order to achieve cultural independence from England, Americans had to re-elaborate the languages inherited from the old world so that they could describe their new reality – a reality that was characterized by a different climate and topography.

In Chapter 5 of *The Politics of American English* (1986), David Simpson underlines how in *The Pioneers* (1823; revised British edition 1832) Cooper succeeded in representing the distinctiveness of American usage. The first footnote that appears in this novel concerns, once again, the word *sleigh*:

- (2) Sleigh is the word used in every part of the United States to denote a traineau. It is of local use in the west of England, whence it is most probably derived by the Americans. The latter draw a distinction between a sled, or sledge, and a sleigh; the sleigh being shod with metal. Sleighs are also sub-divided into two-horse and one-horse sleighs. Of the latter, there are the cutter, with thills so arranged as to permit the horse to travel in the side track; the “pung,” or “tow-pung,” which is driven with a pole, and the “jumper,” a rude construction used for temporary purposes, in the new countries. Many of the American sleighs are elegant, though the use of this mode of conveyance is much lessened with the melioration of the climate, consequent on the clearing of the forests. (JFC *Pioneers* 1980: 17)

In this comment Cooper highlights the fact that Americans were not creating new lexical items: they were just using English words that British readers in big cities had probably forgotten and which for this reason had become obsolete.

Among Cooper's many works, *The Pioneers* is the novel that contains most explanations both in the text and in the footnotes. In one of these notes Cooper refers to the origin of the word *Yankee* explaining that “in America the term Yankee is of local meaning. It is thought to be derived from the manner in which the Indians of New England pronounced the word English or Yengeese” (JFC *Pioneers* 1980: 53). The re-edited version of *The Prairie* (1827; revised British edition 1832), instead contains information on American customs that are supposed to be completely unfamiliar for British readers. One of the recurring characters in Cooper's novels, Natty Bumppo, is often described in this novel as a *trapper*, a lexical item that is clarified in the following note: “It is scarcely necessary to say, that this American word means one who takes his game in a trap. It is of general use on the frontiers. The beaver, an animal too sagacious to be easily killed, is oftener taken in this way than in any other” (JFC *Prairie* 1877: 17).

However, for Cooper no political or social reality elicited so much interest as Native Americans (Schachterle 2011: 49). In his representation of Native languages Cooper created two different linguistic worlds. On the one hand there are the Indians that white civilization has corrupted and who speak, according to Simpson, “an inelegant pidgin English unmarked by any evident memories of their own authentic, poetic locutions” (Simpson 1986: 205). On the other hand, there are the heroic Mohican who use their typical poetic expressions underlining the purity of Native American languages. The first note that appears in *The Last of the Mohicans* explains that Horican was the original name of Lake George, a lake that was renamed by both French and English colonists:⁴

- (3) As each nation of the Indians had its language or its dialect, they usually gave different names to the same places, though nearly all of their appellations were descriptive of the object. Thus a literal translation of the name of this beautiful sheet of water, used by the tribe that dwelt on its banks, would be “The Tail of the Lake.” Lake George, as it is vulgarly, and now, indeed, legally, called, forms a sort of tail to Lake Champlain, when viewed on the map. Hence, the name. (JFC *Mohicans* 1998: 16)

In this example Cooper reconstructs the name used by Native Americans probably by taking their cue from its physical traits (Schachterle 2011: 50). The author also gives another explanation of Native American customs in a note in which he shows how Indian tribes are called in different ways both by their friends and by their enemies.

Schachterle’s analysis continues with another novel, *The Prairie*, where we can find an important note in which Cooper claimed that European and Native American languages were unified in an “American language” that was used by both, but was native for neither:

- (4) The Americans and the Indians have adopted several words, which each believes peculiar to the language of the others. Thus “squaw”, “papoose” or child, wigwam, &c. &c., though it is doubtful whether they belonged at all to any Indian dialect, are much used by both white and red men in their intercourse. Many words are derived from the French, in this species of Prairie nomaic. (JFC *Prairie* 1877: 488)

⁴ See Section 3.2 for further analysis of the word “Horican”.

According to Schachterle, this note represents Cooper's awareness of the fact that "cultural border-crossings between white men and red men were already beginning at the level of language" (Schachterle 2011: 52).

2.2 Critical footnotes

This second type of notes is found in the novels where Cooper used the authorial technique of the artificial editor. This strategy allowed him to present new narrators who often shared his own prejudices, but at the same time he could distance himself from their ideas. Among the footnotes in *Satanstoe* that ridicule American provincialisms there is an editorial note – quoted in (5) below – that shows how much Cooper was afraid that "American provincialism and exuberance sometimes produces linguistic changes that are awkward, comic, and too often grandiloquent" (Schachterle 2011: 55):

- (5) It is northern [that is, Yankee] American, to call a small "lake" a "pond," a small "river" a "creek," even though it should be an "outlet," instead of an "inlet," &c. &c. It is a more difficult thing than is commonly supposed, to make two great nations, each of which is disposed to innovate, speak the same language with precise uniformity. The Manhattanese, who have probably fewer of the peculiarities of the inhabitants of a capital than the population of any other town in the world of four hundred thousand souls, the consequences of a rapid growth, and of a people who have come principally from the country, are much addicted to introducing new significations for words, which arise from their own provincial habits. In Manhattanese parlance, for instance, a "square" is a "park," or, even a "garden" is a "park." A promenade on the water, is a "battery!" It is a pity that, in this humour for change, they have not thought of altering the complex and imitative name of their town... – EDITOR. (JFC *Satanstoe* 1990: 384)

In this note Cooper mentions two great social groups: the Yankees and the Manhattanese and for him they are both guilty of innovations that he did not approve. For this reason, in his later works, Cooper tried to limit American changes that he considered exuberant. In a note to his novel *The Chainbearer*, of 1845, Cooper (1912) severely criticizes the pronunciation of the people of New England and their excessive use of Latinate words to indicate common objects.

In other novels Cooper restricted the right of linguistic creation only to the upper classes: in his view, New Englanders, the lower classes, and social climbers did not possess the proper authority to create and establish new usages. Cooper continued to support this idea in the chapter: "On Language" in *The American Democrat* (1838), where he underlined the most common *lacunae* in American English:

- (6) The common faults of American language are an ambition of effect, a want of simplicity, and a turgid abuse of terms. To these may be added ambiguity of expression. (JFC *Democrat* 1931: 110)

Another interesting aspect of this work is its focus on the word *gentlemen*, that for Cooper means: "One elevated above the mass of society by his birth, manners, attainments, character and social condition" (JFC *Democrat* 1931: 112). Although Cooper never declared openly that *gentlemen* had the task of establishing linguistic usage, he firmly claimed that only those who belonged to this social class succeeded in avoiding the most common errors. For Cooper the duty of regulating and improving American English had to be given to "educated gentlemen of the middle states" (JFC *Gleanings* 1982: 28), a task that he himself attempted to carry out in his publications (Schachterle 2011: 68).

3. Linguistic representations in *The Last of the Mohicans*

3.1 Between realism and idealization

In *Cooper's Eloquent Indians* (1956), John T. Frederick starts his analysis underlining how the language created by Cooper in his novels has often been the object of heated debate. For example, in 1828, General Lewis Cass criticized Cooper in an article about the study of Indian languages. After having quoted about 20 figurative expressions from *The Last of the Mohicans* and *The Prairie*, Cass declared that "This is not the manner in which Indians talk, nor is it the manner in which any people talk" (Cass 1828: 374). Later, in relation to the language used by Cooper for his Native American characters, Cass concluded that in his opinion "[Cooper's] Uncas, and his Pawnee Hardheart... have no living prototype in our forests. They may wear leggins and moccasins, and be wrapped in a blanket or a buffalo skin, but they are civilized men, and not Indians" (Cass 1828: 376). Another critic, William Josiah

Snelling, who had first-hand experience of Native Americans, challenged the authenticity of the figurative language used in the autobiography of the Indian chief Black Hawk, for which he blamed Cooper's novels:⁵

The only drawback upon our credence is the intermixture of courtly phrases, and the figures of speech, which our novelists are so fond of putting into the mouths of Indians [...]. The term pale faces, often applied to the whites in this book, was, we think, never in the mouth of any American savage, excepting in the fanciful pages of Mr. Cooper. There are many more phrases and epithets of the like nature, and we only mention them, because we think it time that authors should cease to make Indians talk sentiment. (Snelling 1835: 69, 70).

Another famous critic who doubted the authenticity of Cooper's characters was Francis Parkman, who affirmed that "[Cooper's] Indian characters [...] it must be granted, are for the most part either superficially or falsely drawn" (1852: 150). Parkman continued his accusation claiming that:

The long conversations which he puts into their mouths, are as truthless as they are tiresome. Such as they are, however, they have been eagerly copied by a legion of the smaller poets and novel writers; so that, jointly with Thomas Campbell, Cooper is responsible for the fathering of those aboriginal heroes, lovers and sages, who have long formed a petty nuisance in our literature. (Parkman 1852: 150).

Also Georg Fridén reinforced the idea that Cooper's Indians were idealized: after comparing them with Byron's pirates and Ossian's Celtic heroes, he declared that "all these figures are but phases of the same romantic movement. Cooper saw his Indians in the light of romantic idealism. Cooper's Indian rhetoric is a poetic creation and not the speech of living men" (Fridén 1949: 55).

Nevertheless, Cooper himself proclaimed the authenticity of his representation in the preface to *The Last of the Mohicans*, where he wrote that "the reader who takes up these volumes in expectation of finding an imaginary and romantic picture of things which never had an existence will

⁵ Snelling added that these figures of speech are "to be attributed to the bad taste of Black Hawk's amanuensis", who was probably influenced by Cooper's novels. (Snelling 1835: 69).

probably lay them aside, disappointed. The work is exactly what it professes to be in its title-page – a narrative” (JFC *Mohicans* 1998: 3). In addition, many scholars defended the author by placing his novel in the social context in which he lived and by considering the Indians’ image that can be found in the sources that influenced Cooper. For example, James F. Beard stood in favour of Cooper’s representation:

Though Cooper seems never to have prepared a systematic list of readings, the extraordinary assimilation of information displayed in his fiction suggests that his knowledge of Indians was as full and authentic as discriminating study of the printed sources of his time allowed. (Beard 1983: xviii).

Even so, according to Frederick, it seems almost impossible to find a universal answer “to the broad question of whether Cooper’s Indians are portrayed realistically or are idealized” (Frederick 1956: 1005), because it will probably always depend on a subjective judgement.

However, Cooper’s figurative language can be examined objectively, and Frederick himself offers a comparison between the metaphorical expressions in Cooper’s novels and those ascribed to the Indian speakers in the sources used by the author, in order to demonstrate that Cooper neither invented creatively nor copied from European authors; on the contrary, he “followed his sources with extraordinary fidelity” (Frederick 1956: 1005).

An essential piece of information for this type of study is the testimony of Cooper’s daughter, Susan Fenimore Cooper. In *The Cooper Gallery* (1865), she guaranteed that her father tried to give a particular authenticity to the representation of his Indian characters and affirmed that “the earlier writers on these subjects, Heckwelder, Charlevoix, Penn, Smith, Elliott, Colden, were studied. The narratives of Lang, of Lewis and Clarke, of Mackenzie, were examined” (S.F. Cooper 1865: 129).

The list given by Susan Cooper was probably not complete, because, on the basis of the books that she mentioned, it could be supposed that he also read other works that were equally accessible and famous (Frederick 1956: 1006). Among such texts we can find the accounts of Alexander Henry, John Long and John Bradbury, the works of James Buchanan and Joseph Doddridge, and the official reports of Jedidiah Morse and Henry Rowe Schoolcraft. In all those works Cooper could find references to the figurative language of Native Americans, as in the work of Roger Williams, *A Key into the Language of North America*, where the author reported that “similitudes

greatly please them” and gave many examples of figure of speech that were typical of Indian speakers (Williams 1936: 132).⁶

Similarly, also John Eliot and Charlevoix commented on the Indians’ figurative language affirming that “under such metaphorical language they usually expresse what eminent things they meane” (Eliot 1834: 44) and that “all these nations have some what of the Asiatic genius in their discourse, which gives it a figurative turn and expression” (Charlevoix 1923: I, 286). Charlevoix also observed that “they use a great many allegories and other figures” (1923: II, 76).

Colden, however, was critical of this abundant use of metaphorical expressions, affirming that “[the Indians’] Speeches abound with Metaphors, after the Manner of the Eastern Nations [...] For the Indians having but few Words, and few complex Ideas, use many Metaphors in their discourse” (Colden 1922: 36). In addition, both Colden and Charlevoix complained about the inability of the interpreter to reproduce Native American figurative language with any accuracy. Heckewelder also provided examples of Indian use of figurative expressions; however, he found such usage excessive, while excusing it at the same time:

The Indians are fond of metaphors. They are to their discourse what feathers and beads are to their persons, a gaudy but tasteless ornament. Yet we must not judge them too severely on that account [...]. Even in enlightened Europe, many centuries have not elapsed since the best and most celebrated writers employed this figure in a profuse manner [...] the immortal Shakespeare, himself, did not disdain it. (Heckewelder 1971: 137)

Despite the presence of these reliable accounts of the frequent use of metaphorical expressions in Indian languages, Cooper did not feel justified in inventing these expressions freely. For Frederick, if we compare the metaphorical expressions employed by Cooper and those attributed to Indian speakers in his sources, we can observe that more than half of them coincide, while the others are created by following models provided in the sources (Frederick 1956: 1009).

⁶ The thirty-two chapters of this book provide a long list of recurring Indian expressions translated into English. These expressions refer to different themes, from religion to the natural and animal world, from relations to war and death. Some of these expressions are used by Cooper in his novels, e.g. *squaw* (Indian woman), *moccasin* (type of shoes) and *Manittó* (Gods).

As Cooper himself noticed, the Indian speaker “draws his metaphors from the clouds, the seasons, the birds, the beasts, and the vegetable” (JFC *Mohicans* 1998: 7). The most varied group of the expressions used by the author pertains to the animal world of the forests and the prairies, which played an essential part not only in Native American economy, but also in its culture. In particular, Cooper employed images of animals in metaphors and similes in order to represent human qualities or actions. In *The Prairie* an expert warrior is described as a “grizzly bear in combat” (JFC *Prairie* 1877: 365). This example relies on Colden’s work, where the author quotes an exhortation of an Indian chief to his warriors, who are encouraged to behave like bears, because they must never give up in spite of all the difficulties. As a matter of fact, Native Americans respected bears on account of their tenacious bravery (Frederick 1956: 1009).

Another example can be found in the accounts of the Lewis and Clark expedition, in which it is reported that during a period of famine some Indians complained of having to “live like bears on roots and berries” (Frederick 1956: 1009). In addition to the bear and the more general “beast”, Cooper’s sources clarify his figurative references to other animals, such as the buffalo, the deer, the dog, the moose, the fox, the pig, the rabbit, the wolf, the puma and the marmot. The figure of the dog is undoubtedly the most frequent image employed by Cooper, especially to denigrate and express contempt, and it often appears in *The Last of the Mohicans*.⁷ Among the most frequent expressions we can find: “dog of the palefaces [...] go yell among the curs” and “paleface cur [...] with tail between his legs”, both taken from the novel *The Deerslayer* (1841) (JFC *Deerslayer* 1910: 327, 338). For these figures Cooper was inspired by the reports of Lewis and Clark, where we find the following simile: “White men are like dogs, the more they’re beaten, the better they act” (Frederick 1956: 1009); and by those of General Cass, who reported the words of a Native American who described a white general who was retreating saying that he was “like a dog running off with his tail between his legs” (Cass 1826: 99n).

With regard to the ornithological field, Cooper allowed himself more freedom of imagination than in any other category. He preferred the image of the eagle to indicate ferocity, courage or a sharp eye, and he often used a particular type of bird, the wren, to describe the melodic voices of his heroines.⁸ In addition, birds are a frequent metaphor of bearers of (often

⁷ It appears six times in *The Last of the Mohicans*, four times in *The Deerslayer*, three times in *The Wept of Wish-ton-Wish*, and once each in *The Prairie* and *Satanstoe*.

⁸ The figure of the eagle is used in all five of the *Leatherstocking Tales* and also in *The Wept of Wish-ton-Wish* and *The Redskins*, for a total of seventeen occurrences.

bad or false) news both in Cooper's novels and in his sources. Heckewelder described the expression "singing birds" as the typical figure to indicate "tale bearers or liars" (Heckewelder 1971: 138). In *The Last of the Mohicans* we can find expressions like "singing birds have opened their bills" – i.e., fake news is spreading – while Magua, the evil character in the novel, is described as "a singing bird" – that is, a liar (JFC *Mohicans* 1998: 347, 339).

Cooper also used some rhetorical figures taken from the vegetable world, like trees, flowers or leaves; the most recurring one is "as many as the leaves on the trees", often employed to refer to white settlers. From the natural world he also took the image of the clouds to represent mistakes, suspicions and misunderstandings, or the image of the sun to indicate friendship, peace and good faith (Frederick 1956: 1011).

The most common metaphorical expressions, present both in Cooper's novels and in his sources, are those in which a sense organ represents a mental ability and those in which a part of the body is used to describe someone's qualities or traits. These figures are also common in English, especially those relating to the heart (e.g. *good-hearted*, *a hearty welcome*, *put one's heart into sth*). Nevertheless, the most frequent figure is the one of the ears, that can indicate listening, comprehension or an agreement between people, like in "Your ears are ever open to slanderous reports" (Colden 1922: II, 107) or in "Why do you wish to stop my ears?" (JFC *Mohicans* 1998: 339).⁹

Other recurring expressions refer to war and fighting, such as *to bury the hatchet* and *to go on the warpath*, expressions that have since become part of ordinary English usage. Many figures also refer to blood and also in this case most of them are still in use (e.g. *hot blood*, *blood chilled by age*, *bloody hands*, *a spot stained with blood*); a very frequent simile based on this image compares white people's blood to *spring water*, as Native Americans thought that white people's blood was as pale as the colour of their skin. An example can be found in the reports of John Long, where a typical Indian expression is quoted about the white man's veins: in the Natives' view, they "run clear like the sea" (Long 1922: 140).

Another Native linguistic feature that Cooper borrows is the use of *woman* or *old woman* "in derogation and contempt" (Frederick 1956: 1013).¹⁰ This usage is frequent in the Native American speeches reported by Mackenzie, Bartram, Heckewelder, Bradbury, Colden, Charlevoix and Long. Similarly, although less frequently, Native Americans also expressed

⁹ The figure of the ears appears fifty-three times in eight novels.

¹⁰ It appears thirty-two times in eight novels.

contempt through a comparison between adults and children; for example, John Eliot said that one Indian accused another of having asked “a papoose question” (Eliot 1834: 47) – i.e., a childish question, while Winslow reported the speech of a Native American who stated that white men “died crying, making sour faces, more like children than men” (Winslow 1624: 206). In addition, Schoolcraft quoted the words of an Indian chief who admitted that “sometimes the Indians have acted like children” (Schoolcraft 1825: 365).

According to Frederick, “the recurring charge that Cooper idealized and falsified his red men in this respect – that their eloquence was the product of his own imagination, or the effect of trans-Atlantic literary influence – is contrary to the facts” (Frederick 1956: 1017). Indeed, as this analysis has shown, Cooper never used his imagination freely in his representation of Native American languages, nor did he imitate the European romantic writers of his time. On the contrary, he acquired the necessary information to represent his Native Americans from the most reliable sources of his time and followed them closely in his linguistic representations. At the same, he employed such representations to reinforce the model of a linguistic hierarchy concerning both Native and Euro-American languages.

3.2 Cooper’s fiction of language: The pure language of Native Americans

In relation to early nineteenth-century ideology concerning languages and their perceptions, Blakemore (1984) claims that in *The Last of the Mohicans* Cooper “imagined another language – a pure, unfallen language that would embody the new American reality” (1984: 21), but above all he imagined a prelapsarian language. Blakemore (1984) underlines how Cooper identified two types of languages: those that precede and those that follow the original sin. In the former group he places the Edenic language of the Delaware, while in the latter we find the corrupt Indian and European languages – in particular, French and English. In order to clarify this concept, we can refer to Steiner (1975), who summarizes the ancient theory according to which a pure language was in existence before the original sin, but after the expulsion of man from the Garden of Eden, it divided itself into many different languages as a result of man’s imperfection, as shown in the biblical story of the tower of Babel.¹¹

¹¹ According to this theory, the prelapsarian language enabled all men to understand one another and contained a divine syntax analogous to God’s own diction. Being of

Among the sources mentioned in Section 3.1 above, John Heckewelder's *History, Manners, and Customs of the Indian Nations* (1818) is the text to which Cooper resorted most frequently, and it is from this source that Cooper took some of his theories about Native American languages. For example, Cooper described the Delaware as noble savages on the basis of Heckewelder's work, where Native Americans are presented as the original people and their language is considered the ancestor of all Indian languages. Another theory that reinforces this idea was outlined by Duponceau, who suggested that Delaware was the original language of Adam and Eve, "first taught to mankind by the great author of all perfection" (Heckewelder 1971: 406). Other ideas of Heckewelder's appear in *The Last of the Mohicans*, such as the superiority of the Delaware language over the corrupt language of the Huron and the sorrow for the impossibility of translating the beauties of that language into European languages. Cooper often stressed these concepts, but Blakemore argues that his support was futile after all: "his fiction of language is finally resolved in the writing out of a myth that inevitably ends with the destruction of the Indian world and the language that crystallized it" (Blakemore 1984: 22).

Nevertheless, in his novel Cooper seems to have an ambivalent attitude towards his own language, because it represents the legacy of an old and already fallen world. In addition, he blamed the end of the Indian world on the corruption of their languages by white settlers. As regards European languages, Cooper created a linguistic hierarchy in which the post-Edenic languages of the Euro-American world, in this case English and French, are considered inferior to the pure language of the Delaware. However, in this scheme he added that English is clearly a superior language among the post-Edenic ones, because it can be used as a mediator between the Delaware and the French.

In addition, in *The Last of the Mohicans* we can find a link between the expropriation of Native American lands and the expropriation of the languages of the peoples who lived there. For example, this connection is demonstrated in the 1850 preface, where Cooper comments on the Indian name "Horican", the original Indian name of "Lake George". In this passage the author informs readers of having extracted this name from some ancient maps of that area, where "it was ascertained that a tribe of Indians, called Les Horicans by the French, existed in the neighborhood of this beautiful

direct divine origin, this Edenic language was consistent with reality and words and meanings matched perfectly. (Steiner 1975: 58, 59).

sheet of water". Cooper explains that this name was first replaced with the French name *Lac du Saint Sacrement* and then with the English name "Lake George" – see (7) below:

- (7) Its waters were so limpid as to have been exclusively selected by the Jesuit missionaries to perform the typical purification of baptism, and to obtain for it the title of lake "du Saint Sacrement." The less zealous English thought they conferred a sufficient honor on its unsullied fountains, when they bestowed the name of their reigning prince, the second of the house of Hanover. The two united to rob the untutored possessors of its wooded scenery of their native right to perpetuate its original appellation of "Horican." (JFC *Mohicans* 1998: 15-16)

Although Cooper criticized the original Indian name, saying it was unpronounceable, Blakemore (1984: 23) argues that the author was also very critical of the new names, because they represented the foreign corruption of the lake's intrinsic reality that was connected to the Indians. According to Blakemore, in this passage there is an implicit connection between the expropriation of the land and the deprivation of the Indians' right to name their land. Therefore, for Cooper, every time the colonists changed the name of the land, the land modified itself because it did not represent the Indian reality any longer. After having lost their land, they also lost their right to represent their reality and history, a right that was claimed by the white settlers.

Another theory discussed by Cooper in the 1826 preface is the link between the decline of the Indians' language and the end of their world. For the writer the confusion of Indian history was a result of the fragmentation of the primeval Native American language into different corrupt dialects that were made even more complicated by European names. For example, European colonists renamed the many Indian tribes in different ways, as the author explains:

- (8) When it is remembered that the Dutch, the English, and the French, all gave appellations to the tribes that dwelt within the country which is the scene of this story, and that the Indians not only gave different names to their enemies, but frequently to themselves, the cause of the confusion will be understood" (JFC *Mohicans* 1998: 8).

The introduction of post-Edenic names creates confusion in the historical reality of the Native Americans and Cooper represents this chaos of names

and languages in his novel. In Chapter 7, the author explains that “the Indians rarely use the same name when different tribes speak of each other” (JFC *Mohicans* 1998: 79). In Chapter 13, Cooper introduces the impossibility of communication among Indian tribes by describing a conversation between some Huron as “unintelligible” for the Delaware (JFC *Mohicans* 1998: 150). Later, in Chapter 19, the narrator summarises the themes that were discussed in the 1826 and 1831 prefaces:

- (9) The confusion of nations, and even of tribes, to which Hawk-eye alluded, existed at that period in the fullest force. The great tie of language, and, of course of a common origin, was severed in many places; and it was one of its consequences, that the Delaware and the Mingo (as the people of the Six Nations were called) were found fighting in the same ranks, while the latter sought the scalp of the Huron, though believed to be the root of his own stock. The Delawares were even divided among themselves. (JFC *Mohicans* 1998: 224)

For his representation of the fragmented Indian language Cooper drew inspiration from the model of Babel. Nevertheless, although he describes the results of this division, he also affirms that the pure and incorrupt language of the Native Americans still existed in 1757. In order to represent Native American languages, the author constructs a double linguistic fiction: a corrupt language that is the result of the Indian languages’ chaos and an original Indian language that is still spoken by the Delaware and the Mohican. For Cooper, Delaware is so superior and prestigious compared to the other languages that even Europeans cannot speak it. In the novel the superiority of this language is underlined in the scenes where Hawk-eye and the two Mohican communicate by using only the Delaware language. In these passages they move away from the other white people in order to discuss the situation in their language. For Blakemore “this physical separation is an objective correlative for the linguistic separation” (1984: 28), thus drawing attention to the fact that the main characters of this novel live in other linguistic and semantic spaces. When the characters have to discuss urgent and important matters, they use Delaware, creating the impression that this language is linked to important issues of life and death. Therefore, in the novel this language becomes the superior language of those who have been “initiated into the nuances of the forest and the mysteries of the Indian world” (Blakemore 1984: 29), distinguishing them from white “novices”.

3.3 Linguistic hierarchy in *The Last of the Mohicans*

As already mentioned before, English is presented by Cooper as one of the post-Edenic languages that were inferior to the pure language of the Delaware; nevertheless, in his linguistic hierarchy, English is at an intermediate level between Delaware and French. As a matter of fact, he could not exaggerate his attacks against his own language, because he was writing for an English-speaking audience. For this reason, Cooper decided to compare English to a more corrupt language that symbolized the imperialistic ambitions of the Catholic French, described as “the white tempters in the garden of the new world” (Blakemore 1984: 30).

Throughout the novel French is presented as the demonic language that is associated with deceit and pedantry. The depiction of French and French Catholicism as corrupt and devious was linked to a deep-rooted ideology. Cooper probably took inspiration from John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1667), because his description of French as the language of the Huron’s manipulation and corruption (especially of Magua) recalls Satan’s use of language in order to seduce and manipulate both the fallen and the unfallen in Milton’s work (Blakemore 1984: 40). Although Cooper attacked this language implicitly, he never showed the superiority of English over French, but in some passages he just proclaimed English as the only authentic white language. In the novel, when Chingachgook asks Natty to speak with his “white brothers” (Heyward and the rest of the group), the latter answers: “That will I, and in English that the king needn’t be ashamed to answer” (JFC *Mohicans* 1998: 42). According to Blakemore, although in this passage there are possible ironic nuances, it describes English as “the native language of the novel’s white hero, and hence the esteemed white language of the novel” (Blakemore 1984: 30). During the scene in the Huron’s cave, even though Hawk-eye describes English as “the genuine tongue of a white-skin” (JFC *Mohicans* 1998: 298), he cannot speak because his language would betray him; therefore, Heyward is obliged to speak French, or better, using Hawk-eye’s words, he has to communicate with the Huron in their “jargon”.

Natty’s negative comments on French are frequent in *The Last of the Mohicans*; for example, in a scene he confuses French with the language of the dead because, finding himself in front of a French sentinel, he asks Heyward: “What says it? It speaks neither Indian nor English!” (JFC *Mohicans* 1998: 155). Natty probably recognized the sentinel’s language; however, with this comment Cooper wanted to reinforce the inferiority of this language compared to English and Delaware. Also in the two conversations between

Heyward and Montcalm, French appears as the language of deceit and treason. At the beginning both characters speak French, but as soon as they try to confuse and deceive one another, “the discrepancy between what they say and what they mean contributes to the reader’s sense that French is the language of rhetorical manipulation and trickery” (Blakemore 1984: 31). Colonel Munro also judges French negatively, complaining that it presents “a Jesuitical way of telling a man his misfortunes!” (JFC *Mohicans* 1998: 171). However, his judgement is more evident in the scene where he hesitates to listen to the French message written by Montcalm and says to Heyward: “Your mother was the only child of my bosom friend, Duncan; and I’ll give you a hearing, though all the knights of St. Louis were in a body at the sally-port, with the French saint at their head, crying to speak a word under favor” (JFC *Mohicans* 1998: 178). This comment represents a rejection not only of the French message, but also of the French language in general, because it is characterized by that ambiguity, deceit and imperialistic ambition that the English novel purports to contrast with opposing values: simplicity, truth and honesty. Blakemore suggests that, even though Montcalm talks about chivalry and humanity, “his language is revealed to be vague and vacuous, full of glittering but hollow phrases” (Blakemore 1984: 31), as in the following example; while speaking to Heyward, Montcalm says: “Your commandant is a brave man, and well qualified to repel my assault. Mais, monsieur, is it not time to begin to take more counsel of humanity, and less of your courage? The one as strongly characterizes the hero as the other” (JFC *Mohicans* 1998: 174). With his critical comment on French, Cooper wanted to represent the French world view, “in which the specious words of French chivalry camouflage the sordid facts of French realpolitik” (Blakemore 1984: 32).

Furthermore, French is also the language that is borrowed by the devilish Huron, the “villains” of this novel. In the following passage Hawkeye presents the Huron in this manner:

- (10) I call them Iroquois, because to me every native, who speaks a foreign tongue, is accounted an enemy, though he may pretend to serve the king! If Webb wants faith and honesty in an Indian, let him bring out the tribes of the Delawares, and send these greedy and lying Mohawks and Oneidas, with their six nations of varlets, where in nature they belong, among the French! (JFC *Mohicans* 1998: 59)

In this further attack, Natty also condemns the tribes that employ French considering them as fallen and corrupt. Therefore, in *The Last of the Mohicans*,

language allows the reader to distinguish the good Indian tribes (Delaware and Mohican) from the bad ones (Huron). An appropriate example is represented by the evil character of the novel, Magua, who calls himself *Le Renard Subtil*: "'Tis the name his Canada fathers have given to Magua,' returned the runner, with an air that manifested his pride at the distinction" (JFC *Mohicans* 1998: 49). In this passage the corruption of Magua is reinforced by the fact that he voluntarily and proudly adopted a French name, abandoning his original name and therefore his Indian identity. Cooper continues his attack on French in the discussion between Heyward and Magua on the meaning of *Le Cerf Agile*, the French name given by Magua to Uncas:

(11) "'Le Cerf Agile' is not here?"

"I know not whom you call 'The Nimble Deer'," said Duncan gladly profiting by any excuse to create delay.

"Uncas," returned Magua, pronouncing the Delaware name with even greater difficulty than he spoke his English words. "'Bounding Elk' is what the white man says, when he calls to the young Mohican."

"Here is some confusion in names between us, Le Renard," said Duncan, hoping to provoke a discussion. "*Daim* is the French for deer, and *cerf* for stag; *elan* is the true term, when one would speak of an elk."

"Yes," muttered the Indian, in his native tongue; "the pale faces are prattling women! they have two words for each thing, while a red-skin will make the sound of his voice speak to him." Then, changing his language, he continued, adhering to the imperfect nomenclature of his provincial instructors. "The deer is swift, but weak; the elk is swift, but strong; and the son of 'Le Serpent' is 'Le Cerf Agile'".

(JFC *Mohicans* 1998: 104, 105)

In this scene Cooper implicitly shows the problem of Native American corruption on the part of European settlers, underlining ironically the fact that Magua has more difficulty in pronouncing the Indian name 'Uncas' than when he speaks English. Moreover, his speech is contradictory and disorganized: at first he attacks the European languages in his mother tongue, but immediately after that he starts again to speak in French, "adhering to the imperfect nomenclature of his provincial instructors". In addition, the debate about the meaning of the French words has the purpose of intentionally confusing Magua, in order to buy Heyward more time. Heyward's strategy is to start a conversation by deliberately mistranslating *Le Cerf Agile* as agile *deer*, although more precisely it means an agile male *stag*. This confusion is further increased by the corrupt French of Magua,

who thinks that Uncas' English epithet, *Bounding Elk*, is the same in the French translation, *Le Cerf Agile*. Another example of an intentionally wrong translation is given when Heyward deliberately fails to distinguish between the English name given by Hawk-eye to Uncas (Hawk-eye cannot speak French) and his French alias.

French is also the language used by both Native Americans and white people when they have to communicate, because neither group knows the mother tongue of the other and the white colonists rely on the Native Americans' knowledge of French. In the second part of the novel, when Heyward is in the Huron' village, their language is "unintelligible" for him; for this reason, he asks in French: "Do none of my brothers speak the French or the English?" (JFC *Mohicans* 1998: 266). In answer to this question a Huron warrior asks provocatively "in the language of the Canadas: 'When our Great Father speaks to his people, is it with the tongue of a Huron?'" . Disguised as a French doctor, Heyward answers in an evasive manner, using the language of deceit and saying: "He knows no difference in his children, whether the colour of the skin be red, black, or white" (JFC *Mohicans* 1983: 266). According to Blakemore, Heyward moves the conversation cleverly "from a linguistic to a racial context in order to placate and distract the Hurons" (Blakemore 1984: 34). In addition, he continues his deception drawing the Huron' s attention to his own artificially painted skin – see (12):

- (12) "When an Indian chief comes among his white fathers," returned Duncan, with great steadiness, "he lays aside his buffalo robe, to carry the shirt that is offered him. My brothers have given me paint and I wear it". (JFC *Mohicans* 1998: 267)

Heyward cleverly succeeds in overshadowing the question about language, "by shifting the category from language, which is 'internal' and intimate, to body paint – the 'external' sign of his deceptive disguise" (Blakemore 1984: 34), and by using French, the language of deceit, that contributes to the linguistic fragmentation of the Native Americans.

4. Concluding remarks

As suggested by Blakemore, in *The Last of the Mohicans* the Edenic village of the Delaware can be seen as a "linguistic microcosm" of the problems discussed in the novel: "chaotic communication, corrupt French, and the impossibility

of translation" (Blakemore 1984: 35). For Cooper, Delaware is a pure and natural language; nevertheless, it only appears in the novel when Uncas ends the chaos of foreign languages by affirming that he will talk "like his fathers with the tongue of a Delaware" (JFC *Mohicans* 1998: 346). However, Cooper does not provide a representation of the Delaware language: on the contrary, he emphasizes the death of this pure and ineffable language.

In addition, the author turns the Delaware's village into a model of Babel, where a language is destroyed by such corrupt, foreign languages as French, English and Huron. Already in 1826, with his representation of the end of a population and its languages and the resulting expansion of white civilization, Cooper predicted the future of America. In this linguistic chaos the author celebrates an Edenic Indian language and at the same time he regrets its destruction. However, at the end, he provides only one possible historical conclusion: "the prelapsarian Delaware tongue disappears with the last of the Mohican, while the extant fallen tribes speak only babel" (Blakemore 1984: 36). Finally, in this linguistic chaos, English imposes itself as the dominant language, understood by everyone, in a world where French and Dutch have been defeated and Native Americans have been decimated. If we read *The Last of the Mohicans* in this context we can affirm that Cooper depicted the fight for the new world also as a linguistic battle between Indian and European languages.

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Address: ANNALISA SCATÀ, Dipartimento di Lingue, Letterature e Culture Straniere, Università degli Studi di Bergamo, Piazza Rosate 2, 24129 Bergamo, Italy.
ORCID code: orcid.org/0000-0001-7609-0979.