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**POLYSYNTHESIS IN THE LANGUAGES OF THE  
AMERICAN INDIANS.**

BY J. N. B. HEWITT.

In the early part of this century Peter S. Duponceau announced his conviction; obtained from a cursory study of the scanty and imperfect linguistic material accessible to him, that the grammatic phenomena of the known tongues of the American Indians are characterized by a common ground plan, or, adopting a phrase of Maupertuis, a "plan of ideas." This plan he called *polysynthetic* or *syntactic*, and defined it as follows:

"A polysynthetic or syntactic construction of language is that in which the greatest number of ideas are comprised in the least number of words. This is done principally in two ways. 1. By a mode of compounding locutions which is not confined to joining two words together, as in Greek, or varying the inflection or termination of a radical word, as in most European languages, but by interweaving together the most significant sounds or syllables of each simple word, so as to form a compound that will awaken in the mind at once all the ideas singly expressed by the words from which they are taken. 2. By an analogous combination [of] the various parts of speech, particularly by means of the verb, so that its various forms and inflections will express not only the principal action, but the greatest possible number of the moral ideas and physical objects connected with it, and will combine itself to the greatest extent with those conceptions which are the subject of other parts of speech, and in other languages require to be expressed by separate and distinct words. Such I take to be the general character of the Indian languages."\*

He elsewhere says:

"I am inclined to believe that these forms are peculiar to this part of the world, and that they do not exist in the languages of the old world."†

In an essay, which won, in 1833, the Volney prize of the Institute of France, he says:

"À l'aide d'inflexions, comme dans les langues grecque et latine, de particules, affixes et suffixes, comme dans le copte, l'hébreu et les langues dites sémitiques, de la jonction de particules significatives, comme

\*Transactions of the Historical and Literary Committee of the American Philosophical Society, held at Philadelphia, for promoting useful knowledge, vol. i, p. xxx.

†Loc. cit., p. 370.