"Il faut parler pour estre entendu":
Talking about God in Wendat in 17th century New France

by
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When French Jesuits began their work preaching Catholicism to the Amerindian inhabitants of modern-day Canada in the seventeenth century, they simultaneously embarked on another project, viewed as essential to the success of their religious mission. Because Jesuits, from the time of Ignatius Loyola, insisted on communicating their message in local languages,[1] a major effort was necessary to analyze, document, and, most importantly, learn to speak the languages of the peoples they hoped to convert in New France. As the Jesuit Superior Paul Le Jeune wrote in a 1636 report to his supervisors in France, "En effet, il faut parler pour estre entendu; c'est ce que nous ne pouvons encore faire qu'en enfans" (Campeau 3.236). In order to achieve the goal of introducing Catholicism to Iroquoian and Algonquian groups, European missionaries and their Amerindian interlocutors alike would have had to adapt to the difficulties of expression and comprehension posed by indigenous tongues that the missionaries found resistant to the task, whether due to their own lack of mastery or to the inherent nature of the unfamiliar languages

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[1] "They will exercise themselves in preaching and in delivering sacred lectures in a manner suitable for the edification of the people, which is different from the scholastic manner, by endeavoring to learn the vernacular language well, to have, as matters previously studied and ready at hand, the means which are most useful for this ministry," instructed Ignatius Loyola in the Constitutions of the Society of Jesus (201). "When a plan is being worked out in some college or university to prepare persons to go among the Moors or Turks, Arabic or Chaldaic would be expedient; and Indian would be proper for those about to go among the Indians; and the same holds true for similar reasons in regard to other languages which could have greater utility in other regions" (214).

(Blackburn 102–103, 163). As the Jesuit priest Jérome Lalemant put it in his 1640 *Relation* from the Huron mission, "Il semble que ny l'évangile ny l'escriture saincte n'ayent esté composez pour eux. Non seulement les mots leur manquent pour exprimer la saincteté de nos mystères, mais mesme les paraboles les plus familiers de Jésus Christ leurs sont inexplicables" (Campeau 4.736). As I will demonstrate in the coming pages, the Jesuits were inventive and flexible in attempting to meet these challenges, and so were their Wendat interlocutors, who would have struggled to understand concepts that were absent from their culture.

In light of the communicative challenges facing both parties, seventeenth century Jesuit reports of the enthusiastic embrace of Christianity by the Wendat, the five Iroquoian groups that are sometimes still called the Huron[2] and that inhabited the land between Georgian Bay and Lake Simcoe in modern-day Ontario (Trigger 27–31), deserve a closer look. In a typical description of an Amerindian's reaction to missionary lessons, Lalemant reported in 1640 that a Wendat interlocutor was inspired to convert after being told about God. "Ayant entendu parler de Dieu, elle fut incontinent éprise de son amour et du désir de croire en luy et de le servir," he wrote (Campeau 4.694). Leaving aside for the present the question of whether Jesuit accounts of their missionary successes were accurate or exaggerated,[3] my aim in this article is

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[2] Wendat is used here, as elsewhere, to designate the people who were once more commonly known as the Huron. Wendat is the name this group gives itself, and Huron was a name imposed by European colonizers (Trigger, preface to the Carleton Library Series reprint). The term "Huron" is used in this study only to refer to specific Jesuit documents or the missionary field.

[3] In fact the question of whether Jesuits faithfully recorded the fruits of their missionary efforts or freely embellished their record to boost material and spiritual support for the mission is a matter of debate. As Carole Blackburn noted in her book *Harvest of Souls,* scholars such as Lucien Campeau and Kenneth Morrison have argued for a literal reading of passages describing conversions in the *Jesuit Relations.* Blackburn herself adopted a more measured

to expose some of the linguistic inventions and compromises that are obscured by the facile declarations that Lalemant and his colleagues made in published texts about the Wendat reaction to their preaching. Specifically, I will examine the strategies that made it possible for Jesuits to preach about God in the unfamiliar tongue of potential converts and then report to their French readers that the Wendat were embracing the message, and also will examine the relatively sparse clues about a strategy that their interlocutors might have employed to understand the ideas about the Christian deity that the Jesuits were trying to express.[4] I will argue that the Jesuit strategy of introducing the terms *ha8endio* and *Di8* into the Wendat language, and the ways their interlocutors would have tried to make sense of them, would have worked together to create meaning that was later obscured when the terms were translated back into French for the purposes of informing French readers of mission progress. The symbol 8 in these terms was used by Jesuits to designate the phonemes [u] and [w] (Steckley, *Words,* vii).[5] Finally, I will reflect on what the Wendat-

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approach, recognizing that Jesuit ideology likely took a toll on the accuracy of their accounts of conversions (Blackburn 6-7).

[4] For the purposes of the present discussion, I give the Jesuit missionaries the benefit of the doubt as to the receptivity of Amerindians to their message, although the Jesuits themselves admitted that at least some of their interlocutors actively resisted their message. For example, Le Jeune reported in 1636 the results of a colleague's effort to persuade the Montagnais to give a dead relative a Christian burial: "Un sauvage lui répart: 'va-t'en, on ne t'entend pas.' C'est une réponse qui nous font parfois les sauvages quand on les presse de faire une chose qui ne leur agrée pas" (Campeau 3.201). Although resistance by Amerindian listeners is fascinating and worthy of study, I have opted to focus the present article on language encounters in which both parties made a good-faith effort to understand and to be understood.

[5] The symbol "represents a sound like the *u* in 'lute' when it precedes a consonant and a *w* sounds when it precedes a vowel" (Steckley, *De Religione* 45). This solution to transcribing

French linguistic encounter means for the religious conversions reported in the *Jesuit Relations*, and for the interpretive possibilities of the texts more generally.

The particular problem of how to express *Dieu,* God, in the language of the Wendat is an intriguing one for study, since the Christian deity, as I will demonstrate shortly, proved challenging to discuss in that tongue. Although seventeenth century France's understandings of God were surely varied, complex, and nuanced in the wake of decades of religious strife, it is safe to generalize that an important and universally recognized feature was the deity's quality as an all-powerful, transcendent, and abstract entity. As Antoine Furetière put it in the entry for "Dieu" in his *Dictionnaire Universel* (1690), "Il ne peut avoir de vraye définition, à cause que c'est un Estre infini et incompréhensible. Les hommes le considèrent comme la première Cause, le premier Estre qui est de tout temps, qui a tout créé, et qui subsiste de luy-même," he wrote. Whatever doctrinal disputes may have been raging in France and the rest of Europe, God was understood to so far exceed man as to be practically indefinable in human terms. The ways French priests and their Wendat interlocutors attempted to communicate about this obviously essential topic are, I hope to show, revealing both of the colonial encounter in New France and of the texts produced by missionaries in that context.

The rich record of French-Amerindian linguistic encounters in New France has inspired a fair amount of work by students of language and culture. Some scholars, notably Victor Hanzeli and Pierrette Lagarde, have used texts produced by missionaries to uncover the methodology of missionary linguists and the grammatical characteristics of Amerindian languages. John Steckley has examined Jesuit texts written in Wendat to demonstrate how priests incorporated aspects of Iroquoian cultures into their message (see, for example, "The Warrior and the Lineage"), and has also used the work of missionary linguists as a source of clues about Wendat culture (*Words of the Huron)*.

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unfamiliar sounds first appeared in print in the *Relation* for 1636, according to Campeau's preface to that text (Campeau 3.183).

Although Jesuit writings certainly have proved a useful tool for the study of Wendat language and culture, I am more interested here in the lessons they offer about how knowledge was produced in dialogue in New France, and how those lessons can in turn inform one's understanding of writings produced in the context of colonial encounter.[6] Complicating this line of inquiry is the fact that the only existing accounts of such encounters were written by Europeans, meaning that the Wendats' reaction to Jesuit efforts to tell them about *Dieu* are only available as perceived and described by missionary writers. It is nonetheless possible, I hope to show, to discern clues as to how the Wendat experienced and coped with the changes wrought in their language by missionaries using it to express novel ideas.

This article draws on the *Jesuit Relations*—annual New France mission reports that were published from 1632 until 1673 with the goal of rallying spiritual and material support for the mission (Pouliot, *Etude,* 7)— and on six unpublished bilingual dictionaries, of varying format and content, penned by Jesuit missionaries in the field. I am aware that my lack of attention to the individuals who authored the *Relations* and the dictionaries deprives them and their interlocutors of individual agency, and glosses over the theological, personal, and political differences that may have

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[6] My approach here is informed by what Natalie Zemon-Davis has identified as a strategy for understanding Canada's history in less Eurocentric terms, privileging "both Amerindians and Europeans as actors and reactors" (24). Like Carole Blackburn, I read the Jesuits' Amerindian interlocutors and informants as "[…] active agents whose cultural logics had the power to decentre the authority of [the] Word and of the Jesuits" (102). Despite the authoritative tone of the *Jesuit Relations,* it is important to recognize and attempt to account for the fact that, in Blackburn's words, "The Jesuits were required to negotiate and struggle over meaning" (104) in the conversations that formed the basis of their written accounts.

existed among members of the Society of Jesus.[7] This shortcoming is a natural consequence of the nature of my sources. The dictionaries I draw on were not only a reference tool for priests in New France, but a pedagogical one as well. New missionaries were required to copy—and partially revise, if necessary—whichever dictionary was currently in use as part of their linguistic training, making the surviving manuscripts good indicators of general Jesuit knowledge, but also difficult to date precisely or attribute to any particular priest (Hanzeli 22–23). Five of the dictionaries I use here are housed at the Archives du Séminaire de Québec at the Musée de la Civilisation in Québec, and are designated here by the catalogue numbers assigned by that library: MS59, MS60, MS62, MS65, and MS67. The sixth is at the John Carter Brown Library, in Providence, Rhode Island, and will be referred to here, for the sake of simplicity, as JCBL. Like the dictionaries, the *Jesuit Relations* do not lend themselves, in my opinion, to studying the motives and philosophical orientation of individual priests. Although authorship of the *Relations* was always attributed to a single Jesuit, named on the frontispiece, in reality the texts were patchwork compositions made up of letters and journals of individual missionaries in the field and then edited together by the mission superior, and then edited again by order officials in France "with current European conditions in mind" (Wroth 117–119). Further complicating matters is the fact that the name that adorned the frontispiece of each *Relation* did not necessarily correspond to its principal compiler. Instead, the mission Superior was usually given credit, regardless of his actual role in the producing the text. The factors complicating authorship of both the dictionaries and the *Jesuit Relations* make it very difficult, in my opinion, to

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[7] As Luca Codignola has pointed out, "[…] even within an order usually deemed monolithic in the extreme, there were differences and jealousies. Barthélemi Vimont, who had problems with fellow Jesuit Paul Ragueneau, was recalled [from the New France mission] in 1659. Ragueneau himself then returned to France, together with Joseph-Antoince Poncet de la Rivière, because they had been engaged in political controversy" (181).

account for the individual voice of particular authors.[8] In any case, my aim here is to illuminate the linguistic limits that confronted all speakers and listeners in seventeenth century conversations about God in the Wendat language, regardless of individual skill, doctrinal orientation, or intelligence.

Before considering the specific case of Jesuit translations of *Dieu* into Wendat, some background on the religious and linguistic confrontation in New France is revealing, since Wendat and French outlooks on those subjects determined what options were open to both groups as they tried to express and understand the Christian concept of God. The Jesuits' missionary efforts were informed by an "assumption of Christian universalism"—the notion that "Christian truth, as embodied by the Roman Catholic Church, could not share space with other beliefs […]" (Blackburn 127)—and by the idea that the Truth could be expressed in novel ways without losing its meaning. While earlier Franciscan Récollet missionaries in New France "based their approach on the assumption that Native people could only be made Christian after they had settled among French people and been taught their language, manners, and customs" (Blackburn 130–131), Jesuits "transformed Catholic practice and translated catholic faith into terms familiar to the people with whom they lived" (Dorsey 401). These transformations were licensed by the Jesuits' understanding of the nature of language itself. Until the eighteenth century, differences between languages were understood to be created deliberately by God, an enduring consequence of the biblical Tower of Babel incident (Gray 4–5). In that foundational Christian tale, contained in Genesis, early man is said to have shared a single

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[8] Several scholars, such as Dominique Deffain, Yvon Le Bras, and Rémi Ferland, have nonetheless written studies that seek to isolate the voice of Paul Le Jeune. Although still complicated, such an endeavor is perhaps least fraught in the case of Le Jeune, who was clearly the most active writer among the New France Jesuits, even continuing to contribute to or entirely compose the *Relations* after his return to France in 1650 (Pouliot "La Contribution").

language, until God found it necessary to "confuse their language […] so that they will not understand one another's speech" because a project by humans to build a tower to reach heaven convinced God that as long as humans had a common language, "nothing that they propose will be impossible for them" (Gen 11.1–9). Accordingly, Lalemant wrote in his 1646 *Relation* that he saw in the Montagnais language proof of God's existence : "Leurs compositions sont admirables et je puis dire que quand il n'y auroit point d'autre argument pour nous montrer qu'il y un Dieu que l'oeconomie des langues sauvages, cela suffiroit pour nous convaincre" (Campeau 6.631). Since the Jesuits understood differences between languages to be divinely created, indigenous tongues were considered as suitable to conveying supposedly universal religious truths as Latin, French, or any other language, a notion common in seventeenth century language studies (Hanzeli 33). As Peter Dorsey put it, "As long as one accepted a single source for the multitude of languages and peoples, cultural difference was acceptable and communication could become effective. At the deepest level, cultural difference cannot prevent God's word from being heard" (412).

This understanding of the nature of language explains how Jesuits could have been satisfied with some of their more inventive solutions to the problem of rendering Catholic doctrine into Wendat. One oft-cited example is Brébeuf's 1636 request for approval of a translation of the Trinity, a concept that apparently was very difficult to express in Wendat.

> Un nom relative parmy eux envelope tousjours la signification d'une des trois personnes du pronom possessif, si bien qu'ils ne peuvent dire simplement: père, fils, maistre, valet, mais sont contraincts de dire l'un des trois: mon père, ton père, son père […] Suivant cela, nous nous trouvons empeschez de leur faire dire proprement en leur langue 'au nom du Père et du Fils et du Saincte-Esprit'. Jugeriez-vous à propos, en attendant mieux, de substituer au lieu: 'au nom de nostre Père et de son fils et de leur Sainct-Esprit'? Certes, il semble que les trois

> personnes de la très saincte Trinité seroient suffisamment exprimées en ceste façon […] Oserions-nous en user, jusqu'à ce que la langue Wendat ne soit enrichie ou l'esprit des Wendats ouverts à d'autres langues? Nous ne ferons rien sans conseil (3.344).

Catholic faith holds that the three entities of the Trinity—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—are "one Being, three Persons" (Torrance 10). Changing the formula to "*Our* Father, *His* Son, and *Their* Holy Spirit" might adequately express the three persons of the Trinity, as Le Jeune claimed, but it also fails to capture their unity in a single being and suggests a hierarchical relationship between the three figures. Brébeuf himself acknowledged the inadequacy of the translation with the phrase "en attendant mieux," suggesting that he hoped the solution was only temporary. Indeed, it appears that Jesuits used a different translation later in the seventeenth century. In *De Religione,* a Jesuit document explaining the nature of Christianity that was composed in Wendat in the late 1660s or 1670s, a different rendering is suggested, as John Steckley pointed out in the introduction to his recent translation of the text. "The Father is *sa,[e]n,* he has them (indefinite) as children'; the Son is *honaen* 'they (masculine plural) have him as child'; and the Holy Ghost is *hoki data hoatato,eti* 'he is a spirit, the very, he is the true one'" (26). This alternate translation poses its own problems, similarly suggesting a hierarchical relationship between the three figures and failing to account for the relationship between them. As Carole Blackburn has noted, "It is doubtful that this accommodation would have been either acceptable to the Jesuits' supporters or defensible if subjected to the scrutiny of their critics" (7). In spite of the apparent shortcomings of their translations, the Jesuit belief in the divine origin of linguistic difference would have assured the missionaries that their point was getting across, regardless of what they perceived to be the limitations imposed by the Wendat language or the acknowledged imperfection of any particular translation of a Christian concept.

Unlike the Jesuits, the Wendat did not view religious truth as universal and exclusive, and therefore "[…] tended to incorporate the Jesuits' message into an existing spiritual repertoire," according to Blackburn (127). Potential converts listening to religious lessons were more likely to understand the new material as supplementary to their pre-existing knowledge, rather than a replacement. As Blackburn pointed out, examples abound in the *Relations*. I will content myself here with just two. In both 1637 and 1639, the Jesuits' reported their horror at the decision by Wendat healers to incorporate mimicry of baptism into their traditional rites (Blackburn 111). And when epidemic disease arrived among the Wendat, the Jesuits reportedly urged them to pray and have faith in God, calling this "[…] le vrai et unique moien de destourner ce fléau du ciel" (Campeau 3.733). As Blackburn notes, "While many people were initially prepared to adopt the Jesuits' terms, most did not realize the exclusive nature of the priests' demands, and they continued to seek other remedies, leaving the Jesuits to accuse them of hypocrisy" (106). In both of the above cases, the Jesuits' potential converts reportedly embraced priestly lessons without sharing the missionaries' assumption that doing so necessarily entailed a rejection of their old practices. Thus, for those preaching about God in New France, the subject was one whose universal and universally intelligible truth could not fail to penetrate the difficulties posed by the Wendat language, and for their listeners, the deity, like other Christian concepts introduced by the Jesuits, was likely regarded as a new figure to simply add to their traditional knowledge. I will now examine the results of the confrontation between these two viewpoints that occurred when the Jesuits attempted to introduce the Christian God to the Wendat.

As I have already mentioned, Jesuits had two common ways of saying *Dieu* in Wendat.[9] Jesuits employed a Wendat term—*ha8endio*, which literally means "he is great or large in voice" (Steckley, personal communication, 4/18/06)—to name God, and also introduced a French word—*Di8*—into the Wendat language. Both words were used often and, it seems, interchangeably in bilingual dictionaries from the period. But merely introducing a word would not, as I will discuss in more detail shortly, ensure that the concept it was meant to designate would be comprehensible to listeners. And before they could be used to convey anything, both invented terms would have to be invested with meaning. Whatever connotations *ha8endio* might have had in Wendat would have to be replaced with Christian religious significance, and *Di8,* as a French word, was a blank slate in Wendat that Jesuits would have had to fill with meaning before it could be used effectively. The ways Jesuits went about assigning meaning to the terms illustrates how the limits of the Wendat language—whether real or merely as perceived by priests struggling to communicate in an unfamiliar language—influenced the Jesuit message.

The obvious problem with borrowing a pre-existing term to express a foreign concept is, as Steckley noted, that the term's original meaning might be durable, potentially "causing cognitive dissonance between communicative intent and result" ("Brébeuf's presentation" 94). For *ha8endio* to be an adequate translation of *Dieu*, Jesuits would have had to erase whatever significance the term might already have had in Wendat and invest it with new meaning. Because there is no record of the Wendat language that predates European contact, it is not possible to know how, or if, *ha8endio* was used before Jesuits began using it to refer to God, nor, therefore, to determine how successful they were in replacing with Christian meaning whatever connotations the term had for the

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[9] I am grateful to John Steckley for his gracious guidance on points of Wendat language. Responsibility for the argument made here remains mine.

Wendat. It is, however, possible to assess how Jesuits attempted to do so. Each of the dictionaries contains bilingual sentences that are useful in determining what kinds of things Jesuits were saying about God to their Wendat interlocutors, and in what contexts they used *ha8endio*. The missionaries used the word to say things like "Dieu a tout fait" (JCBL 'achever'), "Dieu a défendu cela" (MS60), "Nous ne nous cachons, ne sont point cachez à Dieu" (MS59 16), "Dieu ne nous force, ne fait pas faire les choses malgré nous" (MS65 31), "Peririons nous si Dieu cessoit de nous conserver" (MS67 "cesser" 208). Reflecting the limitations Jesuits saw in the Wendat language, these sentences insist on God's role in human affairs, and make no mention of the deity's abstract qualities.

The Jesuits' second strategy, transferring the French term *Dieu* to the Wendat language, seems to have yielded similar results. Simply borrowing a word from French does not guarantee, of course, that all the meaning of the French term would be transferred automatically along with it. Jesuits using *Di8* to refer to God in Wendat would have had to give the neologism meaning by explaining what it meant, in the same way they explained *ha8endio*. Again, contextual examples from bilingual dictionaries provide clues about how the missionaries did so. Sentences such as "rien n'est impossible à Dieu" (MS59 108), "Dieu a créé la terre" (MS67 "créer" 68), "Dieu a fait l'homme ou les hommes" (MS67 "homme" 67), "Garde les commandemens de Dieu" (MS65 10), "Rien n'empeche Dieu de voir" (MS60), and "Dieu est partout" (MS60) all serve to indirectly define the new term, *Di8*, by describing how the deity intervenes in human life. God, in these examples, only has meaning in relation to human affairs and to the visible characteristics of the world.

Comparing translations of Wendat sentences using *Di8* with those that describe *ha8endio* suggests that there was little difference in how the terms were used. Indeed, two of the six dictionaries I draw on here attempt direct definition of *Dieu*, and both entries include both *Di8* and *ha8endio*, testifying to the

interchangeable nature of the two terms.[10] Dictionary definitions using each of the words paint portraits of a God who created the visible world, who forbids or condones human behavior, and from whom it is impossible to hide. They insist on God's role in visible, familiar phenomena and leave out the abstract qualities that the Jesuits had trouble explaining in Wendat. That this was a general characteristic of Jesuit attempts to introduce God to the Wendat is confirmed by descriptions of the deity attributed to Amerindian Christians in the *Jesuit Relations.* A good example is furnished by Lalemant's 1640 *Relation,* in which he claims to report a dialog between a Wendat convert and an infidel. The faithful convert argues for the existence of God: "[…] Nous voyons toutes les choses de ce monde qu'il a créées et nous pouvions aussi peu douter qu'il est un Dieu qu'un homme sage pourroit douter que le soleil est dans le ciel, lorsqu'il est couvert de nuées et qu'il éclaire ce bas monde, quoyqu'on ne le voye pas " (Campeau 6.655). This profession of faith, purportedly uttered by an actual Wendat Christian,[11] focuses solely on the visible

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[10] The definition for *Dieu* in JCBL reads "*Di8 ha8endio*." MS67's entry on *Dieu* is difficult to decipher, but appears to read "*Grand Esprit I Dïo ha8endio da,ionnhe*." According to Steckley, the entire phrase "ha8endio da,ionnhe" literally means "he is master of our lives" (personal communication 4/18/06). The inclusion of both terms in each of the entries demonstrates that both were used in situations where missionaries would have referred to *Dieu* if they had been speaking French, and suggests that neither term may have been deemed entirely adequate on its own.

[11] Modern scholars are often skeptical of the authenticity of such speeches, and with good reason. As the eminent ethnohistorian of the Wendat Bruce Trigger wrote, "Filtered through translators, the recorder's incomprehension, and the general tendency of European authors to embellish and fabricate whole addresses, it is not always certain that such sources are reliable" (17). It is, however, reasonable to draw conclusions about what Jesuits considered correct or acceptable from the contents of Amerindian speeches reported in the *Jesuit Relations,* since they were meant not only to

evidence of a higher being and defines it only in relation to human life. Absent is the abstract originator of all things of Furetière's definition.[12]

Gauging Wendat reaction to attempts to introduce them to the Christian deity is more difficult, since the Wendat themselves produced no written record of their encounter with Jesuit missionaries. Traces of their thoughts on the subject are only available through the filter of the Europeans who wrote about their encounters with Amerindians. This portion of my argument is therefore unavoidably more speculative than my preceding analysis of French strategies for expressing God in Wendat. Nontheless, one can be sure that comprehending Christian lessons in Wendat would have been as much of a challenge as expressing them because of the culture-bound nature of language. As I have argued elsewhere, drawing on the work of Edward Sapir and

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inform the missionaries' superiors in France of their activities, but also to rally support among the reading public of France. Given the dual goals of pleasing company superiors and attracting financial backers, it is unlikely that the authors of the *Relations* would have attributed objectionable comments to new Christians without also remarking on how those who uttered them were corrected. Therefore, there is good reason to think that pious words in the *Relations* that are attributed to Amerindian Christians reflect the message the Jesuits were preaching and the ways they were preaching it.

[12] For another good example, see the prayer attributed to Wendat convert Joseph Chih8atenh8a, in Lalemant's 1641 Relation from the Huron mission. A French translation of the prayer was printed alongside the original Wendat, (Campeau 5.210–214). The text of the prayer includes both Di8 and Chie8enio, the second person singular form of ha8endio, which was used to address God directly (Steckley, personal communication 5/30/06). The prayer covers four pages in Campeau's edition, the entire first page of which is dedicated to describing what God is by detailing the deity's relationship to man, confirming that neither Di8 nor ha8endio was entirely adequate to name God.

Benjamin Whorf, thought and meaning are limited by language, since the ability to think about or discuss a concept depends on its presence in the language—and therefore culture—in question (True "What's in a name"). As Sapir put it, "It is the complete vocabulary of a language that most clearly reflects the physical and social environment of its speakers. The vocabulary of a language may indeed be looked upon as a complex inventory of all the ideas, interests, and occupations that take up the attention of the community […]" (228). It follows, therefore, that if the Wendat had no pre-existing term to express their understanding of God, they would have no concept of the Christian deity with which to associate the terms *ha8endio* and *Di8* when they were introduced. While Jesuits sought to give meaning to the terms they introduced by emphasizing the divine attributes that they found easy, or at least possible, to express in Wendat, their interlocutors, guided by a relativistic perspective on religion, would have sought means of understanding within their pre-existing language and culture.

Indications of how they might have done so are sparse, but tantalizing clues nonetheless can be found in the *Jesuit Relations* and elsewhere. Describing his efforts to teach the Montagnais, another Amerindian group, about God, the mission Superior Paul Le Jeune wrote in his 1633 *Relation:* "Parlant un jour de Dieu dans une cabane, ils me demandèrent que c'était que Dieu. Je leur dis que c'estoit celuy qui pouvait tout et qui avoit fait le ciel et la terre. Ils commencèrent à se dire les uns aux autres: 'Atahocan, Atahocan; c'est Atahocan'" (Campeau 2.434). Although, as I have argued elsewhere, the equation in the *Relations* of Christian concepts to traditional Amerindian figures is a rhetorical tool that the Jesuits wielded to simultaneously demonstrate the need for missionary activity and its likelihood for success (True "Retelling Genesis"), it also reflects the Amerindian strategy for trying to understand the unfamiliar concepts preached by their interlocutors that I discussed earlier, partially adopting news ideas introduced by the Jesuits, but adding them to old ones already familiar. There is evidence that the Wendat and their descendents employed the same strategy when attempting to make sense of the Christian God. The

Wyandot, present day descendents of the Wendat,[13] were found by twentieth century anthropologists to equate the Christian God with Iouskeha, a key figure in the Wendat origin myth (Chafe 257). And it seems that the Jesuits and other Europeans, guided by the flexibility afforded them by belief in the ability of all languages to express divine truth, even encouraged the conflation of Christian and Amerindian religious figures, perhaps recognizing that it aided in the communication of points of Christian doctrine (Chafe 257).

With Jesuits striving to be understood by tailoring their teachings to the perceived strengths and weaknesses of an unfamiliar language and the Wendat, in turn, seeking to understand by adapting the foreign concepts the Jesuits were expressing to their own culture, Jesuit reports of the Wendats' enthusiastic embrace of *Dieu*—like the one cited at the beginning of this article—must be regarded as the products of linguistic confrontation. Even if it is assumed that the author's account was based on the actual words of a Wendat convert, and that he translated the conversation as faithfully as could, the conversion in question must be understood as fundamentally different in nature from what the missionaries communicated to their readers. The convert who is quoted by Lalemant most likely would have used *Di8* or *ha8endio*—or perhaps both—to refer to the Christian God. As I have argued, both terms, as invested with meaning by the French, describe a deity directly engaged in human affairs, whose work is everywhere visible in the physical world, and who is devoid of the abstract qualities that the Jesuits found themselves unable to express in Wendat. And there can be no guarantee that Wendat listeners, attempting to understand by drawing on their own understanding of the nature of religious truth, would have arrived at precisely the understanding that the Jesuits were aiming for. A French reader, presented only with Lalemant's translation of

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[13] When the Wendat confederacy was dispersed by Iroquois enemies around 1650, surviving members moved to Québec to live near the French, fled westward, or were absorbed by other groups. Those moving west came to be known as the Wyandot (Trigger 789).

his interlocutor's words, likely would have understood *Dieu* in its French sense, unaware of the unique characteristics of the deity as invented in dialogue in New France. The fact that conversations that occurred in Wendat, and the outcome of such exchanges, were translated into French for publication opens a dimension of meaning in the words of new converts in the *Relations* that is only clear when one reflects on the linguistic confrontation that produced them. The case of the introduction of God to the Wendat illuminates the challenges of cross-cultural communication in seventeenth century New France, and suggests that analysis of the linguistic encounter can be a potent tool for interpreting European accounts of interactions with Amerindian groups. Reading texts like the *Jesuit Relations* through this lens promises, if not to restore an Amerindian voice that is regrettably absent from the colonial record, then at least to reveal meanings that are present in the text, but obscured by the fact that the Jesuits translated the words of potential converts into French to make them comprehensible to their readers.

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