

**Thirteenth Annual Joshua and Verona Whatmough Lecture
Monday, April 30th at 4:00 PM, Sever Hall 113**

Reception immediately following the lecture at the Harvard Faculty Club

Speaker: Claire Bower, Professor of Linguistics, Yale University

The Mysterious Taensa Grammar: Imaginative Fiction or Poor Description?

Abstract

More than half the world's languages are currently endangered and many have already become extinct. Linguists working in these regions -- including Australia and many parts of the United States -- are reliant on earlier documentary records, often prepared from the last speakers. Inexperienced writers introduce artifacts into the description from their own native languages or make other errors of analysis or fact. In this talk, I focus on the 1882 *Grammar and Vocabulary of the Taensa Language*, published in French in 1882 by J.D. Haumonté, J. Parisot, and L. Adam. It purports to be an expansion of a manuscript compiled in Spanish, undated and anonymous, recorded in the American Southeast (the name Taensa is these days most closely associated with Tensas Parish in northeastern Louisiana). At the time, the grammar attracted much attention as a unique record of a previously unattested language which was, on the face of it, unrelated to any other. However, suspicions were soon raised and by 1911, the materials were firmly believed to be a hoax -- an early "conlang" [constructed language], made up by Parisot and a friend. This opinion has persisted. I argue here, however, that numerous features of the manuscript are consistent with it being a genuine (if poor) representation of a natural language. All indications are that the writers of the grammar made errors in the description of the language. Such errors are very unlikely if the authors of the grammar are the same as the "creators" of the language. While difficulties in accepting the manuscript as genuine remain, I argue that the balance of probability suggests that the Taensa grammar might be genuine after all.