

## CHINOOK JARGON

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Chinook Jargon is a pidgin language that is first attested reliably from the first decade of the 19th century, in the journals of Lewis and Clark. Its lexifier language – the language from which most of its vocabulary is drawn – was Lower (Shoalwater) Chinook, the language of a once-powerful tribe at the mouth of the Columbia River. Chinook Jargon came to be widely spoken in the Pacific Northwest of the U.S. and neighboring British Columbia, eventually extending as far north as southern Alaska, as far south as the northern border of California, and as far east as the Idaho panhandle in the U.S. and interior British Columbia in Canada. It flourished especially during the second half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, when it was a primary medium of communication between Whites, on the one hand, and Native Americans and Native Canadians on the other. Its use diminished sharply in the late 20th century, along with the use of all other indigenous North American languages, as English replaced it everywhere in the Northwest. As late as 1980, however, monthly sermons were delivered in Chinook Jargon (henceforth CJ) in at least one British Columbian church, and a few elderly fluent speakers on the Grand Ronde Reservation in Oregon contributed to its survival by teaching it to younger tribal members and a few White scholars.

Efforts are currently under way to revitalize CJ. There is a lively electronic list devoted to the language, [CHINOOK@LISTSERV.LINGUISTLIST.ORG](mailto:CHINOOK@LISTSERV.LINGUISTLIST.ORG); there is an annual gathering on the Grand Ronde Reservation for the promotion and practice of CJ; and there is an active and effective tribal movement designed to revitalize the language on the reservation. By the late 20th century, CJ was the main or only Native language spoken on the

reservation, where the central tribal organization, the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, comprises members of six Native tribes: Umpqua, Calapooia, Rogue River, Shasta, Molalla, and Chinookan Clackamas. Linguistically, these six tribes represent three completely different language families – Athabaskan, Chinookan and other Oregon Penutian languages, and Hokan (a proposed family that is still controversial). CJ thus performed its traditional function as a lingua franca almost to the end of its continuous existence. As Zenk observed, on the reservation CJ became ‘an important factor in the sense of identity and solidarity that many Natives of the reservation period came to feel as “Grand Ronde Indians” ’ (1984:v). In the first half of the 20th century, Grand Ronde CJ was considered to be more elegant and more “correct” than other varieties of CJ; it was also more “Native”, with some Chinookan morphological structure as well as the more widespread CJ syntactic features. Today, too, Grand Ronde is the center of CJ revitalization, and Grand Ronde pronunciation and morphosyntax will be the model for future education in CJ.

Like other classic trade pidgins, CJ has a limited vocabulary. Over six hundred words are reasonably well-attested – that is, they occur in at least two independent sources, and usually in more than two. Of these, perhaps a third come from French or English, reflecting the widespread use of CJ as a lingua franca between Whites and Natives in the late 19th and early 20th century. The earliest CJ sources, from the first half of the 19th century, also list English and French words, but not nearly as many as in the later documentation. My rough count of CJ words must certainly omit many that were in common use: even the most ambitious dictionaries omit many of a language’s words, and the published CJ wordlists and dictionaries are not especially ambitious. Shaw 1909 is probably the most extensive early published dictionary, but it contains many words that, Shaw says, are used only in limited parts of CJ territory. Other word counts are comparable to mine: according to Thomas (1935:57, 58, 59, quoting Eells), Demers et al. (1871) give 787 CJ words and phrases, Gibbs

(1863) has 490 CJ words in his Chinook-English part and 792 in his English-Chinook part, and Hale (1846) has 473 CJ words in his Chinook Jargon-English list and 634 in his English-Chinook list. Thomas himself has 307 words in his CJ-English part but over 1,000 in his English-CJ list.

CJ phonology is a typical indigenous sound system of the Pacific Northwest. More than thirty consonant phonemes are attested, in a few to numerous words, in at least two independent sources each. Among other consonants that are more familiar to English speakers, there are glottalized (specifically, ejective) stops and affricates, uvular as well as velar obstruents, a glottalized lateral affricate, and a lateral fricative. In addition to non-European consonants, CJ words often contain consonant clusters that are completely foreign to European languages. Examples are /tk'up/ 'white, light in color', /ptšix/ 'thin', and /tL'mn/ 'soft, fine in substance, ground up'. CJ thus presents a striking counterexample to the often-repeated claim that pidgin structures are maximally simple; and the consistency of many of its phonological features across Native speakers of numerous tribes is a striking counterexample to the common claim that pidgin structures show more internal variation and less consistency than non-pidgin languages. In fact, one of the first scientific recorders of CJ, Horatio Hale, observed that all the variations in CJ 'are unimportant, and in general it may be said that the language is spoken with great uniformity throughout the whole extent of country where it prevails' (1846:641).

To judge by the surviving documentation and the few existing tape-recordings, most White speakers of CJ did not learn either the non-European sounds or the non-European consonant clusters of the pidgin. But Natives of all tribes did generally have the 'exotic' sounds and clusters in their own CJ pronunciation. The most notable exception is the small but important stock of words from the Wakashan language Nootka, which is spoken on Vancouver Island, far from the mouth of the Columbia River. Almost all the Nootka words

in CJ lack glottalization, uvulars, lateral obstruents, and the other non-European sounds of Nootka and the rest of the CJ lexicon; this shows that these Nootka words must have been contributed to CJ by Whites, not by Nootkas or other Natives. A partial exception to the generalization about words of Nootka origin is /Luš/ ‘good’, which is rendered as /Luš/ (or, occasionally, /tLuš/) in all Native sources and some White sources – that is, it preserves the Nootka initial lateral obstruent, though usually as /L/ rather than /tL/. But it has /š/ instead of Nootka /L/, a substitution commonly made by Whites in representing Native lateral obstruents; the original Nootka word is /tLuL/.

There are reports in the literature attesting to the difference between Native pronunciation of CJ and White pronunciation. Gill (1891, cited in Hymes 1980:407), for instance, warned that ‘[t]he pronunciation of these words can only be thoroughly learned by conversation with the Indians’.

Also like other classic trade pidgins, CJ has limited morphosyntactic resources. It lacks entirely the complex morphological structures that characterize Native languages in the region, and its range of syntactic constructions is not large. As with the phonology, the syntactic features that can be identified with confidence closely resemble syntactic structures of Native languages of the Northwest – with one possible major exception, the dominant SVO word order. Most Northwest languages are verb-initial; CJ syntax is verb-initial only with adjectival predicates, e.g. *Hayas ulu tsuq nayka* ‘I am very thirsty’ (lit. ‘much hungry water I’ – from Hale 1846). Aside from the SVO word order, the constructions are clearly Native, not due to either English or French. They include, among others, sentence-initial negation, yes/no questions formed with an optional question particle, and an imperative construction (‘it would be good if you would do X’). The possessive construction is also a Native type; commenting on the sentence *Nayka Lutšm@n, yahka aw* ‘My wife’s younger brother’ (lit. ‘I/my wife (s)he/his/her younger brother’), Phillips notes that this construction is ‘strictly

Indian...it is the natural way of speech with Indians and it is the really correct usage in Chinook [Jargon]' (1913:53).

The question of the pidgin's origin remains highly controversial. There are two sharply differing origin theories. One is that Chinook Jargon predates extensive contact with Whites in the Northwest – that it was used as a means of intertribal communication, perhaps at first between speakers of Lower Chinook and their Native slaves (see e.g. Thomason 1983). ('Slave jargons' are reported elsewhere in the Northwest, for instance among the Nez Perce – Splawn 1944:490.) On this theory, CJ achieved its later spread when Whites adopted it for use as a lingua franca, shortly after 1806. The second origin theory is that CJ arose as a lingua franca only after Whites arrived in numbers in the Northwest (see e.g. Samarin 1986). A common feature of this theory is the proposal that a Nootka trade jargon (or pidgin) arose first on Vancouver Island, at the end of the 18th century or early in the 19th century, and then spread to the mouth of the Columbia River when Whites ventured there for trade.

Evidence adduced in support of the second theory is primarily lexical. Most of the lexicon of early Chinook Jargon, including the bulk of the basic vocabulary, comes from Lower Chinook, but two or three dozen words (some of them quite basic) are from Nootka, and a smaller number of words come from Salishan and other languages of the region. In addition, quite a few words entered the pidgin from French and then English, especially after the mid-19th century.

Contribution of the Nootka Jargon to the formation of CJ is predicated on the assumption that such basic words would necessarily have been in CJ from the beginning, not added later after CJ was fully formed. Against this assumption, however, is the undoubted fact that the Nootka words in CJ, unlike the Lower Chinook and Salishan words, show clear signs of transmission from Whites, not from other Natives (as noted above). Words of Chinookan and Salishan origin show all the elaborate features of typical Northwest phonological systems,

including glottalized stops, velar vs. uvular dorsal obstruents, and lateral fricatives and affricates. Not so the Nootka-origin words: they are significantly distorted by comparison to their Nootka source words, with no sounds that would be foreign to English and French speakers. The Nootka Jargon certainly existed (Sturtevant 1981), but the transmission of some of its words to CJ is much more likely to have happened after, not before, the crystallization of CJ as a pidgin language.

Either origin theory is possible and even plausible. The post-contact theory has been popular in part because CJ, from the time it was first documented, already had the set of Nootka words and a fair number of French and English words. Also, of course, there is no pre-contact documentation, since Natives in the Northwest had no writing before Whites arrived. The pre-contact origin theory would be preferred if one were to adopt the historical linguist's simplicity criterion: the Native phonology and syntax are easily accounted for if Natives created CJ without participation by Whites, but if the pidgin arose post-contact, with some French- and/or English-influenced structural features, those features must have been lost before the pidgin was documented. On this criterion, the pre-contact origin is the simpler hypothesis. But not all specialists accept this criterion, so the controversy continues.

The future of Chinook Jargon is in some doubt, because the Grand Ronde elders and others who spoke the language as part of their ordinary daily lives are now gone. Its fate rests with the younger enthusiasts, especially younger tribal members, who are now working to prevent the pidgin from disappearing.

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