

Chinook Jargon – A Métis Trade Language of the Pacific Northwest

By George and Terry Goulet

“Klahowya Tillicum”. Our salutation, meaning “Welcome Friends”, is in Chinook Jargon (also known as Chinuk Wawa). The purpose of this article is to describe Chinook Jargon, its origins and usage.

Prior to the arrival of white men in the Pacific Northwest in the 1770s, there were many tribes of Indians (the historical term still used in the United States rather than First Nations) in that area. It encompassed what is today that part of North America west of the Rocky Mountains extending from Alaska south to California. Each of the tribes spoke their own dialect. This made inter-communication difficult among them.

As a result they developed a common language called Chinook in order to communicate with each other for social, trade and other purposes. It was a tribal language that was originated by the people themselves.

In the late 1700s and early 1800s European and Métis fur traders travelled westward across the Rocky Mountains. Their intent, among others, was to expand the lucrative fur trade into what is now known as British Columbia as well as other areas in the Pacific Northwest. To fulfill that objective, they quickly realized the need to make contact and communicate with multiple indigenous cultures of the Native peoples in this area.

To do so through an interpreter would be time-consuming and ponderous. Consequently they developed an offshoot of the Native Chinook language that was called Chinook Jargon. This meant that they did not have to learn the language of each tribe in order to communicate and trade with them.

The evolution of this language involved the introduction of French, English, Cree and other words into the Native Chinook language. This Jargon differed from that used by earlier maritime fur traders at the mouth of the Columbia River and along the West Coast of Vancouver Island who had developed a prior pidgin language.

Chinook Jargon, often onomatopoeic (imitation sound), became the lingua franca (the common language between speakers who spoke different first languages) in the Pacific Northwest. Eventually over 100,000 people spoke Chinook Jargon in Oregon, Washington, British Columbia, Idaho, Alaska and other locations.

In addition to the Natives and fur traders these people included among others missionaries, gold rush prospectors and settlers. Besides being used as a trade language, Chinook Jargon was also used for social communication, religious services, and other purposes.

It had a restricted grammar and a limited vocabulary of perhaps 500 or 600 words and was relatively easy to learn. Missionaries composed and translated prayers (such as the Our Father) and wrote hymn books and a dictionary in that language.

Many Chinook Jargon words are in common use today in North America. They have made their way into the English language in place names and other ways. A few speakers of this language included Joseph William McKay (the founder of Nanaimo), BC Lieutenant

Governor Edgar Dewdney, and the priests Modeste Demers and Norbert Blanchet (who later became Bishop of Vancouver Island and Bishop of Oregon respectively).

There are hundreds of locations throughout the Pacific Northwest that bear Chinook Jargon place names. Among others a few examples in British Columbia including their English translation for the Chinook Jargon words and approximate location are the following:

- Cultus Lake – “small or insignificant” near Chilliwack;
- Hyak Mountain – “fast” in the Purcell Mountains;
- Hyas Lake – “important” Shuswap;
- Boston Bar – “American or Yankee” on the Fraser River;
- Kanaka Creek – “Hawaiian” near Maple Ridge;
- Malakwa – “mosquito” near Sicamous;
- Mount Lolo – “carry or whole” near Kamloops;
- Ollala Creek – “berries” near Similkameen;
- Siwash Rock – “Indian” in Stanley Park, Vancouver;
- Skookumchuck – “strong water” on the Sunshine Coast;
- Spuzzum – “basket, or making grass” Fraser Canyon;
- Tillicum Road – “friend” Victoria;
- Tumtum Lake – “heartbeat” Adams River;
- Tyee Point – “chief” near Horseshoe Bay.

Some of the Chinook Jargon words adopted or used in English with their translation are the following:

- muck-a-muck – “plenty to eat”;
- high muck-a-muck – “someone in a position of importance and authority”;
- chuck – “water”;
- skookum – “strong or brave or very large and impressive”;
- skookumchuck – “strong or fast water”;
- saltchuck – “ocean, inlet, canal or bay etc. of salt water”;
- hooch or hootch – “alcohol, liquor, or illicit whiskey”;
- potlatch – “a ceremonial gift-giving feast” sometimes referred to as potluck;
- tyee – “chief or elder brother” and today is used to refer to “king salmon”.

In a New York Times Crossword Puzzle published in the Vancouver Sun on December 1, 2009 the answer to the clue “high muck-a-muck” was “grand poobah”. On December 20, 2009 in the same newspaper the answer to the word “hooch” was “moonshine”. These are only a few examples of the continued use of Chinook Jargon in the English language.

There are numerous Internet sources dealing with Chinook Jargon, as well as a number of dictionaries in that language. A dictionary on the Internet is called *Wiktionary*. An early dictionary, published in 1863, is titled *The Dictionary of Chinook Jargon, or Trade Language of Oregon* and was compiled by George Gibbs.

It is interesting to note that neither *The Canadian Oxford Dictionary* nor *Webster’s Dictionary of the English Language* define the word “Michif” but each of these dictionaries do define Chinook Jargon.

The two definitions are similar. *Webster’s Dictionary of the English Language* gives the following definition:

“Chinook Jargon is a pidgin language, once used for trading along the western coast of North America, made up of words borrowed from Chinook, Nootka, various Salishan languages, French, and English”.

Examples of articles relating to this language include:

- “The Origin of the Chinook Jargon” by F. W. Howay in *the British Columbia Historical Quarterly* 1942, 6.4 pages 225-250.
- “Chinook jargon still skookum in area today” by Peter Grauer in the *Kamloops Daily News* of August 14, 1999 page C13.

On May 2, 1891 a newspaper called *Kamloops Wawa* (the Jargon word for “talk”) was published by an Oblate Priest Father Jean Marie LeJeune. One column of this newspaper was in Chinook Jargon and a second column was in its English translation. The Jargon was also converted to phonetic Chinook words using Duployan shorthand.

Until 1907 hundreds of copies of this Chinook Jargon Newspaper were distributed on a somewhat intermittent basis in Kamloops, at the Indian Reserve and other nearby locations. The first edition of the Newspaper stated:

- “It [this paper] will always carry good words to you. It will help you to learn to read”.

Many issues of this newspaper are available for research at the Kamloops Museum and Archives.

The British Columbia Métis Federation (BCMF) holds many programs in order to promote Métis history, heritage and culture. For example, in the summer BCMF presents activities at Klahowya Village (“Welcome Village”) in Vancouver’s Stanley Park.

Efforts have been made to preserve this historic language of the Pacific Northwest. The Grande Ronde Reservation in Oregon has attempted to do so by providing courses in Chinuk Wawa.

In Vancouver there is an artistic rendering of Chinook Jargon (together with an English translation) along the False Creek seawall fence between Drake and Davies Streets. This two block display titled “Welcome to the land of light” was commissioned by the City of Vancouver and was created by artist Henry Tsang. It is a bridge between the past and the present and will live on into the future as an enduring symbol of Chinook Jargon.

Many Métis people and others consider Chinook Jargon a magnificent example of an important era in the history of British Columbia and the Pacific Northwest. It is a cultural treasure that must not be lost.

LONG LIVE THE MÉTIS NATION.

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