The Origin of the Different Languages

From *Folk-tales of Salishan and Sahaptin Tribes,* collected by James Alexander Teit, Livingston Farrand, Marian K. Gould, and Herbert Joseph Spinden; edited by Franz Boas; published for the American Folk-Lore Society by G. E. Stechert & Co. in Lancaster, PA, 1917.

Franz Boas (1858–1942) was a German-American anthropologist who lived for a time in the Pacific Northwest. It was collected by Marian K. Gould from the people of the Sanpoil Tribe, one of the 12 confederated tribes of the Colville Indian Reservation in the Okanagon area of Washington State.

Part IV. Sanpoil Tales, By Marian K. Gould

14. The Origin Of The Different Languages. In a certain place in the winter months, the ducks (lullullo) collected in great numbers. When any one approached them, they would rise and fly away, making a whistling-noise. One morning two hunters went down to a river to kill some ducks. They had each obtained one, when a dispute arose over the question whether the whistling-noise was made with the bill or with the wings when they rose to fly. Neither could convince the other, and the words became bitter. Finally they agreed to take it to the chief, and let him settle the dispute. The chief heard the story, and looked at the ducks. Both of them were dead and could not make any noise. Therefore he called a council to listen to the dispute. The people came from all around to deliberate. They spoke one language and had only one chief. The ducks were brought in, and the chief explained the question. The people said, “We do not wish to be unjust, we will go to the river and hear for ourselves. These ducks can do us no good.” So they went down to the river and frightened the ducks which flew over their heads. Part of the Indians said the noise was made with the bills; part said it was made with the wings. They could not agree. Therefore the ducks were made to fly once more. The people began to quarrel violently, and separated in an ugly mood. All during the winter the feeling grew, until in spring the mutual hatred drove part of the Indians south to hunt for new homes. This was the first division of the people into tribes. They selected a chief from their own division, and called themselves by another name. Finding new objects, and having to give such objects names, brought new words into their former language; and thus after many years the language was changed. Each split in the tribe made a new division and brought a new chief. Each migration brought different words and meanings. Thus the tribes slowly scattered; and thus the dialects, and even new languages, were formed.

**Questions for discussion**

*Why do you think that there are so many different languages in the world?*

*How does this story compare to other stories you have heard about the origin of languages?*

*People have long tried to create a single* ***universal language****. Why do you think humans still speak many different languages?*