

The Development of Chinuk Wawa

The same conditions that led to the creation of a pidgin in Hawaii in the early 19th century were also in place in the Pacific Northwest—a mutual interdependence and more than two languages with one acting as the substrate language. As mentioned previously (Part One), a trade language developed in the Nootka Sound region with the maritime fur trade. As the power structure changed, so too did the language. The emergence of Astoria and Fort Vancouver as centers of the overland fur trade in the Pacific Northwest had implications for the Nootka Jargon that had developed after Cook’s voyage—it spread south to the Columbia. As the lexicon of the trade language expanded to include words from Lower Chinook, the language spoken by people at the mouth of the Columbia, it became known in English as the Chinook Jargon and in the pidgin as Chinuk Wawa.

One of the earliest recorded sentences of Wawa occurred in December 1805 when Captain William Clark was hunting ducks with his musket. After shooting one, it is said that a Clatsop person said the following...

Clouch musket, wake come ma-tax musket.

‘that is a good musket, I do not understand this musket’

Apart from the word “musket” these words would all be intelligible to speakers of Nootka Jargon.¹ Clark was kinder than most in describing the sound system of what he thought was the Clatsop language. He suggested that it was “resembling ours in pronunciation & more easy to learn than [Lower Chinook]” (Lang 2008, p. 15). Meriwether Lewis put together a Chinookan vocabulary that was lost later in a boating accident on the Potomac, but two men traveling with him also developed lists, and one of them, Alexander Ross, included a list of “another lingo, or rather mixed dialect, spoken by the Chinook and neighboring tribes; which is generally used in their intercourse with the whites.” (Lang, p. 56)

When the population of white settlers increased with settlers coming west on the Oregon Trail and exploded after the introduction of the railroad in the late 19th century, English became the dominant language and the need for a trade language declined.

The question about the presence of a pre-contact pidgin remains a topic of much debate. With such a diversity of languages in place before contact, it would make sense that there would have been a lingua franca of some sort.

“There are people who would argue that it’s actually a post-contact language, that is, it came out of just the fur trade and all that. I would tend to argue the other way - that this language existed before. Most of its words and most of its grammar surely come from the native languages here. It has, ten percent of it is French, ten percent of it is English, so the English portion of Chinook Wawa probably came in right at the beginning of fur trade.” [WA state Historical Society page]

¹ In this document the terms Nootka/Nuu-chah-nulth and Chinook refer to older Native languages of the region, not the more recent pidgins.

Tony Johnson and Henry Zenk have written that Euro-American “Chinook Jargon” and Natives’ “Chinuk Wawa” differed with respect to pronunciation, with historical precedence going toward Native pronunciation. French-Canadian missionary priest, Fr. Louis-Napoléon St. Onge, who came in close contact with lower Columbia Native people said, “It is to be deplored that there is a tendency to pronounce Chinook (Chinuk Wawa) with the American twang (from “Bible History Translated in Chinook” in Zenk and Johnson, 2010, p. 446). Statements like this are brought forth in support of the argument that Chinuk Wawa predated the European contact. For more on this see Lang (2008), Thomason (1983), and Zenk and Johnson (forthcoming).