

# 1

## History

### Background

Chinook Jargon is a Native American pidgin language spoken in the Pacific Northwest. The story of Chinook Jargon is the story of Native American culture and Pacific Northwest history. In the 1800s there were over one hundred different languages spoken in the Pacific Northwest. It was one of the most diverse linguistic areas in the world. Chinook Jargon, often known simply as Chinook by speakers, was used among Native Americans, and between early settlers and Native Americans, as a way of bridging the communication gap created by this diversity. Chinook Jargon deeply reflects the oral tradition and culture of that time and place.

Edward Thomas and Rena Grant, historians who wrote about Chinook Jargon during the 1930s and 40s, stated that one hundred thousand people spoke Chinook Jargon in 1875. Speakers ranged from Northern California to Southern Alaska, and from the Pacific Ocean to the Rocky Mountains. Chinook Jargon was still used in northern British Columbia in the 1970s during church services. Over a century later, in 1990, perhaps a hundred individuals, scattered across the region, spoke it. Today however, the situation is changing. Not only are individuals interested in preserving the language, but The Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde Community of Oregon is reviving the language. They have a language immersion program for preschoolers, and use the language on signage and at public events.

Chinook Jargon is different from the “Old Chinook” language spoken by the Chinook people who lived near the mouth of the Columbia River. Old Chinook is complex. It is difficult for non-Natives to learn because its conjugations and syntax are very different from those of European languages. On the other hand, Chinook Jargon evolved to be easy to learn and easy to use. Chinook Jargon is a pidgin language. A pidgin contains a reduced vocabulary (based on a dominant language) and a simplified grammar of its own. Chinook Jargon’s vocabulary is based on Old Chinook. There are also words borrowed from Nuu-Chah-Nulth (Nootka), French, English, and other indigenous languages.

Some linguists and Native Americans think Chinook Jargon was the result of contact with the European, Canadian and American traders. Other linguists and some Native Americans think Chinook Jargon existed long before non-Natives arrived in the Pacific Northwest.

## Chinook Jargon



— Jeffrey Kopp

This map shows some of the many indigenous languages of the Pacific Northwest. No one person could ever learn all of them. A trade language is useful under this condition.

*“Mr. Whidbey estimated the number of Indians inhabiting the place [Gray’s Harbor, 1792] at about one hundred; they spoke the Nootka language, but it did not seem to be their native tongue.”*

— Captain George Vancouver (1798, *Voyage of Discovery*)

*“It is a language confined wholly, I believe, to our North-western possessions west of the Rocky Mountains. It originated in the roving, trading spirit of the tribes, and has been added to and increased since the introduction of the whites among them.”*

— James G. Swan (1857, *The Northwest Coast*)

*“The expansion of trade seems to have emphasized a growing split between remaining hundreds of conservative, sedentary tribesmen and the more numerous and wilder buffalo hunters among the Nez Perces. The Hudson’s Bay people, if they did not originate the split, deepened it by their presence. Indian Agent Cain declared that when he first arrived in the Nez Perce region he could hardly find a member of the conservative group familiar with the trade language called Chinook, whereas the buffalo group boasted ‘any number’ who could.”* — Robert Ignatius Burns (1966, *The Jesuits and the Indian Wars of the Northwest*)

## **Native Trade**

Native Americans in the Northwest traded as a way of acquiring necessities and luxuries. What could be produced easily in one area was often in demand by a neighboring group. A group that had an abundance of camas (or qu-mash, a bulbous food plant) on its land might trade some of it to another group for dried salmon or leather hides. Although most of the trade occurred between neighboring groups on an as-needed basis, there was also a larger “network” in place within which the movement of goods occurred. In 1806, Lewis and Clark explained how one group from the Columbia plains north of The Dalles fit into the trading network:

During their residence on the river, from May to September, or rather before they begin the regular fishery, they go down to the falls, carrying with them skins, mats, silk grass, rushes, and chappel bread. They are here overtaken by the Chopunnish, and other tribes of the Rocky mountains, who descend to Kooskooskee and Lewis’ river for the purpose of selling bear-grass, horses, quamash, and a few skins which they have obtained by hunting, or in exchange for horses, with the Tushepaws.

At the falls, they find the Chilluckittequaws, Eneeshurs, Echeloots, and Skilloots, which last serve as intermediate traders or carriers between the inhabitants above and below the falls. These tribes prepare pounded fish for the market, and the nations below bring wappatoo roots, the fish of the seacoast, berries and a variety of trinkets and small articles which they have procured from the whites.

The trade then begins. The Chopunnish, and Indians of the Rocky Mountains, exchange the articles, which they have brought for wappatoo, pounded fish, and beads. The Indians of the plains being their own fishermen take only wappatoo, horses, beads, and other articles, procured from Europeans. The Indians, however, from Lewis’ river to the falls, consume as food or fuel all the fish which they take; so that the whole stock for exportation is prepared by the nations between the Towahnahooks and the falls....

This trading network extended from the Pacific Ocean to the Rocky Mountains. Although by 1806, European and East Coast goods had become an important part of this network, it is probable that the trade network predates visits by non-Native merchant ships. Large proportions of the goods traded were of Native American origin.

## Chinook Jargon

James Swan chronicles the early 1850s in *The Northwest Coast, or Three Years' Residence in Washington Territory*. He confirms that the falls on the Columbia, or The Dalles, was an important trading site. Swan goes on to record a trip to California, for purposes of trade, that occurred a number of years earlier.

The wife of Mr. Duchenev, the agent at Chenook for the Hudson Bay Company, who is a very intelligent woman, informed me that her father was a Frenchman and her mother a Walla Walla Indian, and that, when she was quite a child, she recollected going with her mother and a party of her tribe to the south for a number of months; that they were three months going and three months returning; that they took horses with them, and Indian trinkets, which they exchanged for vermilion and Mexican blankets; and that on their return her mother died, and was buried where the city of Sacramento now stands. I asked her how she knew where Sacramento was, and she replied that some of her friends had since gone to California, to the gold mines, and that on their return they said that it was at Sacramento where her mother was buried.

She was too young to remember how far into Mexico they went, but I judged that the vermilion she mentioned was obtained from the mountains of Almaden, near San Jose, California. But I have no reason to doubt the statement, as I have heard similar statements from other sources.

Even though Swan acknowledges that this appeared a long trip, it's consistent with other trips he had heard about.

### *California Here I Come!*

Although Chinook Jargon never spread very far into *Spaniyol Ilêhi*, or California, Northwest Natives did visit as far south as the San Francisco Bay area and Sacramento.

"The tribe that had possession of the mines was wealthy as it monopolized the trade in vermilion, a paint ever in demand with warlike savages. These Indians [in California] did a considerable commerce with their neighbors of the North, who visited them in canoes." — A.S. Taylor (1860, *California Farmer*)

"When Fremont first commenced hostilities in California, a large body of Walla Walla Indians from the Columbia was creating disturbances in the region of Sacramento." — James Swan (1857, *The Northwest Coast*)

## Early Visitors

Soon after James Cook's visit to Vancouver Island in 1778, non-Natives began fur trading in the Northwest. Trade ships, after stopping in Hawaii, sailed to Vancouver Island to trade manufactured goods for sea otter pelts. An average sea otter pelt was valued between \$450 and \$650 in today's money. One exceptional sea otter pelt went for \$4000 in London. Besides sea otter there were beaver and other furs. Often \$100 worth of manufactured goods could be traded for thousands of dollars worth of pelts.

The sailors and traders involved in this lucrative enterprise soon learned a jargon based on the language of the Nuu-Chah-Nulth people who live on the western coast of Vancouver Island. A jargon is a simple list of words with no grammar or usage rules as opposed to a pidgin, which has its own grammar. Speakers use jargon words singly or superimpose them on their own language. Traders in their search for otter pelts were able to use this jargon beyond Vancouver Island. In 1792, Captain George Vancouver used Nuu-Chah-Nulth words effectively at Gray's Harbor near the mouth of the Columbia River. His log notes, "[T]hey spoke the Nootka language, but it did not seem to be their *native tongue*." We do not know if Nuu-Chah-Nulth jargon existed prior to non-Native contact or its distribution, but we do know that Chinook-speaking people along the Columbia River in 1805 used Nuu-Chah-Nulth words.

"*Klush musket, wik kēmtēks musket*," said a Clatsop Chinook person, when shown the effect of gunshot on a duck by Lewis and Clark. This sentence, meaning "a good musket, but I don't understand this kind of musket," could be the Nuu-Chah-Nulth Jargon or it could be Chinook Jargon. It is made up of three words from Nuu-Chah-Nulth and one from English. These Chinook people lived 250 miles away from the Nuu-Chah-Nulth people. The Chinooks also used other Nuu-Chah-Nulth words like *pishak* for "bad" or *tayi* for "chief." All these words are found in Chinook Jargon

Along the Columbia, Lewis and Clark met many Native Americans who could speak some English. They had picked up English from trading ships that visited before Lewis' and Clark's arrival. One Clatsop Chinook told Lewis, "Sturgeon is very good," as they came upon a stranded fish while salvaging items along a beach after a high tide. Lewis and Clark were not the first visitors. The Clatsop people gave Lewis and Clark the names of thirteen different sea captains who had already visited them. They expected many of these men to return. Some Chinooks had even learned to swear in English prior to Lewis' and Clark's visit. They used the terms "damn rascal" and "son of a bitch."

### *Origins*

Pidgin languages are a common linguistic phenomena throughout the world. Often associated with the domination of one group over another, they have historically been looked down upon as mere “broken” languages. Now linguists know that each pidgin language has its own unique grammar and often associated culture. The exact origin of many pidgin languages, however, is uncertain.

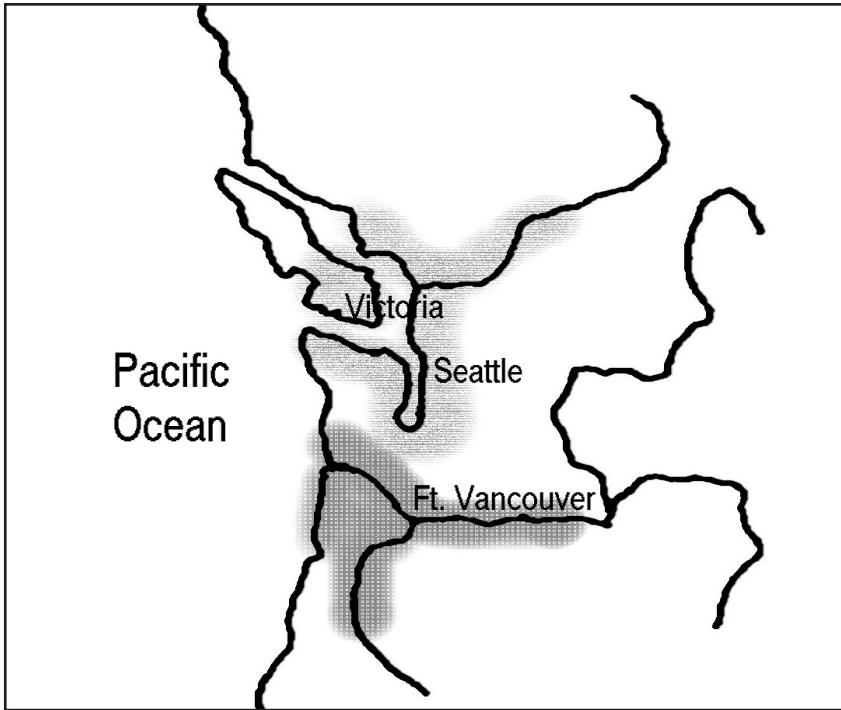
Many pidgin languages have existed in North America. An early one was used between Basque fishermen and Native Americans along the St. Lawrence River in the 1500s. Besides Chinook Jargon, there were Mobilian, Delaware, Ojibwe (Chippewa), and two types of Eskimo pidgins. Perhaps the most famous though is the Plains Sign Language.

“The Jargon originated in the primitive and prehistorical necessity for a trade vehicle. In the beginning the Chinooks picked up some Nootkan words and the Nootkans acquired a few Chinook words.” — Edward Harper Thomas (1927, “The Chinook Jargon”)

John Rodgers Jewitt compiled a word list based on the time he spent as a slave of the Nuu-Chah-Nulth *tayi*, Maquinna, from 1803 until 1806. Of the 87 words he recorded, 10 are found in Chinook Jargon.

“[Captain Cook] recorded a list of native words which were afterwards used by other captains until it became the foundation of the great Chinook jargon, which, as developed by the Hudson Bay Company, became the common language of all northwestern Indians from California to Mt. St. Elias, and from the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific Ocean.” — Edmond S. Meany (1946, *History of the State of Washington*)

“The origin of this Jargon, a conventional language similar to the Lingua Franca of the Mediterranean, the Negro-English-Dutch of Surinam, the Pigeon [sic] English of China, and several other mixed tongues, dates back to the fur droguers of the last century. Those mariners whose enterprise in the fifteen years preceding 1800, explored the intricacies of the northwest coast of America, picked up at their general rendezvous, Nootka Sound, various native words useful in barter, and thence transplanted them, with additions from the English, to the shores of Oregon.” — George Gibbs (1863, *A Dictionary of the Chinook Jargon*)



Chinook Jargon, as we know it today, rapidly spread northward from the Ft. Vancouver area to Victoria and British Columbia after the Hudson's Bay Company relocated its regional offices to British Columbia in the 1840s.

## **Non-Native Settlements**

The lucrative profits of the fur trade made John Jacob Astor the richest man in America. In an attempt to monopolize the fur trade in the Northwest, he established Astoria on the banks of the Columbia River in 1811. This was the first permanent non-Native settlement in the area. Two years later the Northwest Company took it over, renaming it Fort George. The Hudson's Bay Company acquired the Northwest Company in 1821 and expanded the trading post system in the Northwest, founding Fort Vancouver at present-day Vancouver, Washington in 1825. Permanent trading posts changed the economy of the Northwest from primary subsistence to a trading economy. The first trading posts central to this new economy were in the heart of the area controlled by Chinook-speaking people. This economy increased intertribal commerce in furs, manufactured goods, liquor and slaves. During this period, Chinook Jargon rapidly evolved with the majority of its words adopted from Old Chinook, French and English.

## **Chinook Jargon**

From 1829 until 1835, plagues swept through the Northwest, particularly along the Columbia and Willamette rivers. Samuel Parker, an early missionary, stated that the mortality rate along the Columbia River reached seventy-five percent. During this period, Fort George's importance as a trading center diminished. The newer Fort Vancouver, across the Columbia River from present-day Portland, became an important center of trading activity. Horatio Hale, an ethnologist with the United States Exploring Expedition of 1841, visited Fort Vancouver and wrote, "There are Canadians and half-breeds married to Chinook women, who can only converse with their wives in this speech, and it is the fact, strange as it may seem, that many young children are growing up to whom this factitious language is really the mother tongue, and who speak it with more readiness and perfection than any other." In 1841, the 500 permanent inhabitants included 100 Canadians, some Hawaiians, and many Native Americans from different linguistic groups. There were a large number of people coming and going all the time. At any one time there could have been 2000 people at the fort. Chinook Jargon was its language of commerce. Canadian and Hawaiian men employed at Fort Vancouver often married Native American women. Many of these new husbands did not wish to be transferred to other Hudson's Bay outposts. They left their jobs at the fort to farm in Oregon's Willamette Valley and settled down with their families. Chinook Jargon was the primary language of this Willamette Valley community.

England and the United States partitioned the Northwest in 1846. The Hudson's Bay Company had already moved its main operations from Fort Vancouver, which became part of the U.S., to Victoria on Vancouver Island, in present-day Canada. Hudson's Bay Company personnel continued to use Chinook Jargon at Victoria and wherever they went in the Northwest. This spreading of Chinook Jargon by Hudson's Bay personnel led some people to refer to Chinook Jargon as the "Hudson's Bay language."

Career U.S. Army officers often spent a tour of duty in the Northwest prior to the Civil War. Particularly among Northerners during the Civil War, knowledge of Chinook Jargon was a fraternal badge. Ulysses Grant and some of his subordinates knew Chinook Jargon. Chinook Jargon was occasionally used between cronies in telegraph dispatches for fun and to prevent prying eyes. In a hilarious story, a General Nesmith was accused of passing encrypted messages to war speculators. As proof of this, the Secretary of War presented the evidence to Nesmith in the form of a telegram a friend had sent him. It read, "KLATAWA NIKI SITKUM MOLITSH WEGHT OCOKE KONAMOX LUM."<sup>1</sup> Nesmith, after giving Secretary Stanton a good ribbing, explained that his friend, General Ingalls, was asking for a favor. The telegram said, "Send



me another half barrel of that same whiskey.” Nesmith and Ingalls enjoyed corresponding in Chinook Jargon and had been doing so for a year. Stanton was able to get Nesmith’s story verified immediately. It seems he was the only officer in the War Department who didn’t know Chinook Jargon.

## The Heyday

The heyday of Chinook Jargon could be referred to as the “hop days.” New agriculture, such as hop farming, changed the economy of the Northwest even more than the fur trade. Changes in the economic and social conditions of Native Americans perpetuated Chinook Jargon and spread it around the Northwest in the later 1800s. The earliest immigrant settlers to the Northwest learned Chinook Jargon out of necessity. Before 1850 these settlers had daily dealings with Native Americans. Much conversation was in Chinook Jargon. After 1850, the spread of Chinook Jargon was based on the new movement and settlement patterns of Native Americans. Native Americans spread Chinook Jargon outward from the Columbia River, Willamette Valley and Puget Sound areas.

During the 1850s, the U.S. and Canada began acquiring Native American land for exclusive non-Native usage. This policy segregated Native



— Sister M.D. McNamee (1959, *Willamette Interlude*, Pacific Books)

Archbishop F. N. Blanchet, shown here, finished Bishop M. Demers’ word list and produced one of the finest Chinook Jargon dictionaries of the 1800s. Published in 1871, after being edited by Father L. N. St. Onge, this work included a catechism in Chinook Jargon.

## **Chinook Jargon**

Americans from non-Natives except in certain industries. Under the reservation system in the U.S., people who spoke different languages found themselves living together on reservations throughout Oregon and Washington. Sometimes traditional enemies were placed side by side. Native Americans disenfranchised from their land in Canada congregated in urban ghettos around Victoria, Vancouver and New Westminster. These Native American “melting pots” fostered the usage of Chinook Jargon and it was used in the popular arts. Chinook Jargon songs, stories, and even plays flourished from 1850 to 1890. In some families, children were raised speaking Chinook Jargon.

In many parts of the Northwest, Native American traditional law allows individuals to own the rights to songs. Songs can be traded or borrowed and are wealth. This is similar to modern copyright practice. Any person who sings a song that is owned by another is required to make a payment to the owner of the song. However songs in Chinook Jargon were usually excluded from this requirement, so they circulated freely. Franz Boas copied down many Chinook Jargon songs in the 1880s and 1890s. Some of them are quite rowdy. In the following song, a woman lets her unfaithful lover know how easily he can be replaced.

<i>Cultus kopa nika.</i>	I don't care.
<i>Spouse mika mash nika.</i>	If you desert me.
<i>Hyau puty boys coolie kopa town.</i>	Many pretty boys are in town.
<i>Alki weght nika iskum.</i>	Soon I'll take another.
<i>Wake kull kopa nika.<sup>2</sup></i>	It's not hard for me.

Hop picking was one of the new economic activities that caused population shift and movement. Edward H. Thomas wrote:

Seattle and Tacoma are forty miles apart, both on the Sound, but a few miles back of the shore there is a limited but very rich valley extending from one city to the other. This, in the [eighteen-] eighties, was one of the world's greatest hop-producing centers. Indians constituted the bulk of the pickers, and came in fleets and armies in the fall to what was to them a great fiesta, not from the shores of the Puget Sound alone, but from the Yakima and Klickitat countries across the Cascades, using the ancient Indian trails. They came from the North, from the Kwakiutl territory and the islands of the Haidahs and Tsimpshahns.

Chinook Jargon was carried back and forth by this activity. Thomas goes on to say, “Thousands went to the hop fields and followed on the homeward trek just for the fun of it. To these a working knowledge of the Chinook Jargon was very much of a necessity.”

## History

Chinook Jargon was the primary means of communication in many industries in the Northwest from 1860 to 1890. Native Americans furnished the bulk of hired labor for seasonal agriculture, especially hop picking, in Washington and British Columbia until 1890. Fishing, canning, sealing, ranching and timber also employed many Native Americans who used Chinook Jargon as a common language. Non-Natives who worked with Native Americans in these industries learned and used Chinook Jargon. Merchants who served Native Americans spoke Chinook Jargon.

Chinook Jargon was a working person's language. People not working in industries dominated by Native Americans or servicing Native American communities had no need for it. Later immigrants looked down on Chinook Jargon. A prejudice against Chinook Jargon survives to this day. An article in a newspaper from the Pacific Northwest on April 22, 1998 described Chinook Jargon as "a strange admixture of French, English, and Indian, containing only 300 words, and barely suitable for bartering." This writer is apparently ignorant of Chinook Jargon, a language rich in idiom and expression.

Missionaries made use of Chinook Jargon in their efforts to convert Native Americans. Catholics and Protestants translated hymns and prayers into Chinook Jargon. Father Modeste Demers compiled an exceptional Chinook Jargon dictionary and catechism in 1839. Father Demers spent a lot of time among Native Americans studying their languages. He disappeared for years at a time in his quest to learn the languages of various Native American peoples. He was especially fond of singing and even after he became the Bishop of Vancouver in 1847, he conducted choir practice himself. Father Demers' work in Chinook Jargon was completed in 1867 by Fathers F. N. Blanchet and L. N. St. Onge and published in 1871.

Myron Eells was born in Oregon in 1843. He published hymns for the Methodist missionaries. He learned and used Chinook Jargon while preaching to Native Americans on Puget Sound in the 1870s. In a separate evangelical effort, *St. Mark's Kloosh Yiem Kopa Nesika Saviour Jesus Christ or Gospel According to Mark* was published in 1912 by the British and Foreign Bible Society.<sup>3</sup>

Another missionary, Father Jean-Marie LeJeune, was stationed at Kamloops, British Columbia. Father LeJeune published the *Kamloops Wawa* from 1891 to 1904. This was a magazine that reported the diocese's news and teachings. The *Kamloops Wawa* was written in Chinook Jargon as well as English, French and other Native American languages. Father LeJeune wrote Chinook Jargon in the Duployan shorthand script. He believed the shorthand was easier to learn and teach than the Roman alphabet. The Kamloops Diocese published a great deal of religious material in this shorthand.

### *Law, Treaties and The Jargon*

Chinook Jargon was used for treaty negotiations in the Pacific Northwest, as well as in some early court cases involving Native Americans. The proceedings were usually conducted in three or more languages. When a *Bastèn* spoke, English was translated to Chinook Jargon and then Chinook Jargon was translated into the required indigenous languages. When a Native spoke, the process was reversed. Historians like to criticize Chinook Jargon for its part in the treaties. The double translation slowed the proceedings, but Chinook Jargon didn't affect the English copy of the treaties — the subject of debate. Most likely, Native Americans signed “bad” treaties after seeing the force of the westward migration. They realized that there were few options open to them.

The Chinook Nation has no treaty with the U.S. for its historical lands. A treaty agreed to by the Chinooks in 1851 was never ratified by the Senate, while the Chinooks never signed later agreements.

“The Governor told them how the Great Chief in Washington loved Indians, and he told them that he loved them as much as if they were the children of his own loins. Because of his love for them he was going to have the Great Father buy their lands and he was going to give them fine reservations and the blessings of civilization, such as schools and blacksmith and carpenter shops.”  
— Archie Binns (1941, *Northwest Gateway*)

“The first council was held within the city limits of present Tacoma between December 24 and December 26, 1854. Though the Indians appeared in proud finery, Stevens wore the work garb of the district: red flannel shirt, trouser legs thrust inside his boots, a broad-brimmed black hat with his pipe held in its band. The Indians sat on the ground in concentric circles outside the evergreen arbor sheltering the white dignitaries. Standing before them, Stevens made an introductory speech sentence by sentence. Shaw translated into the Chinook trade jargon; Indian interpreters transfromed that into native dialect. The gathering was then dismissed to talk over what had been said. The next day the proposed treaty itself was read and translated phrase by phrase.” — David Lavender (1958, *Land of Giants*)

“That young Indian is now standing before a Court of law, to be tried for his life, before an English Court of Justice, the first proceeding of which he does not, cannot understand, with a Chenook (Chinook Jargon) Interpreter by his side, who neither knows good English nor [the language of the] Tsimsean Indian.” — Alfred W. Waddington (1860, “Judicial Murderer,” *Who Killed William Robinson*, ed. Sandwell and Lutz)

“After Colonel Mike Simmons, the agent, and, as he has been termed, the Daniel Boone of the Territory, had marshaled the savages into order, an Indian interpreter was selected from each tribe to interpret the Jargon of Shaw into such language as their tribe could understand. The governor then made a speech, which was translated by Colonel Shaw into Jargon, and spoken to the Indians, in the same manner the good old elders of ancient times were accustomed to deacon out the hymns to the congregation.” — James G. Swan (1857, *The Northwest Coast*)

“As in some of the other treaties, the Indians misunderstood the terms and believed that they were to receive that much a year for twenty years.” — Archie Binns (1941, *Northwest Gateway*)

“The difficulty was in having so many different tribes to talk to at the same time, and being obliged to use the Jargon, which at best is but a poor medium of conveying intelligence. The governor requested any one of them that wished [to speak] to him. Several of the chiefs spoke, some in Jargon and some in their own tribal language, which would be interpreted into Jargon by one of their people who was conversant with it...” — James G. Swan (1857, *The Northwest Coast*)

“But it was poorly suited to Euro-American attempts to explain complex matters like land holding and religion. One unhappy result was a series of treaties negotiated between whites and Indians, the language and meaning of which are still a matter of legal dispute.” — Carlos A. Schwantes (1989, *The Pacific Northwest*)

“When an Indian spoke the Rogue River tongue it was translated by an Indian interpreter into Chinook, or jargon, to me, when I translated it into English. When Lane or Palmer spoke the process was reversed, I giving the speech to the interpreter in Chinook, and he translated it to the Indians in their own tongue. This double translation of long speeches made the labor tedious, and it was not until late in the afternoon that the treaty was completed and signed.” — George E. Cole (1905, *Early Oregon*)

“The Americans will never leave us alone. Let us not concern our hearts .... We will take [Grand Ronde] .... [W]e will make it our own place.” — Ki-a-kuts (1855, during negotiations with Joel Palmer), excerpt from T. N. Leavelle (1998, “We Will Make It Our Own Place”)

“Governor Stevens, first governor of Washington Territory, before the Civil War, negotiated a long and complicated treaty with all the Indian tribes within the territory, and did it all through the medium of the Jargon.” — Edward Harper Thomas (1927, “The Chinook Jargon”)

## **Chinook Jargon**

Chinook Jargon was the community language of the Grand Ronde and Siletz reservations in Oregon. In both of these places, people from various linguistic groups lived side by side. Chinook Jargon was the only indigenous language they had in common and was spoken as a home and community language. Descendants of Native people from Astoria, Fort Vancouver and the Willamette Valley, as well as others from the Columbia River to Northern California, live today at Grand Ronde. Some of them speak Chinook Jargon with features not found in the general Chinook Jargon of the Northwest. They claim it is a more developed form of the language.

## **Decline**

The conditions that made Chinook Jargon such a vibrant language eventually led to its decline. The expanding economy demanded a more efficient way of moving goods to and from the Northwest. In the first half of the 1800s one had to travel for months by foot, horse, wagon, or sailing ship to get in or out. This restricted immigration to the area. In 1865 this changed with the completion of the first transcontinental train track between the eastern U.S. and California. This was soon followed by track to Oregon, Washington and British Columbia. A journey that used to take three months could now be made in a week.

Native American communities nurtured Chinook Jargon while mass immigration changed the balance of the economy against them. The official population of Washington jumped from 23,000 in 1870 to 357,000 in 1890. By 1910 it had climbed to 1,141,000. Oregon and British Columbia experienced similar growth. But Native American populations remained level. Native Americans now played a smaller role in a larger economy. New immigrants to the Northwest no longer had to learn Chinook Jargon to survive. The reverse was true. The Native Americans had to learn English.

Government policy on both sides of the border was as unfavorable to Chinook Jargon as it was to most Native American languages. Children were forbidden to speak Chinook Jargon at school. Whites shunned Chinook Jargon because of its perceived low social status. Except for a few places like Grand Ronde, Chinook Jargon was on its way out in the lower U.S. by 1900. It hung around a little longer in British Columbia and Alaska, but World War I and motorized transportation exacted their toll and by the 1920s its usage was in serious decline in the north. Many young men left the area to fight in World War I. They came back realizing that English, not Chinook Jargon, was the language of the world and the future. The gasoline engine

broke the isolation of remote settlements. Motorized boats, cars and trucks allowed people to move to larger, English-only towns, where they enjoyed modern comforts and central services, but still accessed the remote resources necessary to earn their living. Chinook Jargon gave way to English.

Some old settlers occasionally used Chinook Jargon as a group identifier. In one instance Chinook Jargon was used to persuade Simon Fraser Tolmie, who had learned Chinook Jargon from his father, to run for premier of British Columbia in 1928. Tolmie refused to consider the job even though citizens were hounding him to run. On the eve of choosing a party candidate, the debate was fierce. Henry Pooley, a veteran politician, stood up and aggressively lectured Tolmie in Chinook Jargon. Nobody else in the room understood, but Tolmie went on to become the twenty-first premier.

Chinook Jargon also lingered a little longer in Seattle. Ex-Alaskans, men and women from the Gold Rush—the last time that Chinook Jargon was a necessity—used it as a fraternal badge. Chinook Jargon separated the old-timers from the *cheechako* or newcomers. Nard Jones wrote:

I remember sitting in the office of a former “Gold Rusher” as he answered the telephone. “*Kloshe*,” he said, “Arctic Club, twelve o’clock. *Alki, tillikum.*”

He replaced the receiver and turned to me as if he had not been speaking in code. In the Chinook Jargon *kloshe* meant good or fine. *Alki* was soon or in the future or, as the Indians thought of it, “bye and bye.” As Seattle’s gold rushers disappeared during World War II, so did their Chinook Jargon.

Chinook Jargon could still be heard in some parts of the Pacific Northwest well into the twentieth century. There are anecdotes told of fishermen and Canadian Coast Guard members using the pidgin during the 1950s to keep radio transmissions secret. Today there are only a few people in the Northwest who can still speak Chinook Jargon. They are part of a long line of speakers stretching back 200 years or more. But for the most part Chinook Jargon is no longer heard.

## **Revival**

Many linguists and anthropologists have studied Chinook Jargon. Franz Boas used Chinook Jargon to communicate with Natives, who did not speak English, while he was studying other languages in the Northwest. In 1936, Melville Jacobs published a collection of stories told by Native Americans in Chinook Jargon. He also made the first serious study of Chinook Jargon grammar since Horatio Hale’s original work in 1846. Henry Zenk studied

## **Chinook Jargon**

the Chinook Jargon used by a dozen elderly people at Grand Ronde, publishing his doctoral thesis in 1984. Dr. Zenk noted that the speakers had all continued to use Chinook Jargon even though they were all also fluent in English. Dr. Zenk believes that they identified Chinook Jargon with being Native American.

In the 1890s, Father LeJeune, of Kamloops, proposed that Chinook Jargon be used as a world language. Father LeJeune argued that Chinook Jargon had a big advantage over artificial languages like today's Esperanto. There were actually thousands of people who could already speak it.

Just as Chinook Jargon was slipping into disuse, interest began to grow in reviving it. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Mrs. Laura Downey-Bartlett, realizing that the Northwest was losing something precious, attempted to revive its use. She spoke and sang at many events in Chinook Jargon. In 1914, she published *Chinook-English Songs*, translations of the period's most popular songs into Chinook Jargon, in an attempt to get people to use Chinook Jargon. In 1924 she published a dictionary. Many other dictionaries were produced from 1909 until 1930 to stimulate interest and satisfy curiosity about Chinook Jargon.

### ***Bound for Alaska***

The gold rushers are credited with carrying Chinook Jargon to Alaska, even though it was well-established there prior to that event. Chinook Jargon was used as a jargon by the gold rushers, not having the distinct grammar it had along the Columbia River. Chinook Jargon was popular with Native Americans on the panhandle, where it was often referred to as the Hudson's Bay language.

"At present it is spoken from Washington Territory to Lynn Channel, in Alaska; the older Indians only do not understand it." — Franz Boas (1888, "Chinook Songs")

"By 1900 CJ was effectively obsolete in Oregon. However during the same period CJ spread to parts of Alaska bordering on British Columbia." — Terrance S. Kaufman (1968, "A Report on Chinook Jargon")

"Chinook was not spoken by Alaska natives of the interior, and it was spoken by those of the far southeastern island fringe only after the Russian cession of Alaska to the United States. The Jargon did not go into that territory until the Klondike rush, and even then only a few words were carried there by the Puget Sounders who were among the first seekers following George Carmack's famous find." — Edward Harper Thomas (1927, "The Chinook Jargon")



In more recent times, Duane Pasco, who learned a little Chinook Jargon during his youth in Alaska, also tried to stir up interest in the pidgin. Duane, a traditional carver, published a bimonthly newsletter called *Tenas Wawa* from 1991 to 1995.

The Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde is taking steps to preserve and invigorate Chinook Jargon usage on the reservation. In 1997, Tony Johnson was hired as a specialist to put together a language program. “People very much want to know their Chinook,” said Tony. “That’s the only language they can say was their community language here. Your grandparents, what you heard them speaking was the Chinook.”

As part of Grand Ronde’s *Twah Sun Chako* preschool, three to four year olds are immersed in Chinook Jargon for 5 hours a day in an attempt to foster fluency in the language. An evening class, in which participants receive University of Oregon foreign language credit, targets adults. Other classes and activities are provided to members of the community.

Other groups across the Northwest have taken an interest in reviving Chinook Jargon. Recently a book, an annual workshop and several Web sites have emerged in an effort to keep this pidgin from dying out.



Tony Johnson, Language Specialist, and Tribal Elder Annabelle “Peachy” Ham are working on reviving Chinook Jargon usage at Grand Ronde, Oregon. Besides Chinook Jargon, the people that moved to the Grand Ronde reservation in the 1850s spoke 30 dialects of 11 Native languages, as well as French and English.

## *The Threads*

If you listen hard enough, you might still be able to hear the echo of Chinook Jargon in the Pacific Northwest. It might be in the form of a place name, an odd expression, or if you're lucky you might run into someone who knows a bit.

"All these words are Chinook Jargon. For Mr. Walker, they were what remained of his 'mother's tongue' [in 1953]." — Dell and Virginia Hymes (1972, "Chinook Jargon as 'Mother's Tongue'")

*Atlki* was used by Yellow cab drivers in Seattle until computerized dispatching was instituted in the 1990s. According to Leland Brajant, a former driver, it was the correct response to a "bell" or dispatch and indicated that the driver was "right on it." The pronunciation simplified the *tl* to an *l* and the *i* was elongated to an *ay* as in "eye."

"As General Grant knew a great deal of Chinook, he was able to appreciate the joke fully." — General Horace Porter (1906, "Campaigning With Grant")

"I would hear a shouted greeting of 'Klahowya!' or be invited to 'huy-huy.' I never knew what these things meant. (Was it Italian? Yiddish? Swedish?) Sometimes a friend would make a passing, baffling reference to something like 'going klahanie,' or inquire about my 'klootchman.' When I asked about these odd terms, my Seattle friends would look sort of embarrassed and say, 'Oh, that's just the Jargon... no one uses it any more,' or something to that effect, and decline to explain further." — Jeffrey Kopp (1998, "Chinook Jargon – An Introduction")

"I'm a 'native speaker' of Chinook, having been taught it by my grandfather." - Robert Henderson (1998, e-mail correspondence)

Duane Pasco learned Chinook Jargon while growing up in Alaska in the early 1940s, but hadn't used the language since then. During the early 1990s, he tried to drum up interest in the language with a bimonthly newsletter. He gave up because, "Nobody was really interested."