

GHOST-NAMING IN THE WEST
COAST (NOOTKA) LANGUAGE

Barbara J. Moon

Peter S. Webster

Department of Zoology

Ahousat

University of British Columbia

British Columbia

INTRODUCTION

Many ethnologists working with the Wakashan-speaking West Coast (Nootka) People of Vancouver Island have noted the avoidance of the names of persons recently deceased (NOTE I). Boas¹, Koppert⁹, and Swan¹² mention only that the name must be avoided but others have noted that living persons bearing the same name must acquire an alternate name for a period of prohibition^{2,3}. Extension of the name-taboo to cover words containing phonetic elements of the proscribed name was recorded by Drucker⁴ and Sapir and Swadesh¹¹. This extension of the name-taboo has also been recorded for the Salish-speaking Twana in Washington^{5,6}. Elmendorf has suggested that the operation of the word-taboo in Twana would result in the elimination of certain words from the vocabulary and contribute to the increase in lexical diversity between at least some Coast Salish languages⁶.

AHOUSAT WORD-TABOOING CUSTOMS

The death of a member of the Ahousat band (a Central group living on Vargas Island) caused the villagers to be called together immediately after the funeral rites. To emphasize the sorrow of the occasion, people were not seated according to status or directed to particular places. A male relative of the immediate family would announce the name of the deceased and ask those present, who had similar sounding names, to find a substitute. These individuals then called out the names that they would assume for the next four years, the period of prohibition. Following this, the spokesman would announce that other phonetically similar words were to be dropped and what substitutes were to be used. Prior to the gathering, the substitute words had been decided upon by the elders of the family. Songs and ceremonials to be "put away" for the next four years were also announced at this time. This gathering was called /laakt'uula/, glossed as "making announcements when one is heartbroken" (NOTE II). Although the gathering was not a potlatch, gifts were given to those present to thank them for observing the taboo and for their sympathy.

The word-tabooing itself was known as /č'ič'ihla/, translated literally as "ghost naming", and meaning roughly "one is not supposed to recall his or her name or even the closest sound". The term is derived from a reduplicated

form of /ǝ'iha/ ("something to be feared; ghost") and the suffix /-la/ ("having...as name"¹⁰).

People of the Ohiat band at Bamfield were unable to remember the terms unaided, but immediately recognized the Ahousat terms for ghost-naming and the tabooing ceremony as identical to their own.

Although no censure was attached to the breaking of the taboo, at least in recent memory, it was unthinkable that anyone should not respect the prohibition. At the end of the period of prohibition, if the family were sufficiently wealthy, a potlatch and feast would be held to end formally the taboo observance. The name-and word-taboo were lifted at this time as were the restrictions on any prohibited songs and ceremonials. This "reinstatement" potlatch appears to have had no special name in Ahousat, nor was it invariably held at the end of the prohibition period, being more dependent than the /laakt'uula/ on the wealth of the family involved.

The practice of word-tabooing by the West Coast People appears to stem from a fear of attracting the ghost by using its given name, thus causing it to interfere in the affairs of the living (NOTE III). The belief that similar sounds have a similar identity or relationship and thus possess the same power would account for the extension of the name-taboo to other words containing phonetic elements of the "ghost

name". The usual reason given for the taboo, however, is that use of the name of the deceased and similar sounding words would cause the relatives further grief by reminding them of their loss. Of the previously mentioned authors, only Colson² was told that the names of the dead were avoided for fear of attracting ghosts. It is interesting to note that the term for word-tabooing refers to fearsome ghosts, rather than just to the deceased.

There are still several people at Ahousat who can remember instances of /č'ič'ihla/ ("ghost-naming") and the substitutes that were used. There also exist many words for which substitutes are known but the personal name that inspired the prohibition having been long forgotten. One remembered example concerned a man named /Siicak^Wapi/. He was known by the name /Siicak/, which translates as "going along with dorsal fin above the water". /Siicik/ ("using a pole to move a canoe") and /sičik/ ("to cause a match or fire-drill to light") were both tabooed after /Siicak's/ death, although the substitutes are not known. The mother of another /Siicak/ dropped the use of /siqacičik/ ("anything cooked") and substituted /?anigšik/ ("the roiling surface of boiling water") for anything that was cooked.

Another example from the late 1920's is still remembered. /Wiwiik'o/ Anderson, whose given name translates as "one

who owns nothing", died as a young boy. His parents requested that people use /qas̥tup'i/, an imperative form of "nothing" (/qas̥tup/), instead of /wik'iɪ/, "don't" (NOTE IV). The substitute was always used by the family although the rest of the village usually substituted only in the presence of the family or those of their house. The last remembered instance took place in the early 1940's at Nootka Sound where many West Coast People had come to work for a fish cannery. A man named /Taapuṣsis/ (familiarly /Teep/) died, causing people whose names began with a similar sound to change their names. Thus Dora became Ann (since no "d" exists in the West Coast language, the Christian name of Dora would, in speech, become Tora). This is one of several cases known of name-tabooes applying to Christian names.

TABOOING CUSTOMS OF OTHER WEST COAST GROUPS

There are several evident differences between the word-tabooing customs practiced by the northern (Moachat⁴) and central (Ahousat, Sheshaht¹¹, Clayoquot⁹) groups:

(1) At Moachat, formal word-tabooing was reserved for the paramount chief of the lineage and was announced at the "throwing away" patlatch after his death. Among the central bands, any well-to-do family would request the village to refrain from using certain names and terms after the death of a relative.

(2) The word-tabooes were announced at ceremonies called /laakt'uula/ by both the Ahousat and Sheshaht. At Moachat, however, /laakt'uula/ referred to the feast given for persons of lesser status for whom no word-tabooes were invoked (although courtesy demanded that the name of the deceased not be mentioned in the presence of relatives).

(3) The prohibition period lasted from one (Makah¹², Sheshaht¹¹, and Moachat⁴) to four (Clayoquot⁹ and Ahousat) years.

(4) The "reinstatement" potlatch was the occasion for the central groups to retrieve and to display part of the remains. It appears that four years was considered long enough to dissipate the power of the ghost so that its name and remains could be safely handled.

The Ahousat customs themselves differed somewhat from Sheshaht traditions. The Ahousat /laakt'uulas/ were held immediately after the funeral rites and appeared to have been attended only by members of the village. During the period of the last occurrence of /laakt'uulas/, every family, assuming they could afford it, would try to sponsor one after a death in the family. In older times, before wealth was more freely available to everyone, the ceremony would likely have been restricted to the upper classes or a chief would have had to initiate the word-taboo on the part of commoners.

The Sheshaht /laakt'uula/ was held several days after the funeral in order to invite neighbouring chiefs. This ceremony was a potlatch and all present were requested to respect the wishes of the family concerning the name of the deceased and similar sounding words¹¹. There is no indication whether the prohibition would be honoured at the villages of the visiting chiefs. It is possible that there was no need for an extensive geographical area of taboo since the power or malevolent intentions of the ghost might well have been restricted to its home village.

WORD-TABOOING IN TWANA

Twana word-tabooing customs are similar in many respects to those of the West Coast People. The taboo on the given name of a deceased person went into effect automatically and operated until that name was resumed by a living kinsman⁶. A feast was sponsored by the relatives of an eminent person in order to announce the proscription of words with a phonetic resemblance to the name of their dead kinsman. Only people of the immediate village were invited to the feast and observance of the taboo seems to have been restricted to the local group⁶. Word-tabooing in Twana was observed to spare the feelings of the relatives and seems to have been associated only with adult names, which were themselves subject to severe restrictions in use.

There was no cultural mechanism in Twana to formally reinstate tabooed words.

ANALYSIS OF THE /Č'IC'İHLA/ PROCESS

Several things became apparent when we examined actual examples of word-tabooing:

- (1) A phonetic element (or elements) prominent in the given name of a deceased person were present in the similar-sounding words which were tabooed. Thus, after /Hay'iχihk^wihsī/ died, /hayi/ ("snake") was proscribed and /wawum'as/ (/wam'as/ = "wriggling" - refers normally to mythological lightning snake) substituted.
- (2) The substitute word used was often already in existence and chosen because the "thing" that it represented shared a trait with the "thing" labelled by the tabooed word. /Huhu!a/ (/huhu!a/ = "upside down on rocks"), the name for the dark-coloured limpets, was used in place of /ha^oistup/ ("low water creature"), the black chiton, because both animals are noted for their ability to adhere closely to rocks.
- (3) Substitutes for tabooed animal names were always morphologically complex and analyzable (NOTE V). For example, /sackapih/ ("sharp all over") was a substitute name for /t'uc'up/ (/t'u/ = "spherical object protruding"⁸), the red sea urchin, and described the prickly appearance of the body spines.

LEXICAL IMPLICATIONS

Elmendorf⁵ feels that word-tabooing, as practiced in Twana, will have three observable effects on a language:

- (1) Morphemes that phonetically resemble adult personal names will gradually disappear from the vocabulary.
- (2) Personal names themselves will become semantically empty since their referants in the lexicon will have been lost through tabooing. In Twana, this process has been completed and names are no longer translatable indicating that the custom had been in effect for a very long time.
- (3) Complex descriptive terms would gradually spread through the lexicon, having been contrived as substitutes for tabooed words. He has also postulated that word-tabooing would accelerate the "normal" rate of vocabulary change⁷.

One difference between the West Coast language and Twana is immediately apparent. Despite the fact that word-tabooing was an old established custom in the West Coast language⁴, many personal names are still meaningful. This suggests that if word-tabooing was constantly causing vocabulary change, that the resultant lexical replacements happened at a very slow rate. It is also possible that word-tabooing did not begin to have a noticeable effect on the lexicon until the language was affected by the European influence on the children and the language started its gradual attrition (about one hundred years ago). At this

time, too, the rigid traditions and restrictions of status would have started to break down and an increase in tabooing ceremonies would have resulted. Tabooed words were also more likely to be reinstated than in Twana since the proscription was only in force for four years. Children learning the language during that period, however, might retain the substitutes as part of their vocabulary.

There are many complex descriptive terms found in the West Coast language. The proportion that could be due to taboo replacement forms can not be determined at this time. However, it might be profitable to compare a West Coast word list with a word list in Kwakiutl, a Wakashan language with no word-tabooing traditions.

We feel that there is considerable evidence in the West Coast dialects for the disappearance of words due to word-tabooing:

- (1) Many substitute names are still known and readily remembered thirty-five years after the last instances of /č'ič'ihla/.
- (2) Some names for animals (collected by the senior author) are known to be "new" names and for which no "old" names are remembered (NOTE VI).
- (3) Certain names recorded for animals were not accepted by some informants who considered them to be only substitute names for other animals. Thus the previously mentioned

substitute name for the red sea urchin (/sačkapih/) is considered by some to be the name for the porcupine (an animal found only on the mainland). This use of the name is firmly denied by others.

(4) There is considerable variation in vocabulary between West Coast dialects. A preliminary examination of the zoological vocabulary of three West Coast dialects indicates that the variation is primarily in words of the complex, analyzable type. The older, often meaningless names for the economically-important animals appear to be cognate throughout the West Coast language. It seems likely that the constantly-used names for important animals would be more readily retained despite even frequent tabooing. The fact that taboos were observed only by the local groups would also tend to favour local names arising.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The money for the field work was provided by a National Research Council Operating Grant, No. 673985, held by Dr. P.A. Larkin, Faculty of Graduate Studies, University of British Columbia.

We would like to thank Mrs. Jessie Webster and Mr. Noah Thomas of Ahousat, B.C. for having provided information on word tabooing.

We would also like to thank Dr. Barbara Efrat, Mrs. Mabel Dennis, and Mrs. Mary Jane Dick of the Linguistics Division, British Columbia Provincial Museum, for checking the phonemic orthography and translations.

NOTES

- I This language will hereafter be referred to only as the West Coast language in accordance with the current usage by the West Coast People.
- II All of the original translations were done by the junior author.
- III An Ahousat story, known to the junior author, illustrates why the word-tabooing custom came into being. Once there were two women both called ʔOkyupa. One of them died and the other one didn't change her name. The husband of the living ʔOkyupa came back one night from raking herring in his boat and landed on the beach. "ʔOkyupa", he called to his wife, "herring!" No answer. "ʔOkyupa, herring!" he kept calling. Finally, ʔOkyupa came silently down to the boat. In the darkness, ʔOkyupa's husband spilled his catch into her burden basket and she left the beach. Some time later, after seeing to the boat, he goes up to the house. He doesn't see the herring so he asks his wife where they are. Surprised, she says that she doesn't know anything about the herring. "But you came down to get them!" "No, I've just been sitting here by the fire. I haven't heard anything." He still doesn't believe her and starts looking in boxes and under mats. She shouts at him that she hadn't gone down to the boat and that maybe the dead ʔOkyupa had come in answer to his call. All of the men of the house gather together, light their torches, and go over to ʔOkyupa's grave in a tree. There, at the foot of her grave tree, is the pile of herring. Since then, people have changed their names when they become "ghost named".
- IV A case of extended /č'ič'ihla/ was coined by Thomas Morris who was collecting seagull eggs on Bear Island with the second author just after Wiliwik'o Anderson died. Finding the nests empty Thomas said "/Sikaastup!/" (Nothing!). /Sika/ (English "cigar") combined with /-tup/ ("thing") to form "cigar thing" which was a pun on and replacement for /gaštup/ ("smoke thing" = nothing) which had been substituted for /wik'ii/ ("don't")!

- V Due to the zoological nature of the senior author's research, only examples involving animal names are known at this time.
- VI The old name (/qavɪc/) for a small marine snail presently called /ɪaysɪayniʰ/ ("little dogs") was only discovered because it was mentioned in an ancient lullaby.

REFERENCES CITED

1. Boas, F, 1890. The Nootka. Brit.Ass.Adv.Sci.(Rept.) 60:582-604; 668-679.
2. Colson, E. 1953. The Makah Indians. Minnesota Press, Minneapolis. 324 pp.
3. Curtis, E.S. 1916. The North American Indian. Volume 11 - The Nootka. Johnson Reprint Corp., New York. pp. 1-113.
4. Drucker, P. 1951. The northern and central Nootkan tribes. Bur.Amer.Ethnol. 144:1-480.
5. Elmendorf, W.W. 1951. Word tabu and lexical change in Coast Salish. Int.J.Amer.Ling. 17:205-208.
6. _____ 1960. "Utterance taboo and restriction on name use". In: The structure of Twana culture. Research Studies, Monogr. Suppl. No. 2. Wash. State Univ. pp. 388-396.
7. _____ 1970. Word tabu and change rates: tests of a hypothesis. In: Languages and cultures of western North America, ed. E.H. Swanson, Jr.. Idaho State Univ. Press, Pocatello, Idaho. pp. 74-86.
8. Haas, M.R. 1972. The structure of stems and roots in Nootka-Nitinat. Int.J.Amer.Ling. 38:83-92.
9. Koppert, V,A. 1930. Contributions to Clayoquot ethnology. Catholic Univ. America, Anthro. Ser.1. Washington.
10. Sapir, E. and M. Swadesh 1939. Nootka Texts. Ling. Soc. Amer.. Philadelphia, 334 pp.
11. _____ 1955. Native accounts of Nootka ethnography. Publ. Indiana Univ. Res. Centre in Anthr., Folklore & Ling. 1:1-457.
12. Swan, J.G, 1870. The Indians of Cape Flattery. Smithsonian Institute. Washington.