THE TRANSLATION OF THE NAME "KWAKIUTL"

Brian Compton  
(U.B.C., Department of Botany)

John Rath  
(Heiltsuk Cultural Education Centre)

1. Franz Boas may not have believed his Kwakwala informants when they told him that kʷaŋulevator kʷaŋulevator (anglicized as "Kwakiutl") means "smoke of the world" (1897: 330) or just "smoke" (1920 in 1940:357), but the following argument shows that the name's connection with smoke is not far-fetched. We will use the notations "HA, HE, OO, KW" to refer to, respectively, the Haisla, Heiltsuk, Oowekyala, and Kwakwala isolates of North Wakashan. All non-English is italicized. In transcriptions, individual phonemes (but not phonemic words) are written between / / and canonical morpheme forms between { }. Individual constituents of these canonical forms, i.e. morphophonemes, are cited between |. For readability's sake, in both phonemic and morphophonemic transcriptions symbols for vowels and vocalic resonants are used even though these latter are but allophones of their corresponding consonantal resonants.

2. In interviews with Kitlope elder Gordon Robertson a name HA kʷakʷkʷsduāyû was recorded which refers to specimens of at least two species of puffball fungi, viz Bovista pila Berk. & Curt. (Christ s.n., 21 Sept. 1980, UBC) and B. plumbea Pers. (Calder & MacKay s.n., 18 May 1981, UBC) (Lycoperdaceae). The mature body of a puffball fungus has a spherical shape; squeezing it results in the release of a cloud of fine dust, the spores. In Bovista spp. this spore cloud is somewhat dark and smoky-looking. Mr. Robertson says that kʷakʷkʷsduāyû was believed to be dangerous; a ghost might squeeze it to hurt your eyes with the spores coming out of it. He described these spores himself as a black powder on 7 March 1988 and as a black cloud on 4 May 1988. On the latter date he also qualified the nature of the hurt as loss of sight and indicated that instead of HA kʷakʷkʷsduāyû, which he said refers to putting the spores in a victim's eyes, the longer name HA kʷakʷkʷsduāyû hs hziq could be used which mentions the ghostly perpetrator of the act.

3. The etymology of the HA terms is somewhat complex. The addition hs hziq means "of/by a ghost." The name kʷakʷkʷsduāyû analyzes as kʷakʷkʷ-sdu-â-ýu. The second

---

1 To be exact, Mr. Robertson's explications of the reference of HA kʷak=kʷ-sduāyû fit Bovista spp. best and he moreover decidedly rejected the possibility of reference to other members of the puffball group, e.g. locally common species of Lycoperdon. On the other hand, the possibility is still open that the name refers both to on the one hand B. pila and B. plumbea, and on the other a third less common species of Bovista or members of the genus Bovistella which is closely related to Bovista. For more botanical information on puffballs see Coker and Couch (1928), and Smith (1951).
in the root allomorph \( k^{"ak"k^{"w}} \) is the reduplicate of initial \( k^{"w} \), the reduplication being an exponent of -a meaning not just "to do" but "to do repeatedly or intensively." The final suffix allomorph, -\( yu \), can be glossed as "agency, means to an end, instrument, embodiment." Although -\( sdu \) can mean various things beside "in the eyes," the latter gloss is appropriate in the case of \( k^{"ak"k^{"sdu}yu \) considering this name's reference to spores in one's eyes. The structural parallelism is obvious between \( k^{"ak"k^{"sdu}yu \) and the following items in which /s/ is written before the reduplicate of the initial phoneme to indicate the not otherwise predictable phonetic schwa between the reduplicate and the next obstruent.

HA ma:mj-sdu-\( \dot{\alpha} \)-\( yu \) “eyebrow tweezers” (root: \{maq-\} "to pluck, tweeze, snap apart, etc."); see e.g. also HA m\( \dot{\alpha}q-\)\( \dot{\alpha}la \) “to go out to pick seaweed”

HA \( \dot{x}i:\dot{x}k-\)\( smp-\dot{\alpha} \) “to peel potatoes etc.” (root: \{\( \dot{x}ix-\} "to whittle wood etc."); see e.g. also HA \( \dot{x}ik-\)\( spm-\dot{d} \) “to whittle off chips with fine adze” and HA \( \dot{x}i:\dot{x}x-b\dot{\alpha} \) “to make a point on a stick.”)

Note that in Haisla before /s/ there is neutralization of the opposition between /k/ and /\( x/\), /k^{"w}/ and /\( x^{"w}/\), /q/ and /\( x/\), /\( q^{"w}/\) and /\( x^{"w}/\), the transcriptional policy being to write /ks, k^{"s}/ (with a plosive before /s/) on the one hand but /\( \dot{\alpha}s, \dot{x}^{"s}/\) (with a fricative before /s/) on the other as this comes closest to phonetic reality.

4. Now which canonical root form does \( k^{"ak"k^{"w}} \) derive from, \{k^{"ax^{"w}}\} or \{k^{"ax^{"w}}\}? Very likely \{k^{"ax^{"w}}\} because Mr. Robertson, when explaining the meaning of the name HA \( k^{"ak"k^{"sdu}yu \), mentioned the words HA \( k^{"k^{"sdu} \) “spores (‘cloud’) from the \( k^{"ak"k^{"sdu}yu when hitting your eye,” HA \( k^{"k^{"sdu}dud \) “to make the spores hit your eye,” and HA \( k^{"k^{"sduk}w \) “person hit in the eyes by the spores.” The root of the latter three items is undoubtedly HA/HE/OO \{k^{"x^{"w}}\} , KW \{k^{"x^{"w}}\} the proper gloss for which has always remained somewhat problematic but which in any event must comprise “to blow out forcefully (smoke, steam, breath, hot air, dust), to rise (said of same).” Although the /s/ in \( k^{"ax^{"w}} \) cannot be explained away as a regular morphophonemically conditioned augment to the root \{k^{"x^{"w}}\}, there are several instances of a type “obstruent+obstruent” root having a counterpart with /\( a/\) inserted between the same obstruents. Let the following examples suffice, HA/HE/OO/KW \{k^{"kp-\} \) “to hold by squeezing, use tongs, etc.” and HA/HE/OO/KW \{k^{"kap-\} \) “to gnaw”;

HA/HE/OO/KW \{\( \dot{\tau}^{"q-}\} \) “covered with dirt, dust, soil” and HA/HE/OO/KW \{\( \dot{\tau}^{"q-}\} \) “to cover with or as if with a sheet.”

5. Given that the meaning of the root \{k^{"ax^{"w}}\} of HA \( k^{"ak"k^{"sdu}yu \) must be related to that of \{k^{"x^{"w}} / kx^{"w} \), is it possible to identify \{k^{"ax^{"w}}\} with the root \{k^{"ax^{"w}}\} for which the glosses “hole, hollow” and “lungs” are given in Rath and Lincoln (1981:284, 1986:458)? Yes, if the meaning of the one root \{k^{"ax^{"w}}\} really is “bellows, belly, blow, air bag,” and see Webster’s Collegiate dictionary for the historical connection between the first three English items.

6. The ethnic name KW $k^{agul}$ and $k^{agu}$ does not contain this root $\{k^{axw}\}$, however. Its root is $\{k^{akw}\}$, the final morphophoneme $k^{w}$ of which has become the phoneme /$\gamma$/ with secondary loss of the labialization due to the fact that a rounded phoneme follows. (No such loss of labialization occurs in the HA/HE/OO counterparts, cf. HA $k^{ag}ul$, HE $k^{ag}ul$, OO $k^{ag}ul$.) Given that the suffix allomorph -$ul$ in KW $k^{agul}$, $k^{agu}$ means “stuff, substance, having the nature of,” what does the root $\{k^{akw}\}$ mean? There is at least the possibility of it being related or even identical in meaning to $\{k^{axw}\}$ because there are other cases of a root ending in a fricative alternating with one ending in a plosive. Some examples are HA/HE/OO/KW 1$\,\tilde{t}ps\,$- and also HA 1$\,\tilde{t}p\,$- “cold”; HA/HE/OO $\{tix\}$, KW $\{tik\}$ “to recline etc.”; KW $\{\tilde{t}mps\}$, HA/HE/OO $\{\tilde{t}mp\}$ “to measure, weigh, try, etc.”; OO/KW $\{\tilde{x}am\}$ and HA/HE/OO $\{\tilde{x}aq\}$ “bone”; KW $\{\tilde{x}is\}$, OO $\{\tilde{x}ic\}$ “to scratch (like people fighting), to claw, to contain or even skin with the fingers”; HA/HE/OO/KW $\{\tilde{g}^{axw}\}$ and OO $\{\tilde{g}^{aqw}\}$ “to croak, raven” (HE/OO also $\{\tilde{g}^{x\,x}\}$). If $\{k^{akw}\}$ is indeed related to $\{k^{axw}\}$ it may refer to powder, air, breath, or smoke rising or being blown out of containment, which is compatible with Boas’s informants’ explication of KW $k^{agul}$, $k^{agu}$.

7. Note finally that Boas mentions (1920 in 1940:357) that not only do his Kwakwala informants believe that the name “Kwakiutl” has to do with smoke, but also that it is actually related etymologically to the derivates of the root $\{k^{ax}\}$, e.g. KW $k^{ax}$-a “to smoke,” KW $k^{ax}$-la “smoke of fire,” etc (cf. Boas 1948:300). Boas goes on to say that $\{k^{ax}\}$ means “smoke” and that he is certain that the etymology must be rejected. And Boas is right inasmuch as the root morph $k^{ag}$- of KW $k^{agul}$, $k^{agu}$ results from underlying *$k^{agw}$*, *$k^{agw}$* (see above) while the morphophonemics of contemporary North Wakashan could not explain how the root $\{k^{ax}\}$ could be actualized as $k^{aw}$-. To say this differently, he is right inasmuch as by contemporary rule a root-final morphophoneme $x$ can be realized as a phoneme $\bar{x}$, $\tilde{x}$, $/\tilde{x}/$, $/\tilde{x}/$ or $/\tilde{x}/$ but root-final $k^{w}$ as a phoneme $/k^{w}/$, $/\tilde{g}^{w}/$, $/\tilde{x}^{w}/$, $/\tilde{x}^{w}/$ or, in KW before a rounded phoneme, $/\tilde{k}/$, $/\tilde{g}/$, $/\tilde{x}/$, or $/\tilde{x}/$. Nevertheless, one wonders if the root $\{k^{ax}\}$ really only means “smoke” and if there is not some historical connection between on the one hand $\{k^{ax}\}$ and on the other $\{k^{axw}\}$ and $\{k^{akw}\}$. After all, Sapir and Swadesh (1939:287) list a root $\{k^{ax}\}$ “to splash, spray, wash over” for the Tseshat isolect of South Wakashan. Admittedly these considerations do not settle the matter of the meaning of “Kwakiutl” yet definitively. They do however highlight the need for the comparative study of Wakashan morphophonemics along with environmental and cultural studies of the area concerned.

2 Some of the many other Tseshat items bearing on our issue are $k^{vhit}$ “wild onion” and $k^{valoaw}$ “to urinate (said of woman),” both of which might derive synchronically or diachronically from this same (Tseshat) root $\{k^{ax}\}$, and the root $\{kah(w)\}$ “open, hollow,” which latter corresponds to HA/HE/OO $\{k^{wx}\}$, KW $\{kx\}$- and/or HA/HE/OO/KW $\{k^{axw}\}$.
References


