

# 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 *k<sup>w</sup>agúł* or *k<sup>w</sup>agúł* (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 isolects 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 *k<sup>w</sup>ak<sup>w</sup>k<sup>w</sup>sduáyú* 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).<sup>1</sup> 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 *k<sup>w</sup>ak<sup>w</sup>k<sup>w</sup>sduáyú* 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 *k<sup>w</sup>ak<sup>w</sup>k<sup>w</sup>sduáyú*, which he said refers to putting the spores in a victim's eyes, the longer name HA *k<sup>w</sup>ak<sup>w</sup>k<sup>w</sup>sduáyú hs híziq* could be used which mentions the ghostly perpetrator of the act.

3. The etymology of the HA terms is somewhat complex. The addition *hs híziq* means "of/by a ghost." The name *k<sup>w</sup>ak<sup>w</sup>k<sup>w</sup>sduáyú* analyzes as *k<sup>w</sup>ak<sup>w</sup>k<sup>w</sup>-sdu-à-yú*. The second

<sup>1</sup> To be exact, Mr. Robertson's explications of the reference of HA *k<sup>w</sup>ak<sup>w</sup>k<sup>w</sup>sduáyú* 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).

**/kʷ/** in the root allomorph **kʷakʷkʷ-** is the reduplicate of initial **/kʷ/**, the reduplication being an exponent of **-a** meaning not just “to do” but “to do repeatedly or intensively.” The final suffix allomorph, **-ýu**, 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 **kʷakʷkʷsduàýu** considering this name’s reference to spores in one’s eyes. The structural parallelism is obvious between **kʷakʷkʷsduàýu** 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:mǎ-sdu-à-ýu** “eyebrow tweezers” (root: {**maq-**} “to pluck, tweeze, snap apart, etc.”; see e.g. also HA **màq-àla** “to go out to pick seaweed”)

HA **xi:ǎk-sm-à** “to peel potatoes etc.” (root: {**ǎix-**} “to whittle wood etc.”; see e.g. also HA **ǎik-sm-d** “to whittle off chips with fine adze” and HA **ǎi:ǎx-bà** “to make a point on a stick.”)

Note that in Haisla before **/s/** there is neutralization of the opposition between **/k/** and **/x/**, **/kʷ/** and **/xʷ/**, **/q/** and **/ǎ/**, **/qʷ/** and **/ǎʷ/**; the transcriptional policy being to write **/ks**, **kʷs/** (with a plosive before **/s/**) on the one hand but **/ǎs**, **ǎʷs/** (with a fricative before **/s/**) on the other as this comes closest to phonetic reality.

4. Now which canonical root form does **kʷakʷkʷ-** derive from, {**kʷakʷ-**} or {**kʷaxʷ-**}? Very likely {**kʷaxʷ-**} because Mr. Robertson, when explaining the meaning of the name HA **kʷakʷkʷsduàýu**, mentioned the words HA **kʷkʷsdu** “spores (‘cloud’) from the **kʷakʷkʷsduàýu** when hitting your eye,” HA **kʷkʷsdud** “to make the spores hit your eye,” and HA **kʷkʷsdukʷ** “person hit in the eyes by the spores.” The root of the latter three items is undoubtedly HA/HE/OO {**kʷxʷ-**}, KW {**kxʷ-**} 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 **/a/** in **kʷaxʷ-** cannot be explained away as a regular morphophonemically conditioned augment to the root {**kʷxʷ-**}, 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 {**kʷp-**} “to hold by squeezing, use tongs, etc.” and HA/HE/OO/KW {**kʷap-**} “to gnaw”; HA/HE/OO/KW {**tqʷ-**} “covered with dirt, dust, soil” and HA/HE/OO/KW {**taqʷ-**} “to cover with or as if with a sheet.”

5. Given that the meaning of the root {**kʷaxʷ-**} of HA **kʷakʷkʷsduàýu** must be related to that of {**kʷxʷ- / kxʷ-**}, is it possible to identify {**kʷaxʷ-**} with the root {**kʷaxʷ-**} 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 {**kʷaxʷ-**} 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<sup>w</sup>agut* and *k<sup>w</sup>agút* does not contain this root {*k<sup>w</sup>ax<sup>w</sup>-*}, however. Its root is {*k<sup>w</sup>ak<sup>w</sup>-*}, the final morphophoneme |*k<sup>w</sup>*| of which has become the phoneme /*g<sup>w</sup>*/ 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<sup>w</sup>ag<sup>w</sup>út*, HE *k<sup>w</sup>ág<sup>w</sup>út*, OO *k<sup>w</sup>ag<sup>w</sup>ut*.) Given that the suffix allomorph *-ut/-út* in KW *k<sup>w</sup>agut*, *k<sup>w</sup>agút* means "stuff, substance, having the nature of," what does the root {*k<sup>w</sup>ak<sup>w</sup>-*} mean? There is at least the possibility of it being related or even identical in meaning to {*k<sup>w</sup>ax<sup>w</sup>-*} 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 {*t<sup>w</sup>nc-*} and also HA {*t<sup>w</sup>nc-*} "cold"; HA/HE/OO {*t<sup>w</sup>ix-*}, KW {*t<sup>w</sup>ik-*} "to recline etc."; KW {*m<sup>w</sup>ps-*}, HA/HE/OO {*m<sup>w</sup>nc-*} "to measure, weigh, try, etc."; OO/KW {*x<sup>w</sup>ax<sup>w</sup>-*} and HA/HE/OO {*x<sup>w</sup>aq-*} "bone"; KW {*x<sup>w</sup>ls-*}, OO {*x<sup>w</sup>lc-*} "to scratch (like people fighting), to claw, to scratch up or skim with the fingers"; HA/HE/OO/KW {*g<sup>w</sup>ax<sup>w</sup>-*} and OO {*g<sup>w</sup>aq<sup>w</sup>-*} "to croak, raven" (HE/OO also {*g<sup>w</sup>x<sup>w</sup>-*}). If {*k<sup>w</sup>ak<sup>w</sup>-*} is indeed related to {*k<sup>w</sup>ax<sup>w</sup>-*} it may refer to powder, air, breath, or smoke rising or being blown out of containment, which is compatible with Boas's informants' explanation of KW *k<sup>w</sup>agut*, *k<sup>w</sup>agút*.

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 derivatives of the root {*k<sup>w</sup>ax-*}, e.g. KW *k<sup>w</sup>ax-a* "to smoke," KW *k<sup>w</sup>ax-la* "smoke of fire," etc (cf. Boas 1948:300). Boas goes on to say that {*k<sup>w</sup>ax-*} means "smoke" and that he is certain that the etymology must be rejected. And Boas is right inasmuch as the root morph *k<sup>w</sup>ag-* of KW *k<sup>w</sup>agut*, *k<sup>w</sup>agút* results from underlying \**k<sup>w</sup>ag<sup>w</sup>-*, \**k<sup>w</sup>ag<sup>w</sup>-* (see above) while the morphophonemics of contemporary North Wakashan could not explain how the root {*k<sup>w</sup>ax-*} could be actualized as *k<sup>w</sup>ag<sup>w</sup>-*. To say this differently, he is right inasmuch as by contemporary rule a root-final morphophoneme |*x*| can be realized as a phoneme /*x*/, /*n*/, /*ŋ*/, /*ɲ*/, or /*ɳ*/ but root-final |*k<sup>w</sup>*| as a phoneme /*k<sup>w</sup>*/, /*g<sup>w</sup>*/, /*k<sup>w</sup>*/, /*x<sup>w</sup>*/ or, in KW before a rounded phoneme, /*k*/, /*g*/, /*k*/, or /*x*/. Nevertheless, one wonders if the root {*k<sup>w</sup>ax-*} really only means "smoke" and if there is not some historical connection between on the one hand {*k<sup>w</sup>ax-*} and on the other {*k<sup>w</sup>ax<sup>w</sup>-*} and {*k<sup>w</sup>ak<sup>w</sup>-*}. After all, Sapir and Swadesh (1939:287) list a root {*k<sup>w</sup>ax-*} "to splash, spray, wash over" for the Tseshat isolect of South Wakashan.<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> Some of the many other Tseshat items bearing on our issue are *k<sup>w</sup>ax<sup>w</sup>is* "wild onion" and *k<sup>w</sup>ax<sup>w</sup>ox<sup>w</sup>* "to urinate (said of woman)," both of which might derive synchronically or diachronically from this same (Tseshat) root {*k<sup>w</sup>ax-*}, and the root {*k<sup>w</sup>oh(ɲ)-*} "open, hollow," which latter corresponds to HA/HE/OO {*k<sup>w</sup>x<sup>w</sup>-*}, KW {*k<sup>w</sup>x<sup>w</sup>-*} and/or HA/HE/OO/KW {*k<sup>w</sup>ax<sup>w</sup>-*}.

## References

25

- Boas, Franz. 1897. *The Social Organization and the Secret Societies of the Kwakiutl Indians*. New York: Johnson Reprint Corp., 1970, pp. 313-378.
- . 1920. *The Social Organization of the Kwakiutl*. In: *Race, Language, and Culture*, New York and London, 1940, pp. 356-369.
- . 1947 (unpublished). *Kwakiutl Dictionary*. Boas Collection of the American Philosophical Society.
- Coker, William Chambers & John Nathaniel Couch. 1928. *The Gasteromycetes of the Eastern United States and Canada*. University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill.
- Rath, John C. & Neville J. Lincoln. 1980. *North Wakashan Comparative Root List*. National Museum of Man, Mercury Series, Canadian Ethnology Service, Paper no. 68.
- . 1986. *Phonology, Dictionary, and Listing of Roots and Lexical Derivates of the Haisla Language of Kitlope and Kitimaat, B.C. (2 Vols)*. National Museum of Man, Mercury Series, Canadian Ethnology Service, Paper no. 103.
- Sapir, Edward & Morris Swadesh. 1939. *Nootka Texts: Tales and Ethnological Narratives with Grammatical Notes and Lexical Materials*. Linguistic Society of America, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.
- Smith, Alexander H. 1951. *Puffballs and Their Allies in Michigan*. University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor.