Comprehension Difficulties
with the
Boas-Hunt kʷakʷala Texts

Peter Wilson

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0. Introduction

During work on kʷakʷala, I often re-elicited material published earlier. The works I surveyed included material by Boas and Hunt and other early researchers and missionaries.1 Among these early written recordings of kʷakʷala, only the works by Boas and Hunt present a consistent and accurate orthography and transcription of the language.2

Although much of Boas and Hunt's grammar and dictionary publications were able to be re-elicited, much of the textual work was not understood very well. This was puzzling, especially since the dictionary and grammar information came from the texts.

In 1985 I had the opportunity to work with James Henderson. We spent much of our time talking about the days when he was a boy and about the people that he had known. I took this opportunity to read to him some of the stories recorded by Boas and Hunt. I focused on the texts from "Kwakiutl Tales - New Series," (Boas 1935, 1943) "The Religion of the Kwakiutl Indians," (Boas 1930a, 1930b) and "Kwakiutl Texts - Second Series" (Boas and Hunt 1906). My goal was to attempt to re-elicit the textual material by having Mr. Henderson listen to the stories in kʷakʷala while providing him with the opportunity to comment, translate, and repeat samples of the material.

James Henderson had no difficulty understanding stories from "Kwakiutl Tales - New Series" (Boas 1935, 1943). On the other hand, he had some difficulty understanding stories from "The Religion of the Kwakiutl" (Boas 1930a, 1930b) and "Kwakiutl Texts - Second Series" (Boas and Hunt 1906).

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1 These included: Boas (1930a, 1930b, 1935, 1943, 1947, 1948), Boas and Hunt (1906), Hall (1882a, 1882b), Scouler (1841), Hale (1846), Schoolcraft (1853), Gibbs (1877), Tolmie and Dawson (1884), Dawson (1887), and various Bible and Hymn translations (e.g. Hall 1897, 1899).

2 See Wilson 1982 for a detailed review of these works.

In this study, I set out to discover what differences exist between the three series of texts. I expected that comprehension would be affected by one or both of differences in language and differences in background knowledge. This hypothesis is based on suggestions made in Wilson (1982) and Berman (1991).

The results of this study demonstrate two points. First, all three series of stories are generally accurate in transcription, lexical items, morphology, and syntax. Among the three, "Kwakiutl Tales - New Series" (Boas 1935, 1943) is more accurate than the other two. This is consistent with the findings in Wilson (1982). Second, "Kwakiutl Tales - New Series" (Boas 1935, 1943) contains stories, characters, events, and places that were familiar to Mr. Henderson. The earlier two series of stories, on the other hand, present words, themes, stories, and background information with which Mr. Henderson was not as familiar (Boas 1906, 1930a, 1930b).

The differences between the later series (Boas 1935, 1943) and the earlier two series (Boas 1906, 1930a, 1930b) are probably not significant enough to account for the lower level of comprehension from the earlier works alone. Perhaps, as suggested in Berman (1991), differences in background knowledge may contribute to overall comprehension.

1.0 Background

The material discussed in this paper comes from two different periods in Boas' work (from Wilson 1982). "Kwakiutl Tales - New Series" comes from the post 1940 "phonemic" period. The English translation was published in 1935 (Boas 1935) and the kʷakʷala version was published in 1943 Boas (1943). The other two works, "Kwakiutl Texts - Second Series" Boas and Hunt (1906) and "The Religion of the Kwakiutl Indians" (Boas (1930a, 1930b) come from Boas' "middle" period. This middle period was "pre-phonemic" but generally accurate.3

1.1 Kwakiutl Tales - New Series

I chose "Kwakiutl Tales - New Series" (Boas 1935, 1943) for two reasons. First, it contains stories written by Hunt which were originally told by story tellers with whom Mr. Henderson was familiar. Second, my earlier research had shown that this text collection presented a consistent and accurate transcription of kʷakʷala (Wilson 1982). In addition, I anticipated that Mr. Henderson would be able to understand the texts because several stories were told by speakers familiar to Mr. Henderson.

"Kwakiutl Tales - New Series" was published in two volumes: English translation (Boas 1935) and Kwakiutl (Boas 1943). Appendix 1 presents a comparison between the Boas (1935, 1943) orthography and my own.

1.2 The Religion of the Kwakiutl and Kwakiutl Texts - Second Series

I choose "The Religion of the Kwakiutl" (Boas 1930a, 1930b) because it presented a description of events rather than specific tales / texts recorded from other speakers. Generally, this volume is a collection of informative stories written by George Hunt (see Berman 1991 for a discussion of the method of data collection and recording employed by Boas and Hunt).

"The Religion of the Kwakiutl" was published in two volumes: Kwakiutl (1930a) and English translations (1930b). Appendix

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3 The term "phonemic" is used to describe Boas' later transcription. In later works, Boas began a process of eliminating symbols that are predictable. For example, he dispensed with /ł/, a variant of /ɛ/ in the environment of palato-velars. The pre-phonemic period from 1900-1940 was generally accurate but contained a large number of symbols that are predictable variants.

2 presents a comparison of the orthography used in Boas (1930a, 1930b) and my own.

Finally, I choose "Kwakiutl Texts - Second Series" (Boas 1906) because it is similar to "Kwakiutl Tales - New Series," (Boas 1935, 1943) only earlier in publication. This series, like the later series, is a collection of legends which George Hunt collected. As noted in Berman (1991), Hunt listened to the stories and then later wrote them down. Again, I read stories from the tribes with which James Henderson was familiar. Unfortunately, the names of the story tellers are not listed in this publication.

"Kwakiutl Text - Second Series" was one in a number of publications for the Jesup North Pacific Expedition. Both English translation and Kwakiutl are presented on each page in two columns. Appendix 2 presents the comparison between the orthography used in Boas (1906) and my own.

1.3 General Comments

In order to elicit the information, I read the stories in kʷakʷala to Mr. Henderson. I stopped after each sentence (or major idea) and we discussed the section. I took notes during our discussions. When passages were difficult we consulted the English translation of the text.

During our collaboration, Mr. Henderson not only provided insights into the texts but also anecdotes about the story tellers and the times. Generally speaking, he was able to comprehend many of the stories, recognize words, and suggest corrections to the transcriptions.

1.4 Notes on the Examples

In the examples presented below, the Boas material is presented in his orthography and Mr. Henderson's work is presented in my own. Since Mr. Henderson's comments were not always phrased in the same sentence as the original, the inflectional morphology is not always the same as the original. Abbreviations used in the examples are listed below:

K.T.	Kwakiutl Tales - New Series (Boas 1935, 1943)
R.K.	The Religion of the Kwakiutl (Boas 1930a,1930b)
K.Txt.2	Kwakiutl Texts - Second Series (Boas 1906)
K.D.	Kwakiutl Dictionary (Boas 1948)

Page and line numbers are listed 2.2, i.e. page 2, line 2.

2.0 Kwakiutl Tales - New Series

As mentioned above, James Henderson appeared to have no difficulty understanding the kʷakʷala in "Kwakiutl Tales - New Series" (Boas 1935, 1943). During our sessions he made comments on the transcription, word formation, syntax, translations, and proper names. The most difficult aspect of the tales were with the mythical names in the stories. Occasionally, we had to consult the translation.

2.1. Similarities

The language in "Kwakiutl Tales: New Series" (Boas 1935, 1943) is accurate and not much different from the language of James Henderson. The lexical items, transcription, morphology, syntax, and dialect were re-elicited without difficulty. Examples are presented below:

Word Formation - Morphology

mɛlē´xLaq
K.T. B.H.211.69
to look behind

melíX̱a
JH 05/03/85

Morphology

g·āx̱ᶜasaqos
K.T. B.H.211.79
those you have come with

gaX̱ʔasaqus
JH 05/03/85

Lexical

tsɛ´lx̱we
K.T. B.H.212.99
wild crabapples

cəlX̱ʷ
JH 05/04/85

tlɛ´lsa
K.T. B.H.213.139
cranberries

t̓əls
JH 05/04/85

Place Names

aᶜwī´ɬbalis
K.T. B.H.210.36
Wells Point in the mouth of Wells Pass

ʔəwiɬbalis
JH 05/01/85

y̓ū´Lle
K.T. B.H.210.38
Rand Island

y̓uX̱l
JH 05/01/85

lɛqwe´ᶜma
KT B.H. 59.8
village name (B.H. tribe)

ləqʷe´m̓a
JH 04/30/85

Names of People

wā′xo^ɛna′kwelas   waX̱oṅakʷeᶜas
KT B.H. 59.10   JH 04/30/85
name

X̱lā′k·ilX̱oǧwaxa   ʔelakilaǧuǧʷa
K.T. B.H.209.5   JH 05/01/85
name, J.H. had an aunt with the same name.

2.3 Differences

The discrepancies between Boas' text and James Henderson
review include differences in transcription, morphology,
syntax, and translation.

Transcription Differences:

ē expect i

hē′mɛnaᵏa   hemenaᵏa
KT B.H. 59   JH 04/30/85
all the time

Add final ʔ

qlāᵏe′   ǯaᵏiʔ
KT B.H. 59   JH 04/30/85
news

Translation Differences: Lexical Choice

James Henderson noted that the English translations did not
always match the kʷakʷala. In the example below, he
preferred a different lexical item than the one used in the
story.

ǧē′ɛǧɛnax·Lā′ɛlX̱e   čačidaǧemɵmeniX̱ʷ
K.T. B.H. 113.22   JH 05/01/85
Boas: little girls   J.H. little girls

J.H. suggested "little girls" (from Boas' English
translation) was best translated into kʷakʷala with the
word based on čačadaǧɵm "girl" not with the word based on
ǧɵna. The word ǧɵna is translated as "infant girl" (see
1948, page 313), and is also used as a familiar address name
for a young girl (J.H.).

Translation Differences: Word Formation

In some examples, the word used in the story contained root-
suffix combinations that Mr. Henderson translated
differently. In the following example, the English version
of the story describes "a mat in front of" some people. Mr.
Henderson, on the other hand, interpreted the kʷakʷala as
"to have a mat over the head."

Lɛpdza′ɛmoliᵏeɛs   X̱epɵmliᵏ
K.T. B.H.212.107   JH 05/04/85
to have a mat in front   to have a mat on
to have mat over (J.H. translation) floor in house

Syntactic Differences

Occasionally, James Henderson suggested alternative sentence
structure. In the following example, he preferred a non-
"passive" non-quotative alternate to the original.

qlwɛɛlā′ᵏɛitsoɛlX̱e dzē′g·ayᾶs q̌ʷelaᵏalis dᶻigayos
K.T. B.H. 113.13   JH 05/01/85
Their digging sticks were hidden.

J.H. prefers this sentence to the Boas text which uses
the -suʔ ("passive") and -ᶠaʔi (quotative) suffixes.

Lexical Difficulties

Some words in the stories were not recognized by Mr.
Henderson. An example is presented below:

k·lɛ′lkwaɛma′laxes k·lɛlā′kᵘ K̓elkʷaṁalaX̱is K̓elakw
K.T. B.H. 113.19   JH 05/01/85
They quarrelled about their digging sticks. J.H. was not
sure about the meaning of the word K̓elakʷ.

3.0. Data: The Religion of the Kwakiutl

James Henderson had difficulty comprehending some of the
information in "The Religion of the Kwakiutl." His
translation of the kʷakʷala was sometimes different from the
texts and indicated a difference in comprehension. Again,
the most difficult aspect of the stories was with the
mythical names and places in the stories. We needed to
consult the translation far more frequently than with
"Kwakiutl Tales - New Series" in order to decipher words and
the general understanding of the story.

3.1. Similarities

The language in "The Religion of the Kwakiutl" is generally accurate and not much different from the language of James Henderson. Individual lexical items, transcription, morphology, and syntax patterns, were re-elicited without much difficulty. Examples are presented below:

Morphology

LeˊLɛxwāɫa   λiλaˊx̌ʷaɫa
R.K. B.H.61.33   JH 08/24/85
standing up, place of standing

Morphology (reduplication)

eȃˊsē   ʔiʔosi
R.K. B.H.62.19   JH 08/24/85
your fathers

Morphology (transitive)

ts!ōˊts!ɛɫɛmdLɛsgˑada   d̵ud̵ɛɫɛmd
R.K. B.H.67.14   JH 09/03/85
to put black on your face (d̵uɫa "black" + -d "transitive")

Place Names

aLōˊᶜlēnoxwē   ʔax̌ufinux̌ʷ
R.K. B.H.64.13   JH 08/29/85
people from behind

Names of People

nōˊngˑäxtȃᶜye   nungex̌təwi
R.K. B.H.63.3   JH 08/29/85
Name: head wolf in story, from nuyəm "knowledge"

Names of Dances

hx̌māˊsɛlaɫ   haˊmasəlaɫ
R.K. B.H.64.9   JH 08/29/85
hamad̵a dance

3.2. Differences

The discrepancies between Boas' text and James Henderson's review include differences in language and background knowledge. Although the language presented in this series of texts is slightly more different from Mr. Henderson's kʷakʷala than Boas (1935, 1943), it is, nonetheless, very similar.

Transcription (ᶜm should be m)

ᶜmɛˊlmaqɛlākwē   məla
R.K. B.H.68.23   JH 09/06/85
to weave, to twist

Transcription (q should be qʷ)

qēɫȃˊlax   qiɫolax̌ ››› qʷiɫolax̌
R.K. B.H. 69.8   JH 09/13/85
The book contains qiɫolax̌ "to listen to water" but it should be qʷiɫolax̌ "to untie"

Lexical

tsɛmōˊt!edɛx   cəmufedəx̌ (not sure)
R.K. B.H.64.4   JH 08/29/85
J.H. did not recognize this word. Boas lists tsəᶜmotaˊ in K.D. as "to be silent. quiet" p. 198.

Morphology (Reduplication)

nauˊalakwasa   naʔoˊnx̌alekʷ
R.K. B.H 62.31   JH 08/27/85
plural of nawalekʷ "supernatural power"

Background Knowledge

An example of the difference in background knowledge between the text and Mr. Henderson is with a dance ritual known in kʷakʷala as /x̌ʷix̌ʷədᶻa/. Boas translates /x̌ʷix̌ʷədᶻa/ as "a member of the Sparrow Society." Mr. Henderson translates this as "the false part of the ritual where people used different names." This difference made comprehending the story difficult: the text used the word to describe a person whereas Mr. Henderson translated the word as the name of the ritual.

g̱wēˊg̱wēsɛmaᶜya   x̌ʷix̌ʷisəmaǧa
R.K. B.H.62.25   JH 08/27/85
Boas translates this word as a proper name "Head Sparrows." J.H. translates this word as the false name part of the ritual.

ǥwēǥwɛdza   ǥʷiǥʷədza
K.D.   F.B.328   JH 08/27/85
Boas translates this word as a member of the Sparrow
Society. J.H. translates this word as the false part of
the ritual where people used different names.

In addition, Mr. Henderson was not able to confirm that
/ǥʷiǥʷədza/ referred to sparrows. He was aware of the
ritual and provided several /ǥʷiǥʷədza/ names in his family.
Perhaps the form of the ritual described by George Hunt was
different from the ritual described by James Henderson.

4.0. Kwakiutl Texts - New Series

The language used in Kwakiutl Texts - New Series is again
generally accurate and not much different from the language
of James Henderson. Individual lexical items,
transcription, morphology, and syntax patterns, were re-
elicited without much difficulty. Examples are presented
below:

4.1. Similarities

Transcription

k·lō′łē   kułi
K.Txt.2   9.29   JH 05/17/85
Boas: Island in front of Denman. J.H. Tree Island off top
end of Denman Island

aō′ms   ʔaʔums
K.Txt.2   10.8   JH 05/18/85
someone beyond ordinary

Morphology

nɛ′xᶜwusta   nəx̌wəsta
K.Txt.2   18.2   JH 05/23/85
straight up river

Morphology (Reduplication)

lā′laχaᶜmasēs   lalaχəm
K.Txt.2   12.40   JH 05/18/85
small basket

Lexical

gu′ldɛma   gʷəldəm
K.Txt.2   13.34   JH 05/18/85
J.H. woodpecker (red breasted) "makes fire"

dō′daᶜmalē   didaħala
K.Txt.2   15.11   JH 05/22/85
possessions

4.2 Differences

There were a number of differences in transcription between
James Henderson and Boas and Hunt (1906). This series of
texts is the least similar of the three. The greatest
differences, however, came in the understanding of the
cultural background behind the information.

Transcription   (addition of wə)

öx·q8′lagɛmōᶜ   ʔixwəqolaǥəmi
K.Txt.2   3.2   JH 05/14/85
best looking (nuyəm name)

Transcription (ᶜy should be y)

ᶜyî′lɣᶜwułtlā   yəlxʷəłtola
K.Txt.2   9.41   JH 05/17/85
dead animal over shoulder

Background Knowledge

The main differences in background knowledge occurred with
proper names, regalia, and rituals. For example, the text
uses proper names that Mr. Henderson felt were not correct.

Llä′gasē   /χ̌eǥasi/   should be ››› χ̌əncaχsəm
K.Txt.2   15.1   JH 05/22/85
name: Black Bear Woman.

nɛ′rŋasē   /nənǥasi/ should be ››› ninənǥəs
K.Txt.2   15.1   JH 05/22/85
name: Grisly Bear Woman.

It is interesting to note that at one point in the story the
text uses the correct form of the word according to Mr.
Henderson:

nō′nɛnǥasē   ninənǥəs
K.Txt.2   19.17   JH 05/22/85
name: Grisly Bear Woman. J.H. This is the correct form
for the proper name.

In another story, the main character puts on a mask to hide
his face. The English translation of the text translates
the mask as "old man" mask. The kʷakʷala version, on the
other hand, uses two different words to represent this mask.
Mr. Henderson translates one of the two mask words
differently:

q!uʹlᵉyakumłe   ƛʷəlağəmł
K.Txt.2 3.18   JH 05/14/85
Boas: old man mask. J.H. life mask.

noʹmasɛmłē   numasəmł
K.Txt.2 5.36
Boas: old man mask. J.H. old man mask.

In the first example, the text uses the word /ƛʷəlğakʷəmł/.
This word is based on /ƛʷəlğakʷ/ "old man" from /ƛʷəla/
"alive." Mr. Henderson interpreted the kʷakʷala as
/ƛʷəlağəmł/ from /ƛʷəla/ "alive" and /-ğəmł/ "mask."
Perhaps Mr. Henderson had never heard of a /ƛʷəlğakʷəmł/ and
therefore substituted a mask that he knew: /ƛʷəlağəmł/. In
the text version, therefore, we have one mask represented by
two different words. In Mr. Henderson's translation,
however, we have two different masks being worn at different
times in the story.

5.0. Dialect

Some of the material Hunt collected from other kʷakʷala
speakers (Boas 1906, 1935, 1943) preserves dialect
differences. This is especially noteworthy because, as
discussed in Berman (1991), Hunt listened to the stories and
then later wrote them down from memory.

Two of the stories in Boas (1906) present examples of
dialect preservation. These stories were collected from
speakers from the Campbell River area who speak a dialect
known as /liƛʷala/ or /liχʷdᶻaḡʷala/. Hunt used terms from
this dialect in presenting the texts. James Henderson
recognized these dialect differences and was able to
indicate the origin of the words. For example:

χʷēʹt!ɛxƚäs   xʷifəx̌ʌa
K.Txt.2 4.10   JH 05/14/85
canoe. J.H. pointed out that xʷifəx̌ʌa is the word for
"canoe" in liƛʷala as opposed to χʷakʷəna in kʷakʷala.

māʹmalɛma   mamaləma
K.Txt.2 16.33   JH 05/22/85
swimming. J.H. notes that this is a liƛʷala word and is not
used in kʷakʷala.

The fact that Hunt has preserved dialect differences may
account for some of the comprehension difficulties. For
example, the use of /ƛʷəlğakʷəmł/ and /numasəmł/ for "old
man mask" in Boas (1906) may in fact be evidence of a
difference in dialect and not a difference in regalia
terminology.

Unfortunately, until I have the opportunity to examine the
kind and amount of dialect preservation in the Boas / Hunt
materials, it remains unclear whether the differences are
dialect or cultural knowledge based. In addition, I have
not had an opportunity to evaluate whether Hunt retained
pronunciation, morphological, and syntactic dialect traits.

6.0. Discussion

In summary, the three works present examples of kʷakʷala
that do not greatly differ from the kʷakʷala spoken by Mr.
Henderson. The latest work (Boas 1935, 1943) is the most
similar, the first work (Boas 1906) is the least similar.
These differences probably do not alone contribute to the
comprehension difficulties encountered by Mr. Henderson with
the two earlier series (Boas 1906, 1930a, 1930b).

As can be noted above, the main difficulties to
comprehension were unknown words, proper nouns, and
different understanding of words and sentences. Many of
these differences in understanding are perhaps due to a
difference in background knowledge. The earlier works
present a higher incidence of unknown information than the
later work.

In conclusion, differences in both language and background
knowledge affect overall comprehension. Mr. Henderson's
knowledge of kʷakʷala, i.e. his communicative competence,
was sufficient to decode all aspects of "Kwakiutl Tales -
New Series." His ability to decode the other two texts,
however, was limited by differences in language and
background knowledge. The source or cause of these
differences, however, is a topic for further analysis. Two
areas for additional enquiry suggested in this work are
dialect and cultural knowledge differences.

Appendix 1: Boas orthography 1940+

Wilson	Boas			
a	a	ā		
i	i	ī	e	ē
u	ū	o	ō	
e	ä			
o	ɛ̆			
ə	ɛ	ᴇ		

Wilson	Boas		Wilson	Boas
b	b		d	d
p	p		t	t
p̓	p!		ƛ̓	t!
m	m		n	n
m̓	ᶜm		n̓	ᶜn
dᶻ	dz			
c	ts			
c̓	ts!			
s	s			
y	y			
y̓	ᶜy			
g	g·	gʷ	gw	gᵘ
k	k·	kʷ	kw	kᵘ
k̓	k·!	k̓ʷ	k!w	k!ᵘ
x	x·	xʷ	χw	χᵘ
w	w			
w̓	ᶜw			
g̲	ɢ	g̲ʷ	ɢw	ɢᵘ
q	q	qʷ	qw	qᵘ
q̓	q!	q̓ʷ	q!w	q!ᵘ
x̲	x̣	x̲ʷ	x̣w	x̣ᵘ
λ	ʟ			
ƛ	ʟ			
ƛ̣	ʟ!			
l	l			
ɾ	ᶜl			
ɬ	ł			
h	h			
ʔ	ᶜ			

Boas does not write word initial glottal stop /#ᶜ.../. He
also does not write glottal stop between two vowels /VV/.
For example:

Wilson	Boas	
ʔeʔən	ᴇ́ᴇ̆́n	eyebrows

Appendix 2: Boas Orthography 1900-1940

Wilson	Boas				
a	a	ā	e	ē	ë
i	i	ī	o	ō	
u	ū				
e	ä				
o	ɛ̆				
ə	ɛ	ᴇ	ı̂	ŭ	ʌ

Wilson	Boas				Wilson	Boas			
b	b				d	d			
p	p				t	t			
p̓	p!				ƛ̓	t!			
m	m				n	n			
m̓	ᶜm				n̓	ᶜn			
dᶻ	dz				g	g·			
c	ts				k	k·			
c̓	ts!				k̓	k·!			
s	s				x	x·			
y	y								
y̓	ᶜy								
gʷ	gw	gᵘ	gŭ						
kʷ	kw	kᵘ	kŭ						
k̓ʷ	k!w	k!ᵘ	k!ŭ						
xʷ	χw	χᵘ	χŭ	X					
w	w								
w̓	ᶜw								
g̲	ɢ								
q	q								
q̓	q!								
x̲	x								
g̲ʷ	ɢw	ɢᵘ	ɢᵋ	g·w	g·ᵘ	g·ᵋ	ɢw	ɢᵘ	ɢᵋ
qʷ	qw	qᵘ	qᵋ						
q̓ʷ	q!w	q!ᵘ	q!ᵋ						
x̲ʷ	x̣w	x̣ᵘ	X̣ᵋ						
λ	ʟ	ᴦ							
ƛ	ʟ								
ƛ̣	ʟ!								
l	l								
ɾ	ᶜl								
ɬ	ł	ɪ							
h	h								
ʔ	ᶜ								

The symbols / X ɢ· ᴇ ᴦ ɪ / are used infrequently. Boas
does not write glottal stop in word initial position nor
between vowels. Both occurrences are predictable.

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