

P. Amoss  
University of Washington

## The Domain of Food in Skagit

### Introduction:

It has been claimed that the method of ethnoscience is capable of uncovering the underlying semantic organization of a particular cultural group and therefore, of laying bare the psychological reality of the people's world view. Whereas the claim of illuminating the one "psychological reality" has been cogently challenged by Burling and others, it still retains its seductive quality. Ethnoscience, therefore, while admitting that there may not be one such reality, have failed so far to attack the question of how much semantic disorganization or even contradiction can be tolerated in a given community before communication breaks down. Wallace's theory of equivalent though not identical semantic structures offers a partial solution, but the evidence seems to suggest that there is a certain tolerance level for structures which are not only not identical, but not even equivalent. It also seems clear that there is considerable leeway for confusion within the semantic system of a given individual, and that this lack of organization only becomes painful when an exercise of the ethnoscience method brings it to the level of consciousness.

Nevertheless, despite these difficulties with the method, it unquestionably brings us closer to uncovering the organizing principles in the thought processes of our informants than the older method of laying our own emic grid down on the native data and noting which cells are filled.

The method assumes that people organize their relevant universe in hierarchical classifications. Elicitation frames such as "is an X a kind of Y?" can be used to establish class inclusion and exclusion. When monolexemic labels for taxonomic levels are lacking, distributional criteria may be used to establish the existence of divisions within a class. Recent work by the Brights on northern California languages has indicated that subdivisions in the domain of "animal" exist there which do not have lexemic cover terms. (Bright, 1965, AA 67, 249-258).

### I. Ethnoscience and Salish Languages

To my knowledge the ethnoscience method has not yet been applied to any Salish language and there seemed to be two good reasons for trying it out.

A. To test the method. If the method is universally valid, as claimed, the most diverse kinds of language groups should be subjected to it with comparable success.

B. To work out some puzzles in Salish semantics. The paucity of "general" terms has been noted by all observers, especially those struggling to collect basic vocabulary lists - no words for bird, for tree, etc. What was interpreted as a characteristic of the languages - a poverty of general terms - may better be explained as the result of cutting the stream of phenomena into different sections according to different principles than those operating in English. There may be general lexemes in Salish which have been undiscovered simply because they do not correspond to general terms in English. Or it may be that a grammatical category like the Salish lexical suffixes serves in place of lexemic cover terms to label and define major semantic domains.

### II. The Domain of Food

Food was selected as the initial domain to investigate because it has clear and unambiguous extra-linguistic referents, because it seems to have been culturally elaborated in the aboriginal system beyond the demands of survival, and because the informant, a woman, was more familiar and comfortable with it. The associated domain of cooking was investigated in an attempt to use cooking terms as distributional criteria to break down the subdivisions of food.

### III. The Procedure

Food terms were elicited with particular emphasis on the more general terms in English. The English word was used to elicit a roughly equivalent Skagit form. The Skagit forms were then arranged in a taxonomy by using the frame "an X is a kind of Y".

Sk *ʔdɪʔdɪ dɛʔdɪ dub* — *tɪyɑ* — / "A blackberry is a kind of fruit" *ʔdɪʔdɪ dɛʔdɪ dub*  
*sɔʔdɪʔdɪ tɪyɑ sɔʔdɪʔdɪ* / (blackberry: /*sɔʔdɪʔdɪ* , fruit: /*sɔʔdɪʔdɪ* /). The attached chart shows the domain of food, as delimited and subdivided by the use of the frame.

An auxiliary approach involved an attempt to define the external limits and inter-

nal dimensions of the domain by distributional criteria. Three such criteria were tried.

1. Lexical suffixes. Salish languages have an admirable distributional criterion in the lexical suffix. Although there are indications that at least the higher levels of the taxonomy should be distinguishable on the basis of lexical suffixes, a complete set could not be elicited for Skagit. Not all the subdivisions which can be established on the basis of the frame are characterized by distinctive lexical suffixes.

2. Predicates. Subdivisions can be determined on the basis of the qualities which can be predicated of them. The use of this approach in Skagit was limited by an imperfect understanding of the sememic components of the descriptive terms. For example, there are two taste terms glossed as "sour" which cannot be applied interchangeably to sub categories of food, but the distinctive features of the terms are not clear to me.

3. Operations. Subdivisions can be further determined by the kinds of operations which can be performed upon them. Berries, for example, are picked; roots are dug; rabbits are hunted, etc. All of these food items, however, are "hustled" /

#### Conclusions:

The research is not in any sense complete and the results are tentative. The domain of food shown on the chart should not be considered exhaustive since it represents only one informant.

The puzzle of the "general" terms is not solved by this research. My results do suggest that there are many more general terms than commonly reported. It also suggests that the lexical suffixes may serve as taxonomic markers in addition to, if not in place of, lexemic labels.

Since only one informant served as teacher, the problem of individual variation in semantic structures has not been confronted. In a larger speech community the taxonomies should be checked with a sample of informants to determine the degree of congruence.

There is also the ever-present spectre of mixed semantic systems. It is not possible to tell how much contamination may have seeped in from the dominant white

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American culture. In a living speech community this source of error should be more easily controlled, or at least, discovered.

The current results are offered as a suggestion for the kind of research which might reward us with a fuller understanding of the semantic structures of these languages. Any value in the present effort is due to the sensitivity and patience of Mrs. Louise George, the Skagit informant, and the valuable insights offered by Prof. and Mrs. Thompson, Prof. Hess, and Prof. Michael Owen. Prof. Hess very kindly made his Skagit materials available to me, but he is not to be held responsible for the numerous mistakes in recording introduced by my own fallible ear.