# The flip side of lexical tabooing: Coast Salish puns, names, and intangible cultural heritage[*]

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**Abstract:** Newly identified humorous word play in Washington State Coast Salish languages may be a corollary of areal onomastically-conditioned postmortem lexical taboos, revealing historical Native cultural values and perceptions of homonymy.

**Keywords:** homonymy, intangible cultural heritage, linguistic archaeology, onomastics, puns, tabooing

## 1    Introduction

William Elmendorf's much-cited ethnographic work documented an onomastically-based custom of lexical prohibition practiced among Twana Salish speakers on the Olympic Peninsula of Washington state, USA, up to the late 19th century (1951, expanded upon in 1992:391–396). This observance was known as *stə́bəqəb*, which roughly means 'spoken of/for the dead' (N. Thompson, p.c.). It involved eliminating from a community's vocabulary any words perceived as sounding similar to the unused name of a deceased eminent high-class person, substituting a semantically transparent neologism until such time as the name was bestowed on a living kinsperson (pp. 205–206). A specific example was the 1880s initiative to taboo the Chinuk Wawa loan *láys* 'rice' following the death of a Skokomish woman known as Eliza (p. 207).[1] As to its geographic distribution, Elmendorf observed cryptically, "There is some slight evidence that the same type of word tabooing was practiced by other coastal groups speaking Salish

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[1] Various factors prevented tabooing from decimating the lexicon; for instance, Eliza's was rejected by the community because she was not high-status and the application of the observance to an English name (and presumably to a Chinuk Wawa word of English provenance) "was felt to be 'queer'" (ibid.). And almost all personal names eventually came to be "empty...of semantic content" (ibid.). This development implicitly reduced any pressure to taboo the many obviously cognate derivatives (e.g., lexically-suffixed formations) that would likely exist in a Salish language. Such observations are reminiscent of observations on the lack of analyzable meanings among neighboring Klallam Salish personal names (Montler et al. 2012; Montler 2015:377), and regarding Kiksht (Wishram) Chinookan (Sapir 1990:258).

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languages" (p. 205). The present study proposes novel evidence to confirm, albeit in a paradoxical way, his sense of the broad occurrence of such customs.

Clearly, the Native tradition of word avoidance shows that this region's cultures possessed a keen awareness, if a negative valuation, of some kind(s) of homophony. A positive counterpart to it – word play – is mentioned in passing by Thelma Adamson in connection with a 1926 myth performance in the Humptulips dialect of Lower Chehalis. Although it is less than clear in storyteller Lucy Heck's husband Silas Heck's English translation as edited by Adamson, the researcher calls attention to a

> ...play on words, a feature that is not uncommon in Coast Salish mythology, and one that always gives rise to a humorous situation. It is impossible to render a passage of this sort adequately in English. (Adamson 2009:287 fn. 2)

In the following sections, I solidify Adamson's claim by documenting Salish-language punning in some detail for the first time, showing some of the parameters of the homophony it involves. I discuss how this species of humor can be seen as part and parcel of a single cultural trait with lexical tabooing, thus supporting Elmendorf's view of a fairly widespread practice. I end with a call for further investigation by specialists in the various Coast languages, perhaps even beyond Salish.

## 2    Methodology

A de facto methodology that has proven productive for detecting Coast Salish puns, since I am not fluent in all of the languages I will be referring to, has been to read traditional stories in English translation, pausing to check a dictionary of the original language when a particularly bizarre misunderstanding happens between characters. For example, when some villagers report the ridiculous experience of being terrorized by a lark but the culprit turns out to be the basket ogress, a glance in the Upper Chehalis dictionary shows that the words for both are closely similar (Kinkade 1991). Thus a play on words is found.

Similarly, in the course of dictionary-building for the Shoalwater Bay Indian Tribe, in the rare situation when etymologies prove indeterminate between a prosaic and an absurd reading, I have found this a predictor of probable puns in Lower Chehalis. The following section tabulates the outcome of both approaches.

## 3    Examples

The following Table displays the probable Coast Salish puns found as of this writing, including at least one masterful three-way wordplay (the notations "+" and "-" are explained in the immediately following section; roots are visually demarcated from other material):

**Table 1:** Some Coast Salish puns

| LANGUAGE | +WORD 1 | -WORD 2 | WORD 3 | CONTEXT |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Lushootseed[2] | *bə́sčəb* +'Mink' | *bščád* -'Louse' | -- | There are many Mink stories (Bierwert 1996:64); just one Lady Louse story (op. cit.:16; MacDonald 2006:14). |
| | *háʔł* +'good' | *p̓áƛ̓•aƛ̓* -'insignificant' | -- | "...*p̓áƛ̓aƛ̓*...which expresses the impression Mink hopes the waterfall will make on Changer, is replaced in this later passage with *háʔł*, which expresses what Changer thinks when he sees the little fall" (Bierwert 1996:98). |
| Upper Chehalis[3] | *x̣aƛ̓-éʔč* +'dentalium' | *x̣aƛ̓-ílax̣ʷc* -'brush(y place)' | -- | *x̣ʷəné·x̣ʷəne* makes a necklace by stringing cut brush segments and tries to pawn it off on basket ogress as dentalia (Amrine Goertz 2018:35). |

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[2] Lushootseed words are as found in Bates et al. (1994). A probably additional example occurs in a "Changer Story", where the repeated verb 'travel' (presumably *ʔíbəš*) is said to be replaced with 'spit' (presumably *tuʔáłəd*) for humorous effect by narrator Martha Lamont (Bierwert 1996:98). Despite the obvious dissimilarity of those two words, here the humor may again lie in homophony, since Bates et al. (1994:228) define *tuʔáłəd* as both 'spit' and a salmon species.

[3] Upper Chehalis words cited are as found in Kinkade (1991), where three more potential examples are (A) +'his little sister, his younger sister' (*pés-ns*, from *pəsé·n-*) vs. -'his monster' (*pə́s-ns ~ pés-ṅs*, from *pə́saʔ*), since the latter word documented by Franz Boas (in some text unfortunately not yet found by me) makes unexpected use of the Inalienable Possession marking otherwise typically associated with kin terms (cf. Robertson forthcoming), (B) (?)-*čát-t̓iqi-ṁł* 'policeman' using a variant form of the root *t̓ə́q-* 'tie up, get arrested' vs. (+)*t̓íq-ṁł* 'soak dried food' using the root *t̓íqi-* 'soak, under water', and (C) (?)+*qʷáł[=]iš-* 'neighbor, company, companion' vs. (?)+*kʷáł* 'aunt' vs. (?)-<*KwaL*> 'slave', the latter perhaps a jocular personal name since we know that slaves were named by their owners (Donald 1997:77), often but not always for their place of origin (T. Johnson, p.c.). (Also note that in closely related Lower Chehalis, among Xʷəníxʷəni's disconcerting ways of addressing his daughters, whom he also calls "my wives", is "my companions", Boas 1890.)

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *xʷə́n,* *xʷəní•xʷəni*[4] +'myth hero's name' | *xʷə́n-* -'buzzing' | *xʷə́n-* -'impotent, tired' | *malé* and daughter are trying to retrieve grandson from the "buzzing of the world" place; many people suspect *xʷəné·xʷəne* of his abduction, but Mountain Lion sneers that "*xʷəné·xʷəne*'s hip is wearing out" (Amrine Goertz 2018:50–51).[5] |
| | *qʷə́cχaʔ* +'lark' | *qʷcχʷé* -'witch' | -- | "The people say it is Lark who always kills the people but it is not that. It is a real monster" (Amrine Goertz 2018:67). |
| | *s-yal-ə́m̓* +'hired help' | *s-ya-qín̓*[6] -'slaves' | -- | Mink's wife's relatives are her "hired help"; this is a known euphemism for "slaves" (Amrine Goertz 2018:143–144, 295n3). |
| | *mánc* +'salmon fry' | *mə́nč* -'excrement' | -- | Mink's wife gives him "fry" five times but it tastes oddly terrible (Amrine Goertz 2018:143–144). |
| | *wə́li* +'name of Raven' (?) | *wəlí-*[7] -'fly (away)' | -- | "The Crows" are addressed by someone from inland as they paddle hard, "Where are you going, *wə́li*?" (Amrine Goertz 2018:169). |
| Lower Chehalis[8] | *kə́cə* +'Bluejay's happy call' | *kə́sə* -'urinate' | -- | Bluejay is trying to distract potential wives for the Chief by saying "Piss, piss, piss," causing them an uncontrollable need to urinate (Amrine Goertz 2018:204). |

[4] Based on comparison with Lower Chehalis, I transcribe the myth hero's name with a velar initial, *xʷ*, whereas Kinkade (1991) has it as a uvular, *x̣ʷ*. Kinkade's spelling matches Boas', but Boas was using the x-with-subscript-dot character to indicate a velar.

[5] *ʔac-xʷə́n̓=yəlps* 'tired tail, tired hips; impotent, paralyzed ḥips [swear word]'.

[6] Comparison with Lower Chehalis *syəlqín* and Quinault *jəlqín* (Modrow 1971) shows that 'slave' is historically *\*s-yəl=qín* 'NOMINALIZER-round=head'. Since the word no longer closely resembles 'hired help', but once did, this is perhaps a very old pun.

[7] Compare also Lushootseed *wəlíʔ* 'appear, be visible'.

[8] Lower Chehalis words are as in our Lower Chehalis Language Project dictionary draft.

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|---|---|---|---|
| *nə́č*<br>+'sink into water' | *s-n̓ə́č*<br>-'area around rectum' | -- | A local man nicknamed "Snitchy" was remembered for having fallen into an outhouse as a child (T. Johnson, p.c.).[9] |
| *ʔúlps*<br>+'go out(side)' | *ʔúl=ps*<br>-'urinate (FEM)' [seemingly 'bare-backside'] | -- | Mentions of people "going outside" and of women urinating alternate throughout the narrative (Boas 1890).[10] |

## 4    Structure

Regularities run throughout the above dyads (and triad): For one, a semantic polarity contrast occurs in every case, in that a word with neutral to positive connotations ("+") is replaced with a word having negative or absurd ones ("-").

With regard to morphology, all of the above puns involve at least roots; most involve the more complex level of the stem.

Of course homophony is evident, here definable as a strong tendency for each word pair to have both the same number of syllables and the same stress pattern (unless a stress contrast is the only way available to clearly differentiate meanings), and fairly strict segmental identity. Articulations are identical (especially those of vowels) or differ minimally, with consonants essentially allowed to differ by either an adjacent place position or a coarticulation/secondary articulation (thus fricative vs. affricate; plain vs. labialized; plain vs. ejective).[11]

## 5    Motivations

Perhaps a major reason for so much punning is to be inferred from the evaluative differences that characterize the members of each pun pair (or triplet). This reason may be similar or even identical to that which drives lexical tabooing: avoidance of powerful forces. In telling myths, one obviously has to mention their potent central characters and themes, yet one might run the risk of summoning "dangerous beings" by mentioning their names. For example, in Lower Chehalis tradition, three successive utterances of the name of one type of dangerous being (viz. the titular character of J. Miller n.d.) calls them to one's presence (E. Davis and T. Johnson, p.c.). It may be no coincidence that the name of that being appears

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[9] The *s-* is the NOMINALIZER prefix and *-i* is a HYPOCORISTIC suffix. The form for 'sink into water' is cited from Upper Chehalis, but I expect it to be of identical form in Lower Chehalis if our ongoing work on the latter encounters it outside this name.

[10] 'Go outside' is itself an areally-shared euphemism in the inland and coastal Pacific Northwest for elimination of bodily wastes, for example in Spokane Salish *snʔóʔcqeʔtn* 'outhouse' derived from *ʔócqeʔ* 'outside' (Carlson and Flett 1989).

[11] The postulated *h~p̓* correspondence in Lushootseed is interesting for its similarity with Tillamook's historical \**p > h* development (Kuipers 2002:3).

to be a prefixed, metathesized form of the Upper Chehalis word for it, *p̓ása?* – perhaps, in its origin, an avoidance form. Alternating mentions of homophonous spiritually powerful and non-powerful entities might serve to ward off the untoward consequences of invoking powerful names.

Of course avoidance has little to do with the non-mythic puns seen above. The sheer pleasure of creative wordplay seems sufficient to explain Lower Chehalis's puns on female urination and the area man's nickname. In this light it is interesting that Jay Miller has written (2006) of "puns" in Salish visual art as well, and in fact the Coast Salish artist lessLIE speaks overtly of graphically punning in pieces such as Figure 1.



**Figure 1:** "Sun, Salmon, Frogs, and Raven" by lessLIE (2007)

## 6    Implications

Identifying puns via this sort of linguistic archaeology holds the promise of repatriating Salish intangible cultural heritage (cf. UNESCO 2003; as Smeets 2004 observes, language is a somewhat neglected component within the latter concept). It does so by allowing a deeper ethnolinguistic comprehension of these languages, all of which are undergoing revitalization among generations who did not grow up speaking them. Examples of the information brought to light include:

- Cultural values: Some of these are perhaps eroded or forgotten by the tide of Anglophone dominance, e.g., around proper behavior with respect to spiritual powers, and regarding the sense that traditional stories are in

fact more humorous in the Native language than in translation (cf. Archibald 2014:75–76).

- The native sense of phonology: Which of a language's sounds "feel" similar enough to be substituted for each other while maintaining identifiability of each word in the pun relationship? This takes us beyond the limited observations hitherto made about segmental substitutions, e.g., those typical of baby talk in this region's languages (as in Thompson 1984:334, Frachtenberg 1920:296).
- Cross-reference notations: Dictionaries and grammars of these languages will be able to make overt connections among words that would not otherwise have occurred to linguists.

Among other explanations for the rampant yet non-predictable $C_1VC_2 \leftrightarrow C_2VC_1$ root alternations that have motivated lexical change from Proto-Salish onward, Michael Noonan (1997:507–508) speculates that such metathesis might be historically traceable to either a language game or to lexical tabooing à la Elmendorf. The latter idea has support in Tuite and Schulze's observations in Caucasus languages (1998). I suggest that whatever its explanation, metathesis reinforces a claim that Salish people have for uncounted centuries engaged in deliberate manipulation of their languages. In a language family that demonstrably relies on a variety of root-centered reduplicative templates as grammatical devices (Czaykowska-Higgins and Kinkade 1998, section 3.5.1), it would be absurd to ignore the heightened sensitivity to root-segment manipulations that Salish speakers would possess.

And indeed, out of all Northwest Coast groups (Figure 2), nearly all those ethnographically reported as tabooing not just names of the deceased but also similar-sounding lexemes are Salish: besides the Twana there are the Southwestern Coast Salish (i.e. Tsamosan branch; Hajda 1990:512) and Tillamook (Seaburg and Miller 1990:563). That this phenomenon is areally diffused is suggested by facts about two immediate non-Salish neighbors. Lower Chinookan manifests homonymy-tabooing of words resembling the names of the dead (Boas 1910:617; a memorable instance is the tabooing of the word for 'dead' in such circumstances, page 666!), and partially similar is the Quileute phenomenon of avoiding at least a proper name, if not other word classes, resembling a decedent's name (Powell 1990:433).

The distribution of groups recorded as avoiding dead people's names but not said to taboo phonologically similar names or common nouns further supports an idea of an areal split between an Olympic Peninsula-northwest Oregon zone and everywhere else: only onomastic, not phonological, avoidance is noted for names of deceased people among the Central Coast Salish (Suttles 1990b:465), Kwakwaka'wakw (Webster 1990:389), Nuuchahnulth (Arima and Dewhirst 1990:407), and Athapaskans of southwestern Oregon (Miller and Seaburg 1990:585).
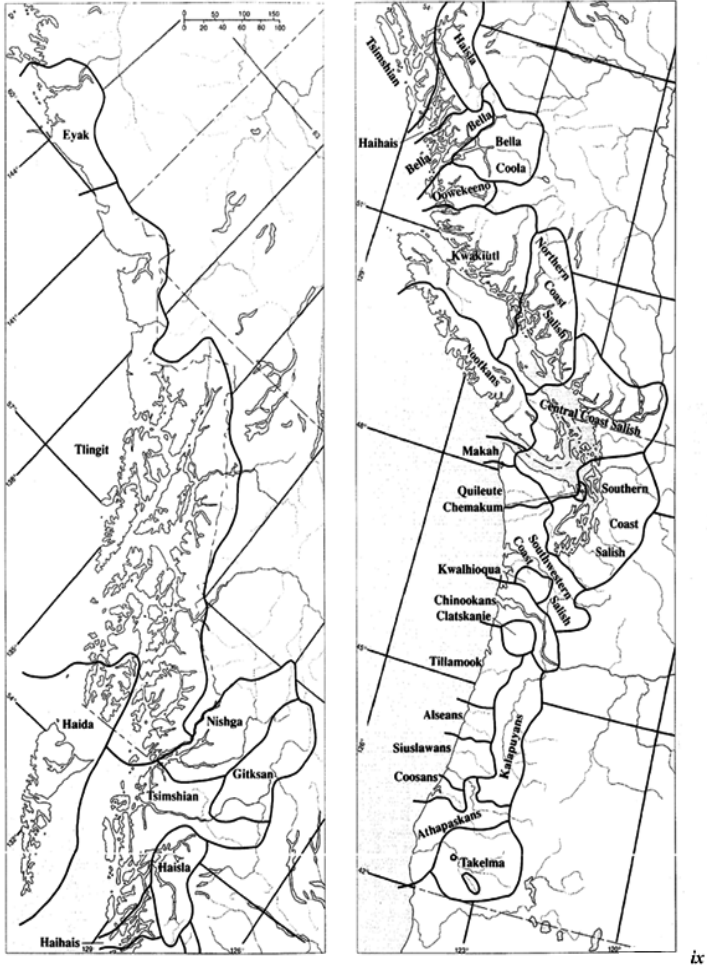
**Figure 2:** Northwest Coast cultures (Suttles 1990a:ix)

Given the ease with which examples of puns have already been spotted in western Washington Salish, the corpus thereof is likely to expand a great deal. They have certainly been noted in nearby sister languages such as Twana (N. Thompson, p.c.) and Stó:lō (my friend Emmett Chase was quickly nicknamed *emét* 'sit down' when visiting Mission, BC (C. Renteria, p.c.)), as well as in the Interior Salish language Lillooet (van Eijk 1984), and are probably widespread. We can look forward to further contributions by Salish and other Pacific Northwest scholars to this hitherto little-known topic of study.

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