

**The case of the two ladies and the owl**  
**How a disagreement can help a dying language speak<sup>1</sup>**

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In this brief article we examine an episode that took place as the Salishan language Twana was about to enter the last phase of its existence and show how information gleaned at that time can be meaningful in analyzing the language and related cognitive structures as they existed during the heyday of the culture. We will demonstrate that insights are captured regarding not only the process of the language's death but also regarding the field of ethnohistory.

**1        Introduction**

Too often, it is thought that research conducted after a language has ceased to be used in daily activities can only be made productive by asking the most insightful of questions. A scarcity of speaker to speaker interactions in the language means that one type of valued data will no longer be available. In this presentation, we will attempt to demonstrate that valuable insights can still be gained.<sup>2</sup>

In order to assist in our presentation, we will bring in the observations of two noted researchers to introduce and discuss what occurred. Unknown to many, Sherlock Holmes and Dr. John H. Watson turned to the study of Salishan languages after they retired from criminal investigations.<sup>3</sup> They found their earlier training and experience to be eminently transferable to their new endeavor.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Thompson would like to express his appreciation to Louisa Pulsifer who taught him about Twana language and culture from 1975 until her death in 1979. He also acknowledges the sharing of field notes and publications by the late William Elmendorf.

<sup>2</sup> Because we were not aware of the deadline for submissions for this year's conference until it had practically passed, we were unable to produce a look at the rise of the notion of private property among the Coast Salish as we had promised at last year's conference.

<sup>3</sup> Holmes's interest in language is documented. The following undated entry, for example, is taken from his resumé:

□ Cornish Language, conceived the idea that it is akin to the Chaldean, and had been largely derived from the Phoenician traders in tin. (Holmes n.d.)

<sup>4</sup> It is our hope that this claim is accepted without argument. Certainly, there are many similarities between the two fields. After all, linguists too feel the thrill of finding a solution, only to feel a drop in excitement in having to write up their findings. Many too are avid crossword puzzle fans.

## 2 Background

The Twana (also spelled Twanoh or, more accurately, Tuanook) were the original occupants of the Hood Canal watershed below the eastern slope of the Olympic Mountains in Washington State and spoke a language also called Twana.<sup>5</sup> The largest of about ten Twana tribes, the Skokomish ('big-river people') lived in six settlements along the Skokomish River. Other Twana tribes included the Hoodspout, Vance Creek, Quilcene, Dabob and Duhlelap (in the area of modern-day Belfair). The exact number of dialects has yet to be determined, although Elmendorf (1960:279) notes reported differences between Skokomish, Quilcene, Duhlelap and Dabob.

The Twana were never very numerous, their numbers being far smaller than those of their immediate Salishan neighbors. Their population at the time of first contact in 1792, already diminished by a smallpox epidemic, is estimated at 774 – far below the estimates of 11,835 for the Puget Sound Salish, 3,208 for the Klallam and 2,880 for the Upper Chehalis; of the tribes of the region only the non-Salishan Chimakum to the north are estimated to have had a smaller population at but 260 (Boyd 1999:264-5).

The Twana signed a treaty in 1855 and, following its ratification in 1859, most of the Twana resided on a reservation established at the mouth of the Skokomish River. Since that time all of the Twana and other Indians of the reservation, including some Klallam and Chimakum from the same treaty-signing, have been known as the Skokomish Tribe. Today, the reservation is home to more than 500 of the 807 enrolled members of the Skokomish Indian Tribe (Skokomish Culture and Art Committee 2002:77).

Ethnographer William Elmendorf worked on the Skokomish Reservation during the summers of 1939-40. He worked with three elderly men who spoke Twana and stated:

Most middle-aged Skokomish can still converse, rather rustily, in their native language, but all of them use English by preference; most younger people have learned only English. The last Skokomish monolingual, who could understand no English, died twenty years ago. (Elmendorf 1958:3)

Likewise, Gaberell Drachman, who worked there during the summers of 1963-65, noted that "Twana [had] long ceased to be a language in daily use, and the number of very old people who remember[ed] even single words [was] progressively diminishing with their death" (Drachman 1969:15). He identifies seven individuals as knowing at least enough of the language for him to collect a one-hundred-word list from (ibid, 15-6).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The people (the *tuwaduq*) and the language (*tuwaduqucid*) were distinct in the language, if not in English.

<sup>6</sup> For an in-depth discussion of the decline and death of the Twana language, see Thompson (1985:30-6).

### 3 The incident

Our case (study) begins back sometime before early 1975 on the Skokomish Indian Reservation in western Washington State.<sup>7</sup> An educator at the public school on the reservation decided that it would be good for the children to hear some of the Twana language from two of the last remaining native speakers. To this end, Louisa Pulsifer and Emily Miller were brought in to class one day. All went well initially, as the two fielded answers as to the equivalents of English nouns. However, all hell broke loose when they were asked to translate OWL. Louisa said it was *wÁh áw* while Emily said it was *ŽæŽÁç á* and that was that. Aspersions were cast as each fought to maintain the correctness of her answer.

"What do you make of that?" inquired Holmes, after Watson had paused in his reading of the local paper.

"You mean the commotion at Hood Canal School?" After receiving a nod, he continued on. "Well, it seems quite elementary," he said with a smirk. "It would seem it is not a good idea to bring elders in to a school to teach their own language unless they have been properly trained." A beaming Watson glanced over at Holmes.

Holmes responded, "I should have thought your degree from the University of Washington or MIT – or was it First Nations University? – could be put to better use than that."<sup>8</sup>

Glumly, Watson reflected on the problem. Time went by. Finally, he cheered up and offered, "That a dying language goes through a series of steps in its final decline, one of which being that instead of having active dialects it is rather composed of inflexible idiolects?"

"Much better," admitted Holmes, although he knew there was more to the story than that. "In order to find the significance of the story, you must start by providing a reason for the dispute." From there Holmes went on to present his view of the problem, followed by his analysis.

### 4 The problem

The two women involved in the incident had served as informants for linguist Gaberell Drachman in the mid-1960s. Significantly, they came from different Twana speech communities. Louisa Jones Charley Pulsifer spoke the Skokomish dialect, having learned it as a young child as a second language after Klallam. Emily Miller was the daughter of a Skokomish father and a Hoodspout Twana mother; the tribes of her parents lived but five miles apart in pre-contact times.

The difference in the disputed names supplied for OWL was, however, not a matter of different words being used to name the same bird in different

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<sup>7</sup> This account was passed along to Thompson after he began fieldwork on the Twana language and culture in February 1975.

<sup>8</sup> We can honestly say that we were unable to locate any evidence as to where Watson had received a degree in linguistics.

dialects. Louisa had supplied the name for the GREAT HORNED OWL (*Bubo virginianus*) while Emily gave that of the WESTERN SCREECH OWL (*Otus kennicottii*). We feel confident that both words existed in both dialects and that each woman knew both words as names for differing Strigiform types.<sup>9</sup> While it is recorded that Louisa knew both (Thompson 1975:283, 328), she was only willing to accept the one she supplied as translating the English word *owl*.

It was not as if owls were unimportant to traditional Twana culture (see 4.2). Thus, it seems unlikely that they did not know their owls, that the argument concerned dialectic variants, or that language change or word tabooing was the point at issue.

## 5 The solution

What the two women were arguing so vehemently over was actually a case of the two dialects having differing generic names for OWL (*Strigiformes*). This difference was itself governed by the environments in which their two tribes lived in pre-reservation times. Those ecosystems determined which type of owl the human residents would be most likely to encounter. The lower end of the Skokomish River, where the Skokomish tribe resided, consists of broad flatlands surrounding a delta. This area matches up particularly well with the latter parts of great horned owl's habitat listing: "forests, woodlots, streamsides, open country" (Peterson 1990:200). Because of its large size, a length of 20 inches and wingspan of 55 inches, it likes open areas where it doesn't have to steer among tree limbs. In contrast, the homeland of the Hoodspout Twana is along a small stream (Finch Creek) which winds its way down to Hood Canal between two large hills. This conforms to the favored habitat of the screech owl: "[w]ooded canyons, farm groves, shade trees" (Peterson 1990:200). Its smaller size, a length of 8 inches and wingspan of 22 inches, allows for far more maneuverability than the great horned owl enjoys.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, we have here a case of the natural phenomenon called 'raising' where a term from one level in a taxonomy, by virtue of its being the most abundant species of its type in an area, is elevated for use as well on the next level. This process was described some time ago by Trager (1937:117) as an example of how the environment can influence language:

[In the American Southwest] the only deciduous trees that grow in abundance outside of the forests on mountain slopes are the cottonwoods [so it is] natural for natives of the region to identify linguistically the concept "cottonwood" with that of "(deciduous) tree" ... In Tewa [for example] *te* "cottonwood"

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<sup>9</sup> Henry Allen, a Skokomish Twana, knew both of these names as names of different species (Elmendorf n.d.). Frank Allen, Henry's brother, knew a third type of owl, *sqîqî'q* 'white owl' (Elmendorf 1993:25).

<sup>10</sup> While the lower Skokomish flows through what is described as a "broad, lower river valley", Finch Creek is a stark contrast with its "steep gradient except in the lower stream reaches" and "stream bank cover" (Williams et. al 1975:WRIA-16 201, 501).

... is used as an equivalent for English "tree" an[d] Spanish "árbol" ... in case no particular species is referred to. (Italics added.)

Hage and Miller (1976:481) capture the concept of raising in modern ethnoscience parlance with their restatement of Brent Berlin's 1972 description of Trager's example:

[T]his polysemy is cited as a typical instance of a regular process in the evolution of ethnobotanical nomenclature, namely, the ascension of generic terms which designate "culturally salient," i.e. abundant and/or useful objects, to life form status.

Although an explanation of the ladies' argument based on the principle of ascension is somewhat unexceptional, it does allow us several insights that would have remained below the surface without it.

## **6 Ramifications**

Our explanation of the cause of the argument at the elementary school has ramifications for studies in both ethnoscience and language death. In the following subsections we will see how data gained through speaker interaction is superior to that gained through a cumbersome method requiring speaker literacy. Next we show data gained from our example invalidates a claim made as to owl taxonomies among North American Indians. Finally, in terms of language death, we show that the last stages of the Twana language were not as previously described, either in terms of the substitution of other languages for Twana or the flattening of dialect differences.

### **6.1 A natural way to find generics**

In a number of fields it has come to be known that questioning informants is not the best way to get accurate data. In ethnography, for example, the researcher strives to record narratives from which to later glean underlying elements of culture. In linguistics, the researcher seeks to record dialogue and/or lengthy discourse.

One of the big concerns of the ethnoscientists some years back was finding a similar natural way to gain insights on taxonomic levels. A good example of what we view as an artificial and unsuccessful method to discover taxonomic categories is provided by Berlin, et. al (1968:293):

[T]he names of the immediately included taxa of each major class name, written on slips of paper. were presented to informants with instructions to read through the lists and place in separate piles those names which applied to plants that were judged to be similar to one another.

A major problem with this method is that it identifies perceptual (or covert) categories which are not named in the language and are not part of the native taxonomy.

In the case at hand, we have an example of how a genetic form can be identified by means other than asking an informant a series of questions or requiring the informant to undertake a sorting task (of written words) irrelevant to the question of "What is the native taxonomy?" What we discover indirectly is that each of the ladies involved in the disagreement has a different genetic term that she uses to refer to what they believe is prototypic OWL.

## 6.2 OWL as a conceptual category

Hunn (1975:237) hypothesizes that no North American Indian language contains a generic term for OWL:

There are some thirty species of owls (*Strigiformes*) in Mexico and North America.<sup>11</sup> Most have quite distinctive vocalizations. They vary in size from the five-inch Elf Owl (*Micrathene whitneyi*) to the twenty-two-inch Great Gray Owl (*Strix nebulosa*). Most local areas are home to a half-dozen or more species. The fact that English- or Spanish-speaking field workers think of "owl" as a homogeneous class is not a testimonial to our abstractive abilities, but rather indicates a divorce from our natural surroundings. Native people are not so isolated.

The only empirical evidence Hunn offers, however, is that in the language he worked on in 1971, namely Tzeltal, "there is no single term for owls in general."

The data from our examination here contradicts Hunn's hypothesis. This is seemingly because of the great importance placed on owls by the Twana. Owls, to the Twana, were the worldly manifestations of spirits from the first land of the dead. The sighting of any owl portended the death of a family member; in this belief, there was no differentiation between members of *Strigiformes*. One way to counteract the omen was to kill the bird (Thompson 1976).<sup>12</sup> Logically, swift action would have been aided by the use of a generic term rather than requiring positive identification of the species prior to sounding the alert. These sightings would often have been in dim light and would not always have been accompanied by the owl cooperating by hooting.<sup>13</sup> As in the

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<sup>11</sup> We have no idea why Hunn does not consider Mexico to be part of the North American continent.

<sup>12</sup> Elmendorf (1960:514) presents an opposing view, stating that ghosts were associated with the screech owl and were not killed. The two differing sounds made by ghosts, discussed in footnote 13, would seem to contradict a link to a single species, however.

<sup>13</sup> The hooting of an owl, which was believed to be the earthy embodiment of a soul, was associated with the  $\epsilon \acute{u} \epsilon \acute{u} \epsilon \acute{u}$  vocalizations that the spirit produced in the first land of the

*cottonwood* = *tree* example above, when there was no species distinction being made, the designation of the most common species was used as the generic. The difference here is that the Skokomish and Hoodspout Twana each had a different generic because of their differing ecosystems.

### 6.3 Each person values a particular way of speaking

The disagreement at the school was not the first time that one of the ladies asserted her correctness over the other. Mrs. Pulsifer had earlier linked the forms which Mrs. Miller uses with her dialect, which she felt did not have the prestige of her own dialect:

[Louisa Pulsifer] was always scrupulous in distinguishing 'the genuine old Skokomish language' from other speech, even to the point of characterizing Mrs. Miller (for example) as 'from Hoodspout' ... (Drachman 1969:16)

Such an attitude is not the proclivity of just Mrs. Pusifer: almost all people subscribe to some notion of correctness. Many people believe that the language or dialect that they speak is the real thing and others pale in comparison. For example, another Skokomish Twana speaker, Henry Allen, made it quite clear that he believed that Twana was the real Salishan language and that the other languages of the region had evolved by falling away from it. According to Henry:

[Many of the] languages around here are like Twana. Those languages sound as if they came from our language, so I think that Twana is the real language and the others have changed from it ... Twana has longer words than the other languages [whose] words sound like whittled-down Twana ... So I think maybe their languages all came from Twana. (qtd. in Elmendorf 1960:281)

These feelings of pride on the part of speakers of Twana for their language and individual dialect are at odds with claims that Elmendorf about why the language was disappearing. He states that, because Twana was considered a difficult language to learn by their neighbors, the speakers of Twana had "an enhanced inclination to learn the languages of other peoples", which "resulted in a tendency to disuse the native idiom in some fields of Twana life, and eventually led them to abandon their language altogether (Elmendorf 1960:282).

We can be reasonably sure that many people will think their own particular form of speech represents the "real" language; the fact that they do

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dead (Thompson 1985:95). Elmendorf (1960:514) notes another sound, *kúkuku*, produced on earth by spirits, "a rapid falsetto repetition of the syllables." The contrast between these two onomatopoeic structures might be accounted for by the difference between sounds produced by the great horned owl and the screech owl.

becomes a tool of investigation. If they do hold this belief about their form of speech, they will compare other speech forms to it invidiously. However, at times we find a situation where particular speakers believe a form of speech not their own is superior. For example, many Spanish speakers in Spain point to the area of Valladolid as the place where the most correct Spanish is spoken while South Americans usually single out Colombia. But knowing that speakers value another language form more highly than their own gives us the same kind of investigational leverage as the opposite case. Speakers of forms of Spanish not associated with Valladolid or Colombia will compare their usage unfavorably with the preferred one.

Contrasts by a speaker between one speech form and another may, as in the case under study here, indicate that there is more to the iceberg submerged under the water. An investigator of a dying language would want to quiz informants with regard to the value they attribute to their own and other forms of speech and would in the process potentially elicit excellent information about both dialectology and folk beliefs.

#### **6.4 Dialect distinctions didn't disappear**

Elmendorf assumed that by the time he conducted field work on the Twana there were no cultural distinctions remaining of those that had existed among the aboriginal tribes:

Before 1850 [the Twana] ... lived in nine villages scattered along the length of the [Hood Canal] inlet and in the Skokomish River area ... By 1870 a new community was in formation at Skokomish, where the remnants of the nine native Twana communities were in process of fusion under the new conditions of reservation settlement. (Elmendorf 1958:4)

In 1939-1940 I found it impossible to gain more than meager specific information on any of the non-Skokomish Twana. The little information obtained shows no noteworthy cultural differences among these groups, with the possible exception of the inland Vance Creek people. The historical situation of the Twana since 1860 must not be lost sight of, however; any slight cultural variations existing before that date undoubtedly underwent an intensive "ironing out" process under reservation conditions. (Elmendorf 1960:273)

The identity of the separate aboriginal Twana communities has been lost, having merged with the (apparently) numerically dominant Skokomish during common residence on the Skokomish reservation since about 1860. (Elmendorf 1961:3)



At the time of my earliest field work, in the 1930's, only fragments of information were obtainable on any Twana communities other than the Skokomish. Thus a detailed comparison of village culture variants is now impossible. (Elmendorf 1960:1)

He considered the former dialects to be among the distinctions no longer in evidence, citing a statement by Eells (1889:606) concerning "the Quilcene-Skokomish-Duhlelap differences as a thing of the past in his time" (Elmendorf 1960:280). A more careful reading of the comment by Eells (also found in 1985:16), however, allows that the dialects were still present in Eells' time and the Eells is saying they were in the process of merging into one at that time

I have gathered most of the words from the older school boys, who have been brought up on the reservation and who have heard all of the dialects, which are rapidly merging into one.

Obviously, this leveling of distinctions might have been going on but was not progressing as rapidly as Eells thought it was. It had not completed itself as late as 1975, as the exchange between Louisa Pulsifer and Emily Miller clearly shows. As far as we can tell Elmendorf did not elicit any information from either of these women.<sup>14</sup> Thompson (1984) demonstrated that what Drachman thought of as a possible difference between male and female speech was actually a difference between the Hoodspout and Twana dialects.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, Thompson (1979) found enough dialect information to do a preliminary contrast of Twana dialects with those of Puget Sound Salish.<sup>16</sup>

In fact the only informants Elmendorf used in a serious way were both from the same Skokomish Twana family.<sup>17</sup> We wonder how he can say that differences had been ironed out or that there was no information available on the distinctions among the original Twana groups having data from only one.

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<sup>14</sup> Elmendorf (1958:3) does directly mention Louisa and Emily in commenting that "[t]wo or three elderly women, still living, know something of how to make the beautiful and intricate Skokomish baskets". Basketry researcher Del Nordquist, who was there during the same time period, had a higher appraisal for the knowledge of these women. He stated (Nordquist and Nordquist 1983:3) that Louisa "[m]ade excellent baskets, the quality of which remained quite good in spite of her age."

<sup>15</sup> The distinction deals with vowel height. Compare the phonetic forms of Skokomish °*ist* 'cow' *s#uc* and 'rain' with Hoodspout °*est* and *s#oc*.

<sup>16</sup> A full range of data on the language was collected by Drachman in the mid-1960s and Thompson in the late 1970s, including narrative texts, contrary to uninformed claims such as found in Davis (2005:2 n.).

<sup>17</sup> Elmendorf (1958:6) lists Henry Allen, his wife, his father-in-law, his brother Frank and Charley Cush as the only individuals he associated with at Skokomish. He conducted field work only with the Allen brothers and Cush, a Quilcene Twana whom he "interviewed for only a few days" (Elmendorf 1960:6).

Pausing from his monologue, Holmes set about filling his pipe. He then continued, "What we have here is a demonstration of how a seemingly unimportant episode during the death of a language can actually have real importance. What this example shows, among other things, is that some of the previous assertions about the death of the Twana language were actually either premature or incorrect."

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