

# Counting in Mainland Comox

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**Abstract:** Mainland Comox once used count numbers as ordinal numbers, unlike English, where count numbers have the same form as cardinal numbers. Counting on the fingers is also described.

**Keywords:** anthropological linguistics, Mainland Comox, cardinal number, ordinal number, counting, counting on the fingers

## 1 Introduction

My first consultant was Bill Galligos (Sliammon, born 1908). In summer 1969, he introduced me to his father-in-law, Noel George Harry (Homalco, born circa 1890). Noel George Harry (whose ancestral name was Mowheyalas [moç<sup>w</sup>iyelɬs]) is to be distinguished from Noel Harry of Church House (who was known as Nuwa [nuwɬ]). During the summer of 1969, Noel George Harry received a letter from the provincial government, a letter meant for Noel Harry; he asked me to clear up the confusion and explain the difference to the government employee(s) who had sent the letter.

Bill Galligos said that the Mainland Comox language was called *ʔayʔajuthem* [ʔaiʔajuθəm] ‘speaking properly’ and his elders used to call English ‘the difficult language’ *xatl’othqin* [χaλ’oθqen] {χaλ-} ‘difficult’; {-uθ-} ‘mouth, lips’; {-qin} ‘inside of the mouth’.

Noel George Harry said that his elders said that even before he was born the language had changed. He was able to explain many of the changes, but the changes in the number system became most evident in the way that he used numbers.

## 2 Count Numbers in Mainland Comox Compared with Sechelt

Mainland Comox			Sechelt	
<i>paʔa</i>	[paʔɬ]	‘one’	<i>pála</i>	(possibly laryngealized [l])
<i>saʔa</i>	[saʔɬ]	‘two’	<i>t’ém.shín</i>	
		(compare Mainland Comox <i>t’amshin</i> [təmšin] ‘twin(s)’)		
<i>chia’las</i>	[ç <sup>y</sup> ɛ <sup>ɛ</sup> ɬɬs]	‘three’	<i>chálhás</i>	
		(compare Mainland Comox <i>chialhaya</i> [ç <sup>y</sup> ɛɬɬyɛ] ‘three people’)		
<i>mos</i>	[mos]	‘four’	<i>mus</i>	
<i>theyaches</i>	[θiyɛçis]	‘five’	<i>tsíla.chis</i>	
<i>t’axam</i>	[təχɬm]	‘six’	<i>t’éxém</i>	
<i>z’o’ches</i>	[t <sup>h</sup> o <sup>o</sup> çis]	‘seven’	<i>ts’ú.chis</i>	
<i>taʔaches</i>	[taʔɬçis]	‘eight’	<i>téʔá.chis</i>	
<i>tegiwh</i>	[tigit <sup>w</sup> ]	‘nine’	<i>túwiwh</i>	
<i>ʔopan</i>	[ʔopɬn]	‘ten’	<i>ʔúpan</i>	

The final syllable *-ches* of the number ‘five’ and ‘seven’ and ‘eight’ appears to be related to the word for ‘hand’ *chiayesh* [ç<sup>y</sup>ɛyiš] — Sechelt *chálash*. See Section 8 below in this paper.

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### 3 Cardinal Numbers Appear to Have Once Required Lexical Suffixes

In 2006, I observed a Comox language class in an elementary school classroom in Campbell River. The teacher showed the students a picture of cows with the label *mos mushmush* ‘four cows’ [mos mušmuš]. This phrase reflected translation from English.

This presentation contrasted with the way that Noel George Harry had spoken. With cardinal numbers he consistently used lexical suffixes. For example, he used the lexical suffix *-iz’a* when speaking of animals. One example was ‘four skunks’ *mosiz’a p’a’laz* [moset<sup>θ</sup>Λ p’a<sup>a</sup>lɪ<sup>θ</sup>].

people	round things	times	boats	animals
<i>pipaʔa</i> [pɛpaʔΛ] ‘one person’	<i>paʔos</i> [paʔos] ‘one round thing’	<i>nach’iawh</i> [nač <sup>y</sup> εç <sup>w</sup> ] ‘once’	<i>nach’iagilh</i> [nač <sup>y</sup> εgɪɫ] ‘one boat’	<i>nach’iagiz’a</i> [nač <sup>y</sup> εgɛɫ <sup>θ</sup> Λ] ‘one animal’
<i>sisaʔa</i> [sɛsaʔΛ] ‘two people’	<i>saʔos</i> [saʔos] ‘two round things’	<i>tha’ma</i> [θa <sup>a</sup> mΛ] ‘twice / second’	<i>tha’magilh</i> [θa <sup>a</sup> mΛgɪɫ] ‘two boats’	<i>tha’miz’a</i> [θa <sup>a</sup> mɛɫ <sup>θ</sup> Λ] ‘two animals’
<i>chialhaya</i> [č <sup>y</sup> ɛɫɔyɛ] ‘three people’	<i>chia’lasos</i> [č <sup>y</sup> ɛ <sup>l</sup> ɔsɔs] ‘three round things’	<i>chianawh</i> [č <sup>y</sup> ɛnΛç <sup>w</sup> ] ‘thrice / third’	<i>chianagilh</i> [č <sup>y</sup> ɛnΛgɪɫ] ‘three boats’	<i>chianagiz’a</i> [č <sup>y</sup> ɛnΛgɛɫ <sup>θ</sup> Λ] ‘three animals’
<i>mosaya</i> [mosayɛ] ‘four people’	<i>mosos</i> [mosos] ‘four round things’	<i>mosalh</i> [mosΛɫ] ‘four times’	<i>mosagilh</i> [mosΛgɪɫ] ‘four boats’	<i>mosiz’a</i> [moset <sup>θ</sup> Λ] ‘four animals’
<i>theyachaya</i> [θiyɛčɔyɛ] ‘five people’	<i>theyachos</i> [θiyɛčɔs] ‘five round things’	<i>theyachalh</i> [θiyɛčɛɫ] ‘five times’	<i>theyachagilh</i> [θiyɛč <sup>y</sup> ɛgɪɫ] ‘five boats’	<i>theyachiz’a</i> [θiyɛčɪɫ <sup>θ</sup> Λ] ‘five animals’

These examples are extremely limited to illustrate a sample of morphologically marked cardinal numbers. They do not reflect the wide variety of forms that numbers can assume in the language.

### 4 Nonce Names Using Numbers

In 1969, I asked Noel George Harry and his wife, Christine, the names of the fingers. Neither of them could remember the name for the ring finger, so Noel George Harry said *sa’a xwawiqojia* [saʔa χ<sup>w</sup>awiq<sup>w</sup>oj<sup>y</sup>ɛ] — ‘number two finger’ (second finger). Another time I asked him the word for ‘Monday’ and he replied *paʔas*, which means ‘number one (day) of (the week)’ before he corrected himself to say *yayaw*.

The names of the week illustrate the use of count numbers to designate the position of the day within the list of days of the week. Whereas cardinal numbers were marked with lexical suffixes, the ordinal numbers could be marked with the possessed suffix *-s* so that *paʔas* meant ‘number one of (a list)’. Compare Turkish *bir* ‘one’ and *biri* ‘one of them’ opposed to *birinci* ‘first’ and *birincisi* ‘first of (a list)’. Here the Turkish suffix *-(s)i* means the same as the third person *-s* Mainland Comox suffix which indicates ‘belonging to’ and can be translated as ‘of’.

## 5 Ordinal Numbers First, Second, Third in a Text

The most frequent translation for ‘first’ is *hihiw* [hɛhɛʊ] as in Ambrose Wilson’s story of how the historical man *T’ichewaxanem* [tɛʃuʋʌχʌnɛm] gained his first power (numbers from the text):

- (8a) *hihiw maʔtas qaytows kw ʔayhos* *hihiw* = first/foremost; *maʔtas* = he took it;  
*qaytolh* = that which was killed; *-t* = intent  
 [hɛhɛʊ maʔtʌs qɛitʊʋs kʷ ʔaihos] *-olh* ‘past’ + *-s* ‘his’ ⇒ *-ows*  
 The first (that) he took from the Ayhos he killed
- (8b) *ʔayhos tl’alhsems* *tl’alhsem* = strong, strength, power; *-s* = its  
 [ʔaihos ʎʌʃsɛms]   
 (was) the power of Ayhos.
- (9) *maʔtas kwes xaxgelhs, ʔa’jiajats kwekwtem* *xaxgelh* = shaman, doctor  
 [maʔtʌs kʷis χʌχgɛʃs, ʔaʔjʲɛjʲɛts kʷʊkʷtɛm] *kwes* ... *-s* = subordinate clause  
 He took being a doctor, to cure the sick *kwekwtem* = (one who is) being sick

The immortal *ʔayhos* allowed *T’ichewaxanem* to kill it three times, then filled him with its blood. The word *nach’iawh* means ‘once’, but the word for ‘first time’ is *higalh* [hɛgʌʃ] {hiW + aL} (compare *mosalh* in Section 3 above).

- (12) *ho ga kw paʔa qajey, tha’mas qeytas kw ʔayhos* *ho* = go; *ga* = concessive particle  
 [ho ga kʷ paʔa qʌjɛj, θaʔmʌs qɛitʌs kʷ ʔaihos] *kw* = ART; *paʔa* = another; *qajey* = again  
 Going to another, the second (time) he killed Ayhos *tha’ma* = second; *-s* = his (subordinate)
- (15) *ho ga kwes chia’nawhs qayewhas kw ʔayhos* *kw* = ART; *chia’nawh* = third;  
 [ho gʌ kʷis ʃʲɛʲnʌʃʲs qʌjʊʃʲʌs kʷ ʔaihos] *kwes* ... *-s* = subordinate clause  
 Going to the third (time) he killed Ayhos *qayewhas* = he killed it; *-ewh* = result

## 6 Days of the Week in Mainland Comox

Lemert writes that in 1868 Father Durieu “brought together the five existing Sechelt Tribes” into one religious community and later made an “abortive attempt to communalize the Homalthko, Tlahoose and Sliammon near Powell River”. Noel George Harry, Tommy Paul, and Ambrose Wilson (all born at Homalco) told me about disputes, including hunting rights, which caused the Homalco and Klahoose to leave the unitary community and return to their home territories.

When the Oblate Fathers gathered the three communities together at Sliammon, the people had not counted out the days in units of seven. However, the week is essential for European religion, so the priests worked with the speakers and devised names for the days of the week.

These names did not use any of the words *nach’iawh* [nʌʃʲɛʃʲʌʋ], *hihiw* [hɛhɛʊ], *higalh* [hɛgʌʃ], *tha’ma* [θaʔmʌ], *chia’nawh* [ʃʲɛʲnʌʃʲʌʋ], *mosalh* [mosʌʃ], *theyachalh* [θɛjʲɛʃʲɛʃʲ]. Instead, they consulted the native speakers and came up with words similar to what Noel George Harry gave for ‘ring finger’ = “number two finger”. Their translations for four of the days of the week mean ‘number two/three/four/five of it’ by using the possessed suffix *-s* ‘of it’. So, for example, the word for Tuesday is ‘number two of (the week)’ — compare Noel George Harry’s nonce names for ‘ring finger’ and for ‘Monday’ (Section 4 above).

The days of the week in Mainland Comox are:

<i>yayaw</i>	[yeyεo]	Monday	
<i>saʔas</i>	[saʔʌs]	Tuesday	‘number two (day) of (the week)’
<i>chia’lass</i>	[čʰyεʰʌss]	Wednesday	‘number three (day) of (the week)’
<i>moss</i>	[moss]	Thursday	‘number four (day) of (the week)’
<i>theyachess</i>	[θiyεčʰess]	Friday	‘number five (day) of (the week)’
<i>t’eq’wtem</i>	[tʰəqʷtəm]	Saturday	
<i>xaxalhnat</i>	[χaxʌʰnʌt]	Sunday	‘holy night/evening’

Ambrose Wilson consistently pronounced the double -ss on the end of the names for the days of the week, as did Mary George of Sliammon (born 1924) when she was enunciating carefully.

## 7 Days of the Week in Sechelt

The Oblate order also proseletyzed at Sechelt and established a boarding school there for the children of all four communities (Homalco, Klahoose, Sliammon, Sechelt). The Oblate priest(s) and their converts created the following words for the Sechelt language:

<i>s.yél.(?)áw.alh.yas</i>	Monday
<i>s.tsám.yas</i>	Tuesday
<i>s.chán.awh.yas</i>	Wednesday
<i>s.mus</i>	Thursday
<i>s.tsíla.chis</i>	Friday
<i>t’eq’w.át.em</i>	Saturday
<i>s.xáxa.lh.nát</i>	Sunday

The root of the Mainland Comox word for ‘yesterday’ *sjiasolh* [sʰjʰesoʰ] is cognate with the last syllable of the Sechelt words for the first three days of the week. However, the Sechelt word for ‘yesterday’ is *chéł.láqalh.ulh*. It may be that the Comox root -*jias*- refers to the span of night and day, including both *z’ok’w* [tʰokʷ] ‘daytime’ and *nat* [nat] ‘night’ — compare *z’oz’ok’wok’w* [tʰotʰokʷokʷ] ‘first glimmer of light’ with C<sub>1</sub>V<sub>1</sub>- imperfective and -V<sub>1</sub>C<sub>2</sub> inceptive reduplication. Many languages differentiate the two concepts of ‘day’: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nychthemeron](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nychthemeron).

## 8 Counting on the Fingers

Counting on our fingers seems to be a universal human behavior. For example, Zaslavsky (2001) compared finger counting methods in several cultures and Tomkins (1929) includes an illustration of finger counting among Plains Indian tribes. However, this latter is different from the method used among the Coast Salish of British Columbia and Washington, even though both cultures start with the little finger of the right hand.

In November 1886, Franz Boas used the North American way of counting when he wrote down the words for fingers as he was interviewing Pentlatch speakers on Vancouver Island, British Columbia. He called the index finger the ‘first finger’, the middle finger the ‘second finger’, the ring finger the ‘third finger’, and the little finger the ‘fourth finger’. He was not describing how the Pentlatch people themselves counted on their fingers.

In the 1970s, I asked Mary George to count on her fingers. She held up both hands in front of her, the palms facing her and the backs of the hands facing toward me, the person she was talking to. Her hands were closed. For the number ‘one’ she raised the little finger of her right hand. Then she raised one finger at a time until all five were raised. She continued with the little finger of her left hand for ‘six’, then the ring finger of her left hand, and so forth. The Plains Indian method of counting as illustrated in Tomkins’s book shows the palms of the hands turned toward the listener. Number six is indicated by the five fingers of the right hand along with the thumb of the left hand, which is different from the count as demonstrated by Mary George. In Tomkins’s illustration, the two thumbs are adjacent. Mary George held her little fingers adjacent.

The suffix *-ches* in ‘five’ and ‘seven’ and ‘eight’ can be seen as being an ancient suffix meaning ‘hand’ — you’re crossing from one hand to the other (see Section 2 above in this paper).

In the summer of 2016, I was at table with members of the Homalco band. One young man in his early twenties was there who was raised in Duncan, British Columbia. He was describing an event where three items were significant. At the same time that he said ‘three’ he held his right hand out to the side and held up the little finger, the ring finger, and the middle finger. Even though we were all speaking English, he used a gesture which would be recognized by his Cowichan ancestors. This is different from the larger society. When we wish to indicate the number three in North America, we hold up the index finger, the middle finger, and the ring finger. In Germany they hold up the thumb, the index finger, and the middle finger.

Noel George Harry and his wife, Christine, called the ring finger *sa’a xwawiqojia* [saʔa χ<sup>w</sup>awiq<sup>w</sup>oj<sup>y</sup>ε] ‘number two finger’ (second finger) — a reference to its use in counting. This name reflects the fact that counting started with the little finger and progressed toward the thumb, in the opposite direction of German (which starts with the thumb) or English (which starts with the index finger). In addition, when counting in Mainland Comox the back of the hand is facing the interlocutor, not the palm of the hand — an action which might be less confrontational.

The significance of these observations might be considered to belong more to the realm of social anthropology rather than to the realm of linguistic anthropology. But these gestures are correlated with language behavior and are part of the realm of communication.

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