

Jargon and European Origins of some Bella Coola Lexicon

Hank Nater
Independent Linguist

Abstract: Bella Coola is a Coast Salish language, now defunct, that is closely affiliated with other Coast Salish in regards to certain deictic and phonological features. However, it differs on other levels profoundly from all non-Bella Coola Salish, e.g., where the genetic makeup of its lexicon is concerned: less than a third of all Bella Coola verbo-nominal vocabulary is of Salish (and areal) descent (Nater 2013). In this report, I focus on those Bella Coola verbo-nominal stems that have been copied from Chinook Jargon, Russian and Spanish.

Keywords: Salish, Bella Coola, trade- & migration-induced contact, lexical copying

1 Introduction and background

In this report, I present and discuss words – copied from Chinook Jargon, Russian and Spanish – formerly used by fluent speakers of Bella Coola, a Salish language that belongs to the *Nuxalk* community of Bella Coola, British Columbia. Their traditional territory spans approx. 52°–53° northern latitude, and 126°–127° western longitude. In Figure 1, once thriving regions are marked as follows: 1 = South Bentinck Arm, 2 = North Bentinck Arm, 3 = Bella Coola valley, 4 = Kwatna River, 5 = Dean Channel, 6 = Dean River, 7 = Head of Dean Channel.

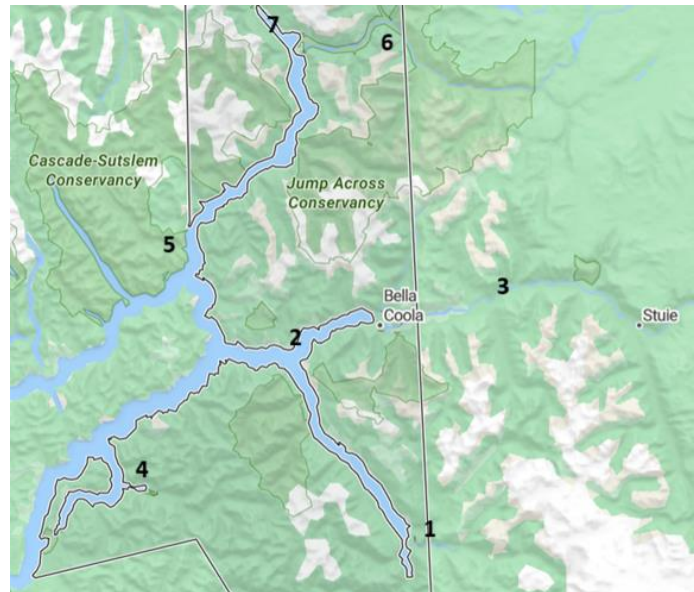


Figure 1: Traditional Bella Coola territory (based on Bing Maps)

Contact info: hanknater@gmail.com

In *Proceedings of the International Conference on Salish and Neighbouring Languages 60*.
Ella Hannon, Brian Diep, Laura Griffin, Mila Loginova, Bruce Oliver, Lauren Schneider, Reed Steiner, and
Bailey Trotter (eds.). Vancouver, BC: UBCWPL, 2025.

In regards to physical, cultural, and linguistic traits of the people native to Bella Coola (henceforth BeCo), Franz Boas (1898) saw a close affinity between BeCo and Coast Salish on the one hand, and between BeCo and North Wakashan on the other. But it was not until much later that areal properties of BeCo lexicon as such were addressed in detail, i.e. when Stanley Newman (1973) pondered the North Wakashan origin of a portion of BeCo vocabulary. In 1974, I presented my first account of lexical similarities between BeCo and Heiltsuk, and in 1994, 2010, and 2013, I expanded and adjusted Newman’s findings, and cited unique links that indicate southern maritime origins for BeCo.

1.1 Bella Coola in time and space

My 1974–2013 and 2024 reports yielded evidence that the BeCo began, arriving from the south (via Ooweekeno) prior to and while settling in the area outlined in Figure 1, to interact with other populations in several regions: southwest of the head of South Bentinck Arm (Ooweekeno: lexicon, absence of distinctive stress and schwa), west of Kwatna (Heiltsuk: lexicon), east of Stuie (Athabaskan: lexicon), and north of the head of Dean Channel (Haisla and Tsimshianic: lexicon). For other scenarios, see Baker 1973:77-79.

The position of BeCo vis-à-vis other Salish is as illustrated in Table 1 below. Note that BeCo is closely affiliated with other coastal Salish – especially Tsamosan (see Nater 2014) – in terms of deictic and phonological features (noun gender and absence of velar and pharyngeal sonorants).

Table 1: The position of BeCo within Salish

	interior southeast:	Spokane-Kalispel-Flathead, Coeur d’Alene
	interior central:	Okanagan
	interior north:	Shuswap, Lillooet, Thompson
	interior southwest:	Columbian
Proto-Salish	northwest:	Bella Coola
	Tsamosan:	Lower Chehalis, Quinault, Upper Chehalis, Cowlitz
	Central:	(3 branches, 10 languages)
	Oregon:	Tillamook-Siletz-Nehalem

For Central Salish branches and languages see Davis 2024. This cladistic model

- ♦ is consistent with the intra-Salish distribution (16.4% proto-Salish, 7.4% Coast Salish, 4.9% Interior Salish) of the Salish portion (28.7%) of Bella Coola lexicon (Nater 2013:124);
- ♦ accounts for the fact that the */k/ series > /č/ series shift has affected only SE Interior and non-BeCo Coast Salish (due to contact on the Common Salish level);

Note also that Coeur d’Alene */y *w/ > /d gʷ/ parallels Tillamook */y *w/ > /y gʷ~g/, Lushootseed */y *w/ > /ʒ~ʒ gʷ/, and Comox */y *w/ > /ʒ g/ (Kuipers 2002). Common Salish would

have been a dialect continuum that was in existence as certain Salish-speaking groups began to relocate towards, into, and beyond the Cascade Range. A few Common Salish words survive in BeCo and Coeur d'Alene: BeCo *cipsx* 'fisher' = Coeur d'Alene *cišps*, BeCo *milix^w* 'kinnickinnick' (dried leaves were smoked) = Coeur d'Alene *mil'x^w* 'tobacco', BeCo *√smiw* *'medium-sized mammal' = Coeur d'Alene *smiyíw* (with /y/ (< */y/) rather than /ǝ/) 'coyote', BeCo *t'k^w* 'to bleed' = Coeur d'Alene *t'ək^ws*, BeCo *χm* 'to bite' = Coeur d'Alene *χem* 'id. (of animal)' (Kuipers 2002).

Figure 2: Salish language area (Kuipers 2002)

... The homeland thus delimited for the Proto-Salish would extend from the Fraser River southward at least to the Skagit River, and possibly as far south as the Stillaguamish or Skykomish River ... From west to east, their territory would have extended from the Strait of Georgia and Admiralty Inlet to the Cascade Mountains.

Of course, this implies that pre-BeCo Salish, too, would first have evolved in this area. This is in fact quite likely: the Olympic peninsula is significant in terms of pre-BeCo migrations and language expansion. There is evidence of pre-BeCo groups moving through and away (west- and northward) from that region, coming in contact with Oregon Penutian, Chinook Proper, Quileute (Nater 2010), and South Wakashan (Davidson 2002)¹, and establishing relations with North Wakashan groups (and later, Tsimshianic and Athabascan as well), see Nater (1994), (2010), (2013), (2014), (2018).

2 Bella Coola Phoneme inventory

The BeCo phonemes can be tabulated as follows:

Table 2: BeCo phoneme inventory

		O B S T R U E N T			S O N O R A N T	
		P L O S I V E		F R I C A T I V E	C O N S O N A N T A L	V O C A L I C
		PLAIN	EJECTIVE			
F R O N T	LABIAL	/p/	/pʰ/		/m/	/ṁ/
	DENTAL	/t/	/tʰ/		/n/	/ṇ/
	ALVEOLAR	/c/	/cʰ/	/s/		
	LATERAL		/ɬʰ/	/ɬ/	/l/	/ɭ/
B A C K	PALATAL	/k/	/kʰ/	/x/	/y/	/ɪ/
	UVULAR	/q/	/qʰ/	/χ/		
	VELAR ROUNDED	/kʷ/	/kʰʷ/	/xʷ/		
	UVULAR ROUNDED	/qʷ/	/qʰʷ/	/χʷ/	/w/	/u/
	L A R Y N G A L		/ʔ/		/h/	/a/

Doubled phonemes and dragged vocalic sonorants are considered in Nater (1983, sections 5 and 12.4.1). Henceforth, syllabicity of /ṁ, ṇ, ɭ/ is indicated only where it is not predictable.

3 Sources and presentation

BeCo lexical data cited in this account are from Nater (1990). I refer to Nater (1983) for a detailed account of the language. In section 4, I list words copied from Chinook Jargon, Russian, and Spanish; in section 5, I make final observations.

4 The data

Below, I consider BeCo copies of Chinook Jargon words (4.1), one word of Russian origin (4.2), and one word that owes its existence to Spanish traders (4.3). All words were copied in the early nineteenth century, when the fur trade peaked, and BeCo traders did business in *C'aamas*² (now called Victoria) on Vancouver Island.

salmon' = BeCo *k'awn*, /-kš, -ikš, -ukš/ 'ANIM PL' = BeCo /-uks/ 'ANIM/MASS PL', Quileute *bolʔ* (/b/ < */m/) 'hair' = BeCo *mnlkʷa* (< **məlkʷ-ən*), South Wakashan *√t'uχ*, *√t'uχʷ* 'head' = BeCo *t'nxʷ*. Eventually, North Wakashan would become the main source of loan words in BeCo.

² Cf. Makah *c'a·bap*, No *c'a·maqak* 'sound, large body of water' (from *√c'a*)

4.1 Words of Chinook Jargon descent

A few Chinook Jargon words copied into BeCo (as recorded by myself in 1972) are listed in Table 3. They are fully incorporated morphologically. Examples of such morphological integration are: *tulumic* ‘I defeated him’, *tulwamkcut* ‘to exceed one’s expectations about self, successfully complete a task’ (from *tulu*, *tuulu* ‘to win, succeed’), *nusaplinta* ‘flour (*saplin*) sack’, *nutaalaata* ‘wallet’, *k^wultaala* ‘rich’ (from *taala* ‘money’), *’aplsul* ‘apple (’*apls*) juice’.

Table 3: Chinook Jargon vocabulary in BeCo (Nater BeCo field notes)³

Gloss	BeCo	CTGR (2011)	Origin
‘pig’	k ^w usu	kushu	French <i>cochon</i> (Zenk et al 2010)
‘sheep’	lamatu	limoto	French <i>le mouton</i> (Zenk et al 2010)
‘bag’	lisaak	lisak, lesak	French <i>le sac</i> (Zenk et al 2010)
‘bovine’	mus.mus	musmus	unknown (Zenk et al 2010)
‘priest’	laplit	lip ^h ret, lip ^h lit	French <i>le prêtre</i> (Zenk et al 2010)
‘money’	taala	dala, tala	English <i>dollar</i> (Zenk et al 2010)
‘and’	’n, ’in	ən	English <i>and</i> [n̩] (Zenk et al 2010)
‘win, succeed’	tulu, tuulu	tulu	Kalapuya (Gibbs 1863)
‘feast’	paalac	palach, pałach	Nootkan (Zenk et al 2010)
‘flour, bread’	saplin	saplel	Unknown (Zenk et al 2010)
‘bell’	tntn	tintin	Chinook Proper (Zenk et al 2010)
‘wagon’	cixcik	t’sikt’sik	Chinook Proper or Salish (Zenk et al 2010)
‘cannery’	pisaws	n/a	English <i>fish + house</i>
‘smokehouse’	smuk ^w aws	n/a	English <i>smokehouse</i>
‘fish with a net’	pisman	n/a	English <i>fisherman</i>
‘church’	caacaws	eklis	English <i>church + house</i> , French <i>église</i>
‘turnip’	tanaps	lenamo	English <i>turnips</i> , Spanish <i>el nabo</i>
‘apple’	’apls	lipom	English <i>apples</i> , French <i>la pomme</i>
‘orange’	’ancns	samən-ulali lipom	English <i>oranges</i> , Jargon ‘fish-berry apple’
‘brine, salt water’	sulut	solt ‘salt’	English <i>salt</i> (Zenk & al 2010)
‘get married’ ⁴	talaws	... dala haws ‘bank’	English <i>dollar + house</i>

In regards to Chinook Jargon *musmus* ‘cow’, Zenk et al (2010) claim “obscure origin”, but they also compare Upper Chehalis √*músmuski* ‘cow, cattle’ and Klamath *mosmas~mosmos*, Molala

³ Here and henceforth, CTGR stands for Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde Community of Oregon.

⁴ The original meaning must have been ‘to (go to the) bank: deposit or withdraw money for a dowry or wedding feast’.

musims ‘black-tailed deer’. However, Tahltan *mášmaš* ‘cow’ (my field notes) – along with the first syllables of Tlingit *wasóos* ‘cow’ (Edwards 2009) and Haida *masmíus* ‘cow’ (Lachler 2010) – resembles French *vache* ‘cow’ more than *mus...* does. Northern *wasóos*, *masmíus* and *mášmaš* themselves may continue regional Chinook Jargon **mašmús*, arguably a hybrid (Métis?) form based on French *vache* and Cree *mōswa* ‘moose’ (Aubin 1975). Further to Chinook Jargon *saplel* ‘flour, bread’, Lyon (2016) considers an old origin (1579) for this term.

4.2 A Russian word in Bella Coola

BeCo *panya* (transitive-intransitive) ‘to smoke fish’ has no Salish cognates or areal matches, but note that:

- ◆ it bears a striking phonetic resemblance to Russian *баня* [bʌnə] ‘sauna’;
- ◆ due to restricted means of communication as well as similarities between *banyas* and smoke-houses, either structure – as a vapor-emitting shed or cabin that is quite dissimilar to the average traditional dome-shaped sweat lodge – could easily be misidentified by visitors during discussions;
- ◆ BeCo transitivity-intransitivity is often indicative of an originally nominal status, such that X may gloss as ‘to apply (an) X to something’, see Nater (1983);
- ◆ *panya* is clearly a redundant (and once-fashionable) lexical innovation, as BeCo already had *q’wup* (tr.) ‘to (expose to) smoke’. If not for contact with Russian traders, a BeCo smokehouse might now have been called **nusq’wupalsta* or **nusuq’wupalsta* rather than *nuspanyaasta*.

This word must have entered the language in the early 19th century (some twenty years after Mackenzie set foot in BeCo, see Mackenzie 1801 and Nater 2020), when the fur trade boomed, and Chinook Jargon began to flourish. In regards to the second argument, note that Chinook Jargon had one word for both ‘smoke’ and ‘steam’ at the time (Hibben 1889 and Shaw 1909), which could certainly lead to misconstruction in conversations between Russian and BeCo traders whenever, and wherever, their paths crossed.

4.3 A Spanish connection

BeCo *yanahu* ‘turnip’ is a copy of Oowekyala *yanahu* which itself resembles Heiltsuk, Tlingit, Haida, and Nishga forms. Evidently, all go back to Spanish *el nabo* ‘the turnip’ = [elnaβo, enˈaβo]. Shaw (1909) lists *lenawo*, *lamooow* [sic], and CTGR (2011) quotes *lenamo*. These data strongly suggest that the different forms evolved as follows:

Table 4: Spanish origin of areal term ‘turnip’

/el_nabo/	[elnaβo]	* nawo	Chinook Jargon <i>lenawo</i> ~ <i>lenamo</i>
-----------	----------	--------	--

[en'aβo]	*'enawu	Heiltsuk 'ynawú, Haida inú', Nishga iinuu
	*'enahu	Tlingit anahu', Oowekyala 'yanahu, BeCo 'yanahu

(For Haida, see Lachler 2010; Heiltsuk – Rath 2010; Nishga – Tarpent 1987; Oowekyala – First Voices; Tlingit – Edwards 2009)

5 Concluding observations

In regards to the southern origin of BeCo, the significance of ancient migrations and trade patterns is often underestimated. Thus, Kinkade (2005) found it difficult to reconcile similarities between Salish and Alsea with the seemingly insurmountable distances separating these languages. Neither could he imagine how similarities between Penutian and Salish could have resulted from interaction with Tillamook:

If Alsea has borrowed from Salish, how did it get forms with p or m, which could not have come from Tillamook, Alsea's only Salishan neighbor (unless the changes of *p to h and *m to w are recent changes in Tillamook)? Unless there have been major population shifts in the area, borrowing is possible, although problematic, given changes in Tillamook phonology and morphology. Inter-marriage, slavery, or trade would not provide adequate sources for borrowing in either direction because of the distances involved. Contact between Alsea and non-Tillamook Salish must have been minimal.

(Kinkade 2005: 66-67)

Yet, Alsea is located between Chinookan and Takelma, within the ancient trade network shown in Figure 3, and it is unlikely that Alsea contact with Salish (pre-Tillamook and/or pre-BeCo) would not have taken place a millennium or so ago. It is precisely this type of regular interaction that could motivate lexical and structural copying (cf. Nater 2010 and 2018b).

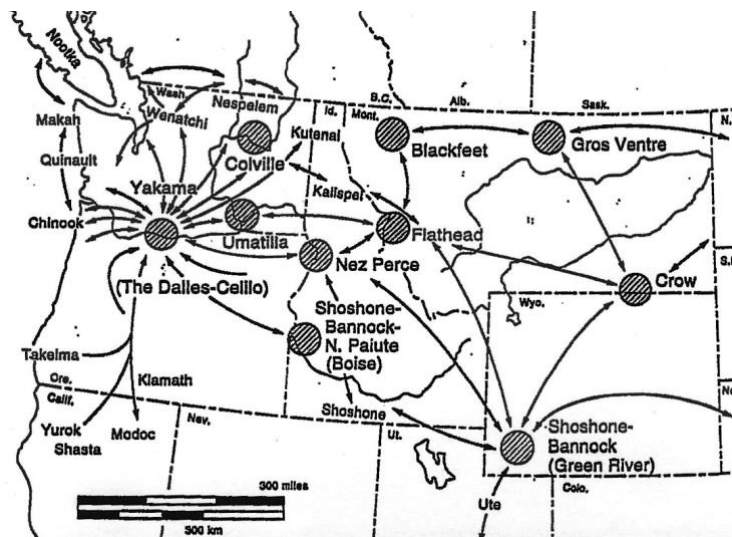


Figure 3: Traditional trade centers and networks (based on Walker 1997)

Amounts and percentages pertaining to BeCo verbo-nominal vocabulary are:

Table 5: Etymological distribution of verbo-nominal vocabulary

Proto-Salish	Coast Salish	Interior Salish	Areal	Copied	Unaffiliated
209 (16%)	94 (7%)	63 (5%)	34 (3%)	214 (17%)	661 (52%)
400 (31%)				875 (69%)	

These percentages confirm the early separation of BeCo from other Coast Salish. Note that most copied vocabulary is originally North Wakashan. It should here be mentioned that morpho-syntactically, too, North Wakashan influence has been pervasive:

- ◆ nowhere in Salish do we find spatio-temporal deictic systems as elaborate as in BeCo (see Nater 1983);
- ◆ lexical suffix stringing plays in BeCo a more prominent role than in all other Salish: while most BeCo lexical suffixes are retentions from PS, productive suffix-stringing (detailed in Nater 1983) is a BeCo innovation;
- ◆ more typical of BeCo than of all other Salish, except Lillooet, is post-predicative enclisis and enclitic-stringing, which must have evolved parallel to a rise in usage of suffixation (this escalation may underlie another difference: where other Salish marks mood via different verbal paradigms, BeCo uses enclisis);
- ◆ the rigid PSO syntax of BeCo is more reminiscent of North Wakashan than of other Salish (where word order appears to be less fixed than is the case in BeCo).

Another feature that sets BeCo apart from all other Salish is lack of distinctive schwa and stress. Elimination of *ə (or devoicing of vowels, see Nater 2024) has made it possible for entirely voiceless words and sentences to evolve (e.g. *q'psttχ!* ‘taste it!’, *k'xllex^w slχ^wtlc* ‘you had seen me go through the passage’), and for distinctive stress – which cannot play a role in voiceless words – to disappear (see Nater 1983). This trait is shared with, and has originated in, Oowekyala (Nater 2024, Howe 2000).

References

- Aubin, George F. (1975). *A Proto-Algonquian Dictionary*. National Museums of Canada.
- Baker, James W. E. (1973). *A Linguistic and Ethnohistoric Approach to Bella Coola Prehistory*. MA thesis, Simon Fraser University.
- Boas, Franz (1898). *The Mythology of the Bella Coola Indians*. Memoirs of the American Museum of Natural History, Vol. II.

- Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde Community of Oregon (2011). *Chinuk Wawa Reference Lexicon*. The Chinuk Wawa Dictionary Project.
- Davidson, Matthew (2002). *Studies in Southern Wakashan (Nootkan) Grammar* (PhD thesis). State University of New York at Buffalo.
- Davis, Henry. (2024). Central Salish from a Nooksack perspective. *Papers for ICSNL* 59, 24–51.
- Edwards, Keri (2009). *Dictionary of Tlingit*. Sealaska Heritage Institute.
- First Voices. 'Wuik'ala. <https://www.firstvoices.com/wuikala/words>.
- Gibbs, George (1863). *A Dictionary of the Chinook Jargon, or, Trade Language of Oregon*. Cramoisy Press.
- Hibben, T. N. (1889). *Dictionary of the Chinook Jargon, or Indian Trade Language, of the North Pacific Coast*. T. N. Hibben Co. Publishers.
- Howe, Darin M. 2000. *Oowekyala Segmental Phonology*. PhD thesis. UBC.
- Kinkade, M. Dale (1990). Prehistory of Salish languages. *ICSNL* XXV.
- Kinkade, M. Dale (2005). Alsea pronouns. *Anthropological Linguistics* 47:61–76.
- Kuipers, Aert H. (2002). *Salish Etymological Dictionary*. UMOPL No. 16.
- Lachler, Dr. Jordan (2010). *Dictionary of Alaskan Haida*. Sealaska Heritage Institute.
- Lyon, John (2016). Francis Drake's 1579 Voyage: Assessing Linguistic Evidence for an Oregon Landing. *Anthropological Linguistics*, Vol. 58, no. 1.
- Mackenzie, Alexander (1801). *Voyages from Montreal, on the River St. Laurence, through the Continent of North America, to the Frozen and Pacific Oceans, in the Years 1789 and 1793: with a Preliminary Account of the Rise, Progress, and Present State of the Fur Trade of that Country*. London: R. Noble.
- Nater, H. F. (1974). Lexical Comparisons between Bella Coola and Neighbouring Languages. *ICSNL* IX.
- Nater, H. F. (1983). *A Grammar of the Bella Coola Language* (PhD thesis). Rijksuniversiteit Leiden.
- Nater, H. F. (1990). *A Concise Nuxalk-English Dictionary*. Canadian Museum of Civilization.
- Nater, H. F. (1994). The Athapaskan Component of Nuxalk. *IJAL* 60:177-190.
- Nater, Hank (2010). Bella Coola /-uks/: Diffusion from Distant Sources. *A Festschrift for Thomas A. Hess on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday*. Whatcom Museum Publications No. 21.
- Nater, Hank (2013). How Salish is Bella Coola? *ICSNL* XLVIII, 92–143.
- Nater, Hank (2014). The Position of Bella Coola within Salish: Bound Morphemes. *ICSNL* XLIX, 65–88.

- Nater, Hank (2018a). Vestiges of Tsimshianic and other Penutian in Bella Coola. *ICSNL* 53, 161–179.
- Nater, Hank (2018b). Language Contact in the Northernmost Regions of the Pacific Northwest: Tlingit Elements in Tahltan. *Anthropological Linguistics* 60:44–59.
- Nater, Hank (2020). Old Records of Three Contiguous Pacific Northwest Languages: Bella Coola, Carrier, Shuswap. *Anthropological Linguistics* 62:183–191.
- Nater, Hank (2024). Voiceless Words in Bella Coola: Facts vs. Fiction. *ICSNL* 59, 411–422.
- Newman, Stanley (1973). Linguistic retention and diffusion in Bella Coola. *Language in Society* 2:201–214.
- Rath, John C. (2010). *Digital Heiltsuk-English Dictionary (version 2.2.1)*. Heiltsuk Cultural Education Centre.
- Shaw, George C. (1909). *The Chinook Jargon and How to Use it*. Rainier Printing Company, Inc.
- Tarpent, Marie-Lucie (1987). *A Grammar of the Nishga Language* (PhD thesis). University of Victoria.
- Walker, Deward E., Jr. (1997). The Yakama System of Trade and Exchange. *Northwest Anthropological Research Notes* 31:71–95.
- Zenk, Henry, Tony Johnson, & Sarah Braun Hamilton (2010). *Chinuk Wawa (Chinook Jargon) Etymologies*. Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde.