

## Preface: *Makúk*

*Makúk* may well have been the first word exchanged by Aboriginal and European peoples on North America's Northwest Coast. James Cook, the first European visitor to land on what is now British Columbia, heard it even before he dropped anchor. The Mowachaht, whom the British explorer met at what is now known as Yuquot on Nootka Island, used the word *makúk* to attempt to convey several messages.

First and foremost, *makúk* meant "let's trade." The Mowachaht were keen to exchange their furs and other items for the metal goods Cook carried with him. Second, the word implied that the Mowachaht would not be intimidated by the well-armed white men into giving even so much as their grass away. Finally, in using the word *makúk* the Mowachaht were offering Cook and his crew their first lesson in a language of intercultural communication.

Yuquot, which Cook and later Europeans called Nootka, or Friendly Cove, thanks to the welcome they received there, became the centre for European trade on the Northwest Coast of North America from 1778 to the late 1790s. Every trading vessel stopped there, and the Spanish established a settlement there. Beginning with *makúk*, the Mowachaht, along with their Nuu-chah-nulth relatives along the west coast of Vancouver Island and Cape Flattery to the south, taught the Europeans a basic trading vocabulary. When trade shifted to the territory of the Chinook people at the mouth of the Columbia River after 1800, the traders took this simple jargon with them.

Yuquot and the Chinook villages at the mouth of the Columbia were already established trade centres when Europeans arrived. The Chinook added the "Nootka Jargon" to their own trading jargon, which they then taught to other foreign traders.<sup>1</sup> This Chinook "jargon," or *wawa* (to distinguish it from the language spoken by the Chinook people), then spread to other aboriginal groups via the fur traders. English and French words for introduced items were added to the language (e.g., *polallie*, from the voyageur French "pouderie," for powder; *lahache*, for axe; and *lum*, for rum.) The jargon spread northward and eastward so that, by the late 1880s,

The Moment we landed I sent some [men] to cut grass not thinking that the Natives could or would have the least objection, but it proved otherways for the Moment our people began to cut they stopped them and told them they must *Makook* for it, that is first buy it.

Captain James Cook, Friendly Cove, 1778



Captain James Cook



Maquinna, Chief of the Mowachaht

◀ Cook's crew exchanging items with the Mowachaht, 1778 (see p. xii)

### I've Begun a Vocabulary

I have begun making a vocabulary of the Chenooke gibberish, by which we communicate with the Indians – it is a vile compound of English, French, American & the Chenooke dialect.

William Fraser Tolmie, *The Journals of William Fraser Tolmie*, June 25, 1833

### Chinook Dictionary

Now, if the learner will just turn to ... "Makook" – "Buy" which also signifies "Sell, etc" this tending to puzzle the person who understands it only in one sense when hears it used by an Indian [meaning?] quite opposite.

Harry Guillod, *Chinook Dictionary* [1862-88]



Harry Guillod, ca. 1880

the anthropologist Franz Boas was among many to remark that it would be impossible to get around British Columbia without it.<sup>2</sup>

This "rough-edged tongue with the whiff of commerce about it," as poet Gary Geddes described it, was born of exchange, at the crossroads of cultures, where novel experiences arise and new language is needed. Sites of exchange and translation of languages also become sites of transformation: just the places where the "Trickster" gets involved. In the European tradition, the ancient Greeks attributed the invention of language to Hermes – the Trickster in their pantheon of gods. Plato thought that spoken language was itself a byproduct of bargaining between peoples. On North America's Northwest Coast, a story from the Nuxalk people tells us the Creator thought one language would be enough for all peoples, but Raven (the Trickster), made many languages in order to have more sport in the spaces of misunderstanding.<sup>3</sup> Certainly, the Trickster was at work in Chinook jargon.

The Nuu-chah-nulth word *makúk* (*makook*, *mahkook*, *ma-kuk*, *maá-kuk*) was central to this trading jargon. It means "to exchange" – in all possible ways. The expression *naika tik-a makúk kiúu-ten* translates not only as "I want to buy that horse" but also as "I want to sell that horse" and "I want to trade that horse." In response, a potential trading partner might reply: *Klosbe*, which generally means "good" but has forty-five other meanings, including "graceful" and "useful." The buyer-seller might then say, *Maika skookum*, but since *skookum* means both "strong" and "demon," he or she could be saying "he (the horse) is strong" or "he is a demon." Words and phrases that sound alike also caused confusion. *Naika weght chako maika*, sounds very much like *Naika wake chako maika*, but the former means "I will come to you tomorrow" and the latter "I will not come to you."

To make the language simple, but also more confusing, there are no articles, no gendered pronouns, and no tenses. In its role as a medium of communication between different peoples with different ways of putting language together – and with vastly different concepts of time, space, and gender – all such markers were left out. The main preposition in the language, *kopa*, can mean completely opposite things: "to" and "from" as well as "in," "on," "under," "about," and "around." The main conjunction *pi* means "and" as well as "but." Add to this the many regional variations in vocabulary, pronunciation, usage, and spelling, and it is not surprising that the fifty-plus Chinook jargon dictionaries in circulation prior to 1935 sometimes offered contradictory definitions. Charles Buchanan, who taught the language in the late nineteenth century, put it this way: "The Chinook word is elastic and expressed a broad and general idea rather than one altogether specific."<sup>4</sup> It was a language of approximate meaning.

After Cook's landing in 1778, the jargon existed in a negotiated cultural space, neither fully Aboriginal nor fully European. If any one cultural group tried to push the language towards greater specificity, the referents were not available to the others, thus defeating the jargon's purpose. The various groups settled on a language amorphous enough that each could interpret it in a way that made sense within its own cultural framework. It was a language of deliberate ambiguity.

The vagueness that allowed the jargon to connect vastly different worlds led, of course, to misunderstandings. And these had their uses. If the Nlaka'pamux of the Fraser River wanted to interpret the Chinook words used by the Anglican Bishop of Columbia to refer to the Christian God – *Saghalie Tayee Papa* (literally, “the above chief father”) – as the Sun and Creator, both sides could feel they had some common ground. Other “misunderstandings” were, of course, counterproductive, or caused offence, such as when a Methodist clergyman, wishing to address a gathering of Aboriginal People as “Children of the Forest,” could, through his Chinook lexicon, get no closer than “Little men among big stick.”<sup>5</sup>

In a few locations the jargon developed into a full Creole (it became the first language of children growing up in intercultural situations), but it remained largely a pidgin, a second language, used for intercultural communication and miscommunication.<sup>6</sup> From a trading language it became the language of work, used in the mills, canneries, and hop fields where Aboriginal People interacted with European immigrants, other Northwest Coast aboriginal groups with whom they shared no common language, Asians, and Hawaiians.<sup>7</sup> A language of material exchange, it was pressed into service as a language of cultural exchange: missionaries used Chinook to explain the gospel, teachers taught with it, anthropologists studied Aboriginal Peoples with it, treaties were negotiated through it, and court cases were tried in it.<sup>8</sup> It was even used as a medium of artistic expression: homesick Aboriginal People composed songs in it, and romantic non-aboriginal writers composed poetry in it.<sup>9</sup> Harry Assu, a Kwakwaka'wakw hereditary chief from Cape Mudge, recalled that, in the early twentieth century, Chinook “was all that was spoken in dealings between Indian and non-Indian people.” As late as the 1930s, the jargon was still the main means of aboriginal/non-aboriginal interaction in the less populated parts of British Columbia, such as the Chilcotin.<sup>10</sup>

Chinook jargon is, itself, an example of *makik* – exchange – between two cultures. James Cook's uncertainty about the term in 1778 was the opening act of a long and ongoing dialogue. From 1778 to the early twentieth century, virtually every exchange between Northwest Coast Aboriginal People and immigrants – be it to do with religion, the law, work,

### Indian Point of View

Chinook ... is not as complicated as it looks ... You have merely to remember the Indian point of view to get the expression of almost any idea.

W.S. Phillips, *The Chinook Book*, 1913

### White Man's Talk

They [Indians] have a great aversion to learning the English language, contenting themselves with the jargon which they look upon as a sort of whiteman's talk.

James Swan, *The Northwest Coast*, 1857



James Swan with his Haida collaborator Johnny Kit Elswa in Victoria, 1883

James Cook's crew exchanges items with the Mowachaht at Friendly Cove, 1778



### The Lingua Franca

Hundreds of Indians of the Comox and Cowichan tribes work on steamers, in saw mills and factories; their language is Chinook, originally pure language of the Chinook Indian, today so mixed with Spanish, French, and English words that Europeans can learn it easily. In British Columbia Chinook is what the *lingua franca* is in the Levant. To the traveller in regions as far north as the Aleutian, it may be more useful than all modern languages combined.

Ernest von Hesse-Wartegg, "A Visit to the Anglo Saxon Antipodes from Canada and Newfoundland, 1889," ca. 1887

barter, sex, or love – was consummated in a language whose very construction guaranteed misunderstandings.<sup>11</sup> These misunderstandings became the basis for subsequent conventions and relationships. When English, which was taught to Aboriginal Peoples in schools, eclipsed Chinook as the language of intercultural exchange, the ambiguities and misunderstandings were already well entrenched in aboriginal/non-aboriginal relations. This book is all about makúk and how those misunderstandings still shape relations today.

# Credits

NOTE: Illustrations are indicated by an open bullet (○) and quotations by a closed bullet (●).

ABBREVIATIONS: BCA (British Columbia Archives), CMC (Canadian Museum of Civilization), CVA (City of Vancouver Archives), DIAR (Department of Indian Affairs Annual Reports), LAC (Library and Archives Canada); RBCM (Royal British Columbia Museum), VPL (Vancouver Public Library).

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- James Cook, *The Voyage of the Resolution and Discovery, 1776-1780*, ed. J.C. Beaglehole (Cambridge: Hakluyt Society, 1967), 1: 307. See also James King's account of hearing the word before they ventured ashore in the same volume, p. 1394.
- Captain James Cook. From James Cook, *A voyage to the Pacific Ocean. Undertaken by the command of His Majesty, for making discoveries in the Northern hemisphere, to determine the position and extent of the west side of North America ...* (Dublin: Printed for H. Chamberlaine, et al., 1784), in University of Victoria, Special Collections.
- Maquinna, Chief of the Mowachaht. From John Meares, *Voyages de la Chine à la côte nord-ouest d'Amérique, faits dans les années 1788 et 1789; précédés de la relation d'un autre voyage exécuté en 1786 sur le vaisseau le Nootka ...* (Paris: F. Buisson, An 3<sup>e</sup> de la République [1794 or 5]), in University of Victoria, Special Collections.

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- William Fraser Tolmie, *The Journals of William Fraser Tolmie: Physician and Fur Trader* (Vancouver: Mitchell, 1963), 210.
- Harry Guillod, *Chinook Dictionary*, BCA, microfilm 225A(3), n.d. [1862-88].
- Harry Guillod, ca. 1880. BCA, A-02187.

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- W.S. Phillips, *The Chinook Book* (Seattle: W.S. Phillips, 1913), 9.
- James Swan, *The Northwest Coast: Or, Three Years' Residence in Washington Territory* (New York: Harpers, 1857; reprinted Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1972), 319.
- James Swan and Johnny Kit Elswa, 1883. University of Washington Libraries Special Collections, NA1412.

## PAGE XII

- James Cook's crew and Mowachaht at Friendly Cove, 1778. Engraving after a painting by John Webber. Reproduced from James Cook, *A voyage to the Pacific Ocean. Undertaken by the command of His Majesty, for making discoveries in the Northern hemisphere, to determine the position and extent of the west side of North America ...* (Dublin: Printed for H. Chamberlaine, et al., 1784), in University of Victoria, Special Collections.
- Ernst von Hesse-Wartegg, "A Visit to the Anglo-Saxon Antipodes (Chapter 18 of *Curiosa aus der Neuen Welt*, 1893)," trans. John Maass, *BC Studies* 50 (1981): 36.

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- John Morton. Painting by G.H. Southwell, CVA, AO4872.