

Dating Velar Palatalization in Carrier*

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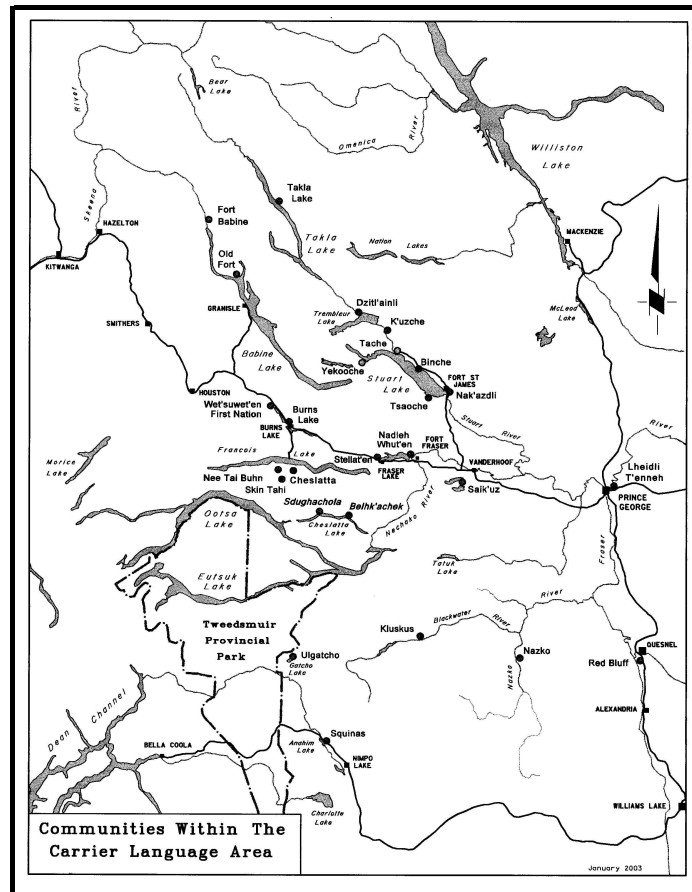
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1. Introduction

Proto-Athabaskan is reconstructed as having had labial, alveolar, retroflex, palatal, velar, and uvular stops (Krauss and Golla 1981). In many of the daughter languages, the velars palatalized and the uvulars became velar. In some cases other points of articulation fronted as well. Of the Central British Columbia group, Chilcotin and the Witsuwit'en dialect of Babine-Witsuwit'en preserve the original uvular and velar stops, while Babine and Carrier have palatalized the velars (Story 1984). Carrier has also shifted the uvulars forward into the velar position. Carrier also shifted the alveolars forward to dental position and shifted both the retroflexes and the original palatals forward to alveolar position.

Although such frontings are widespread in Athabaskan, the details differ from language to language, and the frontings evidently took place on multiple occasions at different times. In the case of Carrier, the evidence is that the fronting of the alveolars to dental position, and the fronting of the retroflexes and palatals to alveolar position, had already taken place by the time of the first attestation of the language in 1793. However, I will show here that the velars did not palatalize until after 1793. Nonetheless, the velars had palatalized by 1819.

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2. The Terminus Ante Quem

The earliest relevant source¹ is Harmon (1820), the journal of Daniel Harmon, an employee of the Northwest Company, who lived in Carrier territory from 1809 to 1819, spending his time both at Fort Saint James and Fort Fraser. Harmon's journal contains 300 some Carrier words. In all cases, the velars are already palatalized. Examples include the following: (In each case, the headword is the form as given by Harmon. This is followed by the modern equivalent.)

tuch-in “wood”

datʃʌn

o-ca-chin “legs”

ʔʌketʃʌn, indefinitely possessed form of -ketʃʌn.

¹ Simon Fraser's journal (Fraser 1809) contain so little linguistic material that there are no relevant forms,

e-chi “grandchild”

ʔʌtfai, indefinitely possessed form of -tfai.

el-chon “pregnant”

ʌltʃan “she is pregnant”

All subsequent sources (A. Anderson apud Hale 1846, Dawson and Tolmie 1884, and the voluminous work of Father Adrien-Gabriel Morice, who began his study of Carrier in 1884 (Morice 1932)) show the proto-Athabaskan velars as palatals.

3. The Terminus Post Quem

Two pieces of evidence may be adduced for the *terminus post quem*. MacKenzie (1801) contains a list of words recorded on June 22, 1793 near what is now Alexandria reserve, along the Fraser River between Quesnel and Williams Lake during the visit of a group of local Indians to his camp. The dialect is therefore most likely that of the Eastern Blackwater, spoken by what are now the Nazko and Red Bluff bands. He gives <dekin> for “wood”, which is modern [dʌtfʌn], and <kin> for “leg”, modern [(ke)tfʌn]. The two forms are not truly independent evidence since both contain the same stem. These forms indicate that in 1793 Velar Palatalization had not yet taken place in the Eastern Blackwater. Unfortunately, for this dialect the *terminus ante quem* cannot be set until much later because it is not attested again until much later.² A second argument, however, provides us with a *terminus post quem* for the Stuart/Trembleur Lake dialect.

The plant *Ledum groenlandicum* “Labrador Tea” is indigenous to Carrier territory. The native Carrier name is /ʔʌyakʷʌʌʔa/. In the Stuart/Trembleur Lake dialect, however, this term has been replaced by the term /ʌdi mʌsdʒek/, a French/Cree hybrid meaning “muskeg tea”. Here /ʌdi/ is from French *le thé* “tea” and /mʌsdʒek/ is from Cree [maskeek]/[maskiik] “muskeg, swamp”.³ Labrador Tea is known in Cree by a similar compound. Watkins (1865; 291a,162a) gives the plural form /maskeekopakwa/, Lacombe(1874;443a) also gives the singular /maskeekopak/. Leighton (1985;122) gives /maskiikopakwa/ for the Woods Cree of Saskatchewan.

On the basis of this form alone, we might suppose that it entered Carrier with the /dʒ/ already a palatal affricate. It might have been borrowed already palatalized from an Eastern Cree variety and brought across the continent by the fur traders, or, as suggested by Ives Goddard (p.c. 2000) it might have been palatalized in Michif, from which it was borrowed into Carrier. However, there is reason to believe that /mʌsdʒek/ had a velar stop, not a palatal affricate, when it entered Carrier.

The crucial fact is that in Witsuwitʼen, the related Athabaskan language spoken to the west of Carrier, the same plant is called [ʌdi mʌsgik] (*lidī misgik* in the practical orthography). Note the presence of a velar stop.

² The next attestation is in Dawson and Tolmie (1884), if this is the dialect that they recorded. From their description, it is unclear whether they recorded the Eastern Blackwater dialect or the Lheidli (Prince George) dialect. The next documentation for this dialect is from the 1970s.

³ According to H. C. Wolfart (p.c. 2002), the vowel of the second syllable is [ee] in most varieties of Plains Cree, but is often phonetically [ii] in the dialects of northwestern Saskatchewan and northeastern Alberta, which do not distinguish /ee/ from /ii/.

The fact that Witsuwit'en has a velar indicates that the Cree word had a velar when it was borrowed into Witsuwit'en. According to Sharon Hargus (p.c. 2002), palato-alveolar affricates do not become velar when borrowed into Witsuwit'en. She provides the following examples:

Witsuwit'en	English	English phonetic
mac _{AS}	matches	[mætʃəz]
cajman	Chinaman	[tʃajnmən]
dzuni	Johnny	[dʒani]
ʔendz _{AN}	engine	[ʔɛndʒən]

It appears that voiceless/aspirated palato-alveolar affricates become unaspirated palatal stops, while voiced/unaspirated palato-alveolar affricates become unaspirated alveolar affricates. If “muskeg” had contained a palatal affricate when it entered Witsuwit'en, the expected outcome would be *[m_{AS}dʒik].

In all probability, the term reached the Witsuwit'en from the East, via Carrier territory, as European contact in this area came from the East. Mackenzie's party, and those that followed it in the next few decades, crossed the Rockies into Sekani territory from which they entered Carrier territory (MacKenzie 1801, Sedgwick 2002). The first permanent European settlement was Fort McLeod in Sekani territory, constructed by the Northwest Company at McLeod Lake in 1805. This was followed by Fort Saint James and Fort Fraser in 1806, and Fort George at Prince George in 1807, all in Carrier territory. Fort Kilmaurs, at the north end of Babine Lake, was not built until 1822, and Fort Conolly at Bear Lake at the headwaters of the Skeena River, on the border between Gitksan and Sekani, was not built until 1826. No establishment was constructed in this period in Witsuwit'en territory.

The Witsuwit'en form demonstrates that the Cree word entered the region with a velar stop. The fact that it is now a palatal affricate in Carrier must therefore be attributed to sound change internal to Carrier. Since this loan can only have entered Carrier after European contact, palatalization must have taken place after contact.

A possible alternative, raised by Ives Goddard (p.c. 2004), is that the form entered Carrier with a palatal, was borrowed with a palatal into Witsuwit'en, and was then changed to a velar within Witsuwit'en due to the consciousness on the part of Witsuwit'en speakers of the correspondances between their language and Carrier. This possibility is ruled out by the Fort Ware Sekani form, which is /másgét/ or /másgék/ with a velar in both variants (Sharon Hargus, p.c. 2002). Sekani has both palatal affricates and velars (Hargus 1988), so there is no motivation to borrow palatal affricates as velars. According to Hargus (p.c. 2004) palatal affricates are not borrowed into Sekani as velars. Since the Sekani came into contact with Europeans first, it is very unlikely that they would have borrowed the term from Carrier. The presence of a velar in the Sekani form therefore seems to confirm that it entered the region with a velar.

Furthermore, it is not particularly likely that the Witsuwit'en would have borrowed this term from Carrier in the first place. Labrador Tea probably had a Witsuwit'en name since it is indigenous to the area. To my knowledge the native Witsuwit'en name does not survive, but the native word is still in use in most dialects of Carrier. It is only in the Stuart/Trembleur Lake dialect of Carrier that /ɫdi m_{AS}dʒék/ has replaced the native term, and even here, some older speakers whom I asked about it recognized it as the older term. Among the Carrier the loan seems to have been adopted only in the area in which there was particularly intense

early contact with Europeans. Since the Witsuwit'en regard themselves as more prestigious than the Carrier, it seems unlikely that they would have borrowed from Carrier a new term for a plant with which they were already quite familiar and for which they already had a name. It is more likely that the loan entered Witsuwit'en only as a result of direct contact with Hudson's Bay Company people.

4. Conclusion

That the palatalization of velars in Carrier had taken place by 1819 is shown by the forms in Daniel Harmon's journal as well as all subsequent data. That the palatalization did not take place until after European contact in 1793 is shown by two pieces of data. First, the two relevant forms recorded by Alexander Mackenzie from an Eastern Blackwater dialect in 1793 still have velars. Second, the French/Cree loanword for "Labrador Tea" has a palatal in Stuart Lake Carrier. Since the Witsuwit'en and Sekani forms of this loan demonstrate that it had a velar when it entered the region, the form must have been borrowed into Carrier with a velar and then undergone palatalization. Consequently, palatalization must have taken place after European contact, that is, subsequent to 1793.

These dates are of interest for two reasons. First, it is remarkable that such a sound change should have taken place within a period of less than 30 years, a single generation. Second, it confirms what we already knew, that the palatalization of the velars and fronting of the uvulars took place independently in multiple branches of the Athabaskan family.

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