

The First Record of the Carrier Language

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The first record of the Carrier language is found in the journal of Alexander MacKenzie (MacKenzie 1801/1962), the leader of the party of Northwest Company men who first crossed the continent, reaching the Pacific at Bella Coola. Most of the Carrier material recorded by MacKenzie takes the form of a vocabulary (p. 164) collected on June 22nd, 1793 while camped near what is now Alexandria reserve. These words are presumably in an Eastern Blackwater dialect, corresponding to those of the current Nazko and Red Bluff bands.

Here is MacKenzie's Carrier vocabulary. The headwords are the words as he wrote them. These are followed by his gloss, the modern form in IPA, if discernible, and in some cases comments.

nah

“eye” /-na/

thigah

“hair” /-tʃiɣa/

gough

“teeth” /-ɣu/

nenzeh

“nose” /-nintsis/

thie

“head” /-tʃi/

dekin

“wood” /dʌtʃʌn/

lah

“hand” /-la/

kin

“leg” /-ketʃʌn/. The modern form consists of /ke/ “foot” plus /tʃʌn/ “stick”. Either MacKenzie missed the first syllable, or in this dialect of Carrier at this time “stick” was used uncompounded for “leg”.

thoula

“tongue” /-tʃsula/

zach

“ear” /-dzoh/. MacKenzie’s transcription probably reflects /dzʌx/, which is the expected earlier form of /dzoh/.

dinay

“man” /dʌne/

chiquoi

“woman” Perhaps /ts’eku/. If this identification is correct, and if MacKenzie is correct in glossing the form as “woman” rather than “women”, it shows that the distinction between singular and plural nouns had already been lost in 1793. Most dialects of Carrier have distinct singular and plural forms only for nouns denoting people and dogs. In the Blackwater dialects, however, even this distinction has been lost, and the word that means both “woman” and “women” is /ts’eku/. In the other dialects “woman” is /ts’eke/, of which /ts’eku/ is the irregular plural. On the other hand, it is conceivable that this dialect still had the distinction between singular /ts’eke/ and plural /ts’eku/ when MacKenzie recorded it, and that MacKenzie’s <chiquoi> represents /ts’ekue/, a blend formed when a Carrier speaker started off with the plural form, then switched to the singular.

zah

“beaver” /tʃsa/

yezey

“elk” /yezih/

sleing

“dog” /hi/. MacKenzie’s transcription presumably reflects /hĩ/. One might take the initial <sl> literally as /sl/, which occurs in the first person singular possessive form, but in this case we would expect a final /k/ since in all dialects the possessed stem is /lik/ or /lak/. Presumably MacKenzie would have heard the final /k/ of a form like [slĩk], but it is not out of the question that this form reflects the 1s possessed form and that MacKenzie failed to hear the final /k/.

thidnu

“ground-hog”. Unrecognizable. “ground-hog” is /dʌtni/ today.

thlisitoh

“iron” /ɬʌztih/ This word is recognizable from the Stuart/Trembleur Lake dialect, where it means “iron, steel, metal, knife” but is no longer in use in Southern dialects, including the Blackwater group, where the equivalent term is /tes/.

coun

“fire” /kwʌn/

tou

“water” /tu/

zeh

“stone” /tse/

nettuny

“bow” Perhaps /neɬɬɲ/ “our bows”. This is currently /neɬti/ and means “our rifles”, but there is other evidence for the sound change involved (Story 1984) as well as the shift in meaning.

igah

“arrow”. Probably the verbless sentence /ʔi k'a/ “it” followed by “arrow” (which generally means “rifle cartridge” today).

nesi

“yes”. Unrecognizable. “yes” is /a/ at present.

thoughoud

“plains” Perhaps /tl'ok'ɬt/.

andezei

“come here”. Unclear. “come here” is /ʔanih/ at present. MacKenzie’s <andezei> may consist of /ʔanih/ followed by something else, but the <d> remains to be accounted for.

In addition to this vocabulary, MacKenzie’s journal contains several names of peoples and places. Since MacKenzie reports no contact with Carrier speakers prior to entering the region occupied by Blackwater speakers, these all evidently reflect the Blackwater dialect group.

Nagailer (p. 164), **Nagailas (pl.)** (p. 186)

“Carrier person”. These probably reflect /nɬkeɬ-a/, with the /s/ of the second form the English plural suffix. The modern term is /dakeɬ/, which means “those who go in boats on top of the water”. As Goddard (1981:430) has suggested, the form recorded by MacKenzie is probably not exactly the same word but contains the prefix /n/ “around, in a loop” in place of /da/ “on top”, together with the verb stem /keɬ/ “go by boat”. The final /a/ recorded by MacKenzie is probably the human singular relativizing suffix,

/ʌn/ in the Stuart/Trembleur Lake dialect familiar from the literature, but /a/ in Southern Carrier. The modern term is a zero-nominalization. The use of a plain <l> for /ɬ/ is notable, since Europeans generally did not know what to make of [ɬ] but were aware that it was distinct from [l] and indicated the distinction in some manner. Unfortunately, we do not have other examples of MacKenzie’s transcription on the basis of which to judge, but in the much more extensive wordlist recorded by Daniel Harmon (Harmon 1820), with the Northwest Company in Carrier country from 1809-1819, although /ɬ/ in the coda is written in various ways and not always distinguished from /l/, /ɬ/ in the onset is almost invariably written <cl>. It is possible that MacKenzie actually heard [l], voiced from /ɬ/ intervocally.

Atnah (p. 164)

/ʔʌtna/. Mackenzie uses this word in reference to Shuswap Indians. It is actually a word of more general usage, referring to any non-Athabaskan Indian.

Anah-yoe Tesse (p. 207)

Mackenzie uses this in reference to a river, either the Bella Coola River or one of its tributaries. The first word may be a garbled version of /ʔʌtnakoh/, the Carrier name for the Bella Coola River.

Sloua-cuss-Dinai (p.198)

“Kluskus people”. /ɬuskʰʌztʰene/ or /ɬuskʰʌzdʌne/. If the former, this consists of /ɬuskʰʌz/ “Kluskus Village” /tʰen/ “inhabitant” and the human plural /ne/. If the latter, it consists of /ɬuskʰʌz/ plus /dʌne/ “person”.

Nascud Denee (p. 186)

/nazkotʰene/ or /nazkodʌne/. The first component is /nazko/ “Nazko Village”. The remainder is either /tʰen/ “inhabitant” and the human plural /ne/ or /dʌne/ “person”.

Although MacKenzie was not able to transcribe very accurately, due to his lack of familiarity with the language, training in phonetics, and a standard phonetic notation, most of the words he recorded are recognizable. Indeed, they reveal a few details of the history of the language:

- a. His spelling of *tree* and *leg* shows that the Proto-Athabaskan velars had not yet become palatal affricates, as they soon thereafter did.
- b. His spelling of *dog* indicates that Carrier still had nasalized vowels. On the basis of comparison with the other Athabaskan languages Carrier must at some point in the past have had nasalized vowels, but it no longer does, and even records from the late nineteenth century don’t show it.
- c. The fact that MacKenzie wrote <th> where older speakers of the current language have /ts/, as in “hair”, “head”, and “tongue” (but not, for some reason, “stone”), suggests that he heard an interdental affricate [tʰ]. Nowadays, older speakers contrast apico-alveolars with lamino-dentals. The distinction has been lost by younger speakers, who have merged the lamino-dentals with the apico-alveolars. The lamino-dentals were very likely once interdental, as their cognates are in some related languages.

One surprising feature of MacKenzie’s word list is that it gives the bare stems of the body parts: “eye”, “hair”, “teeth”, “nose”, “head”, “hand”, “leg”, “tongue”, “ear”. In Carrier as in the other Athabaskan languages, body parts, as well as kinship terms and a few other nouns, are inalienably possessed. The stems recorded by MacKenzie therefore never occur in isolation. MacKenzie never mentions engaging in any sort of morphological analysis, nor is there any evidence that he had any interest in linguistics, but either he extracted the stems or one of his Carrier informants had performed the same analysis on his own language and gave MacKenzie bare stems. Someone did a surprising bit of morphological analysis back in 1793.

References

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