

The Names of the First Nations Languages of British Columbia*

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First Nations languages are referred to by an often puzzling variety of names. Many people are confused by the fact that apparently authoritative sources differ in the names they use. This paper provides details on the names of the languages of British Columbia and their origin, explains the factors underlying variation in nomenclature, debunks some of the mythology that has arisen, and makes suggestions for appropriate usage.

1. Introduction

First Nations languages are referred to by an often puzzling variety of names. Many people are confused by the fact that apparently authoritative sources differ in the names they use. Furthermore, we increasingly read and hear claims that some names are wrong and that other names are to be preferred. Statements about the appropriateness of names are generally cast in terms of a simple dichotomy: correct vs. incorrect. The following statement by the UBC Museum of Anthropology (2002) reflects what appears to be a widely held view:¹

Peoples of the First Nations have always recognized themselves by names in their own language. These names denote their identities: village, house, clan or tribe. Following European contact 200 years ago, the majority of tribal groups in British Columbia were given arbitrary English names or identified under generic terms created by early explorers and ethnographers. The inevitable mis-identifications have created serious concerns for First Nations, as well as confusion in much of the published texts.

In fact, the situation is considerably more complex, and, as we shall see, the above statements are for the most part incorrect. My purpose here is to set out the relevant facts for each of the First Nations languages of British Columbia, review the various factors that bring about the variety of names for First Nations languages, debunk some of the mythology that has arisen, and make suggestions for appropriate usage.

A note on notation is in order. Material within angle brackets, e.g. <tough> is orthographic; that is, it shows how an utterance is written. Material in square brackets, e.g. [t^hʌf] is in phonetic notation; it indicates in some detail how the utterance is pronounced. Material between slashes, e.g. /tʌf/, is in phonemic notation; that is, it shows how the utterance is pronounced, but takes note only of unpredictable aspects of the pronunciation. In the example at hand, the phonetic and phonemic representations differ in the marking of aspiration on the initial /t/ by means of the superscript <h>.

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1 Written statements on this topic are rare. The idea that the commonly used names for First Nations languages and peoples are erroneous and perhaps offensive is widespread but seems to be passed largely by word of mouth. Another published source of this idea, one in which no explanation is given, is Aboriginal Education Branch, Ministry of Education (2002). This map, available both on the web and in print form, is accompanied by a chart, adapted from Coull (1996), in which one column gives preferred names for First Nations peoples; another is headed "Have Been Called".

Since /t/ is always aspirated at the beginning of a stressed syllable in English, this detail of pronunciation is not recorded in the phonemic representation. Material in phonetic or phonemic notation is written in the International Phonetic Alphabet, the international standard used by linguists (International Phonetic Association 1999).

2. The Names of the First Nations Languages of British Columbia

I give here the names that one generally encounters and explain their origin and relationships.² The name used as headword is the name most common in English usage. First Nations names are given both in the practical spelling, where one exists, and in the International Phonetic Alphabet. The discussion proceeds in geographical order, roughly speaking, from North to South and from the Coast to the Rockies, until we reach the southern portion of the province, where we move westward again from the Kootenay to Vancouver Island.

2.1. Tlingit

The indigenous name for Tlingit is [ʔɪŋkít] /ʔɪnkít/, for which the spellings are <Lingít> and <ɛngít> in the two practical writing systems in current use. Tlingit English speakers say /'kɪŋkít/, reflecting the pronunciation in Chinook Jargon. (James Crippen, p.c. 2008-05-15)

2.2. Tagish

Tagish people refer to themselves as /ta:gizi dene/ “Tagish people”. The usual English name is a loan from Inland Tlingit /ta:giʃ/, ultimately from Tagish /ta:gizi/, a place name meaning “it (spring ice) is breaking up” (Goddard 1981b:490). This language is very nearly extinct. Even before European influence became strong, Tagish people had assimilated to a considerable extent to the Tlingit and had largely replaced their own language with Tlingit. The language is therefore sometimes confused with Tlingit.

2.3. Tahltan

The indigenous name is /ta:ʔta:n/, of which the usual English name is an adaptation. /ta:ʔta:n/ is a loan from Tlingit in which it names a low flat at the mouth of the Tahltan River that served as an important trading ground (Goddard 1981c:465).

2.4. Kaska

The indigenous name for the language is /dene dzage/ “the people's language”, but the term /dene/ “people” is not really specific to Kaska. (Patrick Moore, p.c. November 2002). The name Kaska is an English adaptation of the Kaska name for McDame Creek. The same word was also borrowed as Cassiar (Goddard 1981a:449).

2 For other names, such as those found in older documents, the best source is the *Handbook of North American Indians*, published by the Smithsonian Institution. The languages of British Columbia are covered by Vol. 6. *Subarctic*, Vol. 7. *Northwest Coast*, and Vol. 12. *Plateau*, respectively Helm (1981), Suttles (1990b), and Walker (1998). Near the end of the chapter devoted to each group is a section entitled “Synonymy”, which discusses the various names found in the literature.

2.5. Slave

There is no true indigenous name for the Slave language or people. The term /dene/ is sometimes used, but this really means “people” in general. Some Slave speakers have in recent times adopted the term /deneḏa/ "true people" as a self-designation, but this is by no means universally used. The usual English term *Slave* is a translation of Cree /awahka:n/ “captive, slave”. In spite of its originally pejorative sense, it is in general use by Slave people when speaking English. (Asch and Goddard 1981).

2.6. Haida

The indigenous name for the Haida people, meaning "the people", is /hàt'e:/ in the Northern (Masset) dialect, /xa:jdəGa:j/ in the Southern (Skidegate) dialect. The English name is an anglicization of the Northern dialect form. (Goddard 1990:258).

2.7. Nisga'a

The indigenous term for the Nisga'a people is /nisqaʔa/, the etymology of which is uncertain (Halpin and Seguin 1990:282). <Nisga'a> is the practical spelling of this term currently in use by Nisga'a people (Tarpent 1986). An earlier practical spelling is <Nisgha>. One occasionally sees other variants, such as <Nishka> and <Niska>. In English the people have also been referred to as the *Nass* and the language as the *Nass* language.

2.8. Tsetsaut

Very little is known of this extinct language once spoken in the Portland Canal area. The Tsetaut's name for themselves was recorded as <Wetalh>, probably pronounced /wətaɬ/ (Emmons 1911:21-23). Tsetsaut is a rendering of /ts'əts'au/, a term meaning "those of the interior" used by the Gitksan and Nisga'a to refer to the Athabaskan-speaking peoples to the north and northeast of them, including not only the Tsetsaut but some Tahltan and Sekani. (Boas 1895:555)

2.9. Gitksan

The indigenous name for this language varies somewhat with dialect. The usual form /gitksan/, meaning “people of the Skeena River” (Hindle and Rigsby 1973:2) is the pronunciation used in the Hazelton area; in the Eastern villages it is /gitxsan/; in the Western villages it is /gitxsen/ (Rigsby 1986). Since Nisga'a and Gitksan are closely related they have often been treated as dialects of the same language, denoted *Nass-Gitksan*.

2.10. Sekani

Sekani people call themselves /tsek'ehne/ or /tθek'ehne/ depending on dialect, both meaning "people on the rocks" (Denniston and Goddard 1981:440). The usual English term is an anglicization of this.

2.11. Beaver

Most Beaver people call themselves /dʌneza/ "the real people", usually spelled <Dane-zaa>. Some Beaver people in Northern Alberta prefer <Tsaaty'ē>. (Dagmar Jung, p.c. 2007-10-08) The term Beaver is the English translation of terms used for them by neighbouring groups, e.g. Carrier /tsat'en/ and Northern Plains Cree /amiskiwiyiniw/ (David H. Pentland apud Gillespie and Goddard 1981: 359).

2.12. **Saulteaux**

The indigenous term for the language of the British Columbia Saulteaux is unknown. The English term Saulteaux is a loan from French meaning “people of the rapids”, based on *sault* “rapids”. The French is a translation of the Old Ojibwe term /pa:wittikwiriniwak/ "people of the rapids". The term originally referred to the Ojibwe who lived at the rapids at Sault Ste. Marie. It was later extended to all speakers of the Westernmost dialect of Ojibwe (Goddard 1978:769).

2.13. **Cree**

The indigenous term for the Plains Cree language is /ne:hiyawewin/. (Wolfart and Ahenakew 1998). The English name Cree is borrowed from the French *Cri*, a contraction of *Kiristineaux*, the French rendering of the name of a Cree-speaking group in the James Bay area.

2.14. **Coast Tsimshian**

Coast Tsimshian people call their own language /smʔálkāχ/ "the real language". <Sm'algax> is the practical spelling now in use. The term Tsimshian is an anglicization of /ts'imsjæn/ “at the entrance of the Skeena River”, the term used by the Coast Tsimshian and Southern Tsimshian to refer to themselves (Halpin and Seguin 1990).

2.15. **South Tsimshian**

The indigenous name of the language, also known as Klemtu, is /skĩː x s/ (John Dunn apud Halpin and Seguin 1990:282). As this language is nearly extinct no practical spelling has developed.

2.16. **Haisla**

The indigenous name is /χạ̀tisəla/ “(those) living at the river mouth, (those) living downriver” (Hamori-Torok 1990:311). The usual English name is an anglicization of the indigenous name. Because the name Kwakiutl has sometimes been extended to include all three of the North Wakashan languages (Kwakw'ala, Haisla, and Heiltsuk/Oowekyala), the Haisla and their language have sometimes been referred to as the Northern Kwakiutl.

2.17. **Babine-Witsuwit'en**

This language consists of two dialects, Babine and Witsuwit'en. There is no indigenous term for the language as a whole. /witsuwit'en/ is the indigenous term for the Western dialect. It is variously spelled <Witsuwit'en>, <Wetsuwet'en>, <Wit'suwit'en>, and <Wet'suwet'en>. The indigenous term for the Eastern dialect is /nedut'en/, variously spelled <Nedut'en>, <Nat'oot'en>, and <Ned'u'ten>. This dialect is usually known in English as Babine, the French term meaning "big-lipped" applied to its speakers by the fur traders because the women wore labrets. A few people consider this term offensive, but this has not been a major issue and the Lake Babine Nation continues to use the term itself in its official name. The term Bulkley Valley/Lakes District Language has been proposed in an attempt to adopt a purely geographic description but has not caught on and is no longer being promoted (Sharon Hargus, p.c., 2002).

2.18. **Carrier**

Dakelh /dakeh/ is the name that Carrier people use for themselves and also for their language. The name "Carrier" is the English translation of the Sekani name for the Carrier. The Northwest Company men who first made contact with Carrier people came from across the Rockies and passed through Sekani territory before reaching Carrier territory. Since they learned about Carrier people from the Sekani, they used the Sekani name translated into their own language. In French, Carrier people are referred to as les Porteurs, and the language as la langue des Porteurs. In older literature, and occasionally still today, one sees Taculli, as well as a number of variant spellings, as a name for both the people and the language. This is a garbled version of Dakelh. The term Carrier has been used both as the name for Carrier in the narrow sense and for Carrier together with Babine-Witsuwit'en, which is sometimes called Northern Carrier. Preferred linguistic usage is now to restrict Carrier to Carrier in the narrow sense.

2.19. Heiltsuk

This language is spoken by three groups of people: the Bella Bella (/pálbálá/), the Haihais (/χίχίς/), and the Oweekeno /ʔuwik'inuχʷ/. Heiltsuk, an anglicization of /hiłʒaq/, refers to the Bella Bella and Haihai people and their language. The language of the Oweekeno is called /ʔuwk'ala/ (Hilton 1990:321). Heiltsuk and Owekyala are dialects of a language that has no traditional name.

2.20. Nuxalk

No traditional name for all Nuxalk people or the language as a whole is known. The name currently used by the Nuxalk Nation and for the language is an anglicization of the word /nuχalk/ "Bella Coola Valley". Although originally restricted to the people of the Bella Coola Valley, the derivative term /nuχalkmx/ "people of the Bella Coola Valley" has been extended to all Nuxalk people since the consolidation of the Nuxalk people at Bella Coola village in the 1920s. The usual English name for this language, Bella Coola, is an anglicization of /bálxəl/, the Heiltsuk name for the Nuxalk (Kennedy and Bouchard 1990a:338).

2.21. Chilcotin

Chilcotin people refer to themselves as /tsilqot'in/ "people of the young man's river", for which the practical spelling is <Tsilhqot'in>. The same term is used for the language. The usual English name Chilcotin is an anglicization of the indigenous name.

2.22. Shuswap

Shuswap people call themselves <secwépmec> /ʃəxʷəpməx/ and their language /ʃəxʷəpməxtʃin/ (Kuipers 1983). The practical spelling is: <Secwepmectsin>. The English term Shuswap is an anglicization of /Secwépmec/. (That the English terms begin with [ʃ] but the Shuswap practical spelling uses <s> is due to the fact that in Shuswap [s] and [ʃ] do not contrast, with some speakers using one, some the other, in the same word.)

2.23. Kootenay

Kootenay people in Canada use the term /ktunaxa/ in reference to all Kootenay people. The origin of this term is unknown. The Kootenay in Montana use the term /ksanka/ "standing arrow" for themselves

and for other Kootenay people. (Brunton 1998:236). The origin of the usual English name <Kootenay>, also spelled <Kootenai> (usual in the United States) and <Kutenai>, is uncertain. It may be an anglicization of /ktunaxa/. Another possibility, suggested by Turney-High (1941:11), is that it is based on the Blackfoot name for the Kootenay /kutuniua/ (Uhlenbeck and van Gulik 1934). The Blackfoot name may itself be based on /ktunaxa/.

2.24. Okanagan

The indigenous name is /nsilxcín/. This language is also known as Colville in the United States. The hyphenated name Colville-Okanagan is therefore sometimes used. The term Okanagan is an anglicization of /uk^wnaqínx/, which designates all of the people living in the drainage of the Okanagan River (Kennedy and Bouchard 1998:251). It is therefore a cover term for most but not all speakers of this language.

2.25. Thompson

The indigenous name of the people is /n̄t̄eʔkepmx/. The practical spelling is <Nlaka'pamux> (Czaykowska-Higgins and Kinkade 1998). The usual English term refers to the Thompson River, a prominent feature of their territory. Simon Fraser gave the river its English name in honour of the explorer David Thompson.

2.26. Nicola

So little is known of this extinct language that we do not know what the Nicola called themselves or their language (Kinkade 1998). The term in general use is the name of a portion of their former territory.

2.27. Lilloet

The indigenous term is /stl'átl'imx̄ts/ [stl'étl'əm̄x̄ts], for which the practical spelling is <St'at'imcets>.³ The usual English name Lilloet is based on /lil'wat/, the indigenous name for Mount Currie. (van Eijk 1997).

2.28. Halkomelem

This language consists of three dialects: (a) Upriver, known to its speakers as /halq'eméylem/, spoken by Stó:lo people living upriver from Sumas; (b) Downriver, known to its speakers as /hun'qumi'num'/, spoken downriver from Matsqui, including Musqueam, Katzie, and Tsawwassen; and (c) Island, known to its speakers as /hul'q'umín'um/, spoken by bands including the Nanoose, Nanaimo, Chemainus, Cowichan, and Malahat. The English term is an anglicization of a compromise among the terms used in the three dialects. (Suttles 1990a, Donna Gerds, p.c. 2002).

2.29. Squamish

The indigenous name of the language is /sq^wχ^wúʔməʃ/, for which the practical spelling used in the community is <Sk̄w̄x̄wúʔmesh>. The English name is an anglicization of the indigenous name. (Suttles 1990a:473).

3 Since the language does not have a glottalized /t/, /tʰ/ is written <t'> rather than <tʰ>.

2.30. Comox/Sliamon

This language has two dialects, each of which has an indigenous name. The indigenous name for Comox is /sáʔuʔtxʷ/ in Mainland Comox, /θáʔuʔtxʷ/ in Island Comox. Comox is an anglicization of /q'úmuχʷs/, the Kwakw'ala name for the place (Kennedy and Bouchard 1990b). The indigenous name for Sliamon is /ʔayʔadʒúθəm/ (Czaykowska-Higgins and Kinkade 1998:64). Sliamon is from Comox /ʔáʔamin/ (Kennedy and Bouchard 1990b:451). The name Comox/Sliamon is the only available name for the language as a whole as it has no traditional name.

2.31. Northern Straits Salish

This is the language spoken by the Ts'ooke (Sooke), Semiahmoo, Songish, Lummi, Saanich and Samish nations. It has no generally accepted traditional name, though some speakers use the term /ləkʷəjínəŋ/ (Suttles 1990a:474). Since its speakers do not form a political unit, it cannot be given a name on that basis. The term Northern Straits Salish reflects the recent recognition (Montler 1996, 1999) that Klallam, formerly included in “Straits Salish”, is a distinct language.

2.32. Penlatch

The indigenous name for this language, which became extinct in 1940, is not known. The English name is an anglicization of /pəntl'áʔtʃ/, the name by which the Pentlatch were known to the neighbouring Comox and Sechelt (Kennedy and Bouchard 1990b:451).

2.33. Sechelt

The indigenous name is /ʃáʃíʃáʔəm/. <Shashishalhem> is a practical spelling of this term (Czaykowska-Higgins and Kinkade 1998). The English name Sechelt is an anglicization of /ʃíʃáʔ/, the Comox name for part of the Sechelt peninsula (Kennedy and Bouchard 1990:452).

2.34. Kwakiutl

The indigenous name for the language is /kʷákʷala/, which in the anglicized form <Kwakw'ala> (sometimes <Kwakwala>, without the marking of glottalization) is considered the preferred name for the language. The widely used English name <Kwakiutl> is an adaptation of the word /kʷáguʔʔ/ ([kʷáɡʷuʔʔ]). Although it has often been used as a name for the language, it is actually the name of one of the internal divisions of the people who speak this language. Another term sometimes erroneously used as a name for the language is <Kwakw'aka'wakw>, which actually means “those who speak Kwakw'ala”. (Goddard, Codere, and Suttles 1990).

2.35. Nitinat

The indigenous name is /di:ti:dʔa:ʔtɣ/. This was originally the name of the group around Nitinat Lake. It was later extended to include all Ditidaht-speaking people. (Arima and DeWhirts 1990). The currently favoured English name Ditidaht is an adaptation of the indigenous name. The more widely used English name Nitinat reflects the fact that the indigenous name used to be pronounced /ni:ti:nʔa:ʔtɣ/. After the name was borrowed into English, Ditidaht /n/ changed to /d/ (Kinkade 1985).

2.36. Klallam

Klallam is a Salishan language spoken primarily on the Olympic Peninsula in the United States. In British Columbia, it was spoken in a small area around Becher Bay on the south coast of Vancouver Island and on a few adjacent small islands; the handful of remaining speakers of Klallam all live in the United States. It has often been lumped together with the Northern Straits Language under the name Straits Salish. The indigenous name for the language is /nəx^wstl'əyǰəmúçən/. The name Klallam appears to be an anglicization of the Northern Straits or Halkomelem name /x^wstl'él'əm/ (Suttles 1990a:474).

2.37. Nootka

The indigenous name is /nuʃa:nʔuʃ/ “all along the mountains”, of which <Nuuchahnulth> is an anglicization. This term was created in 1978 by the West Coast Allied Tribes, which on 2 April 1979 changed its name to Nuuchahnulth Tribal Council. Prior to this, there was no indigenous name for the language or its speakers as a whole, only for individual subgroups. The usual English name Nootka refers to one of the areas in which the language is spoken, Nootka Sound and Nootka Island. These place names themselves are not indigenous. The most likely explanation for the name is that Captain Cook misunderstood a Nuuchahnulth person's description of a boat circling about /nu:tkɑ:/ as the name of the place. (Arima and DeWhirts 1990:410)

3. The Origins of the Names of the First Nations Languages of British Columbia

On the basis of the preceding information, we can now address some of the issues raised in section 1:

- Is it the case that First Nations languages were given arbitrary English names?
- Is it the case that First Nations languages have been misidentified?
- Is it the case that there is confusion in the literature?

By and large, First Nations languages have not been given arbitrary English names. Of the commonly used English names for First Nations languages, the great majority turn out to be, in some sense, of First Nations origin. One, Gitksan, is the indigenous name. Another twenty-one, Chilcotin, Coast Tsimshian, Comox-Sliamon, Cree, Haida, Haisla, Halkomelem, Heiltsuk-Oowekyala, Kootenay, Kwakiutl, Lillooet, Nisga'a, Nitinat, Okanagan, Sekani, Shuswap, South Tsimshian, Squamish, Tahltan, Tlingit, and Witsuwit'en are anglicizations of the indigenous name for the language or of the people or a subgroup of the people. Sixty-one percent are therefore directly derived from self-designations. Five names, Bella Coola, Klallam, Pentlatch, Sechelt and Tagish are those used by neighbouring First Nations. Three more, Beaver, Carrier, and Slave, are English translations of terms used by neighbouring First Nations. One, Sauteaux, appears to be the French translation of the indigenous name of one band. One, Kaska, is an anglicization of the indigenous name of a place in Kaska territory. In all, thirty-two names (86 percent) either are, or are based on, First Nations terms.

Only five names are of purely colonial origin: Babine, Nicola, Nootka, Northern Straits Salish, and Thompson. In one of these cases, Nicola, there is no alternative since we do not know what Nicola speakers called themselves or their language. In two other cases, Northern Straits Salish and Nootka, there is no traditional name for the language as a whole. Where the number of dialects is small, as with Comox-Sliamon and Heiltsuk-Oowekyala, a combination of indigenous names is reasonable, but in

these two cases constructing a name by combining the names of the component languages or groups would be excessively cumbersome. Only in the cases of Babine and Thompson were native names available. In sum, it is not in general true that First Nations languages and peoples have been given arbitrary English names

If “misidentification” means that speakers of one language have been identified as speakers of another, this has occurred only in a few cases, all of which involve the failure to differentiate related but distinct languages. One example is the now long-outdated use of the term “Northern Kwakiutl” to encompass Kwakw’ala, Haisla, and Heiltsuk-Owekyala. A second is the use of the term “Carrier” to include both Carrier proper and Babine-Witsuwit’en. A third is the failure to recognize, until recently, that “Straits Salish” included two distinct languages, Klallam and what is now known as “Northern Straits Salish”. Examples such as these have nothing to do with naming practices. Rather, they reflect a knowledge of the languages insufficient to classify them correctly.⁴

A different sort of misidentification is exemplified by the map produced by the Aboriginal Education Branch of the Ministry of Education (Aboriginal Education Branch 2002). On this map, Babine is included in the area marked Dakelh, while Witsuwit’en is marked as a separate language. This is an error since Babine and Witsuwit’en are more closely related to each other than either is to Carrier proper. This map splits Babine-Witsuwit’en into two parts and includes one of them with Carrier.⁵ Here the error is not in the standard terminology but in the ignorance of those making the map of what the terms refer to.

Are the names generally used a source of confusion? There is no reason to believe this to be true. The plethora of names and spellings that appear in nineteenth and early twentieth century sources can indeed be confusing, but order was brought out of this chaos long ago.

I am aware of only one case in which confusion has been caused by the name used by linguists and anthropologists. This is the term “Nahani”, applied to a variety of Athabaskan-speaking groups in Alaska, the Northwest Territories, and British Columbia (Gillespie 1981). In British Columbia it has been applied especially to the Kaska, Tagish, and Tahltan, but also to the Taku River Tlingit and the Mountain Slave. This term is genuinely confusing since one cannot be sure which groups it includes, and from a linguistic point of view, in its broader use, it is non-sensical, since Kaska, Tagish, Tahltan, Mountain Slave, and Taku River Tlingit do not constitute a valid linguistic grouping. However, this term has not been in general use by scholars for several decades; it was already obsolete in 1981 when Gillespie's article was published.⁶

4 A related example is the continuing misidentification in some sources, e.g. Muckle (1998), of the Alexandria band (along the Fraser River between Quesnel and Williams Lake) as Carrier. Alexandria was originally Carrier, but has for some time been Chilcotin. But this is an example not so much of misidentification of a language as of the belated recognition of a shift in population.

5 Since this map is, strictly speaking, intended to be a map of nations, not languages, one might ask whether it better reflects political divisions. It does not. Most Babine speakers belong to the Lake Babine Nation, which is an independent band, while most others belong to the Takla First Nation, a member of the Carrier-Sekani Tribal Council, in which speakers of Carrier predominate. Speakers of Witsuwit’en are divided among a number of bands: Hagwilget, Moricetown, Nee-Tahi-Buhn, Skin-Tayi, and Wets'uwet'en First Nation. The first four are independent; the fifth belongs to the Carrier-Sekani Tribal Council. The division on the map thus does not correspond to any current political division.

6 At the level of finer-grained classification confusing terminology again seems to be rare. The only case of which I am aware is the terminology for Carrier dialect groups, where the terms “Central Carrier” and “Southern Carrier” are used with such variability that one cannot be sure which which dialects are referred to.

In sum, there is little truth in the claim that First Nations languages have been given arbitrary English names, that they have been misidentified, and that the nomenclature has led to confusion. In fact, most language names are anglicizations of the indigenous names, and most of those that are not are far from arbitrary but are in some way based on First Nations terminology. Only five of the thirty-seven language names are of purely colonial origin, and of these in most cases there has been no alternative, for the indigenous name is either unknown or did not exist since the language as a whole had no traditional name. Only one language for which an indigenous name was available, namely Thompson, is generally known by an arbitrary English name.

4. Issues in Naming of First Nations Languages

The names by which First Nations languages are referred to are not merely right or wrong, but vary for many different reasons.

4.1. Level of Classification

It is possible to refer to languages at many levels of classification. We may, for example, refer to the Indo-European language family as a whole, to its Germanic branch, to the Western branch of Germanic, to the Anglo-Frisian branch of West Germanic, or to English. Furthermore, we may refer to large dialect groups within English, such as British English, or to very specific dialects, such as Cockney. All of these are correct ways of referring to English, the appropriateness of which depends on the context. The same is true of First Nations languages. Thus, we may quite correctly say that Musqueam people speak a Salishan language, that they speak a Central Salishan language, that they speak Halkomelem, that they speak Downriver Halkomelem, or that they speak Musqueam.

Depending on the context, therefore, a language name may be used, the name of a dialect or community (which may or may not constitute a distinct dialect), or occasionally, mostly in scholarly publications, the name of a language family or branch thereof. This may be confusing for those unfamiliar with the classification of the languages, but there is nothing intrinsically confusing about it.

Other things being equal, it is the language name that is most appropriate. Finer subdivisions are likely to be unnecessarily detailed, higher levels of classification insufficiently specific. However, First Nations bands and communities often prefer to use more specific terms when referring to their own language, when they want to emphasize their independence and distinctness.

Generally speaking, decisions regarding which linguistic varieties to call a language are linguistic, but political factors sometimes intervene. If the people do not think of each other as forming a single social or political unit, it may be necessary to make a finer distinction. Thus, until fairly recently Nisga'a and Gitksan were treated as a single language called Nass-Gitksan in the linguistic and anthropological literature. The two speech varieties are still quite similar and mutually comprehensible, but they are generally treated as separate languages, and given distinct names, because of the political differences between the the two groups.⁷

⁷ In some situations speakers of what linguists consider to be a dialect object because they consider the term dialect pejorative. For linguists, dialects are varieties of speech that do not differ from each other very much. Every form of speech is a dialect, and everyone speaks a dialect. In common usage, however, a distinction is often made between a standard form of the language and the dialects, that is to say, non-standard forms. And since “non-standard” tends to carry with it the connotation “sub-standard”, many people object to their form of speech being labelled a dialect. However, to my knowledge this issue has not arisen in British Columbia. Indeed, in some cases the sense of unity with

The opposite situation is sometimes found as well. That is, sometimes people who feel a sense of social, political or cultural unity will consider that they speak a single language even though the speech varieties are rather different. For example, the Southern Wakashan languages, Nuuchahnulth, Ditidaht, and Makah (spoken on the Olympic Peninsula in Washington State), are considered by many of their speakers to form a single language, to which they refer as the “Westcoast language” (Thompson and Kinkade 1990: 39-40). Since these three speech varieties are sufficiently different as not to be mutually comprehensible, however, linguists consider them to be three different languages.

4.2. Change in Classification

In a few cases nomenclature has changed due to changes in linguistic classification. In several cases, improved knowledge has led linguists to split what was previously considered a single language into two languages. An early example is “Tsimshian”, which was used by Franz Boas (1902, 1911) to refer to what we now call the Tsimshianic language family. When the languages came to be better known, the term “Tsimshian” was restricted to Coast Tsimshian as distinct from Nisga'a and Gitksan. Still later, the existence of the distinct language now known as South Tsimshian was discovered (Dunn 1979), leading to the need to distinguish between Coast Tsimshian and South Tsimshian. A second case is that of Babine-Witsuwit'en, which was considered a dialect of Carrier until more careful study (Kari 1975, Story 1984, Kari and Hargus 1989) revealed the extensive differences between Babine-Witsuwit'en and Carrier proper. The most recent example of this type is that of Northern Straits Salish. Until quite recently, this language was called “Straits Salish”. The adjective “Northern” was added when it was recognized that Klallam is a distinct language.

4.3. Lack of Cover Term

A problem that arises in a number of cases is the lack of a traditional indigenous name for a language. People always have some way of referring to themselves, but their terminology is often based on political or residential units; they do not necessarily characterize themselves in terms of linguistic or cultural units. In some cases, various dialects of a language have indigenous names but not the language as a whole. In this case, when it is necessary to refer to the language as a whole, linguists have made up names. One way to do this is simply to join the names of the dialects or communities that speak the same language. Thus, we have Comox/Sliamon for the single language spoken both at Comox and in Sliamon, and Heiltsuk/Owekyala for the language spoken both at Bella Bella and Oweekeno.

A more complex case is that of Babine-Witsuwit'en. Until fairly recently, a name for this language was not a problem, because it was considered a dialect of Carrier and so called Northern Carrier. Once it was recognized that it is a distinct language from Carrier proper, a new name became necessary. Since there is no traditional name for the language as a whole, linguists coined the term Babine-Witsuwit'en by combining the names of its two dialects.

Another approach is to create a non-compound name, typically on the basis of geography. For example, linguists use the term Northern Straits Salish to refer to the language spoken by Ts'ooke, Semiahmoo, Songish, Lummi, Saanich and Samish people. The name is based on the fact that this language is spoken along the Strait of Georgia. The modifier “Northern” was added subsequently to distinguish this language from Klallam, which had been thought to be a variety of the same language. Nootka and its

speakers of kindred languages is so great that all members of a language family are referred to as dialects. I have, for example, on several occasions heard Carrier people speak of “the Navajo dialect of Carrier”.

replacement Nuuchahnulth are both further examples of names based on geography.

4.4. Dialect Variation in First Nations Name

The name of a language sometimes varies from dialect to dialect of the language. We have seen two examples of this: Gitksan and Halkomelem. In such a case, if one wants to refer to the language as a whole it is necessary either to choose the form used in one dialect, as in the case of Gitksan, or to use a cover term, which may, as in the case of Halkomelem, be based on a compromise among the dialects.

4.5. Historical Change in First Nations Name

It sometimes happens that the name used in the First Nations language has changed in pronunciation since it was borrowed into English. This is what happened with Ditidaht. Since the time of contact, /n/ has shifted to /d/ (Kinkade 1985). The English form with /n/ is not the result of an error; it reflects the pronunciation of the indigenous name when Europeans learned it.⁸

4.6. Variation in Writing System

Sometimes what is intended to be the same name is spelled in more than one way. One reason for this is that First Nations languages may often be written in more than one writing system. For example, the Carrier name for Carrier is <Dakelh> when written in the Carrier Linguistic Committee writing system, at present the most widely used, but <Takél> in the writing system used by Father Adrien-Gabriel Morice, whose extensive anthropological and historical publications made him the major source of information for non-native people. As a result, non-native people familiar with Father Morice's work may spell the name this way. For some the symbol <é> is meaningless and is taken to be merely an odd kind of <l>, which results in the spellings <Takél> or <Takel>.

Many native languages have one or more "official" writing systems as well as one or more unofficial "folk" writing systems. These "folk" writing systems are usually attempts by speakers of the language, or occasionally other people, to write the language in as similar a fashion as possible to English. The spelling <Dakelth> is a folk spelling corresponding to official <Dakelh>, with <lth> an attempt at writing the unfamiliar voiceless lateral fricative [t̥] represented by <lh>.

An additional source of variation in spelling arises from the occasional practice of separating the syllables of First Nations words. That is why Nuuchahnulth is usually spelled <Nuuchahnulth> but is spelled <Nuu chah nulth> in the name of the Nuu chah nulth Tribal Council.

4.7. Spelling Errors

Language names sometimes vary due to spelling errors. One of the two major dialects of Babine-Witsuwit'en is witsuwit'en. This language is often referred to instead as wet'suwet'en.⁹ This is simply a mistake. The /ts/ is not glottalized and therefore should have no apostrophe, but plain and glottalized /ts/ are easy to confuse. The incorrect spelling is nonetheless found in official use.

How is it possible for the official spelling of a name to be erroneous? If a First Nation spells its name

8 Another example of this type is the English word *yen* for the unit of Japanese money, pronounced /en/ in Japanese. This word was pronounced /jen/ in Japanese at the end of the 16th century when English people first came into contact with Japan. In the interval /j/ was lost before /e/. (This is why older publications spell the pre-1615 name of Tokyo <Yedo> while more recent publications use <Edo>.)

9 The variation between <e> and <i> reflects a difference between earlier and later analyses of the vowel system.

or that of its language a certain way, isn't that a decision it is entitled to make, just as someone named /bræwn/ is entitled to decide whether to spell his or her name <Brown>, <Browne>, <Braun>, or <Braune>? The answer is that a choice of spelling is an error if it fails to conform to the principles of the writing system of which it is a part. In a purely phonological writing system¹⁰ the correctness of the spelling of a word is determined by the principles of the writing system; there are no arbitrary choices to make. The question as to how to spell a word arises only when a writing system is not purely phonological, and allows for words to have arbitrary spellings, as in English and French. The question of how to spell /bræwn/ arises only because English is not written in a purely phonological writing system, and one cannot, therefore, determine how to spell a word on the basis of one's knowledge of the language alone. Insofar as the writing system for Witsuwit'en is intended to be phonological, as indeed it is, it is an error to write <ts'> for the sound /ts/.

4.8. Anglicization

When the name of the language is not originally English, the name is generally adapted to the sound system of English. With the exception of Cree and Saulteaux, which have rather simple sound systems, the First Nations languages of British Columbia contain quite a few sounds that are exotic, and without instruction and practice, unpronounceable, from the point of view of the average English speaker. These include glottalized consonants such as [p'], [t'] and [k'], uvular consonants such as [q], [G] and [χ], the voiceless lateral fricative [ɬ], the lateral affricates [tʃ], [dʃ], and [tʃ'], and the velar fricatives [x] and [χ]. Many of the languages also permit clusters of consonants not permitted in English. As a result, it is quite difficult for English speakers to pronounce these words as they are pronounced by native speakers. Thus, even when First Nations names are used, they will necessarily be pronounced differently by English speakers. This reflects no insensitivity on the part of English speakers; all languages adapt foreign words to their own sound system. Only in rare cases do languages adopt new sounds from foreign words. First Nations languages have done the same with words borrowed from English and French. For example, Shuswap, which has no /f/ or /r/, has borrowed “coffee” as /kapi/ and “rope” as /lop/ (Kuipers 1983).

4.9. Language Names and Ethnonyms

Some variation, and some disputes, arise because different languages have different relationships between the names of languages and the names of nations and peoples. In English and French, for example, we do not really have distinct language names. Instead, language names are nominalizations of the adjective referring to the nation or ethnic group with which the language is associated. Thus, in English *French* is the adjective meaning “of or pertaining to France” and therefore also serves as the name of the language. Similarly, in French *anglais* is the adjective meaning “of or pertaining to England” and therefore also serves as the name of the language associated with England. The same is true of some native languages. In Carrier, for example, the word /dakeɬ/ refers basically to the people, but may also be used to refer to the language. It is possible to compound /dakeɬ/ with /xʌni/ “language”, yielding /dakeɬxʌni/ “Carrier language”, but this is rare and somewhat pedantic. Much more natural is a phrase such as /dakeɬ bʌxʌni/ “Carrier people's language”. There is no expression “to

10 A purely phonological writing system is one in which there is a one-to-one correspondance between letters and units of sound, where the units of sound in alphabetic writing systems are individual sound segments. Larger phonological constituents, namely moras, syllables, onsets and rhymes, may also serve as the units with which graphical symbols are associated.

“speak such-and-such a language”. What one says is “to speak in the manner of such-and-such people”.

In contrast, in some languages there are distinct nouns for languages. In Japanese, most languages are named by nouns consisting of the name of the associated nation or ethnic group followed by the morpheme /go/ “language”. Thus, “France” is /huransu/ and “French” is /huransugo/. Occasionally, the language name is not even related to the usual term for the country. “England” is /igirisu/, but “English” is /eigo/.

Speakers of English, therefore, naturally name languages after the people who speak them; they do not expect languages to have distinct names. Thus, in using Kwakiutl as the name for the language, English speakers are not making a mistake. Rather, they are following the grammar of their own language. Given that Kwakiutl is the English name for the people, as well as the adjective meaning “of or pertaining to Kwakiutl people”, it is also the name of the language. The fact that in their own language /Kwakw'ala/ is the name of the language spoken by Kwakiutl people is of no relevance to the speaker of English, the rules of whose language derive the name of the language from the ethnic adjective. The question of whether to call the language Kwakw'ala or Kwakiutl is not a simple question of right or wrong, knowledge or ignorance, but a more complex question of whether to follow the conventions of English or to violate them in introducing a specialized language name.

Although in the case of Kwakw'ala it is the First Nation that prefers to use a distinct language name and non-natives who have named the language after the people, this is not always the case. Sometimes a term that is not basically a language name is preferred by First Nations people because it is more specific. The people who live along the Fraser Canyon and in the Fraser Valley upriver from Sumas call themselves Stó:lō. Linguists refer to their language as the Upriver dialect of Halkomelem. In their own language, they refer to Halkomelem as /Halq'eméjlem/. They currently prefer the term Stólō for their language because it clearly refers to their own dialect, in contrast to /Halq'eméjlem/ and Halkomelem, which include all of Halkomelem, and because <Stó:lō> is easily pronounced by English speakers (though it is not obvious to an English speaker that <ó> is pronounced [a], not [o].)

5. Indigenous vs. Foreign Names

Some First Nation languages are known both by indigenous names and by names given them by other people. Some non-indigenous names, such as Thompson and Babine, are entirely of European creation. Others are borrowings or translations of names used by other First Nations people, typically a neighbouring people with whom Europeans made contact first.

The existence of both indigenous and non-indigenous names is a prominent source of variation. The use of non-indigenous names is also perceived to be a cause of complaint on the part of First Nations. It is worth noting, however, that it is not invariably the case that foreign names are rejected. According to Fiske and Patrick (2000:33), the Lake Babine Nation has chosen “Babine” as its official name because, in spite of its French origin, this term evokes the fact that:

...their identity as a nation and distinct culture can never be severed from their ties to the lake and lands that sustained their ancestors...This European name testifies to early Euro-Canadian recognition that the lake and surrounding territory was indeed that of the Babine people.

In contrast, the indigenous name /nedut'en/ is considered by many to be of foreign, that is, Nak'azdli Carrier, origin.

The claim that indigenous names should be preferred to foreign names raises the question of whether there is a recognized right to have others call a people or language by the same term as that used by the people themselves. Judging by the usage of European and Asian languages, no such right is recognized in the "Old World". European and Asian languages frequently use names for other languages that are completely unrelated to the self-designation of the language. This is illustrated by the English, French, and Japanese names for various languages given below.¹¹

English	French	Japanese	Own Name
Chinese	chinois	tʃu:gokugo	gwɔjy
Dutch	néerlandais	orandago	nedrlants
English	anglais	eigo	iŋgliʃ
French	français	ɸuransugo	frãse
German	allemand	doitsugo	dojtʃ
Japanese	japonais	nihongo	nihongo
Korean	coréen	kankokugo	hangunmal
Russian	russe	roʃiago	ruski
Spanish	espagnol	supeingo	espaɲol
Welsh	gallois	we:ruzugo	kumri

Only occasionally are the foreign name and native name the same, as with French *espagnol* and Spanish *español*, which are pronounced the same although spelled differently. In other cases, the language name is an adaptation of the self-designation, but the adaptation is significantly different from the original. Japanese *doitsugo*, for example consists of *doitsu*, adapted from German *deutsch*, plus *go*, a loan from Chinese meaning "language". In many cases there is no relationship, or only a very obscure and distant one. Thus, the English term for "German" is based on the Latin form of the name of one of the Germanic tribes, the Germani; the French term *allemand* is based on the name of another of the Germanic tribes, the Allemani. The Japanese term for "English" consists of /go/ "language", preceded by the Japanese pronunciation of the Chinese character used to write the first syllable of the Chinese name for England. The Mandarin Chinese name for "England" is [jɪŋgwɔ], where [gwɔ] means "country" and [jɪŋ] approximates the first syllable of the English word "England".

Is there perhaps a different view among First Nations? Here again, the answer is no. First Nations languages themselves use terms for other peoples and languages that bear little resemblance to the self-designations.

11 The entries in the English and French columns are given in practical spelling, the others in phonetic transcription.

Consider for example the Carrier terms below. The only term that closely resembles the self-designation is that for Babine. The term for “Chinese” is derived from English “Chinaman”, the term for “Asian Indian” from the English term “Hindoo” as it was once used to refer to all Indians. Ironically, most of the Indians with whom Carrier people have contact are Sikhs, most of whom would not be pleased to be referred to as Hindus. The term for Cree is a loan from Sekani or Beaver and means “medicine men, witches” a reference to the widely held belief among the Athabascan peoples of the region that the Cree possess great but malign spiritual power. The term for “French” means “true white people”, the French being considered the prototype of European. The term for Shuswap literally means “downstream non-Athabascan Indians”.

Asian Indian	hindu
Babine	nadot'en
Chinese	tʃaimʌn
Cree	dʌʃine
French	su nedo
Shuswap	ndaʔ ʔʌtna

The same is true of the Sekani names for other peoples given below. Of these, only that for the Babine is even approximately the same as the group's self-designation.

Babine	nadot'ene
Beaver	tsàʔ dənèʔ
Carrier	ʔaye
Chinese	dəsdluda
Cree	dʌʃini
Tlingit	tot'ēne

Nor do the Nisga'a necessarily adapt other nations' names for themselves. Of the names given below, the names for the Gitksan, Haida, Tahltan, Tlingit and Coast Tsimshian are evidently adaptations of the self-designations. On the other hand, the names for the Chinese, Heiltsuk, Japanese, and Witsuwit'en are not.

Chinese	dʒajɲ
Gitksan	gitksan
Haida	haj'daɣ
Heiltsuk	dido:
Japanese	dʒapa:n
Tahltan	daɫda:n
Tlingit	ɬingit
Tsimshian	ts'imsan
Witsuwit'en	dini:

Nor do the Shuswap necessarily adopt a nation's self-designation as their own term. Of the seven terms below, only the names for the Lillooet and the Thompson, the two most closely related nations, resemble the self-designations. The other five are entirely different.

Chilcotin	pəsɣíɣnəm
Chinese	stqɹ'wméps
Cree	səkéwəmɣ
French	spətɰwɫəʔúw'i
Lillooet	stét'ləmɣ
Okanagan	sxəxp'wén'əmɣ
Thompson	ɬəképəmɣ

In sum, the practice of Europeans and Asians as well as British Columbia First Nations shows that none of them recognize a right for a people to be called by their self-designation or for the self-designation of their language to be used in other languages. In view of the fact that the connection between sound and meaning is arbitrary and that each language is autonomous, this should not surprise us.

Does this mean that there is no validity to the desire of some First Nations to see their own self-designations used as their English names? I suggest not. Here in British Columbia, there is indeed a good reason to make use, where possible, of indigenous names.

It is one thing to argue that people elsewhere need not use the native names for the First Nations languages of British Columbia. It is another thing to make the same argument for those who live in the territory of these First Nations, who only now are beginning to negotiate a respectful co-existence. Indeed, since English is now the primary language of of most First Nations people, the use of foreign names puts them in the awkward position of referring to themselves and their languages in foreign

terms.

Everywhere in the world immigrants are expected to learn the language of their new country. Non-native people now so outnumber native people, and the First Nations languages are in most cases in such a state of decline, that it is no longer realistic to expect large numbers of non-native people to learn them, but for non-native people to learn a few words of the First Nations languages, such as the names of the languages and their speakers, and of important places, would be a small gesture of respect for their hosts.¹²

Indeed, an argument can be made that British Columbians ought not merely to make use of anglicizations of the native names but to learn to pronounce the native names in their true form. For adults this may be difficult, but for primary school children it is not. The task is facilitated by the fact that in spite of their diversity, the First Nations languages of British Columbia have similar sound systems. Learning what the languages of our province sound like could easily be integrated into the social studies curriculum. Indeed, it would be a small step in including something about language in the school curriculum.¹³

A similar point may be made with regard to the issue raised by Nitinat. Since <Nitinat> reflects the older pronunciation, one may consider it more traditional and in a sense, more accurate. However, using <Ditidat>, based on the current pronunciation of the indigenous name, reflects the recognition that the distinctive culture of Ditidat people does not lie entirely in the past, but in spite of the impact of contact with Europeans and the assimilation of aspects of European culture, has continued to develop in its own way.

6. Conclusion

Most of the criticism of the naming of First Nations languages turns out to be unfounded. Very few languages have been given arbitrary English names. Most language names are anglicizations of the indigenous names; most of those that are not are based on First Nations terminology. Where foreign names have been imposed, in most cases there was little alternative. Misidentification and confusion have been rare.

Variation in the names of First Nations languages arises from a number of different sources. In different contexts, different people may refer to different levels of linguistic classification. In some cases, a language has no indigenous name, so one is forced to choose between an invented cover term or a lower

12 Although Museum of Anthropology (2002) contains the passage cited above suggesting that the usual names for First Nations languages are wrong, it also contains the only clear statement I have seen of a position akin to that advanced here: "Today, as First Nations take control of their own destiny and strive for self-determination, they have asked the non-Native public to recognize them by the names they prefer. We are striving to present these names on the First Nations Map of B.C. (Map A). To recognize our First Nations neighbours with whom we share the Georgia Straits region, we have focussed on distinctive local names."

13 "Language arts" of course occupies a large place in the curriculum, but this subject consists almost entirely of learning to read and write, becoming familiar with formal, written English, and the study of literature. It includes next to nothing about language itself. Learning some linguistics would give students a better understanding of the world around them and of an important and unique ability of their own species. It would give teachers a greater ability to detect language-related problems in children, to teach "language arts" (we currently expect teachers who do not know what the sounds of English are to teach children to read!) and foreign languages, and to understand language-related issues in other areas, such as social studies. But that is a topic for another paper.

level of classification. Some languages have different names in different dialects of the language. In one case, the pronunciation has changed since English-speakers first heard it, leaving English with an earlier version of the name. For some languages the use of more than one writing system has led to different spellings of what is intended to be the same name. Spelling errors add further variety.

A major source of variation results from the need of English speakers to adapt the pronunciation of words in First Nations languages to the sound pattern of English. The English form of the word, therefore, is rarely the same as that in the native language. Furthermore, names may be based directly on the First Nation's name for its language, but more commonly, as a result of the grammatical rules of English, are based on the name for the First Nation itself.

The main point of contention today is whether English speakers should designate First Nations and their languages by means of names that approximate as closely as possible those used by the First Nations themselves, where this is not already the case. On the basis of actual usage it appears that no such right is recognized either by Old World cultures or by the First Nations of British Columbia. I suggest that there is, nonetheless, an ethical argument for the use of English names based on those of the First Nations, namely that this recognizes the fact that First Nations and settlers are not foreign nations but share the same land. Using First Nations names shows respect for our hosts and neighbours.

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