

## Etymological Problems in the Lexicon of Chinook Jargon:

## Some Proposed Solutions

## Part I: Words of French and Canadian French Origin

Barbara P. Harris

University of Victoria

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

The lexicon of Chinook Jargon, the nineteenth century trade language of the Pacific Northwest, has, like that of all pidgins, a number of sources. The core vocabulary is chiefly from Chinookan and Nootkan languages, but English and French also made large contributions. While most of the lexical items in the Jargon have been more or less satisfactorily accounted for, there remains a score or so of what might be termed 'mystery words' — words for which an etymology either is not given<sup>1</sup> or is of dubious accuracy. The intent of this paper is, therefore, to attempt to track down the probable origin of as many of these words as possible (and, in three cases, to make corrections to the etymologies as given). Since French is my second language, and the one, next to English, with whose history and structure I am most familiar, the first part of this study will deal with those items which are apparently of French or Canadian French provenance. But before dealing with the words themselves, it is necessary to discuss briefly the phonology of

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<sup>1</sup> Each dictionary maker, at least anyone who attempted etymologies, of course relied heavily on his predecessors. Thus, words of unknown or debatable origin tend to remain so from one dictionary to the next, usually marked 'Quaere U. D.', roughly, 'query whence descended'.

Chinook Jargon as supporting evidence for my later etymological claims.

## 2.0 PHONOLOGY

Most of the dictionaries which I have consulted make little attempt to indicate pronunciation,<sup>2</sup> apart from marking stress, relying rather on a sort of generalized English orthography which is not always entirely consistent. It is therefore impossible to give an accurate rendering of any given item, but only a broad semi-phonetic transcription based on Shaw's 'Guide to Pronunciation'.<sup>3</sup>

Like all pidgins, Jargon had a phonological system that was a compromise among the systems of the various contributing languages, consisting basically of those sounds that are common to all, with, of course, much local and personal variation (especially where the vowels are concerned) depending on the mother-tongue of the speaker. Native speakers of English and the local indigenous languages would thus denasalize the French nasal vowels, while a French speaker would retain them; an Amerindian speaker would devoice the voiced obstruents of English and French; English and French speakers would deglottalize the glottalized consonants of the local languages and render

<sup>2</sup> Chiefly, Gibbs' A Dictionary of the Chinook Jargon or Trade Language of Oregon (1863), and Shaw's The Chinook Jargon and How to Use It (1909), plus two or three smaller and lesser known works. Shaw, who was my main lexical source, is an exception to this general rule.

<sup>3</sup> Where Shaw did not give a pronunciation, I have attempted a transcription based on the orthography of the item in question compared to that of items for which pronunciations are suggested. Such transcriptions are indicated by a following question mark thus: [liklē]?

the difficult (to them) laterals [λ] and [χ] as the cluster [kl] or the sibilant [ʃ], and so forth. Some compromises were made by everyone, the two most notable being the substitution of [p] for [f], and of [l] for [r] and [R] in words of English or French origin. Chinook Jargon, therefore, was highly dialectal, not to say idiolectal, in spite of its demonstrated success as a lingua franca.

### 2.1 The vowels

It is very difficult to discuss the vowel system of the Jargon except in the most general terms. Although Shaw uses eighteen combinations of *a*, *e*, *i*, *o*, *u* and diacritics, plus two digraphs *ou* and *oi*, to account for seventeen vowel sounds and three diphthongs, it appears on analysis that the number of vowel phonemes could be reduced to six (plus the three diphthongs [ai], [oi], [ou]). However, as on an individual word basis there seems to be a complete lack of minimal pairs, this hypothesis is difficult to prove.

Basically, then, the vowel system of Chinook Jargon seems to be as follows:

- a. a high front vowel [i] ~ [ɪ];
- b. a mid front vowel [e] ~ [ɛ];
- c. a low front to low central vowel [æ] ~ [ɑ] (the distribution here appears to be [æ] if stressed, unless an original [R] or [r], or an [l], follows, [ɑ] elsewhere or if stressed under the condition just stated);
- d. a mid central vowel [ʌ];<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Shaw's 'Guide' does not indicate in any way that unstressed vowels might weaken to [ʌ] or [ə], although a transcription of the Lord's Prayer in Chinook Jargon, given to me by a student, would indicate that such indeed was, at least in some words, the case. (Her transcription is from the speech of an elderly male relative who had

- e. a high back vowel [u] ~ [v];
- f. a mid back vowel [o] having lower variants [ɔ] and/or [ɑ] (the distribution of these appears to be very complex depending, at least for words of French origin, on the environment of the corresponding sound in the word in the source language).

## 2.2 The consonants

The consonantal system is easier to determine, having probably consisted fundamentally of these sounds:

p	t	č	k
	s	š	(x) h
m	n		(ŋ)
w	l		

It should be noted that, as stated above, English and French speakers would have voiced stops in words having them in those languages; thus Fr. (*la*) *bouteille* 'bottle' became CJ *labooti* [labutí]? or *laputay* [lapúté]? [č] apparently varied with [tš]: French and English [f] invariably became [p], and [v] became [w].<sup>5</sup> [s]

learned to speak the Jargon in his youth.) It is also apparent from this transcription that, in the speaker's dialect at any rate, the tense mid vowels [e] and [o] are replaced by the tense high vowels [i] and [u]. The transcription, interlined with the orthographic version, is appended at the end of Part II, WPLC 2-1 (forthcoming).

<sup>5</sup> There is one exception to this, *lummieh* [lʌmɪə] 'old woman' from French *la vieille* [lavjɛj], where the [v] has changed to the corresponding labial nasal, presumably because of the relative difficulty of articulating a string consisting of vowel, glide, vowel, vowel, as would have been the case if the expected change had taken place.

occasionally varied with [z], e.g. *le sap* [!Isáp] 'egg(s)' ~ *lezep* [iezép] from French *les oeufs*.<sup>6</sup> [x] is marginal in the sense that Shaw does not indicate it as such, but where the orthography has *gh*, his 'Guide' gives [hh] as the corresponding sound, which he may have intended to represent the velar fricative; in the transcription of the Lord's Prayer referred to in footnote 4, [x] is used for the medial consonant in the word *saghalie* 'above' (It also appears from this transcription that [k] was sometimes fricativized.) The velar nasal [ŋ], although listed in Shaw's 'Guide', appears in only one item, *lalang* [lalæŋ] 'tongue, language', and is probably entirely due to interference from English *language*. French [r] and English [r] (and variants thereof) become [l] or disappear altogether in final position or as the first member of a consonant cluster, e.g. *leplet* [!Ip!ét] 'priest' from Fr. (*le*) *prêtre* 'priest'; *waum* [wam] 'warm'.<sup>7</sup> [j] occurs only prevocalically in initial position; a medial [j] from English or French becomes [i] in Jargon, and since [i] never occurs prevocalically in initial position, [j] may thus be considered a positional variant of [i] and as such is not included in the inventory.

<sup>6</sup> The final [p] in this word, although necessarily derived from [f], should not have been there if the derivation is from the French plural form alone, as the final consonant was lost during the Early Modern French period, giving *oeuf* [øf] sg; but *oeufs* [œ:] pl. However, since the word no doubt came into the Jargon via the French of Canadian fur traders, the final consonant in the plural may well have been retained in their more conservative speech. (The tendency to retain final consonants, especially [t], still exists in some modern dialects of Canadian French.)

<sup>7</sup> Where no derivation is indicated, the etymon is the same as the English gloss.

Before going on to a discussion of the 'mystery words' in Chinook Jargon, I should like to point out three errors in Gibbs' and Shaw's etymologies. The first is simply an error in the gender of the French etymon; they have derived *lekleh* [liklé]? 'key' from French *le* [sic] *clef* when *clef* is, of course, a feminine noun. The blame for this error cannot be laid at the door of 'mispronunciation' on the part of Jargon speakers, as the next entry in both dictionaries is *lemah* [léma] 'hand', correctly derived from *la main*. The other two errors are less trivial, in that the wrong French lexical item has been given as the etymon for the Jargon word. Our two lexicographers stated the derivation of *lebal* [lIbál] 'ball, bullet' to be 'French, - idem', thereby indicating (*le*) *bal* 'dance' (as in *un bal masqué* 'a masked ball') as the etymon, when clearly it should be (*la*) *balle* 'ball, bullet'<sup>8</sup> Gibbs has also given the French etymon of *lasanjel* [lasænjɛl] ? 'girth, strap, belt' as being *la cingle*, a word which I cannot find in either Larousse or Robert; he clearly meant *la sangle* 'strap, cinch' (Shaw includes the word only in his 'Supplemental Vocabulary' so it is indicated simply as being of French origin, with no etymon given).

#### 4.0 WORDS OF APPARENT FRENCH ORIGIN

The following items are all of apparent French derivation (and in 'French' I include the Canadian as well as the European variety),

<sup>8</sup> These three items are the only ones of those of French origin borrowed with article intact - as are most French nominals - that have, so to speak, changed gender in their migration from one language to the other.

but either were not identified as such by earlier lexicographers or were given an etymon which is at best uncertain, and frequently dubious. I should like to propose here some probable (or possible) etymologies for these words based on a combination of the known phonological correspondences and some provable semantic correspondences. The words are discussed in alphabetical order according to Shaw's orthography.

#### 4.1 *Lagwin*

*Lagwin*, *lakween* [lagwɪn~lakwɪn]? 'a saw' is listed in Shaw only in his 'English-Chinook' section, and no derivation is suggested. The usual word for the instrument was apparently *lasee* [laſɪ] from Fr. (*la*) *scie* 'saw'. The only French word I have so far found that is phonologically parallel is (*la*) *gouine* [gwin], an archaic word for a prostitute or a 'woman of loose morals'; its modern popular meaning is 'a female homosexual'. In its older sense, a figurative semantic connection could be made, especially if the saw is of the kind generally referred to as a 'crosscut', i.e. the action is from one man to another.<sup>9</sup> The only other French word even vaguely related either semantically or phonologically is (*le*) *gouet* [gwε], a type of large pruning hook. However, there are various arguments against this as the etymon of *lagwin*. In the first place, as stated in footnote 8, there are only three items in Jargon of known French provenance that shift the article from one gender to the other, and all shift feminine to masculine rather than vice versa as this pair would require. In the second place,

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<sup>9</sup> I have just been reliably informed that a facetious term in English for this kind of two-man saw is a 'come-to-me-go-from-me', as well as other less printable ones.

Fr. [ɛ] remains [ɛ] in words borrowed into Jargon (in one instance [ɛ] > [e], and in another [a], but both these variants — and they are the only ones — can be accounted for). Thirdly, Standard French [i] frequently laxes to [ɪ] in Canadian French speech, thus accounting for the form [lagwín], while the devoicing of voiced stops gives [lakwín]. Lastly, final consonants, especially obstruents and nasals, are preserved in Chinook Jargon. I thus feel that *la gouine* is so far the most likely candidate for the etymon of *lagwin*.<sup>10</sup> The old *coureurs du bois* and *voyageurs* were nothing if not men of robust humour and imagination.

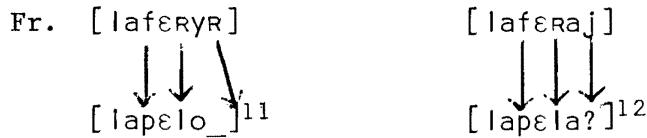
#### 4.2 *Lapollah*

Shaw gives no gloss for *lapollah* [lapəla]? but simply marks it as a verb and then cites *mamook lapollah* 'to roast before the fire'. Both he and Gibbs note 'Quaere if from the French, - *le foyer*' (which means, basically, 'hearth'). However, apart from the fact, already twice mentioned, of the unlikely event of a 'gender change', the phonological facts are against this derivation. The standard pronunciation of *foyer* is [fwojé]; we here have the [p] to [f] correspondence, but no other:

- a. [pw] is a legitimate consonant cluster in Jargon, for example, *lepxau* [lIpwɔ̄] 'peas'; why then should it be reduced to [p] in this item?
- b. Fr. [ɔ] > CJ[o], occasionally [ɔ] but never a front vowel;
- c. Fr. medial [j] > CJ[i];
- d. Fr. [e] > CJ[i] ~ [ɪ]

<sup>10</sup> There is also a French verb *couiner* [kwine] 'to squeak, make a sharp sound' which could certainly apply to a saw; unfortunately its corresponding nominal is (*le*) *couic* [kwik], the gender and the final consonant both disqualifying it.

If the fundamental meaning of *lapellah* is something like 'a spit' or 'a grill' (as the compound form *mamook lapellah* suggests it might be) then two other possible etymons which correspond phonologically better than *foyer* and semantically satisfactorily (if somewhat metaphorically) are (*la*) *ferrure* and (*la*) *ferraile*. The former, in its oldest sense, means 'an iron fitting', and the latter '(a piece of) scrap iron', either of which could apply to a rustic or homemade spit or grill. The phonological correspondences are as follows:



Either of these is much closer to the Jargon word than is *foyer*, and it is at least possible that *lapellah* comes from a confusion of *la ferrure* and *la ferraille*, although I personally lean towards the former as being the etymon.

#### 4.3 *Lekye*

Gibbs, quoting Anderson, derives *lekye* [likié]? [likái]? from a Canadian French word *caillé* for which he gives no gloss. The Jargon word refers to a piebald horse, and also has the meanings 'a spot, spotted, speckled'. In Standard French and in Canadian French, *caillé* [kajé] means 'curdled' or 'clotted', not requiring, perhaps, too

<sup>11</sup> Fr. [y] normally unrounds to [i] or backs to [u], but in *leloba* [lilóba] 'ribbon' from (*le*) *ruban* [Rybã] it lowers to [o] apparently under the influence of the preceding uvular.

<sup>12</sup> There are no definitely known examples in the Jargon lexicon for derivations of the French sequence [aj]; [ɛj] > [i] or [ai]. See also item 4.3.

fanciful a semantic leap to apply it to a 'curdled' colour. However, there is also a Canadian French adjective *caille* [kaj(ə)], meaning 'white spotted with black or tan, piebald', although in Standard French *la caille* means 'quail' — a bird which does not, at least on this continent, fit the colour combination attributed to *lekye*. The nominalization of CF *caille* (adj.) is (*la*) *caillette*, applied frequently to cows that are piebald or skewbald in colour; it thus could conceivably be extended to refer to horses of the same coloration, although the fact of the final [t] would seem to disqualify it as an etymon for *lekye*. It appears that the lexicon of Acadian Canadian French includes an item *kayé* [sic:Juneau 1977] 'pelt that is white with tan spots'. We thus have two possible etymons for *lekye*: CF *caille* and ACF *kayé*; Anderson (quoted by Gibbs) was presumably referring to the latter. The choice probably depends on the pronunciation of the Jargon word; the orthography would tend to support [lIkai], as one would expect \**lekyeh* if a final non-low front vowel were retained. Also, Fr. [e] becomes CJ[i] or [I]<sup>13</sup> which would seem to eliminate *kayé*, leaving us with *caille*. The fact that this form is basically an adjective in Canadian French poses no problem, given that most descriptive adjectives in French can also be used as nominals, simply by preceding them with the appropriate article, e.g. *la vieille* the 'old woman', *le fou* 'the madman'. As an etymon for *lekye*, then, (*le*) *caille* fills all the criteria, syntactic (both nominal forms), semantic (identical meanings) and phonological (if indeed *lekye* was pronounced [lIkai] as the orthography indicates — see also footnote 13).

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<sup>13</sup> CJ[e] is rare and is derived from other sources; see Appendix II, Part II, WPLC 2-1 (forthcoming).

#### 4.4 *Lepishemo*

This was the most challenging of all the items. *Lepishemo* [lɛpiʃəmø] means 'saddle blanket, (and) housings of a horse'. The usual etymon given is *puis on monte* 'then one mounts'; I should like to suggest a less 'folk-y' etymology, for various reasons. In the first place, nominal forms derived from syntactic formations are rare at the best of times and especially so where borrowing is involved. Secondly, an expression such as *puis on monte* is used mainly in connected narrative and not, as presumably the lexicographers intended, as an incidental remark made at the time of the action where *alors* would be more likely than *puis*. The phrase is also difficult to justify on phonological grounds, even assuming a close vowel [i] in the [p \_ š] environment:

- a. the liaison between the underlying [s] > [z] of *puis* [pɥi] and the following vowel [š] had been lost before the time of contact;
- b. even were the sibilant retained, it should still be [s] in Jargon, not [š];
- c. the vowel [š] of *on* would become [o] (or, rarely, [ɔ]) — even if unstressed, it would more likely turn up as [ʌ];
- d. [št] (in *monte*) would not reduce to [o], cf. *lemonти* [lemɔ̃nti] < Fr. (*la*) *montagne*.

The etymon that I propose is not, I admit, to be found in any of the dictionaries that I have consulted; it is however, based on sound syntactic and morphological principles.<sup>14</sup> The French verbs *panser* [pãse] and *bichonner* [biʃɔnɛ] both mean, among other things, 'to groom a horse', the latter being a colloquial form also having

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<sup>14</sup> I have also 'tried it out' on two French-speaking colleagues, and they agree that my suggested derivation is not only possible but probable.

the meaning 'to dress up' (and if you 'dress up' a horse, presumably you put on its saddle blanket, saddle, bridle, and so forth). The corresponding standard French nominal forms are (*le*) *pansage* and (*le*) *bichonnage*, where the suffix [-aʒ] denotes 'the action of'. However, there is another Standard French nominal derived from *panser* (in its sense 'to dress (a wound)'), i.e. (*le*) *pansement* 'a bandage', the suffix [-mã] here indicating the thing used to perform the action. All these forms also exist in Canadian French. It would therefore seem not unreasonable to posit a nonstandard form \**le bichonnement* [ləbiʃɔnmã] arising through analogy. Phonologically, while the correspondences with *lepishemo* are not perfect, they are a good deal better than those of *puis on monte*:

Fr. *[l e b i š o n m a]	[pɥ i(z) ŋ m ŋ t]
CJ [l i p i š e m a]	[(I)p _ i s o m on t]

The derivation from \**le bichonnement* illustrates the typical Jargon devoicing of the voiced stop, the equally typical laxing of [i] to [I] (also typical of Canadian French, as noted above), the retention of Fr. [š], and the assimilation of the [n] to a following [m] as a manifestation of the cluster reduction common in Chinook Jargon. The last two vowels create a minor problem, if one assumes that the given orthography *lepishemo* reflects the pronunciation relatively accurately;<sup>15</sup> however, if one takes the position that the unstressed [o] could have reduced to [ʌ], and looks upon o as a possible spelling for any low non-front vowel (final

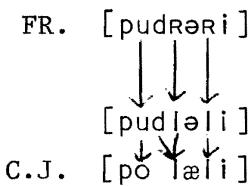
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<sup>15</sup> One can only assume this for the most basic items of the lexicon and even they often have at least one alternate spelling; some words have as many as five or six or more.

[o] is usually spelled -oh), the problem solves itself.

#### 4.5 Polallie

This word means 'gunpowder; dust, sand'. Gibbs says, 'The word is neither Chinook nor Chehalis,' and suggests Fr. *poudre*; Shaw adds 'certainly' to Gibbs' statement and notes 'Quaere French, *Poudre*. He gives the pronunciation as being [pōlæli], but also lists seven alternate spellings, five consistent with this pronunciation, but two (*poolala*, *pooale*) indicating variant forms having a high vowel [u] in the first syllable. I should like to make a case for Canadian French *poudrerie* [pudRəri] 'snow that the wind lifts and blows in swirls' as the etymon for this item, perhaps confused with *poudrière* [pudRiēR] 'gunpowder store'. The former accounts for the phonological shape of the word:



(note the cluster reduction typical of Jargon borrowings). *Poudrerie* also accounts, by extension, for the glosses 'dust' and 'sand', both of which typically blow in swirls in the same manner as does powder snow, which is a climatic rarity in this part of the world. *Poudrière* would contribute to the meaning 'gunpowder', which, while indisputably of dusty or sandy consistency, is less likely to be found blowing about in large quantities.

#### 5.0 SUMMARY

There remain to be dealt with a dozen or so words which may or may not be attributable to some definite source, and a few whose origin has been obscured by the passage of time. These

will be dealt with in detail in Part II of this paper, 'Words of other than French origin'. Meanwhile, I should be very interested in receiving any comments that readers might have to make, especially if they can cast any further etymological light into these murky depths of linguistic history.

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<sup>16</sup> The full bibliography, as well as the two Appendices, 'Transcription of the Lord's Prayer in Chinook Jargon', and 'Phonological Correspondences between French and Chinook Jargon' will appear with Part II, WPLC 2-1 (forthcoming).

Shaw, George C. 1909. *The Chinook Jargon and How to Use It: a Complete and Exhaustive Lexicon of the Oldest Trade Lanugage of the American Continent.* Seattle: Rainier Print<sup>ing</sup> Company Inc.

