

Video Transcript – Tony A. Johnson, Chinook (2002)

Unit: Language (Elementary and Middle School)

Lewis and Clark, when they spent their time at the mouth of the Columbia River, they believed, from my understanding, that they learned the Clatsop language. But they didn't learn the Clatsop language. No one in a winter can learn that language.

They learned Chinook wawa, or as people later called it Chinook jargon. We call it Chinook wawa or Shawash wawa. Shawash wawa means Indian talk. It's the Indian language. And it's just a language that was used by all the tribes in that area to communicate, and not just for trading. It wasn't just what Europeans used with Indians. Indians used it because there are so many languages on the Coast, that you go just a couple river valleys away and it's an unintelligible language.

And so there's this language based on the Chinookan languages of the Columbia River, that being a highway that people had to travel through, mostly for trade, but for all kinds of other reasons: for family alliances, for marriage. People moved through there.

And so our language became the basis for this trading language, really a pidgin language or a pidgin Creole language. That's its designation.

But the language, that's what Lewis and Clark heard. If you see some strange person, then you go to them and speak Chinook wawa to them. You don't speak your old language. You speak Chinook wawa. That's the only language you expect somebody to know that you don't know. And so that's what we spoke to them.

In the little bit of language that they [Lewis and Clark] wrote, they recorded Chinook jargon, Chinook wawa.

Chinook wawa, as I know it, is majority old Chinook, Chinookan language, language from the Columbia River like-and that's where it's like (speaking Chinook).

Those are words from old Chinook. But then there are words from English that are very old. They came from, like, the ship-captain days, you know. The trading ship days. That's where we get our English. It's words like (speaking Chinook). Some of it you might recognize, like, oh, well, stick or sick. We say those in Chinook wawa.

“Paya” means fire, but it's become very Indianized. It's been in the language through Indian mouths for a long time. So it's become something different than fire. Or “lam” just means liquor, because it's from rum.

But then also there's a good percentage that is French. And that's from mostly French-speaking Indians and some mixed Indians, michif speakers maybe, that came as employees of Hudson Bay Company.

I have an ancestor named Urbain Heroux, who's an Ottawa Indian, who came out with Hudson Bay Company and married a Chinook woman. And in those households, they-you know, those French-speaking Indians and French-speaking men--they married Indians in our country. And so French also gets in the language. We still screw it up, I'm sure.

But we say things like “tamanawas-lamatay.” That means spirit mountain. That's a mountain in the Grand Ronde community where I work. But “lamatsin” is medicine. “Laputhay”, a bottle. “Lidu,” that's your finger. (Speaking in native language), your mouth, “labush.”

But (speaking Chinook). We also say the old Chinook words, “siyaxwas,” your eyes. So it's really a mix.

It also has west coast of Vancouver Island language in it, which is a very important part of it, which speaks, I'm sure, to its origin in that there's a very important trade connection between the west coast of Vancouver Island Nu-cha-nulth people and the Columbia River, because that's where the money came from.

We say “alikhuchik” for dentalium shells. “Kupkup” is the little ones and “alikhuchik” is the big really expensive ones. And that comes from Vancouver Island.

And this fact that it's a small percentage of the language but a very important part. You couldn't use Chinook wawa. I couldn't speak Chinook wawa without that part that comes from.