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Author:
Nick Doe, 1787 El Verano Drive, Gabriola, BC, Canada V0R 1X6
Phone: 250-247-7858
E-mail: nickdoe@island.net

Hul ’qumi ’num

by Nick Doe

Although there are currently nearly seven thousand different languages in use in the world, the great majority of these are spoken by only a few people. Over 80% of the world’s population now speaks less than 2% of its languages. Local languages are disappearing fast, as are the isolated and self-reliant cultures with which they were once intimately, and arguably inextricably, connected. Depending on how you count them, there are in BC between twenty-seven and thirty-four Aboriginal languages still in use, but none can be said to be flourishing. At least ten have gone extinct fairly recently.

Languages evolve surprising quickly. In spite of the trend for the number of world languages to fall, the processes that lead to the birth of a new language can still be observed. Groups with a common language and history, but who seldom communicate, rapidly develop their own versions of the language with distinct vocabularies and distinct accents. From personal experience I can attest that localized Caribbean English has taken on meanings and pronounciations that are a long way from the English of Gabriola. Eventually, these versions become dialects, and if isolation persists, they become mutually unintelligible. Even an artificial language like Esperanto has been found to undergo considerable modification in periods as short as a year to suit the special circumstances of the community that uses it. In India, which has sixteen official languages and more than a thousand others, there is an old Hindi proverb that “language changes every twenty miles” and from the ethnographical records, one can deduce that this was similarly the case among the Aboriginal people of the northwest coast before contact with Europeans.

Some researchers believe that the propensity of human languages to develop dialects evolved at a time when establishing membership of a group was a way of establishing kinship. Like other social creatures, human beings are genetically predisposed to help their blood relatives rather more than less-closely-related individuals—all part of the selfish gene syndrome. Being able to establish probable kinship, by speaking a dialect or having an accent, was thus an asset. The same forces probably led to the development of “accents” in whales, crows, song-birds….

Variety in language develops when groups are isolated, but this does not necessarily mean geographical isolation. Dialects are frequently associated with subcultures, and in societies with distinct social classes (the English and Salish are both examples), accent is sometimes a badge of class. “Mixed” marriages of any kind in these societies are often discouraged, a fact that lends support to the “kinship” hypothesis.

For nearly two centuries, scholars have realized that it is possible to group the thousands of languages of the world into *families*. There are about 200 families in all. Canada has about eleven of these. Although the languages within a family are far from being so similiar that speakers of one can understand another—English, Dutch, and German for example—there is enough commonality for it to be reasonable to suppose that they had a common origin. The Italic family of languages—Spanish, Italian, Romanian…with their origin in

Latin—is perhaps the best-known example of this. Some families, known as *isolates*, contain only a single member, examples of which are Basque in Europe, Burushaski in India, and Haida in North America. Other families, such as Etruscan, have no living members at all.

More recently, and more controversially, linguists have been attempting to group language families into *superfamilies* in the belief that the roots of all human languages can be traced back even further than the last few thousand years. The number of superfamilies varies according to researcher from about twenty all the way down to one.[1]

The best-known example of a superfamily is Indo-European. Indo-European families of languages are spread across the whole of Europe, the steppes of Asia all the way to the Pacific coast, the Middle East (Iran), and the northern Indian subcontinent (Sanskrit). Superfamilies are great fun for people who study these things. Does the Indo-European vocabulary indicate that the original speakers were neolithic farmers? or that they were warriors from Asia travelling in horse-drawn chariots? Do Basque and Etruscan belong to the same superfamily as old eastern Mediterranean (Hattic, Urartian…), North Caucasian, Sino-Tibetan, and Yeniseian from far-away Siberia?

Apart from a handful of minor and now dead languages, Europe has, again depending on the researcher, either one—Nostratic, or two superfamilies—Indo-European and Uralic-Altaic (Finnish, Estonian, Hungarian, Lapp, Turkish…). North and South America are currently said to have three superfamilies, namely, **Paleo-Siberian** (Eskimo-Aleut), a Nostratic candidate of course, spoken along the coasts of the Arctic Ocean; **Na-Déné** (Dene-Caucasian) spoken in the forestland all across Alaska and northern Canada south of the tundra as far east as Hudson Bay, also by the geographically isolated Navajo and Apache in southwestern USA and at various places along the coast from southern Washington to northern California; and **Amerind**, a large superfamily of some 150 different families spoken throughout the rest of North and all of South America. The origin of Amerind is as much a puzzle as the origin of the people that speak it—the links with Eurasiatic languages although there, are weaker than are the links of Paleo-Siberian or Na-Déné, a likely indication that they have been here longer**.**

The languages of the Aboriginal people of BC fall into six family groups.[2] Within each family, there are several mutually unintelligible languages, some with several dialects. The speakers of these groups are the **Athapaskans** (Déné) who live in the northeast part of the province (the Tlingit and Eyak are Alaskan coastal relatives);[3] the **Haida** in the Queen Charlottes;[4] the **Tsimshian** who live along the northern coast and in the Skeena and Nass valleys; the **Wakashan** who include the Haisla and Kwakiutl of the central coast and northern Vancouver Island and the Nuu-chah-nulth on the west coast of Vancouver Island; the **Salish** who occupy most of the south from Vancouver Island to the Albertan border;

[1] An example of a word whose origins may go back a very long way is the word that may originally have meant "suckle or swallow". Arabic (mlj), Old Egyptian (mnd^{y}), English (milk), Latin (mulgere), Hungarian (mell), Indo-European (melg), Tamil (melku), Malayalam (melluka), Quechua (malq'a), Surinam (e'mõkï), Guamo (mirko), Mohave (mal^{y}aqé), Paleo-Siberian (melug), and many others.

[2] I'm excluding the Algonquian, perhaps unjustly, because Cree is a recent arrival to BC.

[3] Tlingit used to be regarded as an isolate. Déné may be related to the ancient Siberian language Ket.

[4] A few linguists think Haida may be Na-Déné, but this is not generally accepted. The remaining four families in the list are of the Amerind superfamily.

and the **Kootenay** (Kutenai) in the southeast corner of the province.

Both the Wakashan and Kootenay families appear to have weak links with the Algonquian family of languages, once spoken by migatory bands all across southern and eastern Canada, including Newfoundland.[5] The origin of Salish is not known. It used to be thought that **Coast Salish** came with migrants at some unknown date from the interior, and the languages are therefore descendants of the **Interior Salish** languages spoken widely in the Interior plateau, along the upper reaches of the Fraser and Thompson Rivers, and across the border in Washington, Idaho, and Montana. This conventional view has however been challenged by ethnographer Wayne Suttles, who has argued that the archaeological record does not support the notion of an "invasion" from the interior, and that the greater diversity of language and culture among the Coast Salish compared to the Interior Salish suggests that Coast Salish is longer-established, and any "invasion" is therefore more likely to have been from the coast to the interior rather than vice versa.

The Coast Salish branch of the Salish language family has sixteen members. These are **Bella Coola** or Nuxalk (a geographically isolated group of Salish speakers); **Comox** (north end of the Strait of Georgia); **Pentlatch** (coast of Vancouver Island south of Cape Lazo, north of Nanoose); **Sechelt**; **Squamish**; **Halkomelem** (Vancouver Island, Gulf Islands, and the Fraser); **Straits** (Boundary Bay, the San Juans, and southern Vancouver Island around Victoria); **Nooksack**; **Clallam** (southern coast of the Juan de Fuca Strait); **Lushootseed** (east Puget Sound); **Twana** (west Puget Sound, Hood Canal); Tsamosan comprising **Quinault**, **Lower Chehalis**, and **Upper Chehalis** (southern Olympic Peninsula); **Cowlitz** (Cowlitz valley in Washington); and **Tillamook** (a geographically isolated group on the coast south of the mouth of the Columbia River).

Halkomelem has three mutually intelligible dialects—**Island Halkomelem** (spoken by the Nanoose, Nanaimo, Chemainus, Penelekuts, Cowichan, and Malahat), **Downriver Halkomelem** (the Fraser River delta up to just above Fort Langley), and **Upriver Halkomelem** (upriver to the lower Fraser canyon).

And **Hul'qumi'num**? That's the Island dialect pronounciation of "Halkomelem", and is the language and dialect spoken by, among others, the local Snunéymux^{w}.[6]

All Aboriginal languages are in great danger of becoming extinct, as many already have. According to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal People (RCAP), less than three thousand people in 1996 were fluent speakers of any of the twelve still-existing Salish languages in BC, and virtually all speakers were over fifty. Very few, it seems, oppose the idea that they are worth preserving, but, sadly or inevitably, few seem prepared to make the life-style changes and put in the work needed to save them.

Sources: *Handbook of North American Indians,* Vol. 7, Smithsonian Institute; *Aboriginal Language Program Handbook, http://www.schoolnet.ca* ; *Hard Words—Trends in Linguistics*, Scientific American, April 1991; Robin Dunbar, *Grooming, Gossip, and the Evolution of Language*, faber and faber, 1996. ◊

[5] Kootenay has also been linked with Salish, but not all linguists are convinced.

[6] Downriver speakers call it Hun'qumyi'num, and upriver speakers, Halq'eméylem**.** The upriver dialect, I'm told, has a "sing-song" quality to the ears of the Vancouver Island locals.