

**The Evolution of the Chinook Jargon
Language**

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Anthropology, 11:00-12:00

The word Chinook comes from the language of the Chehalis Native Americans. The word originally referred to a village that was located at the mouth of the Chinook River. Four tribes lived at the mouth of the Columbia River, and eventually used this word to describe themselves. These specific tribal groups were the Shoalwater Chinook, Columbia Chinook, Kathlamet, and Clatsop. Though they were all distinct tribes and spoke a sub-dialect of the same language, their culture was based on the same myths and rituals. Because of this unifying factor the separate tribes considered themselves to all be part of a larger group.

Before European contact, the Chinook traded with several other tribes up and down the coast of the Pacific Northwest, and also with inland groups. Trading was an extremely important part of the Chinook economy. Men and women both were intricately involved in the trading of goods with other tribes. The main items traded by the Chinook were dentalia shells, slaves, shellfish, salmon, sturgeon, smelt, seal, blubber from whales, and canoes. They traded these objects both to tribes in the north and in the south. The Chinook controlled much of the market in the north due to the fact that dentalia shells were used as currency there yet were not found south of the Strait of Juan de Fuca. The main tribes that the Chinook traded with were the Nootka, the Haida, and the Kwakwaka'wakw. There were over one hundred distinct languages that were spoken on the Northwest Coast, so the creation of a trade language was extremely beneficial. The language that was used in trade among the tribes of the Pacific Northwest tribes is called Chinook Jargon.

It is unknown as to how long ago Chinook Jargon first came to be spoken due to lack of written records. Early maritime fur traders didn't much care for the language or

customs of the Native Americans. Their main goal was to procure furs and there was little to no time taken to record native customs, language, or social organization. This causes a lack of information as to what the Pacific Northwest tribes were like prior to land-based trading influences. When contact was first made with Europeans that were exploring the Pacific Northwest in the early 1800's, the explorers kept some journals that reference a second language used by several different tribes. Lewis and Clark recorded the first words of Chinook Jargon in 1805 while exploring the mouth of the Columbia River. John Rodgers Jewitt also kept a journal while with the Nootkans. His journal unknowingly referenced several words of the Chinook Jargon language that he thought were Nootkan. He mistakenly identified the Jargon language as being a separate language used by the Nootka solely for the purpose of poetical expression. Both journals of Lewis and Clark and Jewitt give evidence that the Chinook Jargon language was present before European influence.

With the beginnings of land-based trade, there was a necessity for European traders to communicate with the Native Americans that were present. White traders realized that it would be incredibly beneficial for them to learn the Chinook Jargon language due to the fact of its widespread knowledge among the different tribes. The supreme control that the Hudson Bay Company had on this region led to an emphasis of the Chinook Jargon language and it became the most widely used trading language in the Pacific Northwest.

Chinook Jargon consists of only several hundred words, yet those words encompass much of the trading needs of the time. The language was originally composed of a variation of words from Chinookan, Salish, Wakashan, and the Kwakiutl language.

The Chinookan language (Sometimes called “Old Chinook”) was the biggest contributor of words to the Chinook Jargon language. The second greatest contributor to the language was the Nootkan tribe of the Wakashan group. Because of the small amount of words required to speak the language, Chinook Jargon was an efficient language to learn and to utilize. These factors are what led to the widespread use of the language among most of the major tribes in this region.

With increased settlement of whites, and the utilization of the Chinook Jargon language among traders, words from other languages began to get incorporated into the language. New words were added from English, French, Spanish, and Russian. The new words were used to describe new objects brought by settlers and traders. Many of the words introduced by the settlers and traders were changed to a more pronounceable form for both the Native Americans and the traders. Many of the harshly emphasized sounds disappeared, and the *d, f, g, r,* and *z* of European languages became *k, l, p, s,* and *t*. Such words like *fish* became *pish*, *warm* became *waum*, and *carbine* became *calipeen*.

Like all languages, Chinook Jargon continued to evolve, though at a much greater pace. The large amount of attention and use the language was receiving caused it to change much more rapidly than any other language. Eventually the language came to be used by merchants, bankers, missionaries, tradesmen and trappers. The vocabulary and use of the language continued to increase so that many people could speak it nearly as fluently as the English language. Missionaries used Chinook Jargon extensively to conduct sermons with Native Americans and attempt to convert them to Christianity. It also allowed the missionaries to deliver their beliefs in a language that the Native Americans could understand. Chinook Jargon was also used as the primary language at

Fort Vancouver around 1840. Children that lived at Fort Vancouver grew up speaking it as their first language. The language was also extremely popular among career Army soldiers who were spending a tour in the Northwest. Both Philip Sheridan and Ulysses S. Grant had a working knowledge of the Chinook Jargon language.

Chinook Jargon was at its peak around 1875. Historians estimate that around 100,000 people spoke the language. The language began to slowly die off over the next hundred years or so because of the influx of new settlers and immigrants. The population of settlers in Washington State increased from 23,000 in 1870 to over 1,100,000 in 1910. There was similar growth experienced in the surrounding states and Canadian provinces. While all this was going on, the Native American population stayed at relatively the same number. The overwhelming majority of people coming in spoke English, so much less emphasis was placed on the Chinook Jargon language and it couldn't possibly compete with the suddenly present English language. Another factor that helped cause the decline of Chinook Jargon was the negative opinion placed on it. Much of the settlers coming from the east had the opinion that it wasn't a valid language. Many of them had prejudiced views of the Native Americans. There also wasn't the need to learn it like there had been with settlers before the 1860's. All of these factors, combined with the United States' policy towards Native Americans and taking their lands from them to give to white settlers led to the eradication of Chinook Jargon. Chinook Jargon was almost completely gone from the U.S. by 1900. The language managed to keep a foothold in British Columbia and Alaska until around the 1920's. After World War I, Chinook Jargon was nearly extinct. The only tribe that still used it as a primary language was on the Grande Ronde Reservation in Oregon. There were still slang terms used by old gold

miners and fishermen, but conversationally the language was dead outside of a few select reservations. The language was last used in church services in British Columbia in 1970. By 1990, there were only around one hundred people that spoke it fluently and most of them were extremely old. Now, there are very few people left who still speak Chinook Jargon.

Chinook Jargon was an extremely important language that incorporated the cultural and lingual aspects of several different tribes. Contact with Europeans led to an emphasis of the language and caused it to evolve at a much quicker pace. This emphasis was both present and encouraged while the Europeans had trading relations with the Native Americans. The language was used widely among Native Americans and European traders. However, with the acquisition of tribal lands and mass settlement, the language was shunned by the new settlers and was no longer an integral part of society on the Northwest Coast. All of these factors are what caused Chinook Jargon to rise greatly in popularity, and then rapidly decline and reach near-extinction.

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