

September 17, 1970

Dear Wilson,

I've been intending to write you the past week to thank you for writing the letter of recommendation for Lonnie Hindle, so I was very glad to get your note yesterday morning. We've had the University send a letter to First Citizen's on Lonnie's expenses and he is drafting another letter to them now, so we expect to get his finances straightened out soon.

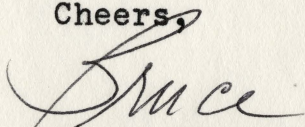
I'm enclosing a sheet with the inventory of practical orthographic characters we're proposing for Nass-Gitksan now. It is somewhat removed from the underlying phonological representation, but is designed for maximal transference of English reading and writing habits. For example, the voicing of the plain obstruents is non-phonemic- it is predictable and always occurs prevocally. Nevertheless, I've found that the several people I've worked with on orthography prefer to use both voiceless and voiced characters. However, it may be that the voiced characters will be dropped when a literate native tradition develops. As well, there are really only three phonemic short vowels, yet we write five. For example, /suʔ/ food taken home from feast is phonetically [soʔ^o ~ soʔ^o], while ~~xxxx~~ /nuw/ die (sg) is [n^uʔ^u]. In practical orthography, we write so'o and n'uw' or perhaps n'u'u. Similarly for /yiʔ/ ---> [yeʔ^e] grandfather (voc) and /niy/ ---> [niʔⁱ] I, me, which in practical orthography we write as ye'e and n'iy' or n'i'i. As you see, we still have some decisions to make on the postvocalic glottalized sonorants⁷ should we write ganaaw' or ganaa'u for /qana.w/ frog?

In choosing characters, I've been very much guided by a desire that the practical alphabet be typable on a standard keyboard. I've also profited much from correspondence and comments from Randy Bouchard (Okanagon and Lillooet) and with Misses Naish and Story who've done the same thing for Tlingit. I've kept the x's for the dorsal spirants and we use the underline to indicate the uvular series g k k' x. In teaching orthography this summer to Sahaptin teacher's aides on the Yakima Reservation, I found it easy to speak of "front" and "back" k-sounds and it got across very well. Also, we use the ' to mark the glottalized series, which I call "hard" as opposed to the "soft" plain series.

I hope these remarks will help your student proceed-
in the next few months I hope to get an orthographic
primer written, but I'll be glad to answer any questions
that come up before then.

Again, thanks very much for supporting Lonnie's
application for funds to come down to study with me.
I'm enclosing a copy of a paper I published recently
on N-G speechplay. Did I ever send you a copy of my
ms. on a linguistic view of recent Tsimshian prehistory?

Cheers,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Bruce".

Bruce Rigsby
Associate Professor

Nass-Gitksan Practical Alphabet in alphabetical order

1 a 2 aa 3 b 4 d 5 e 6 ee 7 g 8 g

9 gw 10 h 11 hl 12 i 13 ii 14 j 15 k

16 k⁹ 17 k 18 k⁹ 19 kw 20 kw⁹ 21 l

22 l⁹ 23 m 24 m⁹ 25 n 26 n⁹ 27 o

28 oo 29 p 30 p⁹ 31 s 32 t 33 t⁹

34 tl⁹ 35 ts 36 ts⁹ 37 u 38 uu 39 w

40 w⁹ 41 x 42 x 43 xw 44 y 45 y⁹ 46 y

Nass-Githsan Practical Alphabet

(underlying systematic phonemes in pencil; practical alphabetic characters in ball-point)

obstruents

p	t	c		k	k ^w	q
p/b	t/d	ts/j		k/g	kw/gw	<u>k</u> / kw
ṗ	ṫ	ċ	ṫ	k̇	k̇ ^w	q̇
p ³	t ³	ts ³	tl ³	k ³	kw ³	<u>k</u> ³
		s	ʔ	x	x ^w	x
		s	hl	x	xw	<u>x</u>

m	n	l	
m	n	l	h p
ṁ	ṅ	l̇	h ³
m ³	n ³	l ³	

glides

w	y
w	y
ẇ	ẏ
w ³	y ³

sonorants

vowels

i	u	i.	u.
i/e	u/o	ii	uu
		ε.	o.
		ee	oo
			a.
a			aa
a			

Nass-Gitksan Practical Alphabet
in alphabetical order

- 1 a
- 2 aa
- 3 b
- 4 d
- 5 e
- 6 ee
- 7 g
- 8 g
- 9 gw
- 10 h
- 11 hl
- 12 i
- 13 ii
- 14 j
- 15 k
- 16 k⁹
- 17 k
- 18 k⁹
- 19 kw
- 20 kw⁹
- 21 l
- 22 l⁹
- 23 m
- 24 m⁹
- 25 n
- 26 n⁹
- 27 o
- 28 oo
- 29 p
- 30 p⁹
- 31 s
- 32 t
- 33 t⁹
- 34 tl⁹
- 35 ts
- 36 ts⁹
- 37 u
- 38 uu
- 39 w
- 40 w⁹
- 41 x
- 42 x
- 43 xw
- 44 y
- 45 y⁹
- 46 ⁹

Nass-Gitksan Practical Alphabet

(underlying systematic phonemes in pencil; practical alphabetic characters in ball-point)

Obstruents

p	t	c		k	k ^w	q
p/b	t/d	tʰ/s/j		k/g	kw/gw	q/k/ʔ
p̣	ṭ	c̣	ṭʰ	ḳ	ḳ ^w	q̣
pʰ	tʰ	tʰsʰ	tlʰ	kʰ	kwʰ	q̣kʰ
		s	ʔ	x	x ^w	x̣
		s	hl	x	xw	<u>x̣</u>

m	n	l
m	n	l
ṃ	ṇ	ḷ
mʰ	nʰ	lʰ
w	y	
w	y	
ẉ	ỵ	
wʰ	yʰ	

sonorants

h ʔ
h ʰ

glides

vowels

i	u	ị	ụ
i/e	u/o	ii	uu
		ε̣	ọ
		ee	oo
a		ạ	
a		aa	

A NOTE ON GITKSAN SPEECH-PLAY

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- 0. Introduction
- 1. Tongue twister
- 2. Riddles
- 3. Pun

0. This note is intended as a short substantive contribution to the small but growing literature on American Indian speech-play, which includes such phenomena as puns, riddles, and tongue-twisters.¹

My examples all derive from fieldwork in the Nass-Gitksan language of northern British Columbia.² Nass-Gitksan and its closely related congener, Coast Tsimshian, comprise the Tsimshian language family. Nass-Gitksan, as a language name, subsumes the dialects which are spoken today in a number of villages located in the Nass and Skeena River valleys. These dialects appear to fall into two major sub-groupings: the Nass dialects of the Nass valley and the Gitksan dialects of the Skeena valley.

I first became aware of punning in Gitksan two summers ago in the field at an informal drinking party when I heard a man refer to wine as /ʔaksa looʔ/ to the great amusement

¹ Some fairly recent articles in this subject area are: Alan Dundes, A Choctaw Tongue-Twister and Two Examples of Creek Word Play, IJAL 30 194-6 (1964); and Albert Alvarez, Some Papago Puns, IJAL 31 106-7 (1965). Dundes' Choctaw-Creek paper and his North American Indian Folklore Studies, Journal de la Société des Américanistes 56:53-79 (1967) give extensive bibliographic references.

I would like to thank Alan Dundes who read an earlier draft of this paper and suggested several changes, which I have made. I alone, however, am responsible for the short-comings of this paper.

² My fieldwork in Nass-Gitksan during the summers of 1966, 1967 and 1968 was supported generously by the National Museum of Canada. My summer, 1969 fieldwork was supported by a grant from the Phillips Fund of the American Philosophical Society.

of his hearers. The Gitksan usually refer to wine as /ʔaksa maaʔ/ *juice of berries or fruit*, while the phrase /ʔaksa looʔ/ has the more specific primary meaning *juice of elderberries*. However, /looʔ/ *elderberry* is secondarily extended to refer to a *prepubescent girl's vagina*. People also use it to humorously refer to that of a nubile female. /ʔaksa looʔ/, then, may also mean (*prepubescent girl's*) *vaginal discharge*. Several times since, I have heard this phrase used by both men and women in mixed company, and its double entendre always evoked a humorous response.

1. I encountered another example of Gitksan speech-play during the spring of 1969 when Mr. Wallace Morgan³ of Kitwanga, British Columbia, spent two weeks with me at Harvard University. During our work there, Wallace told me the following tongue-twister:

/na-qaks-tii/ [by me-be for first time-contrastive] /kaʔ-ɬ/ [see-connective] /la-qax-qaak-kʷ-ɬ/ [relative-plural-be tough-passive-connective] /la-qaxʷ-qakʷ-ɬ/ [relative-plural-sinew-connective] /la-qax-qaax-ɬ/ [relative-plural-wing-connective] /qaaq/ [raven].
[nagáksdi· gáʔaʔ ɬagaxgá·kxʷɬ ɬagaxʷgákʷɬ ɬagaxqá·xɬ gá·qʰ].

I have just seen for the very first time the

³ I would like to express my appreciation to Michael Silverstein and the Department of Linguistics, Harvard University, who made it possible to bring Wallace Morgan to Cambridge in March, 1969.

Wallace Morgan is the head chief of Kitwanga, a small Gitksan village on the middle Skeena River. Wallace is a member of the Wolf phratry and his full chiefly name is /ʔaxtii hixl kibuu/ *Skinny Wolf*.

*toughness of the sinews of the wings of the raven.*⁴

The phonetic difficulties of this sentence tongue-twister derive from several sources. Most immediately, they arise from the proximal articulatory positions of its palatals, velars, labiovelars, and uvulars which, as well, manifest stop / spirant, voiced lax / voiceless tense, and plain / ejective oppositions. Such dorsal or guttural segments are characteristic of the native languages of the Pacific Northwest and they are judged to be harsh- or 'hard-' sounding even by many Indians. A second source of phonetic difficulty relates to the proper application of the Nass-Gitksan 'Grassman's Law', a series of synchronic phonological rules which operate upon initially reduplicated noun and verb themes. These rules deglottalize ejective segments and spirantize post-vocalic stops and affricates. In part, their application is conditioned by normal allegro speech tempo, as opposed to slower deliberate delivery.

Wallace Morgan, who is now in his seventies, recalled that he learned this tongue-twister as a youth. He knew of one other tongue-twister, but was unable to recall it. During late July and early August, 1969, two Gitksan matrons visited me at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. The elder of the two had heard a version of Wallace's tongue-twister which begins differently:

/wil cipéipkʷɬ . . ./.

The place where [the sinews . . .] are tied.

2. During a short informant session with

⁴ Forms enclosed by slashes are in systematic phonemic representation where the segmental symbols represent fully specified distinction feature complexes. The system of representation is that given in my unpublished Tsimshian Comparative Vocabularies with Notes on Nass-Gitksan Systematic Phonology, (Albuquerque, ditto-graphed, 1967), with a few minor changes. I have also indicated surface formative boundaries with hyphens to facilitate interlinear translation. Forms enclosed by square brackets are in systematic phonetic representation.

this same woman, I came across a verb stem /ʔankʷs/ *have a cataract, be cataracted*. I remarked that it was homophonous with the verb stem /ʔankʷs/ *be cooked*, and I asked whether the two forms were in some sense related. She felt that they were not semantically the same and then, with typical Nass-Gitksan wit and humor, she volunteered that she knew some riddles, one of which involved these forms. It goes:

/ʔitkʷ/ [call out] /ci-tii/ [irrealis-contrastive] /yeek-ý/ [riddle-my], /ca-ʔax-tii/ [irrealis-negative-contrastive] /kʷup-kʷ-t/ [eat-passive-it] /la-ʔankʷs-t/ [relative-be cooked or have a cataract-it].

Guess my riddle—it's something you can't eat even after it's cooked.

The proper answer is, of course, /caʔ/ *the eye*. The riddle thus involves a pun based upon the homonymy of the two verbs *be cooked* and *have a cataract* in Nass-Gitksan.

A second riddle which my informant professed is:

/ʔitkʷ/ [call out] /ci-tii/ [irrealis-contrastive] /yeek-ý/ [riddle-my], /ci-sooʔ-t/ [irrealis-be oval-shaped-it], /ʔii ʔutkʷu/ [and around] /ɬax-ɬ/ [hair-connective] /hi-taax-t/ [relative-outer circumference-it], /ʔii kʷux/ [and sometimes] /ksi/ [out of] /paʔ-ɬ/ [run-connective] /ʔaks/ [water] /loo-t/ [oblique Pro-base-it].

Guess my riddle—it's oval-shaped, has hair all around it, and sometimes water runs out of it.

Again, the proper answer is /caʔ/ *the eye*, although another answer more quickly suggests itself to the Gitksan-speaker and the linguist.

The third riddle is:

/ʔitkʷ/ [call out] /ci-tii/ [irrealis-contrastive] /yeek-ý/ [riddle-my], /ci-wii/ [irrealis-big] /ñakʷ-t/ [be long-it], /ʔii/ [and] /cuusk-m/ [be small-attributive] /wii hilaʔ-ɬ/ [big be big-connective] /hi-tim-qis-t/ [relative-outer surface-hair-it] /ʔa-ɬ/ [oblique preposition-connective] /hi-tim-u-t/ [relative-outer sur-

face-body-it], /ʔii/ [and] /kʷii/ [about] /hiks-ɬ/ [slip-connective] /hi-tq̄a-t/ [relative-skin-it], /ʔii-t/ [and-it] /qaniwila/ [always] /kʷii/ [about] /ki-kiy-ɬ/ [iterative-look for-connective] /hi-liki/ [relative-any] /cim/ [inside] /wil/ [complementizer] /nuʔ/ [hole] /tim/ [future] /wil/ [complementizer] /cimwil/ [into] /tq̄aʔtkʷ/ [crawl].

Guess my riddle—it's very long, its head is a little bigger than its body, its skin is loose-fitting, and it's always looking around for a hole to crawl into.

The proper answer is /alt/ a snake.

Both my woman informants told me that riddling was an informal activity which anyone might use in various situations to pass the time more quickly. Some riddles are conventionalized, while others are composed for the occasion, and of course, some people are more adept than others in composing new riddles.

The existence of indigenous riddling traditions among New World peoples, as many older anthropologists and folklorists will recall, has been a controversial question for some decades.⁵ After reading through the literature, I am inclined to agree with Dundes (1967:57-8) who believes that there were indigenous New World riddling traditions, "... but it is equally certain that the riddle tradition was a weak one." At the present time, however, I cannot say whether modern Gitksan riddling continues a pre-European pattern of speech-play or whether it was learned from the Whites. On the one hand, the shape of the unanalyzable noun stem /yeek/ riddle exemplifies the favored CVC canonical form of Nass-Gitksan lexical morphemes and it seems to have no other meaning. As well, both of my middle-aged woman informants believed riddling to be an old pattern. On the other hand, the Gitksan

⁵ The standard paper on this question is Archer Taylor, *American Indian Riddles*, JAF 57:1-15 (1944). More recent papers include: Charles T. Scott, *New Evidence of American Indian Riddles*, JAF 76:236-41 (1963); and David P. McAllester, *Riddles and other Verbal Play among the Comanches*, JAF 77:251-7 (1964).

have been in contact with Whites since early in the nineteenth century. Also, the formulaic structure of these riddles matches very closely that of White schoolchildren and I recall having heard English versions of the last two 'pretended obscene' riddles during my own school days in Kentucky.⁶ Clearly, further field collection of Gitksan riddles and data on the 'ethnography of Gitksan riddling' is called for before we can determine whether it has indigenous origins.

3. Another example is less easily classified and labelled as a form of speech-play, yet it deserves mention since it appears to be fairly widespread.⁷ It involves the Gitksan as secondary participants and it derives from situations where local Whites hear native speech. Wallace Morgan told me that a local White preacher once commented to him that it was easy to speak 'Indian', since all one had to

⁶ I have not personally attempted annotation for these two 'pretended obscene' riddles, but Alan Dundes (personal communication) has informed me that the first ('hair around it with water coming out') has been reported in English versions from Bermuda and North Carolina by Archer Taylor, *English Riddles from Oral Tradition*, p. 578, riddles 1425-1426, Berkeley and Los Angeles (1951).

⁷ I have been unable to find an existing technical term for the phenomenon in question, and have not attempted to coin a new one. Oswald Werner has given me several examples from German and Navajo. In the former case, a popular travel book for English-speakers in Germany advised travelers to reply 'donkey fieldmice' (for Danke vielmals) in thanking a German-speaking person. In the latter case, a common Navajo sentence is haʔáʔfísh baananíná *What are you doing?* Local Anglos render this as 'hot dish o' banana'. On their part, some Navajo refer to Studebaker cars and trucks as hastóʔ dibidí *fat men*.

William Elmendorf (personal communication) has noted that this phenomenon is also to be observed in the final anglicized form of many loanwords from American Indian languages, including place-names. For example, the Twana Salish place-name [dɔxʷyabús] *place of crooked-jaw salmon* became Duckabush with three recognizable English morphs. There are many other examples from western Washington; some are only partially analyzable, e.g., *Enumclaw*.

say were the two names 'Matthew Lawson' and 'Sam Wilson'. The former derives from /małtý loosm̄/. [médíʔi lós̄m̄] *I told you*. and the latter from

/saʔam̄ wils̄m̄/. [saʔám̄ wíls̄m̄] *Keep it up, you're doing fine*.

Both are fairly common sentences in Gitksan conversations.

A final comment relates to the use of proverbs among the Tsimshian-speaking peoples. Dundes (1967:58) has observed that the evidence for indigenous North American proverbial sayings is rather slim and he cites O. Morison's 1889 paper on Coast Tsimshian proverbs⁸ as one of the few examples. I read the Morison paper only recently, but I was impressed by the fact that most of her proverbial sayings made clear reference to characters and episodes in the native oral literature. Though her transcription leaves much to be desired, I believe that she was reporting an indigenous tradition of proverbial sayings. I collected a similar proverb during the summer of 1968 when I was doing fieldwork in the village of Gitlakdamix on the Nass River.

One afternoon when we were discussing

⁸ O. Morison, *Tsimshian Proverbs*, JAF 2:285-6 (1889).

Elmendorf and Suttles have reported a proverbial saying from the Musqueam Salish, but it is not clear whether it is part of a larger tradition of proverbs or simply an isolated instance. See William W. Elmendorf and Wayne Suttles, *Pattern and Change in Halkomelem Salish Dialects*, AL 2:7.7 (1960).

the Raven cycle, my informant, Hubert McMillan,⁹ recalled a sentence from a Raven tale which he said was used as a proverb. It is:

/kʷilks qoʔ-s/ [back go-connective] /txeem-sim-ɬ/ [Raven-connective] /kʷiis-qaaq-t/ [blanket-raven-his].

Raven went back [to using] his raven-blanket.

It occurs in the following episode of the Raven cycle: Once Raven passed through the village of the Air-People. He went into an apparently empty house where he spotted a nice shaman's-blanket. He tore the old raven-blanket that he was wearing into pieces and put on the shaman's-blanket. As he was about to walk out with it on, an invisible arm reached out from behind and grabbed it off of him. So, he had to go back to his old raven-blanket and sew together the pieces he had torn it into, before he continued on his way up the Nass River.¹⁰

Hubert told me that one might use this proverbial saying in such a case as when a man's new outboard motor breaks down so that he must fall back on using the old one he had put away in his shed.

⁹ Hubert McMillan, in his fifties, is the hereditary head chief of Gitlakdamix. He is a member of the Wolf phratry and his chiefly name is /kstiýawaq/ *Moves in a stately dignified manner*.

¹⁰ Compare this episode with a similar one which Franz Boas recorded in Kincolith village on the Nass River in 1894. See Franz Boas, *Tsimshian Texts*, BAE-B 27, p. 39 (1902).