



## A Preliminary Survey of Chinook Jargon Lexical Item Use in the Pacific Northwest

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# A Preliminary Survey of Chinook Jargon Lexical Item Use in the Pacific Northwest

Michael JOHNSON

マイケル ジョンソン

**Abstract** : This paper sets out to explore the distribution and use of Chinook Jargon (CJ) lexical items in the Pacific Northwest. Examples of English loanwords originating in CJ were collected from general web and periodical database searches, as well as queries within the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). Content analysis of the collected data in reference to the most frequently encountered CJ term (*skookum*) revealed that current usage fell primarily into three broad categories: commercial, geographic, and daily use. A range of examples of *skookum* from these categories is discussed to provide an overview of the use of this particular CJ lexical item in current Pacific Northwest English. These findings are also considered in respect to their geographical distribution and the role such CJ lexical items serve in specific communities.

**Key words** : Chinook Jargon, Pacific Northwest English, dialect

## 1. Introduction

English currently used in the Pacific Northwest of North America is characterized by a number of distinct lexical items. Unbeknownst to the vast majority of Pacific Northwest English (PNE) users, these distinct lexical items have rich linguistic and sociocultural histories. A number of words distinct to PNE originate from Chinook Jargon (CJ), a trade language that developed along trading routes between Alaska and Oregon in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This pidgin served as the lingua franca for commerce amongst First Nations communities and European traders for well over a century. While few fluent CJ speakers remain today, it perseveres in part through its lexical representation in both PNE and broader varieties of English. This paper will provide a brief overview of the history of CJ and examine its usage and geographic range in modern PNW English.

There is some debate as to exactly when CJ became established in the Pacific Northwest. The majority of early researchers and chroniclers of the jargon trace its origin to Vancouver Island where European explorers and traders interacted with First Nations peoples in Nootka Sound in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century (Gibbs, 1863; Leechman 1926; Thomas, 1928). Later researchers

posited the possibility that a proto-version of CJ necessarily existed pre-contact due to the number of indigenous languages and the nature of trade relationships amongst First Nations communities in the Pacific Northwest (Thomason, 1983; Harris, 1994).

Despite uncertainty regarding its genesis, development and growth of the jargon were undoubtedly accelerated with the expansion of trade and commerce in the Pacific Northwest. With the establishment of trading posts on the Columbia River following the Lewis and Clark and Astor expeditions, and the later expansion of Hudson Bay Company trading into the region, the rudimentary trade language expanded significantly in accordance with new needs and influences (Lutz, 2009). As of publication of Charles Gibbs' (1863) *Dictionary of the Chinook Language: or Indian Trade Language of the North Pacific Coast*, the Jargon had expanded to about 500 words, consisting primarily of words from Chinook, Chehalis, Nootka, and other regional indigenous languages, but also with French and English words comprising about a third of the CJ lexicon.

With the establishment of CJ as the lingua franca for trade in the Pacific Northwest, its use also expanded to other social functions and institutions. Sermons and bibles were translated into CJ by Roman Catholic missionaries, legal proceedings were conducted in the language in regional courts, and local news shared via the Kamloops Wawa – a CJ-medium newspaper. CJ became particularly valuable in serving as a lingua franca between peripatetic First Nations communities working in the seasonal agricultural and fisheries industries (Boas, 1888), and as a means of communication between First Nations and Chinese communities (particularly in Vancouver) (Leechman, 1926). At its peak in 1870, the number of CJ users had reached an estimated population of 100,000 (Grant, 1996).

Despite widespread use of the jargon, its use fell rapidly during the early twentieth century. This decline appears a direct result of the inroads English had made as the new lingua franca of the west coast, both through its expanding commercial importance, and discriminatory language policies and practices that discouraged use of First Nations languages (Klassen, 2006). As Jacobs (1932) observed, by the early 1930's younger First Nations people found English a much more versatile means of communication for travel and work than CJ, particularly as "the whites no longer trouble to learn it" (p.27).

The most recent census of CJ users places its population at 723, which Ethnologue (2013) defines as a "dying" language status. Despite its moribund state, there is a ray of hope that CJ can be revitalized. In the First Nations communities of Grande Ronde, Oregon, where CJ once reached creole status as it was passed down through generations of users, current kindergarten and elementary school immersion programs are producing a new generation of "Chinuk" users (see Holton, 2004). The community-led initiative, in promoting the use of CJ not only in schools, but in homes as well, provides a suitable linguistic and social foundation for revitalization.

Despite efforts to revitalize CJ the number of current users remains small and most frequently encounters with its lexical items occur in geographical or cultural references, or in casual language use of speakers of PNE. While the Oxford English Dictionary identifies a number of English words as having CJ etymologies, most examples of their use originate from sources at least half a century old. In order to derive a more contemporary perspective on the range and extent of CJ lexical item use in modern English, this study set out to conduct a survey of CJ usage in Pacific Northwest periodicals. It was hoped that such an examination could shed light on current categories and/or domains for CJ lexical item usage as well as provide data which would elucidate its relative cultural and social relevance in Pacific Northwest communities.

## **2. Methods**

### **2.1 Data Collection**

Data were collected from general searches within online archives of periodicals based in the Pacific Northwest (Alaska, British Columbia, Washington, and Oregon). Further queries were made within the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) to both confirm and explore the geographical distribution of usage. Due to the exploratory nature of this study, only details of the most frequently encountered CJ lexical item (*skookum*) was retained for analysis. Further CJ lexical items will be examined in subsequent inquiry.

### **2.2 Analysis**

Each sample item revealed in searches within archives was recorded, along with its contextual details. The family name Skookum was not included for analysis, nor was historical reference to Skookum Jim, or references to the skookum breed of cat, as they were thematic outliers and their frequency would skew the significance of the other result categories. The derived corpus was comprised of a total of 245 examples (N=245). This corpus was subjected to two-step content analysis: first samples were placed into broad thematic and geographical categories, and then further refinement of thematic categories was undertaken to arrive at the final thematic groupings. Due to the finite nature of commercial and geographic references, subsequent searches of online business directories and map applications were undertaken to derive the actual number of businesses and places with skookum in their names.

## **3. Results**

### **3.1 Daily use in periodicals**

Searches of Pacific Northwest periodicals' online data bases and COCA returned 245 (n=245) examples of skookum in use. These examples were analyzed and were found to fall within four thematic categories: daily use, commercial, geographical, and other (see Table 1).

The daily use category included examples of skookum that appeared in naturally-occurring prose while the commercial category included business or product names that included skookum. Examples that fell into the geographic category included place names or built structures which had skookum in their names. The final category ‘other’ included instances where skookum was a chosen element in the names of things or collectives including animals, boats, teams, and musical or community groups.

Table 1 Appearances “skookum” in Pacific Northwest periodicals: Categories of use

Location (number of hits)	daily use	commercial	geographical	other
Alaska* (N=65)	30.7% (N=20)	41.5% (N=27)	21.5% (N=14)	7.69% (N=5)
British Columbia** (N=45)	44.4% (n=20)	22.2% (n=10)	4.4% (n=2)	38.8% (n=13)
Washington*** (N=82)	1.2% (n=1)	30.48% (N=25)	58.5% (N=48)	9.7% (N=8)
Oregon**** (N=53)	7.54% (N=4)	16.98% (N=9)	52.80% (N=28)	22.64% (N=12)

\*Alaska Dispatch News, Juneau Empire, Ketchikan Times

\*\*Vancouver Sun, Times Colonist, North Shore News, Prince George Citizen, Maple Ridge-Pitt Meadows Times, Alberni Valley Times, Surrey Now, Okanagan Saturday, The Province, The Daily Courier, Comox Valley Echo, Parksville Qualicum Beach News.

\*\*\*The Seattle Times, The Olympian, The Bellingham Herald

\*\*\*\*The Oregonian, Daily Astorian, Register Guard

Within the daily use category results varied significantly across geographic area with significantly higher daily usage examples appearing in the Alaskan (30.7%) and British Columbian (44%) samples. In the Alaskan samples there were a range of daily usage examples where skookum appeared to remain extant in daily vernacular. In one such example a 2011 Itadarod participant used skookum to describe the high quality of that years’ race course:

“I like it hard and fast,” he said. “It’s pretty skookum all right – probably one of the best ever.” (*Anchorage Daily News*, 4/8/2011)

Further, in a letter to the editor an Alaskan resident used the term to describe potentially robust fish species impervious to environmental degradation,

Fishermen would be happy for the jobs...unless maybe they’re gainfully employed catching carp and catfish that proved skookum enough to survive in the tailings run-off and mercurial river fluctuations. (*Alaska Dispatch News*, 9/17/2013)

The term was even used in political commentary, as an Alaska State House Representative in his legislative e-newsletter explained to his constituents,

What we didn't do is save any money for the future. Some legislators claim money we put into yet another state fund – the Statutory Budget Reserve – is savings. But it isn't. It's just moving money from one pants pocket to another. It can be spent any time. That doesn't seem too skookum to me. So, as I write this, I am trying to balance some of that spending by putting \$2.2 billion into the Alaska Permanent Fund. (*Alaska Dispatch News*, 5/13/2013)

Alaska Democrat Governor Candidate Bob Poe also used the term on a visit to Ketchikan where he commented,

That is a really skookum-looking operation over there, ... Clean, neat, professional. Lots of really capable workmanship....Ketchikan ought to be really proud of the work ethic that's been applied out there to make that thing a success. (*Ketchikan Daily*, 10/22/2009)

In an opinion piece discussing the possibility of armed guards in public schools, one Alaskan commenter used skookum to explain the gap between his assumed, and actual, prowess with firearms,

I thought I was pretty skookum with a firearm – for a civilian – until I went through some basics in the Firearms Training Simulator at the Alaska Department of Public Safety (DPS) Academy. (*Alaska Dispatch News*, 1/18/2013)

The use of skookum also extended into other sections of periodicals. In the television section of the *Alaska Dispatch News* readers were asked to rank Alaska-based reality shows on a scale from “One (awful) to five (skookum), and explain what they love or hate about each series” (*Alaska Dispatch News*, 2/12/2011). In the news section of the *Juneau Empire* a Police Sergeant described a grenade disposal robot as a “pretty skookum thing” (*Juneau Empire*, 12/19/2008), while the sports section described an Australian ski coach's temporary accommodations in the Goldstream Valley as a “skookum house-sitting gig at a roomy log home ... complete with sauna” (*Juneau Empire*, 1/15/2012).

Like Alaska, British Columbia periodicals provided a wide range of examples of Skookum in daily use. These examples included the use of skookum to describe the importance of proper bear-proof garbage receptacles on Vancouver Island:

“Some people are building what they feel are secure garbage containers and the bears are breaking into those. A simple plywood box is easily breached by a hungry bear”, he said. “You need something real skookum” (*Times Colonist*, 6/22/2012)

In an article describing urban redevelopment in Vancouver, a recently demolished parking structure was described as “a skookum structure that didn’t come down without a fight” (*Vancouver Sun*, 10/20/2010). In a similar example, skookum was used in Comox to describe the tools that would be required to bring down a robust hillside cross that came down under suspicious circumstances,

“There is no way the wind could blow that thing over.” He said. “The cross was installed in concrete, using 12-inch bolts”, Pearce pointed out. “Someone would have had to have a sledge, or something else good and skookum to knock it down.” (*Comox Valley Citizen*, 11/14/2014).

Similar to the Alaska samples above, skookum was also used in the political realm in British Columbia, where it was used to describe the need for impactful political initiatives on Vancouver Island:

But in truth, the 750,000 people of Vancouver Island haven’t seen the province take on a really skookum initiative since the \$1.3 billion Vancouver Island Highway Project launched by the New Democrats. (*Times Colonist*, 2/19/2011)

Skookum also found its way into other sections of British Columbian newspapers. In food sections, it was used to describe the “skookum wood-fired pizza oven” at Vincino’s Italian restaurant in Vancouver (*Vancouver Sun*, 9/13/2012) and the “skookum sandwiches with a side of love” on offer at the Smokehouse restaurant (*Vancouver Sun*, 4/8/2012). For those who prepare food at home, the Prince George Citizen suggested that “you can pack a pretty skookum lunch for less than \$2” (3/22/2011). In the fashion section, skookum was used to describe one Victoria retail shop’s offerings, “Fall is around the corner. We own fall fashion, in all its layered, utilitarian, skookum fabric and cozy goodness” (*Times Colonist*, 8/0/2011). In a review of sporting footwear, the term was used to describe how a particular brand of snowshoes were stronger and better built than others: “The IRL shoes are a little more skookum than what the casual hiker would buy at a sports store” (*Prince George Citizen*, 4/19/2011). In local community news, the executive director of the Friends in Need Food Bank lauded the “skookum deal” offered by a local Pitt Meadows restaurant (*Maple Ridge-Pitt Meadows Times*, 2/11/2011), while in Comox, skookum was used in an auto parts shop review: “They replaced my windshield AND cleaned inside my truck AND gave me skookum new windshield wipers” (*Comox Valley Echo*, 4/19/2013). In the travel section, skookum was used to describe a beautiful spot on the Georgia Strait: “Everything’s skookum on the Sunshine Coast” (*Surrey Now*, 3/23/2010). Further, it was used to describe a feeling of surprise and wonder that accompanied a trip to a mecca of sports car production: “And then I get those skookum-holy-cow kind of days, like the one that took me to the Lamborghini and Ferrari factories...” (*Vancouver Sun*, 3/6/2010). British

Columbia itself was similarly described, where a report on the out-migration of young BC residents described the perceived charms of the province.

Snowboarding in the morning, paddling in the afternoon, swimming at sunset. British Columbians generally rate their province as pretty skookum, a “supernatural” place. (*Vancouver Sun*, 9/6/2013)

Finally, in the entertainment section of the North Shore News (7/9/2010) an event review of the Lilith Fair concert used skookum to describe the fireworks that accompanied the culmination of the event,

The night came to a close with a collective performance from all the Lilith musicians followed by some skookum fireworks. The downtown show lit up Lions Gate Bridge while others were set off in John Lawson Park.

In Washington and Oregon there were far fewer daily usage examples of skookum found in regional periodicals. In Washington State a single example was found, where “skookum trademark” was used in an obituary to describe the legacy of built-structures left behind by a departed engineer. In Oregon, a total of four daily usage examples were found. These examples included the Harry Potter novel being described as a “skookum read” (*Oregonian*, 7/8/2005), a “skookum boat” being described as a “fisherwoman’s best friend” (*Oregonian*, 6/14/2014), and a well-built igloo as a “skookum igloo” (*Oregonian*, 3/5/2010). In describing how to further First Nations initiatives at a conference attended by former members of congress, and representatives from the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Interior Department, and the White House, an advocate explained,

If you’re really smart, or ‘skookum’, as we say, is that you can get some time with them on the side or over lunch or dinner or something like that and then just educate them about what we want to have, so you actually get to talk to the real decision makers. (*Daily Astorian*, 10/28/2011)

### 3.2 Geographic

Use of the term skookum in geographical and commercial references also appeared frequently in periodicals. Due to the finite nature of such actual places and businesses, subsequent searches were undertaken to obtain specific numbers. North American locations with skookum a major element in their names are summarized in Table 2.



**Table 2 Skookum: Geographic**

<u>Alaska (n=9)</u>	<u>B.C. (n=9)</u>	<u>Washington (n=10)</u>	<u>Oregon (n=2)</u>
Skookum Creek (5)	Skookum Creek	Skookum Creek	Skookum Lake
Skookum River	Skookum Gulch	Skookum Meadows	Skookum Court
Skookum Lake	Skookum Island	Little Skookum Inlet	
Skookum Glacier	Skookum Lake	Little Skookum Creek	<u>Idaho (n=3)</u>
Skookum Gulch	Skookum Trail	Skookum Inlet	Skookum Creek (2)
	Skookumchuck	Skookum Flats	Skookum Lake
	Skookumchuck Creek	Skookum Bay	
	Skookumchuck Narrows	Skookum Ridge	<u>Montana (n=2)</u>
	Skookumchuck Rapids	Skookum Trail	Skookum Butte
		Skookum Slope	Skookum Point
			<u>Michigan (N=1)</u>
			Skookum Road

### 3.3 Commercial

A number of commercial enterprises and products with skookum as a primary component in their names were revealed through regional business directory searches. The results of these searches are summarized in Table 3. As the results indicate, commercial uses of skookum are concentrated within the Pacific Northwest, although several businesses outside that region also used the word. Not included in Table 1 was the product name “Skookum 29er”, a high performance mountain bike produced in Wales.

**Table 3: Skookum Corporate**

<u>Alaska (n=4)</u>	<u>B.C. (n=11)</u>	<u>Washington (n=9)</u>	<u>Oregon (n=5)</u>
Skookum Adventures	Skookum Robotics	Skookum Contract Serv.	Skookum Rope
Skookum Sales & Recycling	Skookum Janitorial Services	Skookum Paddle	Skookum Fishing Charters
Skookum Canvasworks	Skookum Dodge	Skookum Brewery	Skookum Marine
Skookum Charters	Skookum Scaffolding	Skookum Snowmobile	Skookum
	Skookum Landscaping	Skookum Dog	Skookum Reforestation
<u>Yukon (n=2)</u>	Skookum Landscaping	Skookum Surf Co.	
Skookum Asphalt	Skookum Floor	Skookum Red	
Skookum Brand	Concepts	Skookum Sportswear	<u>North Carolina (n=1)</u>
	Skookum Tools	Skookum Fishing	Skookum Digital Works
	Skookum Chicken	Charters	
<u>Alberta (n=1)</u>	Burger		<u>Colorado (1)</u>
Skookum Creative Works	Skookum Cycle & Ski		Skookum Ski Boots
	Skookum Inn		
	Skookum Monkey		

### 3.4 Other results

Within the periodical searches Skookum appeared in a number of instances outside the daily usage, geographic and corporate categories. These results were mainly where skookum was used in reference to the names of groups or things. In Alaska skookum was used in the names of a band (The Skookums), a boat (The Skookum Yarder), and the Skookum ice hockey team. Similarly, in BC there were bands called Skookum and Skookum Shine Shine, and adventure race teams called the Skookum Juniors and Skookum Youngsters. Finally, in Washington there

was an archery club called the Skookum Archers, a community group called Skookum Rotary, and a race horse named Skookum Dear.

#### 4. Discussion

The results of this exploratory survey of CJ provided a number of interesting insights into its current state in the Pacific Northwest. In regard to its use in daily periodical vernacular, the single lexical item chosen for examination in this study, skookum, was shown to appear in varying degrees of frequency and modes of use in different regions. In Alaska and British Columbia skookum was frequently used in periodicals in its adjectival form. In the 40 samples collected from the two areas (Alaska n=20; B.C. n=20) the range of meaning extracted included: strong, resilient, proper, sustainable, neat, clean, professional, competent, skilled, good, strong, nice, splendid, worthwhile, effective, high quality, impressive, grand, big, surprising, and supernatural. However, in Washington and Oregon, far fewer examples emerged in the periodical searches. In these two states skookum was used a combined five times (Washington n=1; Oregon n=4) as an adjective with a range of meaning including: good, strong, smart, sturdy, and impressive. Two of these examples included in-passage explanations of the meaning of the term, suggesting the writer or editor suspected it might not be familiar to the readership. In quantity and quality these results contrasted with the Alaska and British Columbia samples which were much larger, contained a wider range of meaning, and did not define the term within the passages – suggesting that the readership of periodicals in these areas was familiar with the term.

Geographic references to skookum abound in the PNW, particularly in Alaska, B.C. and Washington, and occasionally appear in other western states such as Idaho and Montana. While these geographic names have existed for generations, and do not necessarily indicate a conscious embrace of skookum by PNE English users, they do represent a cultural and historical legacy that remains visible in daily life across the Pacific Northwest.

Speaking more to the conscious use of skookum in PNW English are commercial ventures choosing the name as a means to convey their identities and values. The number of commercial references were led by BC (n=11) and Washington (n=9), and followed by Oregon (n=5) and Alaska (n=4). The range of commercial usage in BC and Washington was particularly wide with IT/high tech, engineering, adventure sports, hospitality, human resourcing, and general retail companies utilizing skookum in their names. In Alaska and Oregon commercial references were primarily associated with fishing and forestry enterprises. In other areas of North America, and in Europe, occasional commercial use of the term was observed. In a direct query to Skookum Digital Works in North Carolina as to why they chose to use skookum in their name, the company replied that it was chosen due to its positive association with integrity, but also that they frequently needed to explain the term to customers.

Combined, the geographic and commercial examples serve to provide a glimpse of the

linguistic landscape of the Pacific Northwest. The concept of linguistic landscape was originally proposed as means to assess the vitality of particular languages in multilingual communities through an examination of “the visibility and salience of languages on public and commercial signs in a given territory or region” (Landry and Bourthis, 1997). This concept is particularly useful in assessing the status of Chinook Jargon lexical items as it provides important informational and symbolic insights. Specifically, it renders insight into the territoriality of usage and the degree of value and status given to the lexical item in question. The survey findings suggest that skookum remains in daily use in the Pacific Northwest, particularly in British Columbia and Alaska, but that its daily usage fades quickly outside of these areas. The widespread use of skookum in commercial enterprises and products across the Pacific Northwest suggest that it still holds positive symbolic value to business owners and customers alike, and that its use conveys a brand identity that is synonymous with regional values.

## **5. Conclusion**

English lexical items originating in CJ appear to have continued widespread use in the Pacific Northwest in a variety of domains. While domain usage is inconsistent across regions, CJ lexical items such as skookum appear to carry cultural and symbolic value in the region, and this value appears to contribute to their enduring usage. Further analysis of the linguistic landscape, particularly the semiotic characteristics of signage, in addition to the manner in which CJ lexical items are used in regional discourse, are important in providing a more complete picture. Certainly, other CJ lexical items must also be included in subsequent inquiry to assess if the observed current use of skookum in PNW English is representative of broader trends of CJ loanword usage.

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#### Author's Information

Name: Michael Johnson

Faculty: Muroran Institute of Technology

Email: migjohns@mmm.muroran-it.ac.jp