

Duck-Kettles in Canada

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DUCK-KETTLES IN CANADA

To Eric Hamp, with his interests in Algonquian, language contact, and philology, I offer this brief observation.

In cases in which similar features are found in geographically contiguous languages, it is not always possible to sort out a borrowing explanation from one involving independent development. Moreover, even if borrowing is indicated, the direction of borrowing is often hard to determine. With this in mind, the following example from the native and nonnative languages of Canada can be examined, for the facts are such as to allow us to make some headway on how to decide among these possibilities. Moreover, philological analysis—so often a forgotten partner to linguistic analysis—provides some of the crucial information here.

In at least two Algonquian languages of Canada, a compound of the word for 'duck' and the word for 'kettle' occurs in the meaning 'tea kettle'. For example, in Cree, one finds *sisibwaskik* cited in Lacombe (1874:597), and the form *cicibakik* is given for Algonquin (Ojibwa) by Cuoq (1886:86). One interesting aspect of the occurrence of such a compound is that a similar semantic connection is to be found in Canadian French; colloquially, *canard* 'duck' is used to

mean 'kettle' (so Clapin 1894:s.v., for example). The question naturally arises, then, about what connection, if any, there is between the Algonquian form(s) and the Canadian French colloquial usage of *canard*.

Cuoq glosses the Algonquian form as 'canard-chaudière', and then goes further, explaining the Canadian French usage as well: 'utensile de cuisine à bec de canard, et que, pour cela, on appelle vulgairement *canard*'; a similar explanation is given in Clapin (s.v.). Interestingly, one Cree speaker in Edmonton, when consulted about the Cree form, gave virtually the same justification, saying that the kettle is so called because its neck looked like a duck's neck. We are thus faced with a typical dilemma: did these languages arrive at this metaphor independently or is the connection found in one of the languages a calque on the other?

Independent creation is always a difficult hypothesis to prove or disprove. In this case, one would have only to assume that Canadian French and Algonquian speakers arrived at the same connection because they were each dealing with a similar object, and there are typological parallels involving the naming of utensils after various fauna.¹ However, one has to wonder why the duck was selected as the basis for the metaphor by both groups, especially when there are other birds, e.g., the Canadian goose, that would fit the bill equally well.

An additional relevant fact is that continental French knows no such usage for *canard* as the Canadian French one, as an examination of standard and dialectal sources, e.g., Boucoiran (1898) or Jaubert (1864), reveals. Thus the duck-kettle connection is localized in North America. Nonetheless, there are some standard and dialectal uses of *canard* and phonetically similar words, some even related to *canard*, which may have provided the basis for the Canadian French metaphor. For example, the Larousse (1975) dictionary gives as a secondary gloss for *canard* 'sorte de récipient ferme, pourvu d'un long bec, dont on se sert pour donner à boire aux malades couchés'. Similarly, Dottin (1899:276) gives the following for Bas-Maine French: '*kane*, petit canard;—tube en fer-blanc pour puiser le cidre par la bonde'. While perhaps a confusion with a derivative of *kan* (Standard *canne*) 'reed', nonetheless it and the above gloss for *canard*² do show that a link between 'duck' and a word for a vessel or container for liquid is present in continental French. Furthermore, influence from (western) dialectal *cagnard* 'small portable stove', phonetically similar to *canard* and likewise denoting a small warming object, cannot be discounted.³ These forms suggest that the necessary elements for a metaphorical and/or folk-etymological

¹ One can compare the dialectal American English *spider* for 'frying pan', based on the cast-iron legs one variety originally had, or Finnish *sorsa* 'duck', used by hospital staff in Helsinki for 'bedpan'. I am indebted to Ron Craig for general research help here and elsewhere and to Riitta Blum for the Finnish form.

² There are other dialectal forms, e.g., Norman *can(n)e* 'pitcher; pail' or Old French *canari* 'small boat', which could also be cited; the etymological connections with the root of *canard* are not at all clear for these forms.

³ Thanks are due to my colleague, Hans Keller of the Department of Romance Languages and Literatures, for bringing this form to my attention.

connection of 'duck' with 'kettle' were already present in French before the move to Canada. From this evidence, therefore, it might appear that the Algonquian form is in some way due to contact with the French in Canada.

One piece of further evidence, though, casts doubt on this conclusion. There is a passage from a Cree sacred story (*ātayōhkēwin*) whose interpretation seems to depend on a connection between ducks and kettles. In story 45 of Bloomfield (1934), *Wisahkēcāhk*, the Cree culture hero, visits an old couple in their tent. There is a large stone in the tent. *Wisahkēcāhk* is starving, and at his request, the woman puts a kettle (*askihk*) on the fire. At that point, the man gets up and climbs on the stone and:⁴

*omist itwēw, asinīhk ēh-apit: "kwēk kwēk kwēk!" itwēw, tāpiskōc sīsīp.
"hā, nōtokēsiw, kitaskihk omis īsih iyipēn!" ēkwah, "kwēk kwēk kwēk,"
k-ētewēt, ēkosi omisi tōtam: oma oskāt ohpinam, ēh-mīsīt askikohk.*

'Sitting on the stone, he said, "Quack, quack," like a duck. "Hey, Old Woman, tip your kettle this way!" Then, while crying "Quack, quack, quack," he did this: he lifted his leg and muted into the kettle'.

The man's duck imitation is apparently unprovoked and nothing in the previous context of the story explains his sudden outburst. Even though the *Wisahkēcāhk* stories are fantastical, it does seem that the 'duck-kettle' connection is being played on here. The connection Cree speakers made between ducks and kettles, as evidenced by the compound in question, would give some motivation for the man's actions. The reference to a kettle would summon up the 'duck' image, so that the narrator would simply be following up on that by having the man act as he does.

The presence of a duck-kettle connection in the language, then, would allow for a reasonable interpretation of an otherwise baffling aspect of a sacred story. Since these sacred stories are presumably old,⁵ the connection needed to understand this particular passage must be an old one too; it thus emerges that the Algonquian could not have borrowed this feature from the French. However, if the facts about the nature of French-Indian contact in Canada are such as to preclude a French calque from Algonquian,⁶ then we would have a clear indication that the duck-kettle metaphor was an independent creation of the French and of the Algonquians of Canada. Obviously, more details are needed on nonlinguistic matters such as the nature of early Algonquian-French contacts, the types and actual shapes of their cooking utensils, etc., in order to have a complete answer to the mystery of the Canadian duck-kettles. Still, the philological interpretation given here provides an important clue and serves to narrow the range of possible solutions that must be explored further.

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⁴ The text is from Bloomfield (1934:298), with the mechanical orthographic substitution of *o, ē, c* for Bloomfield's *u, ā, ts*, suggested by Wolfart (1973:12).

⁵ They are, for example, "highly conventionalized" (Wolfart 1973:11), talk of bygone days, and have parallels in other Algonquian languages.

⁶ As suggested by Hans Keller (personal communication); I have no information handy on this question and leave it open at this time.

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HIEROGLYPHIC EVIDENCE FOR LOWLAND MAYAN
LINGUISTIC HISTORY

Mayan epigraphers and linguists have been successful in using data from Mayan languages to explain patterns of sign use in Mayan hieroglyphic texts, showing that specific words, roots, bound and unbound grammatical morphemes, phonological units, and grammatical constructions are represented that are widespread in Mayan languages. Fox and Justeson (1982) have shown more specifically that the phonological and lexical *innovations* documented in the script are those of the Lowland Mayan linguistic area (the Cholan and Yucatecan subgroups of the Mayan family). Linguistic research on Mayan writing is sufficiently advanced that it has provided spatial and temporal frameworks for Lowland Mayan historical linguistics. Fox and Justeson (1982) show that Lowland Mayan speech extended surely to very near the borders of ancient Lowland Maya civilization, and probably somewhat beyond them, and more provisionally that the boundaries between Cholan and Yucatecan groups lay approximately in the same place at ca. A.D. 700 as it did, eight or nine centuries later, at Spanish contact. Justeson et al. (1985:12–17, 57–59) have established an absolute chronology for language change and diversification in the Cholan-Tzeltalan and Yucatecan subgroups, for the texts documenting the innovations discussed by Fox and Justeson occur mainly on monuments dated to the year of their erection. Given this spatial and temporal framework, hieroglyphic evidence can sometimes reduce or remove uncertainty concerning lexical or grammatical reconstructions or concerning the conditions on sound changes—contributing to the primary linguistic data of Mayan historical linguistics. This note illustrates the current potential of the hieroglyphic data with examples of each type of contribution.