

## Nontraditional Placenames in Tlingit

The earliest recorded nontraditional placename used by a Tlingit speaker appears to have been for Victoria, the present capital of British Columbia on the southern end of Vancouver Island. During the late 19th century Victoria was a place where numerous Northwest Coast indigenous people from many different tribes would gather for monetary employment in the burgeoning lumber and fishing industries. The Tlingit name for this town, as with many other early non-Russian loanwords in Tlingit, is derived from Chinook Jargon (CJ). The CJ name was *Biktoli*, and as recorded in Swanton's *Tlingit Myths and Texts* (Swanton 1909:406) Gooshdutéen, the Naanyaa.aayí chief Shakes at the time, called Victoria in one of his songs *Waktáni*, transcribed by Swanton as "Waktâ'nî". A lamentation song from Yakutat calls the town *Mektori*, which is clearly similar (Hans Chester, p.c.). In addition, Vancouver Island has been called *Deikee Xaat*, meaning "Salmon Island" (Harold Jacobs, p.c.).

The Tlingit language lacks a number of sounds which exist in English and Russian, and even in some neighboring indigenous languages like Haida and Tsimshian. Not to be left behind, Tlingit has perhaps four sounds which are not attested in any other language, these being  $x'$ ,  $x'w$ ,  $\underline{x}$ , and  $\underline{x}w$  (Crippen 2007). Thus when a word is borrowed into Tlingit from a foreign language it must be reshaped to fit the sounds of Tlingit. This is similar to the process by which words borrowed from one language are changed to fit another language, such as how Japanese *karaoke* is often pronounced by English speakers as "carry-okey". The patterns and rules by which sounds are transformed when words are borrowed from one language to another is called loanword phonology, and is an active area of research in linguistics. In the name *Waktáni* the "b" sound of *Biktoli* which does not exist in Tlingit has been converted to a "w" which is used in Tlingit. We can tell that the original was a "b" as in CJ *Biktoli* rather than a "v" as in English *Victoria* because the Tlingit conversion of the English name would probably be something closer to \**Wiktáwya*. Numerous other loanwords from CJ exist in Tlingit as well, such as *nakwnéit* from CJ *leplet* meaning "priest", originally from French *le prêtre* (Johnson 1978).

Another nontraditional placename that was borrowed into Tlingit was the name for Portland, Oregon. Frederica DeLaguna recorded the Tlingit version of "Portland" in her book *Under Mount Saint Elias* (De Laguna 1972), said by a Yakutat speaker to be *X'wáatlan*. In this example we have the non-Tlingit sound "p" changed to  $x'w$  which is a rounded ejective fricative. The rounding approximates the labial quality of the English "p", and the ejective frication

approximates the noisy burst of air released in the English “p”.

The same Tlingit loanword phonology can be applied to other modern placenames as well. For example, “Seattle” could easily become \**Seeyátl*, “Anchorage” could be \**Áankawich* or just \**Áankich*, and “Vancouver” could be \**Wankóowa*. The object of using such Tlingitized placenames is not of course to make fun of Tlingit pronunciation, as some might suppose, but instead to reduce the amount of language mixing of Tlingit and English when talking. While this may be unimportant to native speakers of Tlingit, as more people learn Tlingit as a second language and work to keep it alive, they will want to avoid mixing in English as much as possible. Using loanword forms of nontraditional placenames is one method by which such language mixing can be avoided.

A method for nontraditional placename development which can prove useful is to borrow names from neighboring indigenous languages. For example, Tlingit people living in Anchorage may want to discuss places around upper Cook Inlet, but lack names for these places since this was never a traditional Tlingit territory. However, it was the traditional territory of the Dena’ina people and their placenames of the region are well documented in the book *Shem Pete’s Alaska* (Kari & Fall 2003). Dena’ina has some sounds which do not exist in Tlingit, but it is a much closer fit to the Tlingit sound system. For example, one Dena’ina name for Anchorage is *Qatuk’e’usht* meaning roughly “something drifts up to it” (p. 332), a name which is easily pronounced by Tlingit speakers and could be spelled *Katuk’e.oosht* in Tlingit.

An interesting Dena’ina placename in Anchorage is *Chanshtnu*, better known in English as “Chester Creek”. The Dena’ina name for this creek, from which the English version is derived, simply means “Grass Creek”. Adapting this name to Tlingit could give \**Chaansh Héeni*, or even \**Chaanshtnu Héeni*, the latter an example of placename pleonasm since *-nu* in Dena’ina has the same meaning as *héen* in Tlingit. The Dena’ina people have developed new nontraditional placenames to fit the many changes which have happened to the Cook Inlet area in the past century, one example derived being the name for Westchester Lagoon, a small lake created in 1973 when the mouth of Chester Creek was dammed. Kari & Fall offer *Chansh Kaq’ Bena* “Grass Mouth Lake” as a novel yet entirely genuine Dena’ina name, derived from the traditional *Chansh Kaq’* “Grass Mouth” which refers to the small Chester Creek delta that empties into Cook Inlet. A Tlingit adaptation of this is relatively simple, starting with any of the previous names for Chester Creek and adding the Tlingit term *wát* “mouth of a river”, e.g. \**Chaansh Wát*, and then adding *áak’w* “little lake” to give \**Chaansh Wát Áak’w*.

An alternate method of deriving placenames is direct translation. This method will tend to work better with names of Native American origin where placenames are more commonly descriptive, rather than those of European-American origin which are often taken from untranslatable personal names like “Baranof” and “Douglas”. Working with the Dena’ina name for Chester Creek again, the Dena’ina word *chansh* “grass” might be translated into one of the Tlingit terms *sháak* “reed grass”, *sook* “wide grass”, or *xaatl’* “freshwater grass”. From one of these roots a number of new names can be created; using *sháak* we can produce \**Sháak Héeni* or \**Shaakhéeni* “Reed Grass Creek”, \**Shaakhéeni Wát* “Reed Grass Creek Mouth”, and \**Shaakhéeni Wát Áak’w*, just for example.

Another method of developing new nontraditional placenames in Tlingit is to create descriptive names from scratch using only Tlingit terminology. For example, Anchorage is well known for its extensive tidal mudflats around the head of the Cook Inlet, and could thus be named after this feature. The common Tlingit term for a tidal mudflat is *léin*, so Anchorage could be called *Léin.aan* or “tidal mudflat town”. Whitehorse is on the Yukon River and might be called *Héenwán.aan* for “riverside town” (*héenwán* “riverside”), or perhaps because there is a good fishing hole (*eesh*) downtown, *Eeshká.aan* for “at the fishing hole town”. Although these names are not traditional, they have a very close resemblance to the form of more traditional names and hence fit well with the existing placename system.

In sum, although the development of Tlingit placenames has largely ceased with the declining population of native speakers and increasing loss of traditional knowledge, there is no reason that this situation should continue. This is especially relevant for Tlingit people who live outside their traditional homelands and who wish to maintain and invigorate their culture and language. There are a number of different methods by which new placenames can be developed: by direct loans from European-American languages with adaptation to the Tlingit sound system, by direct loans from indigenous Native American languages requiring much less adaptation, by translation from other languages into Tlingit, and by creation of completely new descriptive names using existing Tlingit terminology. Of course, various combinations of these methods are also possible and useful. And eventually, over enough time and with continuing use, these new, nontraditional placenames may acquire the intricate cultural and geographic relationships that traditional names have as they are gradually adapted into the existing systems of Tlingit language and society.

## References

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