

# Language loss among the Chilcotin<sup>1</sup>

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By now there are a good number of reports on the loss of native languages and their replacement by majority or prestige languages (Dorian 1980, 1981; Spolsky and Kari 1974; Dressler and Wodak-Leodolter 1977; Gal 1979; Harris 1982). Such reports contain at least a census of speakers and their ability or willingness to speak the dying language. More recent studies even provide some information about the loss or leveling of specific structures of the native language and their replacement by suitable structures from the impinging language (Dorian 1981; Schmidt 1985).

After the loss of the language has been thoroughly documented, some attention may be given to factors which are presumed to have led to its loss. The usual explanation is that minority languages undergo 'a lowering of social prestige leading to a loss of domains of usage which finally results in the preference of the speakers to use another language' (Harris 1982: 71). Gal (1979), for example, presents a detailed study showing how German is replacing Hungarian in the eastern Austrian town of Oberwart. She has carefully documented the restriction of Hungarian to the peasant social networks in Oberwart and shown how this network is shrinking. However, there is evidence in her own data that contradicts her social-network thesis: her tables consistently show that members of peasant households speak German to their own children and grandchildren, not Hungarian. Surely these children are part of the peasant network; they just aren't being addressed as peasants. This phenomenon seems to recur in a number of communities experiencing language shift (Dorian 1981).

These studies neglect the fact that all situations of language loss are simultaneously instances of language acquisition. Language loss may be thought of as a case of defective bilingual acquisition. In order to fully understand the process of language loss, it is necessary to study how children in such situations go about acquiring language. In such cases, children learn to speak only one language, even though two languages are present in their environment. The study of language acquisition in

such contexts can contribute critical information about the type of exposure children require in order to learn language. In this paper I shall examine some factors which influence exposure to language as well as evidence which points to the children's role in deciding which language to acquire.

My data come from ethnographic fieldwork among the Chilcotin, an Athabaskan community of central British Columbia. There are approximately 1800 Chilcotin speakers scattered over six reserves. The largest of the reserves contains roughly 800 speakers, while the smallest has about 100 speakers (see Table 1). Despite its relatively small population base, the Chilcotin language has managed to hold its own until very recently.

Whites first entered Chilcotin territory in large numbers during the Cariboo gold rush of 1857 (Lane 1981). Catholic missionaries followed the prospectors in the 1870s. These missionaries collected the nomadic Chilcotin into the villages which formed the nuclei for the present reserves. This development coincided with the introduction of ranches into the region in the 1880s. Well into the middle of the twentieth century the Chilcotin were able to make a living from seasonal labor on the ranches supplemented by hunting and the sale of furs. The villages were merely a temporary locus they could return to at the end of the haying, fishing, and hunting seasons (see Brody 1981).

Mission schools were introduced into Chilcotin communities in 1914. This change had relatively little effect on the language, and up to the early 1950s many Chilcotin children were still not attending school.

Table 1. *Population of the Chilcotin bands*

	1837	1905	1970	1978	1985
Alexandria			52	64	64
Alexis Creek			311	383	441
Anaham			606	731	829
Nemiah Valley			193	222	257
Stoney			146	195	209
Toosey			93	105	128
Total	600 <sup>a</sup>	550 <sup>b</sup>	1401 <sup>c</sup>	1700 <sup>d</sup>	1928 <sup>e</sup>

a. Douglas (1839), cited in Lane (1981).

b. Teit (1909: 760), cited in Lane (1981).

c. Canada, Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, Indian Affairs Branch (1970: 28-32), cited in Lane (1981).

d. Canada, Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, Indian Affairs Branch (1980: 36-45), cited in Lane (1981).

e. *Coyoti Prints* (newspaper publ. in William's Lake, British Columbia), June 1985, p. 5.

'Progress' finally came to the Chilcotin area in the 1960s. Road construction made the area more accessible to hunters, fishermen, settlers, and would-be ranchers. Roads also made it possible to reach the town of William's Lake even from the most distant reserves by a six-hour drive at the most. I have talked with Chilcotin over the age of 30 who remember making the trip into town by horse and wagon once a year. The introduction of mechanical haying in the 1950s further weakened the economic base of the Chilcotin and added to the pressure to seek employment outside the area. The network of schools has also grown tremendously in the last decade. There is now a school in each Chilcotin community, and students spend roughly nine months of the year in an English-dominant context. Moreover, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation has recently built a television relay tower which enables the Chilcotin to receive television programs without a satellite dish.

The economic and social changes of the last two decades have tipped the scales against the maintenance of the Chilcotin language. Surprisingly, this fact is not apparent to most Chilcotins today. Almost everyone I talked to felt that Chilcotin was still a viable language, especially in relation to the surrounding Salish languages. Indeed, a sizeable percentage of children over ten *do* still speak Chilcotin. I discovered, however, that children under ten speak only English. This seems to be the result of a curious situation of language usage: most Chilcotin parents, though fluent in Chilcotin, use English when speaking to children. This was dramatically brought to my attention on one of my trips to the reserves. I was attempting to tape-record a three-year-old girl in order to find out how much Chilcotin she knew. Her mother helped me by telling her, 'Say *našlhiny*. Can you say *našlhiny*?', using English to coax her daughter into producing the Chilcotin word for *horse*. (See Cook 1983 for an outline of Chilcotin phonology and orthography.) This was interrupted when the grandmother came to the back door to find out what I was doing there. The mother and grandmother entered into a long conversation in Chilcotin. Yet, when the mother returned to her daughter, she continued the conversation in English.

For reasons I have yet to understand fully, Chilcotin parents seem to have come to view their own children as native speakers of English who must be 'taught' Chilcotin. Their teaching targets a few Chilcotin words (numbers, colors, and a few basic nouns) for imitation. Furthermore, many parents feel the children's mispronunciations of the first Chilcotin words they attempt is evidence that they cannot learn Chilcotin. Mispronunciation of English words is ignored. Chilcotin-speaking parents even address their babies in English, long before the babies have produced any intelligible vocalizations.

This process is reinforced by the different ways adults and older children use Chilcotin and English. It is very much like the situation Scollon and Scollon (1981: 134) describe for the Athabaskan language Chipewyan at Fort Chipewyan, Alberta. Traditionally talk belonged to the domain of the parents. Children were expected to be silent observers. Many of my Chilcotin assistants told me that Chilcotin parents only tell a child to do something once. A Chilcotin woman told me that children always went to their bedrooms when company came. If they misbehaved they were told the owl would come to take them. One mother told me that the children of Chilcotin-speaking parents seemed much more obedient than the children of English-speaking parents. Indeed, my Chilcotin assistants found it difficult to break out of this mold and engage in casual conversation with children in Chilcotin. In the houses I visited, I was usually left alone in one room with my subject and tape recorder while the parents, older siblings, and guests kept an eye on me from a distance. The few times I was successful in eliciting the mothers' cooperation resulted in endless repetitions of the stock question, *Did didan* 'What's this?'

This situation seems to be responsible for the relatively long delay in the children's production of Chilcotin. Scollon and Scollon (1981: 134) state that Chipewyan children 'who do not begin to speak until five years of age or older are interpreted as growing up respectfully, not as being 'language-delayed''. I noticed some language lag among Chilcotin children as well. Mothers of one-year-olds told me that their children were just making meaningless sounds. One mother of a two-year-old said that her daughter was not yet speaking.

In this context, English seems to be filling a gap for which nothing in Chilcotin is suitable. It is possible to chat with children in English because this is one of the domains for the use of English as evidenced in the schools. It may not be too daring to suggest that English has taken over the role of baby talk in the Chilcotin culture. This puts Chilcotin parents into something of a dilemma. Either they stimulate their infants by speaking to them in Chilcotin and violate cultural expectations, or they raise their children in an English environment and so contribute inadvertently to the decline of the Chilcotin language.

In fact, I observed households that had chosen each of these strategies. In one house, the parents had adopted a deliberate policy of speaking to one another and to their children solely in Chilcotin. Both parents are extremely verbal in Chilcotin and stimulated their four-year-old daughter with questions about my tape recorder and how it was recording their speech. They even addressed their year-old daughter in Chilcotin. As a result, the four-year-old daughter was very articulate in Chilcotin and was very good at keeping up her end of the conversation. She also spoke

English fluently. In another home, the parents had also decided to raise their youngest son to speak Chilcotin. They took a more traditional approach, however, and spoke to him only in brief sentences. In one tape that I made in their house, 50 per cent of their Chilcotin speech to their son consisted of simple nouns or the 'what's that?' question. Only 6 percent of their son's sentences were in Chilcotin. There were a number of other differences between the two households that probably contributed to the different outcomes (differences in the birth order, age, and sex of the children, and the isolation of the houses), but the different uses of language in the two households do suggest the role which cultural definitions of language use may play in language obsolescence.

Another factor contributing to the loss of Chilcotin is its subordinate status vis-à-vis English. There are several ways in which Chilcotin has become a 'marked' language. When several people gather together it is more polite to use English if someone is present who does not speak Chilcotin. But it is *not* considered necessary to use Chilcotin even if someone present does not understand English. This also helps to explain why parents talk to their babies in English rather than in Chilcotin. They may view them as not being able to understand Chilcotin and may therefore use English instead. There are possibly only a dozen homes left in which Chilcotin is still the daily medium of communication. Even the Chilcotins who have jobs teaching the daily 20-minute classes in Chilcotin speak English, both in and outside the classroom. In fact, the more 'successful' Chilcotins speak English; Chilcotin has been left to those families who have not made it.

This attitude is also partly explained by the parents' feelings about Chilcotin. Most have stories to tell about the difficulties that they faced in schools where all instruction was in English and they were punished for speaking their own language. Chilcotin parents are extremely concerned for their children's future and view the English language as an important means of insuring success for them. The local schoolteachers constantly reinforce this theme by telling parents that their children need more work on improving their English language skills. However, no one has made a conscious decision to speak to the children in English. Instead, Chilcotins under the age of 50 are simply more comfortable speaking English to their children and to each other. Some parents have also told me that English is easier for their children to learn than Chilcotin. In light of their exposure to Chilcotin it is easy to see how they reach this conclusion.

The factors I have listed so far (beliefs about speech to children and Chilcotin's 'marked' status) help to explain why Chilcotin parents speak to their children in English. However, they do not quite account for the

children's failure to acquire Chilcotin. Within any given Chilcotin house there are likely to be at least three generations. The oldest generation speaks fluent Chilcotin and only broken English. The middle generation is comfortable in either Chilcotin or English, while the youngest generation is only comfortable when speaking in English. Thus, the majority of Chilcotin babies are still brought up within earshot of Chilcotin. Yet, to a remarkable degree they are able to block out the language. Dorian indicates that the same phenomenon probably occurs among the children of Scotch Gaelic speakers. She states that most of the children 'merely ignored the second language in their environment and opted for English exclusively' (1981: 105).

The literature on first-language acquisition contains several studies of children's ability to pick and choose between lexical acquisitions on the basis of syntactic class or phonological properties (Horgan 1979; Schwartz and Leonard 1982). The Chilcotin data I have recorded suggests that the social status of the language can also influence children's acquisition of vocabulary. The subordinate status of one language may be so clear that even two-year-olds refuse to use it. Older children are definitely sensitive to the social status of Chilcotin speakers. They tease anyone in school who openly displays a knowledge of the language. One of my two-year-old subjects had a five-year-old sister who teased her every time her mother tried to get her to speak Chilcotin. The older sister resents it that her mother gives special attention to her sister, but she also communicates the feeling of most children (and their parents) that Chilcotin is better left unspoken.

This suggests to me that even children exposed only to Chilcotin in their homes will learn English. The competition from English is so severe that a child has to receive only Chilcotin from his/her parents in order to learn it. The children today hear other children and most adults speaking English, so there is more than enough pressure from outside the home to speak English. Dorian concludes that no language can survive for long in an economically and socially subordinate position (1981: 39). She feels that language death is inevitable in such circumstances, that speakers will switch their allegiance to the socially dominant language. She has also noted that an intermediate generation of semispeakers may arise which has imperfect control of the grammatical rules of the ancestral language. The 'mistakes' that semispeakers make are explicitly labeled as such by the remaining fluent speakers of the language.

There are a number of factors about the Chilcotin situation which make it difficult to detect semispeakers. The Chilcotin never had a standard form, so there is no basis on which to judge a speaker's abilities. Consequently, many Chilcotin speakers criticize the speech of other Chil-

cotins who happen to speak a different dialect. Most of these differences are phonological, which makes it highly likely that they are the result of language variation rather than language death. Adult informants for a Chilcotin field-methods class showed various degrees of fluency. Markers of nonfluency were the overuse of serial verbs, the loss of the optative and usitative moods, and the loss of voicing assimilation.

Dorian and Schmidt relied on translation tasks to identify constructions in the languages they observed which might be undergoing some type of leveling process. Such a task is not suitable for work with children. I chose instead to modify an interview technique that Wolfram et al. (1979) had used to elicit English sentences from children living in two Southwest Indian communities. Two Chilcotin speakers translated the questions into Chilcotin, since our goal was to elicit as much Chilcotin as possible from the children. The questions ranged across such topics as what games were played, where the children had traveled, whether they had seen any scary animals, and whether anyone in their homes spoke Chilcotin. We took the questionnaire into a school and interviewed a total of 25 students in the first, second, fourth, and fifth grades.

We found that present-day fourth graders can still speak Chilcotin, whereas their brothers and sisters in first and second grade can not. Even the fluent fourth graders required some time in order to switch to Chilcotin for the interview. This was probably their first Chilcotin conversation inside the school buildings. The second graders could understand between 30 and 90 percent of the Chilcotin questions but responded in English. The first graders responded appropriately to even fewer of the Chilcotin questions. Some individual subject results are shown in Table 2.

Although these results could be interpreted to show that children become more fluent in Chilcotin as they grow older, this would be a mistake. I recorded interviews with three girls aged four years who were fluent Chilcotin speakers. The recording situation was similar to that in which the schoolchildren were recorded. However, the four-year-olds understood every Chilcotin question and responded in Chilcotin more than 70 percent of the time. The conclusion is inescapable; the first graders did not understand Chilcotin because they had not learned the language.

The 11- and 12-year-olds did not have perfect control of all the prefixes of the Chilcotin verb. They showed a tendency to use the imperfective form as a basic, all-purpose verb form. For example, one 11-year-old used the form *pedih* in place of the perfective *ghanih* 'I did it'. He also used *qak'ez* instead of *qwez'ez* 'it was cold'. To express a perfective action, he would combine an imperfective verb with the perfective form

Table 2. *Individual conversational abilities in chilcotin, expressed as percentages of appropriate responses*

Subject	Age	Grade	Understood Chilcotin (%)	Spoke Chilcotin (%)
A	6	1	39	3
B	7	1	30	0
C	8	1	52	1
D	8	1	61	14
E	8	2	34	0
F	8	2	50	2
G	8	2	95	4
H	10	4	93	51
I	11	4	96	79
J	11	5	98	63
K	11	5	92	58
L	11	5	96	74
M	12	5	93	86
N	12	5	86	6

of the verb 'to be'. The inceptive verb forms provide further evidence of difficulty with the perfective. The inceptive combines the inceptive prefix *te-* with the perfective aspect *gha-*. One 11-year-old usually dropped the inceptive prefix as well as the perfective from his speech. He also showed a tendency to use a more general verb in place of one that was more specific. For example, he used *nayah* 'he travels' in place of *naljid* 'he crawls' and *tizah* 'he went there'. The children also tended to drop the nonspecific subject marker *ts'e-* from their verbs. Thus, the 11-year-old said *delistelh* instead of *ts'edenilhtelh* 'someone shot him'. At present, I cannot tell to what extent these results are due to incomplete language learning rather than language obsolescence.

Chilcotin children have not switched directly to a standard dialect of English. Instead, they are learning a dialect which seems to have retained some of the phonological and syntactic features of Chilcotin. These features are more difficult to detect in children under five who are in the midst of acquiring their first language, but it is possible to find sizable differences between the speech of these children and that of children acquiring standard American English. The differences are apparent when talking to Chilcotins of all ages, although there are noticeable differences between the English of the older and younger generations. I did a preliminary analysis of the English of two five-year-old Chilcotin girls. I taped these girls in their home in order to see how much Chilcotin they knew.

They kept lapsing into English in my presence, however, even though they were speaking to a native Chilcotin.

The aberrancy in their English can be found at all levels. They were able to produce all of the English sounds even though there are substantial differences in the Chilcotin and English phonological inventories. One of the girls, G, sometimes changed /s/ to /ʃ/ and /f/ to /h/, but not very frequently. Word-final sounds seemed to cause them the most difficulty. They produced the progressive *-ing* suffix as /-in/ or /-In/, but this is common in colloquial English as well. They also produced words with ending in [z] in standard English (for example *girls, boys, there's, and is*) with a voiceless [s].

There were also a number of substantial morphological and syntactic differences. The irregular past tense (*found, sang, read*) was present about 57 percent of the time in G's speech and absent in one case from C's speech. Children learning the standard dialect use the irregular past about 75 percent of the time at this age (Brown 1973). The regular past tense marker (*-ed*) was absent from the speech of both children. The third person present (*runs, sings*) was present about 69 percent of the time in G's speech and 40 percent of the time in C's speech, compared with 90 percent presence for children learning the standard dialect. Gender was incorrect in 35 percent or more of the children's third person pronouns (subject, object, and possessive forms). Note that the disregard of gender distinctions is common in the speech of adult Chilcotins.

Both children dropped WH words (*where, why, and particularly how*) from subordinate clauses of complex sentences: 'I know \_\_\_ to dance', 'She just worries \_\_\_ to go'. G used WH words 67 percent of the time, while they were completely absent from C's sentences. The children showed a tendency to misplace adverbs: 'She is scared outside for her to play' (= 'She is scared for her to play outside'), and 'I danced one time at the dance only' (= 'I only danced one time at the dance'). The girls also used *got* for different forms of the verb *have*: 'Do you guys got a red car over there?' and 'B got a baby'. G sometimes used an inappropriate preposition: 'one of time' (one time) and 'on the window' (from the window). Finally, both children showed a tendency to use resumptive pronouns, producing such sentences as, 'I throw it in the water, rock' (= 'I threw the rock in the water') or 'I stole somebody's gum, R's gum' (= 'I stole R's gum').

Several of these features seem to preserve aspects of Chilcotin structure. Consonant devoicing in word-final position is most likely due to the retention of a phonological process of Chilcotin which neutralizes the voiced/voiceless distinction in word-final position. The use of the past tense in Chilcotin English should be investigated more carefully, since

Chilcotin has aspect markers rather than tense markers. Chilcotin also does not distinguish gender in the pronoun system. It does have agreement markers on the verb for both subject and object, however. The use of resumptive pronouns in Chilcotin English appears to preserve part of the Chilcotin agreement system.

The change from Chilcotin to a nonstandard dialect of English makes it all the more difficult to explain the loss of Chilcotin. Rather than assimilating into the mainstream culture, the Chilcotin encounter as much discrimination based on their language as ever (see Wolfram et al. 1979 and Drechsel 1976 for discussion of this phenomenon in other native American communities). Children who speak this dialect are not doing noticeably better in school than their brothers or sisters who speak Chilcotin. Why, then, would the Chilcotin switch to a language that is no more acceptable to the dominant culture than Chilcotin? If economic and political conditions are the principle forces behind language loss, they should lead to the complete acquisition of the superordinate language. This apparently happened in Scotland and Austria (Dorian 1980; Gal 1979).

I can only speculate that the conditions of exposure to English were different in the Chilcotin region. One explanation might be that Chilcotin English is the product of a creolization process rather than language assimilation (Naro 1979). Creolization might have occurred under the limited contact between the Chilcotin and the first white settlers. Before the turn of the century, and possibly up to World War II, the Chilcotin outnumbered the white settlers in the region. The limited contact would have promoted the development of a Chilcotin-English pidgin which would develop into the Chilcotin creole seen today. The period of intense contact between Chilcotin and English may have been too brief for total linguistic assimilation to have taken place. It is difficult to believe, however, that the amount of contact in remote Scottish fishing villages would be more intense or have occurred over a longer period than in the Chilcotin region.

Another possibility is that regional dialects seldom, if ever, become fully assimilated to a standard variety. The forms of Black English spoken in the United States show great stability over a long period. The Cockney dialect has an even longer history of intense contact with standard British English. The stability of such dialects suggests that *they* are the 'standard' dialect of their region. There are more than a few white ranchers in the Chilcotin region who use features of Chilcotin English. The competition is, therefore, between Chilcotin and Chilcotin English. It would seem that we must recognize that there are shortcomings in the traditional explanations of language change. Economic and political factors were and are

involved in the change from Chilcotin to Chilcotin English. However, they do not explain the continuation of Chilcotin English in contact with standard Canadian English.

In this paper I have attempted to show that the phenomenon of language obsolescence cannot be understood successfully using the standard methods of socio-linguistics. Situations of language loss are simultaneously instances of language acquisition and should be examined with the techniques that researchers in that area have developed. The study of children's language in situations of language obsolescence can contribute invaluable information on the amount of exposure to language that children require in order to learn and use it. In addition, such studies should demonstrate the intricate connections between language acquisition in the home and the social structure of language use in the community. It would be a mistake to assume that children under three are less sensitive than adults to the status of their mother tongue. There is an urgent need to explore precisely how children translate their sensitivities into a spoken language.

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## Note

1. Field research for this paper was supported by Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Grant no. 66-0637, David Ingram, principle investigator. I would like to thank the Chilcotin community for their support and cooperation. Many of my insights into the current situation were gained through discussions with Maria Myers, Allen Haig-Brown, Illa Quilt, Beverly Quilt, Gilbert Solomon, Verna Solomon, Mary Ann Solomon, Leona Williams, and Mary Williams. They also assisted me in the collection and transcription of Chilcotin language samples. I would like to thank the Chilcotin parents and children for allowing the peculiar *midugh* bearing tape recorders into their homes. I would also like to thank the principal and staff at the Stone Indian Day School for making their students and facilities available to us. Heather Goad helped to phonetically transcribe several tapes. I am grateful to Ed Cook, Heather Goad, David Ingram, M. Dale Kinkade, and Allan Taylor for their comments on an earlier version of the paper.

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