
Reviewed by William J. Samarin (University of Toronto, Emeritus)

The title of this book only modestly suggests its contents because it covers almost the whole life of this interesting language, from its beginnings at the end of the 18th century to the present. And this is not to suggest that the language is dead or obsolescent, for it has been adopted by the Confederate Tribes of Grande Ronde, Oregon, as a heritage language, renamed Wawa (here referred to as Chinook, one of its contemporary names). Indeed, as the book’s author suggests, it may be the linguistic emblem of a developing sense of indigenous Cascadian culture on both sides of the U.S./Canadian border.

The focus of Making Wawa, nonetheless, is on the origin or genesis of this pidgin, and its spread in what came to be called the Pacific Northwest. The language arose when Europeans first entered into contact with the inhabitants of Vancouver Island during a rather brief but intense period of exchange — mainly pelts of sea otters and other mammals — for foreign goods, when a contact medium was ‘made’ (with allusion to the book’s title). This was Nootka Jargon (NJ), possibly preceded by a Sibero-Alaskan one (Samarin 1992). From about 1805 onward, NJ was taken to the mouth of the Columbia River, down the coast, where trading was more profitable, and beavers replaced otters. There — and up the river — this contact medium was blended into elements of the indigenous Chinook language (frequently referred to as Lower Chinook [LC]) so that something else appeared, a ‘broken Chinook’ or ‘makeshift pidgin’ (p. 101) that the indigenous speakers perceived as ‘a set of routines not far removed from the Nootka Jargon’ (p. 83). More of the language took place very quickly (from about 1811), when members of an expedition arrived on behalf of the capitalist John Jacob Astor and founded Fort Astoria for his Pacific Trading Post on the southern bank of the river, where the Lewis and Clark expedition had wintered in 1805–1806. But the ‘expanded pidgin’ (p. 86) finally developed at Fort Vancouver (a ‘hothouse’ for language contact [Chap. 4]), founded by the Hudson’s Bay Company in 1825 about one hundred miles inland by water. By the end of the 1820s, the new variety of Chinook had ‘jelled’ (p. 149, for similar statements also 107, 125, 126, 127). Even at the beginning of this decade it had a ‘cohort of near native speakers’ (p. 116, also 129), but by 1850 the language’s ‘heartland’ had collapsed with the arrival of white immigrants, and the apogee of common use of the language began to wane.

In the author’s words, his goal was ‘to show that a contact language is “made” from the ground up, and that the whole raft of interdisciplinary, interstitial specializations in the academic market-place are necessary tools for its study’ (p. 147), an approach to the study of pidgin origins that all endorse and that many put into practice. (John Singler’s response to Donald Winford’s provocative keynote address at the Annual Meeting of the SPCL, January 2009, is a case in point.) The work under review is indeed a multidimensional and well-researched treatment, for it draws from at least ethnography, sociology, anthropology, economics, philology, literary criticism, and linguistics (without getting involved in
‘formal linguistics’ [p. 69]), etymological analyses, and contact (‘creole’) linguistics. The reader is provided enough information about the region as a ‘culture area’ to understand why a lingua franca of any type did not arise before this period (p.90). The last topic, however, does not figure prominently. I would have appreciated learning more from the perspective of Hymes’ ‘ethnography of speaking’ about, for example, what went on at Astoria and Fort Vancouver and the regions that brought the indigenous peoples to them. Early in the 1840s, five languages, including the European ones and Chinook, were spoken at Fort Vancouver by only about five hundred people, not including other languages that appeared occasionally (p.101). Was it this little community that led to Chinook’s becoming ‘jelled’? What more could have been said, or conjectured, about the ‘making of Wawa’ in various kinds of verbal interactions? One also wonders why the author did not use the concept of ‘chaotic determination,’ which he proposes as an explanation for the genesis creoles (Lang 1999: 448).

Whereas the book proceeds somewhat chronologically, it is woven together with several themes inherent in the language’s history, all very relevant to readers of JPCL: language acquisition theory, ‘communicative functions’ in the development and expansion of a pidgin, and the role of women in this process.

1. For the first, the author adopts Robert Chaudenson’s explanation for what happened in the emergence of French creoles with autonomous ‘second-degree approximations’ of the earlier ‘makeshift’ first-degree approximations (pp. 65–68, citing Chaudenson 1992).

2. Communicative functions (citing Mühlhäusler [consistently misspelled] 1986) — such as propositional, cognitive, directive, integrative — play a more important role in the narrative to track the development for a lingo that consisted at first of routines to a medium that allows persons to engage in casual speech. (On functions, see pp. 26, 30, 70, 73, 85–86, 118, 124, 125, not in the index.)

3. The role of women, ‘often neglected’ in accounting for the genesis of Chinook, is underscored (p. 143) and ‘women’ are found in the index, although pages 88, 101, 143 should be added to it. Neglected also is Samarin (1996) on this very topic. The following is based on the 1992 handout where I first presented my 1996 study in oral format.

   ○ From 1820 onwards, there was a steady increase of western Indian wives. By 1841 most of the men are married to aboriginal or half-breed women.
   ○ In 1839 at Fort Vancouver women are ‘almost totally unacquainted’ with the language of their husbands.
   ○ Based on Catholic records of the marriages of 386 women (319 of them Indian), my analysis reveals that 57% had ‘French’ husbands (many of them probably voyageurs métis), 21% English, 8% Hawai’ian, and 14% Indian.
   ○ Marriages were stable. Indian and métis wives sometimes achieved high status.
   ○ Expeditions for trapping and trading beaver consisted of 100–200 persons, including women and children.
   ○ At posts, Indian wives lived outside the walls and constituted a separate society.
Wives of traders had their own Indian or Hawai’ian slaves. On the place of women in the colonization of Central Africa, see Samarin (1984/1985) and the chapter ‘Not excluding women’ in Samarin (1989) and its index.

With respect to the controversies that have accompanied discussions about Chinook, Lang addresses himself only to Michael Silverstein’s assertion that those who spoke the jargon did not constitute (in his words) a ‘stable linguistic [or ‘language’] community’, and that it was not ‘amenable to a unified grammatical description’ (p.102). Lang replies that the distinction between a speech and a linguistic community is ‘not essential to what follows’ [in the book] (p. 2). (On pidginization and community, see Samarin 1988a.) He goes on to argue contra Silverstein, aptly considering, ‘the site of their [trading] transactions as composing ipso facto membership in a group of some kind or other, a community of practice’ (p.70, italics added; see also pp.101, 102, 118, 146). As for the controversy over whether the language had a pre-colonial origin (cp. Thomason 1983, Hymes 1980) or a colonial one, Lang also favors the latter (p. 53) without reference to me, even though the topic is central to Samarin (1986) and (1988b), both cited in the book (pp. 43, 88, 166, 168 are not in the index for Samarin). The argument, offered by Thomason (1983:865), that the phonology of Chinook is too complex to be explained by a post-colonial origin, is not mentioned by Lang, but is dismissed (p.120) on grounds similar to my own in Samarin (1988b). He also rejects the view that a ‘pidginized slave Chinook’ existed before Europeans arrived (p.50), not referring to the extended discussion of the topic in Samarin (1988b). Apart from these remarks, the book does not argue for a colonial genesis of Chinook; it assumes it.

The book is a valuable contribution to the study of Chinook, but the author concedes that more work is needed. I agree: researchers should continue to be diligent in the search for archives, not only in North America but also abroad. We should, in fact, make an effort to get a ‘satellite’s-view’ of the entire Pacific region that was linked with ships carrying crews of linguistic diversity from the North West to China. Let us also see parallels with what happened on another waterway: the flow of the Congo and Ubangi rivers in Central Africa — characterized by ‘mobile multilingual colonies’ (Samarin 1988b) — as we develop the field of language contact macroscopically.

The book is well supplied with a note on the orthography used for Chinook, four maps, a chronology from 1774 to 1849, an appendix of ‘A partially annotated early glossary of Chinook Jargon’ based on documents discovered recently by Henry Zenk (Lang 2006), ten pages of references, and an abbreviated index. One could well use this book in a course on language contact, but it might put off the ‘general reader’ for bits of technical words and phrases (‘universal syntax’ [pp. 69, 70], ‘serial verbs’ [p. 82], ‘phonological shifts’ [p. 93]).

References


