Salish and Algonquian: A Possible Relationship Revisited

JAN P. VAN EIJK

First Nations University of Canada

In a contribution to the 41st International Conference on Salish and Neighbouring Languages, Bakker (2006) attempts to prove a distant relationship between Salish and Algonquian (and possibly Kutenai as well). Bakker is first of all to be complimented on his thorough and meticulous approach to this subject: rather than throwing a hodge-podge of poorly matched data at the issue, he sets out the various features of Salish and Algonquian in an orderly fashion, comparing each feature to its counterpart in the other family and drawing conclusions as to their possible relationship. In the second place, Bakker is to be praised for his honesty: instead of trying to prove a relationship by hook and by crook he chivalrously admits where he does not see a basis for comparison, much less for a possible relationship. In all, however, Bakker is quite sanguine about a possible relationship between the two families.

In this article I take issue with Bakker’s conclusion, and it is my intention to show that, in addition to those features that are not matched between the families (as admitted by Bakker), the evidence for potential matches where he believes that such exist is in most instances very weak. I will, of course, not attempt to provide a negative proof. In other words, I will not try to prove that Salish and Algonquian are not related, as such a proof is impossible (cf. Arlotto 1972:45). However, I will try to demonstrate that any evidence that seems to suggest a possible relationship can most probably be chalked up to coincidence, to universals or near-universals or to borrowing.

In what follows we provide first of all a body of background information, by assessing possible diffusion between the Salish and Algonquian families through hypothetically adjacent urheimats, and by discussing the general methodology of comparing apparently unrelated families. This is followed by separate sections on phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and the lexicon.

BACKGROUND

As is well known, the presence of comparable material in two or more languages or language families may be due to four different factors (which may occur in any kind of combination): (a) genetic relationship, (b) diffusion, (c) universals or near-universals, (d) coincidence. Of course, genetic relationship is not always accompanied by formal resemblances, in that sound shifts and/or analogical readjustments may hide the original relationship (as in the case of English *five and Latin *quīnque, both from PIE *penkwē). On the other hand, diffusion, (near-)universals and flukes prove nothing with regard to any possible genetic relationship. A classic case of a fluke is Greek *mati and Malay *mata, both meaning ‘eye’, as already noted by Bloomfield (1933:297). Since *mati and *mata are not backed up by similar correspondences, and have different etymologies (*mati going back to *ommation, while *mata has essentially remained unchanged for a long time), their mutual resemblance proves nothing for a possible relationship between Greek and Malay or Indo-European and Malayo-Polynesian. Similarly, any occasional lexical relationships between Salish and Algonquian would have to be backed up by systematic correspondences to be of any value for a possible genetic connection.

As for diffusion, it has been suggested (Denny 1989, 1991 – both mentioned in Bakker 2006 – and Denny 2003) that Salish and Algonquian had urheimats that were much closer in geographical proximity than is implied by Siebert’s 1967 location of the Algonquian ancestral homeland around the Great Lakes. (By contrast, Kinkade’s 1990 location of the Salish urheimat in southwestern British Columbia and northwestern Washington still remains essentially unchallenged.) Goddard (1994:207) posits an Algonquian homeland “somewhere immediately west of Lake Superior,” i.e., still to the west of Siebert’s location.

An example of possible diffusion is the occurrence of two terms for ‘one’ in both Salish and Algonquian, with strong mutual resemblances between the individual members of each set of forms, as noted in Van Eijk (2005:388-389) and in the section on the lexicon below. However, and as stated above, if we do have a case of diffusion here, it of course and ipso facto does not prove a genetic relationship. For that we would need systematic, recurrent correspondences (cf. Hock 1986:562-563). We now turn to this issue, with regard to phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics and the lexicon.
PHONOLOGY

Bakker (2006:8) admits that the phonologies of Salish and Algonquian are very different. As such, they do not seem to offer a good basis for comparison. However, the apparent differences between these two systems should not discourage us from investigating a closer relationship than the surface facts suggest.¹

The core of the Proto-Salish phoneme system can be tabulated as follows:

(1) Consonants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>p</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>c</th>
<th>k</th>
<th>q</th>
<th>k₁w</th>
<th>q₁w</th>
<th>?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>p'</td>
<td>t'</td>
<td>c'</td>
<td>k'</td>
<td>q'</td>
<td>k₁w</td>
<td>q₁w</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>s</td>
<td>ɨ</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x₁w</td>
<td>x₁w</td>
<td>h</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>m</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>l</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>w</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>m'</td>
<td>n'</td>
<td>l'</td>
<td>y'</td>
<td>w'</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition to this system, Kuipers (2002:x) lists a velar and uvular/pha-ryngeal resonant series (γ γ' ð ð' ð₁w ð₁w) and a series of retracted vowels (a i u ø), all ten of which occur only in the Interior Salish languages. There has also been considerable debate about the status of r and r', which some Salishists reconstruct for Proto-Salish, while others (including Kuipers) do not. A more controversial system, which questions the status of labials in Proto-Salish, and adds, among others, ŋ₁w and ŋ₁w, is given in Thompson (1979:724-725), but has found only a limited following.

The Proto-Algonquian phoneme system, based on Bloomfield (1946) and Goddard (1979), can be tabulated as follows:²

(2) Vowels

| i  | u  | æ  | a |

1. An anonymous reviewer of this article correctly points out that, for example, Icelandic and Russian have very different phonologies, but are still related. The same reviewer also points out the crucial importance of recurrent phonological correspondences, something I mention above and will return to at the end of this phonology section.

2. In keeping with the standard roman orthography that is widely used for Cree and Saulteaux, the symbol c is used instead of Bloomfield's and Goddard's ç, and vowels with macrons correspond to Bloomfield's double vowels and to Goddard's raised dots: ê = ee = e', etc.
The phonetic status of θ (described by Bloomfield as "unvoiced interden­
tal or lateral?") is unclear, and it has merged with other sounds in the
majority of the daughter languages. In addition, Bloomfield reconstructs ç
and x, which only occurred in clusters, and of which Goddard (1979,
1994) has shown that they most probably result from other consonants
that were already part of the Proto-Algonquian inventory.

In spite of the considerable differences between the two systems,
there is a remote possibility that they were closer to each other in the pre-
proto-stage. For one thing, θ may have been a voiceless lateral, a sugges­
tion already made by Bloomfield (see above) and supported by Siebert
(1975:300,451, as quoted in Goddard 1979:73). In that case it would cor­
respond to Salish ɨ. Also, Proto-Algonquian had pre-aspirated conso­
nants, and these could possibly go back to glottalized consonants, as
suggested by Pentland 1987 (and summarized in Bakker 2006:24-25),
bringing the two systems even closer. Even so, we still have no parallel in
Algonquian to the uvular series in Salish, and if we reconstruct velar and
uvular/pharyngeal resonants and retracted vowels for Salish, the gap cer­
tainly becomes too wide to support a common origin for both proto-lan-
guages. Moreover, Goddard (1994:204-205) argues convincingly against
interpreting θ as ɨ, and provides strong evidence that it was indeed [θ].
Bakker (2006:9) mentions the use of sound symbolism in Cree and in Sal­
ish, but this phenomenon is widespread beyond Salish and Algonquian, as
admitted by Bakker, and as such it is not a good basis for postulating a
relationship between Salish and Algonquian.

There is of course also the possibility that the glottalized consonants
and the uvular series in Salish were themselves the results of secondary
developments, in which case we would end up with a simpler system that
was close to the Proto-Algonquian system. There is, however, at this point
no evidence to support this hypothesis. In other words, and as mentioned above, we do not have sets of regular correspondences by which, for example, the Salish glottalized obstruents can be seen as related to the single series in Algonquian through either a split in Salish or a merger in Algonquian.

**MORPHOLOGY**

In the classic comparative-historical method, phonology is central, and morphological change is often seen as the result of analogical change or other formal-semantic realignments to restore the damage done by blindly operating sound laws. Although this methodology – starting from phonology, and seeing morphological change as the result of analogical or other realignments – works well within an established family, the results are less promising for the exploration of possible links between different families. Indeed, as is shown above, the phonologies of Salish and Algonquian provide no basis for any genetic relationship. With this in view, Bakker bases his proposal for a common genetic origin for Salish and Algonquian largely on a morphological comparison between these language families, and in this he claims to follow Goddard (1975), which proves the genetic relationship between Algonquian, Wiyot and Yurok.

Goddard’s argument mainly rests on two points: (a) the inescapable overall morphological resemblances between Wiyot, Yurok and Algonquian, and (b) numerous details, particularly in the pronominal prefix system of these three languages, that are too similar to each other to be the result of pure chance. As for the first point, the morphological resemblances are structural, but not formal, as in Cree pakamihkwēhw- ‘to hit someone on the face’ (pakam- ‘to hit,’ -[i]hkwē- ‘face,’ -hw- ‘act upon animate object’) vs. Yurok s’ōpē’weyet ‘to hit (s’ōp-) someone on the face (-e’yey-)’ (-et- ‘transitive marker’). Although no etymological relationship between these constructions can be established, Goddard correctly points out that the parallelism between these forms “insures at least prima facie verisimilitude in the comparison of similar elements.”

---

3. The reshaping of the inflection of Old English stān, as discussed in Bynon (1983:32-33), or the reinterpretation of Old Irish ber-Ø-t [< *ber-s-t], as summarized in Arlotto (1972:154-158), are good examples.
Similar or identical details in the pronominal prefix system of Wiyot, Yurok and Algonquian include not only the fact that they are formally related (e.g., ?ne- for first person singular in Yurok, du(?)- in Wiyot, and *ne- in Proto-Algonquian), but also, for example, the insertion of t between the prefixes and vowel-initial non-dependent nouns in Algonquian and Wiyot, as in Fox ahkohkwa ‘kettle’, netahkohkwa ‘my kettle’ (with ne- plus t) and Wiyot i?l ‘intestines’, duti?l ‘my intestines’ (with du-plus t).

4 In applying Goddard’s method to Salish and Algonquian, Bakker points out a number of similarities between both families, both in overall morphological structure and in a number of details. As for overall structure, the Cree and Yurok forms for ‘to hit someone in the face’ (given above) find an almost perfect parallel in Lillooet túp-us-ən ‘to punch (tup-) someone in the face (-us)’ (-ən transitivizer). As for similarities in details, Bakker mentions the Cree reflexive -iso- vs. its Proto-Salish equivalent *-t-sewt (-cút [< -t-sút] in Lillooet), and the transitivizer -t both in Cree and in Salish (although it is dropped, or merged with object suffixes, in Lillooet).

There are, however, also numerous differences between the two language families, which strongly argue against any genetic relationship. For example, whereas Algonquian has an animate-inanimate gender distinction, Salish lacks this (or any gender distinction, except for a female vs. non-female distinction in Coast Salish). In the same way, the distinction between first person plural inclusive and exclusive, which is a fundamental feature of Algonquian grammar, is absent from Salish, except for Shuswap, where it is most probably a local innovation (see Van Eijk 2005). On the other hand, the difference between controlled and non-controlled events, which is crucial in Salish (as in Lillooet ?áč’x-ən ‘to see it’, with the ‘control’ transitivizer -ən, vs. ka-?áč’x-s-a ‘to catch sight of it’ and s-?áč’x-s ‘to watch over it’, with ‘non-control’ -s) is as such absent from Algonquian. Both families make use of various patterns of reduplication (see, for example, Ahenakew & Wolfart 1993, Dahlstrom 1997, Junker & Blacksmith 1994, and Proulx 2005 for Algonquian, and Van Eijk 1990 and 1998 for Salish) but there are strong differences in form and function between the individual patterns in both languages. To name

4. Yurok has no vowel-initial stems, so the t-insertion does not apply in this language.
just one, Salish VC reduplication, which repeats the second consonant of the root plus preceding vowel (or, in some languages, the consonant preceded by the stressed vowel) and which in general expresses ‘recursive, circular, out-of-control’ (as in Lushootseed saqʷ ‘to fly’ > səqʷ-aqʷ ‘to fly slowly in circles’) is lacking in Cree, as conceded by Bakker (2006:21), and also, I presume, in pan-Algonquian.

Perhaps the strongest morphological evidence against a genetic relationship between Salish and Algonquian comes from the pronominal subject and object marking in both families. As is shown in Van Eijk (2006), Salish has a strict slot-assignment and case-marking system, as in Lillooet ?ác’x-ən-c-as ‘he (-as) sees (?ác’x-ən) me (-c)’ vs. ?ác’x-ən-0-íkan ‘I (-íkan) see him (-0)’, while Algonquian works with a direct-inverse system, as in Cree ni-wāpam-ē-w ‘I see (wāpam-) him’ vs. ni-wāpam-ik (ni-wāpam-ikw-w) ‘he sees me’ (with the ‘direct’ marker -ē- indicating that the action goes from the first singular ni- to the third singular -w, and the ‘inverse’ marker -ikw- indicating that the action goes from -w to ni-). It is difficult to see how two systems that are so different could have come from a common source.

As for the similarities in detail between Proto-Salish and Proto-Algonquian, such as *-t-sewt and *-iso (see above), Bakker gives a list of these (2006:14). There is, however, a difference between this list and the one that Goddard provides for the pronominal prefix system in Algonquian-Wiyot-Yurok, in that the latter is a well-structured system of parallel forms. To quote Goddard (1975:7): “These are not vague similarities pulled at random from various parts of the grammar, but represent a single, self-contained system which is found in virtually identical form in all three languages.” By comparison, Bakker’s list, which is drawn from various parts of the inflectional-derivational complexes of Salish and Algonquian, shows far less cohesion. Not only are some Algonquian correspondences to the Salish forms absent, but I also have my doubts about some of the suggested correspondences, such as Proto-Salish *-awalxʷ ‘reciprocal’ (given erroneously as -awalxʷ by Bakker) and its presumed Cree counterpart -ito-. Bakker deserves credit for his thoroughness, but the comparison of two exceedingly rich morphologies, such as those of Salish and Algonquian, is bound to yield a number of surface similarities. Unless they are part of a well-constrained system, as in Algonquian-Wiyot-Yurok, they must be regarded with a good deal of suspicion.
SYNTAX

Bakker gives a brief but insightful comparison between the major syntactic features of Salish and Algonquian (2006:20-21). On the whole, the similarities between the two families are too general to support a common origin, or the differences are strong and as such militate against uniting the two families genetically. Bakker mentions the occurrence of person hierarchies in Algonquian and in a number of Salish languages (see, for example, Jelinek & Demers 1983), plus Wakashan and Chimakuan, and discusses this in greater detail (in his section 7.5, p. 25). However, in his conclusion to this section he leaves open the possibility that person hierarchies and related features may have spread from the Pacific Coast languages to Algonquian during the time of earlier contacts. In that case, the resemblance between Salish and Algonquian would be due to diffusion and not to genetic relationship. Also, person hierarchies are frequent in morphologically complex languages, and any resemblance between Salish and Algonquian may just as well be due to a typological resemblance which in itself is no use for establishing a genetic relationship.

SEMANTICS

Semantics and ethno-semantics do not provide a solid enough basis for a viable comparison between Salish and Algonquian, as is readily admitted by Bakker (2006:21). Semantic domains such as colour terms, kinship terms or body part terminology can be shared by languages that otherwise have next to nothing in common. As for colour terms, Berlin & Kay (1969) show that widely different languages may have the same type of system. In the same way, similar kinship systems may be shared by unre-

5. With the above in mind, I should also mention that Kinkade [2004], in a posthumous article, points out that the pronominal subject markers of [non-Salish] Alsea are virtually identical to those that can be reconstructed for Proto-Salish. Nevertheless, as Henry Davis [personal communication] brings to my attention, Kinkade does not accept this resemblance as sufficient evidence to posit an Alsea-Salish relationship, precisely because there is not enough additional structural (i.e., grammatical, syntactic) similarity between the two. In other words, we need the kind of systematic correspondences that Goddard has identified for Algonquian-Wiyot-Yurok before we can establish a relationship between any two language families.

6. For example, whereas Salish prefers VSO, with VOS and SVO as alternatives, word order in Algonquian is much freer, and at least in Cree all six logical combinations of S, V, and O are allowed.
related languages, such as the bifurcate merging system that is found in, for example, Omaha and Crow (both Siouan) and in Iroquoian (Schusky 1965:51). On the other hand, while Lillooet and Shuswap are both Interior Salish languages and geographical neighbours, the kinship system of Lillooet is lineal while that of Shuswap is at least partially bifurcate collateral (with separate terms for father’s brother and mother’s brother, but identical terms for father’s sister and mother’s sister; cf. Kuipers 1975:14). Body part terminology is, of course, limited by obvious biological parameters, but typically in Salish one does not distinguish between ‘hand’ and ‘(lower) arm’ (s-kʷakst for both in Lillooet), while Plains Cree has mispiton for ‘arm’ and micihciy for ‘hand’ (Wolvengrey 2001).

LEXICON

Bakker does not attempt to set up a core lexicon that would be shared between Proto-Salish and Proto-Algonquian. This does not mean that at some point in time such a shared core lexicon might not have existed. Certainly in Salish a good deal of lexical replacement has taken place, which in itself could have obscured an older word stock that could have been identified as shared with Algonquian. For example, Nater (1977, 1994) identifies rather massive borrowing into Bella Coola (Nuxalk) from non-Salish sources, Hess (1979) describes the systematic replacement of words for ‘deer’ (and ‘lake’) in a number of Coast Salish languages, and Elmendorf (1951, 1970) writes on word tabu and change rates in Salish, with particular reference to Bella Coola and Twana. A broad impression of the range of lexical drift within Salish, in comparison to Algonquian, can be obtained from a list of the numerals ‘one’ through ‘five’ in five languages.

A detailed discussion of these items falls outside the parameters of this paper, but we will illustrate the point with the sets for ‘one’ and ‘four.’ The Halkomelem form ləc’ə for ‘one’ goes back to Proto-Salish *nk’-u’ (Kuipers 2002:70), which shows an intriguing resemblance to Proto-Algonquian *nekotwi (Bloomfield 1946:116) or *nekwetw- (Goddard 1979:106-107). The Sechelt and Lillooet forms pála and pálaʔ are shared with Thompson (péyeʔ), and with Comox (paʔa). They also show a

---

resemblance to Plains Cree pēyak, the form of which Bloomfield (1946:117) describes as “unique,” in comparison to Ojibway pēšik, which goes back to Proto-Algonquian *pēšekw- (Goddard 1979:106-107). As is mentioned above, the double sets for ‘one’ in both Salish and Algonquian may hint at some very early mutual borrowing. This is also supported by the fact that *nekotwi (*nekwetw-) is attested in Plains Cree nikotwāsiq ‘six.’ A detailed description of the history of Algonquian numerals is given in Rhodes & Costa (2003). Goddard (personal communication) points out that the Algonquian numerals for ‘one’ through ‘five’ share a prefix *ne- (in 1 and 3) or *ny- (in 2, 4, and 5), the semantic function of which is now difficult to trace, and the formal history of which is complex.

The Sechelt form múš for ‘four’ reflects the Proto-Salish form (and the basis for Sapir’s term “Mosan”), while the Lillooet and Halkomelem forms ʔwʔucin and ʔəʔəθəl, together with Squamish ʔəʔúcn (Kuipers 1967:369), are limited to these three languages. The Proto-Algonquian form for ‘four’ is reconstructed as *nyewwi by Bloomfield (1946:117), and its development into the various daughter forms seems to be non-problematic.

Although the Salish lexical picture seems rather chaotic, most borrowings and internal shifts have been identified as such. 8 What we are left with is a large stock of items that promise very little, if anything at all, for a possible shared lexicon with Algonquian. The mutual resemblances between the two pairs for ‘one’ are possibly due to ancient borrowing, as noted above, or are the result of a fluke. It is of course possible that the Proto-Salish inventory that can be reconstructed results itself from massive borrowing from a now-disappeared substratum, and that the “true”

8. See, for example, the lists of borrowings from non-Salish in Kuipers 2002:232-233.
Proto-Salish stock (before this purported borrowing) was closer to Proto-Algonquian. However, replacing the unknown with the unknowable is hardly advisable as a path towards knowledge.

CONCLUSION

As is mentioned by Bakker, Sapir (1929) was perhaps the first to suggest a link between Algonquian and Salish, and he classed both within a larger group, “Algonkin-Wakashan,” comprised of (1) Algonkin-Ritwan (Algonquian, Wiyot, Yurok, and possibly Beothuk), (2) Kutenai (also spelled Kootenay, and now usually referred to by its own name, Ktunaxa), (3) Mosan (Wakashan, Chimakuan, Salish). Bakker is to be commended for adding a massive amount of data to Sapir’s hypothesis, and for organizing it in a format that is readily accessible and easy to read. Whether one finds in these data enough evidence for accepting a genetic link between Salish and Algonquian is ultimately a matter of personal choice. For me, the similarities between Salish and Algonquian are either due to universalistic tendencies – “fat” morphologies tend to organize their internal structure according to a root-derivation-inflection format, as in the Cree, Wiyot and Lillooet examples given above – or they are due to flukes (the double sets for ‘one’ in both families) or possibly to very old diffusion (again, the double sets for ‘one’).

REFERENCES


Bakker, Peter. 2006. Algonquian-Ritwan, (Kutenai) and Salish: Proving a distant genetic relationship. Papers for the 41st International Conference on Salish and Neighbour-

9. Thanks are due to Ives Goddard and Henry Davis for their insightful comments at the 38th Algonquian Conference, to Ives Goddard for further comments during subsequent correspondence, and to Peter Bakker for sharing further insights on diffusion and genetic relationship with me. I would welcome his observations in print in the near future. I also wish to thank the anonymous reviewer of this paper for his/her detailed comments on the pre-final draft of this paper. The responsibility for any errors rests entirely with me.

The assistance of First Nations University of Canada, which made it financially possible for me to participate in the 38th Algonquian Conference, is gratefully acknowledged.


Cover: The basic modal distinction of Plains Cree according to Clare Cook, with the conjunct showing another structure intervening between the proposition and the speech act.