

A Vignette on Canadian Fish Names

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A limited number of fish names in Canadian English are examined in relation to the specific cultural background and language-bound word-formational processes, as well as to a universal framework.

To honour Professor Vojmir Vinja a brief comparison is attempted of Canadian ichthyonyms with those of the Croatian Adriatic coastal region. A limited sample of fish names current in Canadian English, general and regional (source McConnell, 1978) will be examined synchronically to show their typical structure and meaning, and diachronically to indicate their possible origin (Vinja, 1986/17).

There are two important differences between the Adriatic and the Pacific situation however, a) the Croatian fish names (Vinja 1986) refer to Mediterranean marine life, whereas the Canadian names examined in this paper will refer to (mostly) fish of the Pacific coast as well as of the landlocked lake and river fish; b) the Medieval Croats who settled the eastern Adriatic coast came from the interior of the European continent to an entirely new environment. The English speaking population of Canada settled there from the second half of 18th century, and came with a developed continental as well as maritime background and culture. Accordingly, the Croatian vocabulary contains no ancient Slavic words (except for *riba* = fish) that were brought from the original homeland (Vinja, 1986/36) whereas the Canadian fish names contain a number of words brought to the American continent from Britain, and others brought from the more southerly American British colonies whose settlement precede that of Canada by a century.

The process of naming new things and creatures is thus a universal one, and probably has not changed substantially since Adam (Genesis 2.19). Discoverers of new lands and the settlers that followed them were compelled to name the new objects they encountered in order to be able to communicate about them. Unlike Adam though, whose sole model was God's word, these men could follow traditional name patterns in either the language of their ancestors or of the natives and other settlers in their new

land. Thus Croats borrowed from other Mediterranean peoples, and the Canadians from the Indians, Eskimo and French.

The sources to be used by Canadians (North Americans) in naming were the existing English words that could be modified to suit a new denotatum, words used by non-English speaking inhabitants of Canada, and words invented for the purpose of naming a new type of fish. Since the large expanse of the country was settled by different groups of settlers in different places, the same type of fish was sometimes given different names in different localities.

The rule that names of commercially important fish spread over a wider territory, whereas the important, but less exploited types tend to show variation, and that there is a multitude of local names for small and unimportant fish, is in principle borne out in the case of Canadian fish names too (Vinja, 1986/26).

In the first place there are a number of fish names, including the generic term **fish**, that were brought to North America and used to name new species of the same genus, i.e. **herring**, **pike**, **salmon**, and **trout**. These are the names of fish important for commerce and the diet of the population. Their names are thus used throughout the English speaking world in combination with other words to denote the particular localized species.

A brief overview of their etymology shows that they are all ancient English names, **fish** being of Indo-European heritage, **salmon** and **trout** transmitted from Latin via Middle French, and Greek via Latin respectively. The spread of these names is proof of the importance of the fish in the central and northern parts of Europe. **Herring** is of common Germanic origin, and **halibut** is also found (in similar forms) in other Germanic languages (e.g. Du **heilbot**, Swed **helgefundra**), while **pike** is a localized English name.

fish < OE *fisc* (L *piscis*)

halibut < “holy (i.e. holiday) plaice” < ME *hali* + *butte*
(L *Hippoglossus hippoglossus*)

herring < ME *heering* < OE *hæring* (L *Clupea harengus*)

pike < ME *pike* < OE *pic* (L *Esox lucius*)

salmon < MF *saumon* < L *salmo* (L *Salmo salar*)

trout < OE *truht* < LL *tructa*, *trocta* < Gk *troktes* (genus *Salmo* and genus *Salvelinus*)

All these names are eventually descriptive of a quality of the fish, except that in the borrowed words the original meaning has become opaque, which can also be said of the Germanic **herring**, whose etymology is obscure. The name **pike** is descriptive alluding to the characteristic form of the fish's jaw (OE *pic* = a point, a pike). **Halibut** is so called because it was a delicacy and used to be eaten on holidays. The fish name **butt** refers to a flat fish and is also descriptive, meaning “stump”. Iconic names referring to the pointed or flat form of the fish are abundant in the Mediterranean fish names, e.g. the **igla**, **plat**, **obliš** (Vinja, 1986/69–100).

These “basic” fish-names are often the head noun in a nominal phrase or compound, which is then modified to denote the specific Canadian (North American)

fish. The most frequent types of word formational patterns used in naming fish are the following:

1. a phrase with an English “basic” fish name defined by
 - 1.1. a proper name
 - 1.2. a common name
 - 1.3. an adjective
2. compounds referring to a property of the fish
3. clipped forms
4. loan-words from
 - 4.1. Indian languages or Eskimo
 - 4.2. French
 - 4.3. other languages
5. blends

1.1. A very common proper name used to define the basic name is **jack**. It is a device used in English to mark the masculine gender (or masculinity, e. g. **Jack Frost**, severe frost) as in **jack herring** and **jack salmon** (British Columbia). It can also refer to a type of fish, e. g. **jackfish** “a common game fish (*Esox lucius*) of the pike family, having a long slender body and large head, found throughout Canada” (also **northern pike**). This pattern does not exist in Croatian fish names, since maleness would be expressed by grammatical gender, i. e. suffixes for the formation of masculine nouns. Such frequent anthroponyms are used, however, but with even more vivid imagery, e. g. **suha mare** (“dry mary”) which compares with Eng **dry jack** and **poor john** (Vinja, 1986/497) for very small and thin fish.

Other proper names added to the basic fish-names are primarily Canadian place names, referring to the habitat of the fish, thus

Kamloops trout “a medium-sized variety ... of the rainbow trout found in British Columbia’s small interior lakes...” (< Kamloops, B. C., Gage).

Malpeque oysters “a variety of oyster found in Malpeque Bay, Prince Edward Island.” (Gage)

Winnipeg goldeye a Canadian variety of goldeye “an edible freshwater fish (*Hiodon alosoides*) native to rivers and lakes from Ontario... to Mississippi” (Gage), where the fish-name is not one of the basic ones, but a descriptive name (see 2.)

Somewhat different is **Madeira fish** in the dialect of Newfoundland, which denotes a “second grade codfish, once used to supply the Spanish and Portuguese markets” (Mc Connell).

Croatian fish names such as **turska britvica** = “Turkish razor” (Vinja 1986/497), though somewhat different in structure (adjective denoting origin, or perhaps shape of the fish together with the head noun which is descriptive) belong to this group.

The two-part names are particularly common in the Canadian fish nomenclature, which is not the case in Croatian, and which points to their relative novelty. Names used for many generations tend to be shortened to the extent that their transparency is lost (see 3).

1.2. This name model is also descriptive in nature, and there are three types in our examples: a) the descriptive modifier is a noun denoting a land animal (a universal practice, Vinja, 1986/27), b) it is the name of a season, c) the noun is **king**.

a) A name like **dog salmon** (other names: **chum**, **keta**), “a salmon (*Oncorhynchus keta*), that occurs abundantly in the streams of the American Pacific Coast from the Sacramento northward, also on the Asiatic side, and that is the common large salmon of Japan” (Webster), could express some resemblance between the dog and the fish, the size of the fish or its common occurrence etc. Dog as a fish name is very common in the Mediterranean nomenclature (e.g. Cro. **morski pas**), but many other animal names such as cat, cow, horse, goat or pigeon, to name only a few, are abundant as well.

Chicken halibut (also **chix**) on the other hand, is used to refer to a young halibut. Thus a word from the land fauna is applied to the marine world, a characteristic strategy in all languages (Vinja, 1986/27).

b) **Spring salmon** (in Brit. Columb. for **king salmon**) is “The largest Pacific salmon (*Onchorhynchus tshawytscha*) found from California to Alaska mainly dark greenish-blue...” (Gage) and like **fall fish** (also **coho salmon**, U.S. **silver salmon**, *Onchorhynchus kisutsch*), a “Pacific salmon found along the coast from S California to Alaska” (Gage), may be a translation from an Indian language denoting its fishing season.

c) The proper noun **king** is used to denote large, majestic fish, thus also “the largest Pacific salmon” (above). This kind of designation is very common all over the world (also for animals and birds and things, e.g. **king-size** cigarettes), though sometimes it may refer to the splendid colouring of the fish, not only to its size. As a stylistically very marked expression it can sometimes denote the opposite, i.e. a very small and insignificant fish (Vinja, 1986/205).

Chinook salmon a spring salmon, especially a large one) = also called **quinnat salmon** (**black salmon**, Webster).

It is interesting that this important fish has several names used throughout Northern America. Some of the names are of Indian origin and it is difficult to decide to which word class to assign the modifiers.

1.3. Adjectives as modifiers of the basic fish names refer a) to the colour of the fish: **gilded fish**, **blue pike**, **yellow pike** (also **dore**), **whitefish** (also **conny**), b) to its size, **great northern pike** (also **brocket**), and c) to its habitat, e.g. **great northern pike**, **northern fish**.

d) names like **walleyed pike** (from Old Norse *vagleygr* “with a beam in his eye” i.e. with diseased eyes, Skeat) for “a common North American freshwater fish (*Stizostedion vitreum*) of the perch family that is one of the most important food and game fishes of Canada’s inland waters, ranging in color from mainly olive brown to yellow, and having smoky, silvery eyes thought to resemble those of walleyed domestic animals” (Gage) are popular interpretations of a foreign, opaque, word. This particular name is also an example of transfer of reference from continental to marine life.

2. One word names are also descriptive and derive from noun + noun phrases (see 1.1.) fused into a *compositum*, such as **goldeye**, “an edible freshwater fish (*Hiodon alosoides*) native to rivers and lakes from Ontario to the Northwest Territories and south to

Oklahoma and Mississippi” (Gage) or **alewife**, “a food fish of the herring family found in sea and fresh waters of eastern North America” (Gage). The first one refers to the colour of the fish’s eyes, the second perhaps to a large rotund woman alluding to the fish’s shape.

Names like **piddler** (the Martimes), probably from “piddling”, a colloquial word meaning insignificant (and alluding to a small frequently urinating child = for an “Atlantic salmon less than 3,5 kg” (Mc Conell) refer to the fish’s commercial value.

3. With long and frequent use two-part names are shortened so that the basic fish name is elided leaving only the modifying element. This process may eventually make the word opaque and liable to popular etymologizing. Some examples of elided head nouns are:

shediacs, plural < Shediaac oysters (i.e. oysters from Shediac, New Brunswick)

malpeque < Malpeque oyster < Malpeque Bay oyster

chinook < Chinook salmon (“a spring salmon, especially a large one”, Gage)

walleye < walleyed pike.

jacks, plural < jackfish

chix, plural < chicken halibut

Two shortened forms of the name for “a very large freshwater fish (*Esox masquinongii*) of the pike family” (Gage), i.e. **lunge** and **muskie** are derived from the noun **muskelunge** (4.1.) by “cutting off” either the first or the second syllable. It is in accord with natural phonology to elide weakly pronounced, i.e. unstressed syllables, so it is reasonable to assume that the first name has its origin in the French, the second in the English adaptation of the Indian word.

Elision of one word in frequent usage is common, whereas the clipping down to the stressed syllable is more typical for English than languages with different types of word stress (e.g. Croatian with its melodic stress system).

4. Names of fish are readily borrowed from other languages spoken by either the native Canadian Indians and Eskimos or by the later settlers, particularly the French. These names are adapted into English in the first place to fit the English phonological system (i.e. pronunciation). Forms created in such a way may only faintly reproduce the original word, particularly in the case of Indian names. The other process affecting such loanwords is semantic interpretation, since the meanings of the Indian names are not transparent (unless they are also place names and then refer to a locality, but remain opaque as to the meaning). Both processes are typical for any contact situation, when the newcomer borrows words for new objects (fish) from the natives. The largest number of Croatian fish names are loans from Greek or Romance languages (e.g. **tuna**, **orata**, **raža**, Vinja, 1986/25).

4.1. Fish names of Indian origin:

Chum (other names **keta**, **dog salmon**) from Chinook jargon “tzum” meaning spotted (Gage, Webster, Collins). This is a phonologically adapted loan word (Filipović, 1986), though probably also accompanied by folk etymology.

Sockeye from Salish “sukh-kegh” meaning red fish. Another name is **red salmon** with the same image as in the Indian name, again testifying to a universal cognitive

process reflected in naming. The English form, however, has gone through the usual process of adaptation, with a marked popular interpretation, but more importantly following the name pattern of the English **goldeye**. Unlike the model, but like **walleye** and **sockeye**, it does not offer a plausible description of the fish. Such examples abound in the Mediterranean fish names, which have been transmitted to the Slav settlers through several linguistic strata. (Vinja, 1986/25).

Muskelunge (see 3.) from an Algonquian (Ojibwa) word “mashkinonge” meaning great pike (*Esox masquinongy*), “a very large freshwater fish of the pike family” (Gage). The transparency of the Indian name is of course lost in the loan word.

Coho, **coho** from Salish, meaning fall fish. The calque of the Indian name (**fall fish**, which is also used in some localities, retains the connotation, that the fishing season is in the autumn. Vinja, however, discussing the Cro fish name **zubatac** for “*Dentex vulgaris*” (Vinja, 1986/37f) maintains that it is doubtful whether such forms are calques or simply “polygenetic” creations, arising from analogy in the observation of the same reality.

Oolichan, **eulachon** from Chinook jargon where it means “candlefish”. This is “a small, highly valued food fish (*Thaleichthys pacificus*) of the smelt family found along the Pacific coast of North America” (Gage).

Most of the place-names modifying the basic fish names (1.1.) are also of Indian origin, thus **kokanee** from Salish for “a permanent form of the sockeye salmon common to British Columbia lakes and rivers” from the place name Kokanee Creek, British Columbia. Also **kamloop** from the name of a lake, meaning “meeting of the waters”, and **malpeque** from Micmac via French (Malpeque Bay), meaning “large bay” (McConnell).

4.2. Examples of common French fish names are:

doré/do'rei/, **doree**/do'ri/, or **dory**/dori/ from French “poisson dore” (gilded fish), a description of the fish's appearance, shortened of the general term “poisson”, and adapted to English pronunciation (phonology) and spelling. Particularly characteristic is the shift of the stress to the initial syllable with a shortening of the final vowel in the vernacular form **dory** (McConnell), not recorded in the dictionary (Gage);

conny, **connie** from French “poisson inconnu” (unknown) has gone through the same process of adaptation as **dory**. The difference here is that the unstressed initial syllable in the French word is elided. The English dictionary (Gage) records also the form **inconnu** /'inkənju, 'inkənu/ as referring to “a whitefish (*Stenodus lucichtys*, Gage, *Stenodus mackenzii*, Webster) of Northwestern North America and parts of Northern Asia, generally valued as food fish”. Its name derives from the fact that it was little known to the anglers.

Neither **dore** nor **inconnu** are transparent to the English speaker, nor is **barbot**(te) “a large catfish”, **brocket** meaning **great northern pike**, and **gaspereau** (alewife). **Barbot** (the Central Provinces) and **brocket** are local names (recorded by Mc Connell) not recorded in general dictionaries (Gage, Webster). (Note)

4.3. A Russian name is also used mainly as a commercial name, i.e. **keta** for **chum** or **dog salmon** (*Salmo keta* = The word is of Greek origin, and it was used by the Greeks for large fish or other large sea animals) (Senc).

5. Modern fish breeding has produced new fish species and at the same time new fish names. Both processes run parallel, the new hybrid fish created by crossbreeding between two species is named by a “blend” of two words (i.e. parts of words, not entire morphemes as in a compound): a **splake** is a “speckled lake trout”, and **muspike** is a “**muskellunge pike**”. This word-formational process is relatively recent in languages and thus cannot be attested in traditional nomenclatures.

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Even superficial enquiry like the one above, reveals the universal nature of patterns in human cognitive processes involved in naming practices, as well as a language bound system of word-formation determining the actual form of the name. On the diachronic axe there are universal processes at work again, shaping or “cutting” the word to a size most suitable for spoken, informal, professional communication, i.e. sound change (including adaptation in loan-words), reduction of the size and complexity of the name (phrases reduced to one-word or further one-syllable names), and interpreting opaque forms.

NOTE

Webster records “barbotte” only as a Canadian French name for a fish (Mc Connell) while Gage does not record the word at all. Similarly “brocket” is in Webster recorded as an originally French word for a kind of deer, while it is not recorded in Gage.

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VINJETA O KANADSKOM NAZIVLJU ZA RIBE

Nekolicina kanadskih imena za ribe analiziraju se prema strukturi i značenju, te uspoređuju s univerzalnim procesima tvorbe imena za ribe.