Slavey Jargon: A Trade Language of the Métis

 Slavey Jargon, and *le Jargon esclave* was a trade language used between the Métis and Forst Nations people and whites in the Yukon area, for example, in around Liard River and in the Deh Cho (Mackenzie River) in the 19th century.

It is based primarily on the Slavey language with elements from French, Cree, and English. However Father Petitot (1889) states that it lacks English, Dene (Chipewyan), or Gwichèin (Kutchin) elements in contrast to the neighbouring Loucheux Pidgin (or Loucheux Jargon, while Dall (1870) states that it includes English elements and McClellan (1981) states that it contained Dene Suline influences.

Later sources have assumed that Slavey Jargon is merely French vocabulary loanwords used with northern Athabascan languages. Petitot distinguishes the Slavey Jargon trade language spoken along the Mackenzie River from a different trade language called Loucheux Pidgin that was spoken along the Peel River and Yukon River.

The native languages of speakers who used Slavey Jargon were Dene Suline, French, Gwich'in, Inuktitut, and Slavey. One notable speaker of Slavey Jargon was Antoine Hoole, a Métis Hudson's Bay Company translator at Fort Yukon. Hoole (or Houle) searved the Company for well over twenty years at Peel River and at Fort Yukon.

Having a French-speaking father and a Métis mother, Houle was born in 1827 and raised in a household where at least two languages were spoken. He originally came from Fort Halkett on the Liard River in what is now the southern Yukon Territory. He probably spoke South Slavey because that was the Indian language spoken around the Liard River, although Sekani and Kaska people also frequented the area. Hoole died in Fort Yukon at the age of forty-one, on October 22, 1868. The Gwich'in apparently stopped speaking the jargon in the early 20th century.

Antoine Houle 1827-1868
1842-1845, Apprentice Interpreter Fort Halkett, Mackenzie River.
1845-1846, Apprentice Fort Halkett
1846-1849, Apprentice Interpreter Fort Halkett
1849-1868, Interpreter Fort Yukon
1868, 22 October died at Fort Yukon

William H. Ball, director of the Western Union Telegraph Expedition of 1866 describes his meeting with Antoine Houle at Fort Yukon:[1]

We were much elated at the successful issue of our journey, and I confess to having felt a pardonable pride in being the first American to reach Fort Yukon from the sea.

This trading-post was founded by McMurray in the season of 1846-47, and the original fort was a mile or more farther up the river. The present fort was commenced in 1864, and at the time of our visit needed only the erection of a stockade to complete it. The cause of the change of location was the undermining and washing away by the river of

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[1] William H. Ball. *Alaska: Its Resources*. Boston: Lee and Shepard Publishers, 1897: 101-106.

the steep bank on which the old fort was built. At this period, the old houses had been removed, and some of the remaining foundation-timbers projected far over the water.

The present buildings consist of a large house, containing six rooms, for the commander ; a block of three houses, of one room each, for the workmen ; a large storehouse ; a kitchen ; and four block-houses, or bastions pierced for musketry, at the corners of the proposed stockade. Outside of the fort is a small house of two rooms, belonging to Antoine Houle the interpreter.

All the houses were strongly built, roofed with sheets of spruce bark pinned and fastened down by long poles. The sides were plastered with a white mortar made from shell-marl, obtainable in the vicinity. Most of the windows were of parchment, but those of the commander's house were of glass. The latter was provided with good plank floors, and the doors and sashes were painted red with ochre. The yard was free from dirt, and the houses, with their white walls and red trimmings, made a very favourable comparison with any of those in the Russian posts.

The fort is situated about two hundred miles from La Pierre's House, by the Porcupine River, the journey there and back being performed in about twenty days. Further particulars in regard to its geographical position will be found elsewhere. The inhabitants are all employees of the Hudson Bay Company. Most of them are from the Orkney Islands and the north of Scotland, while a few are French Canadians, with a mixture of Indian blood.

At this time the garrison consisted of Mr. J. McDougal the commander, and six men, of whom four were Scotchmen. The Rev. Mr. McDonald, a missionary of the Established Church, was also expected with the boats.

We invited the commander and Mr. McDonald to be our guests for the day, and did our best to provide a good dinner. We found them to be typical Scots, — quiet, reserved, cautious, but hospitably inclined. Antoine Houle the interpreter, who arrived with them, was of mixed French and Indian blood, and was a thorough voyageur. More independent than most of the Company's servants, he had his house to himself outside of the fort; and like many of his Indian cousins, deaf to the remonstrance's of the missionaries, had provided himself with one more wife than is usual in civilized countries. This was the more excusable, as the poor fellow suffered from ossification of the knee-joint, and could do but little to help himself. His house was always open to every one, and was a noted resort of the Indians, with whom he was a great favourite. With them he could talk in their own dialects, while the usual mode of communication between the whites and Indians in this locality is a jargon somewhat like Chinook, known by the name of "Broken Slave." The basis of this jargon, which includes many modified French and English words, is the dialect of Liard River. The native name of the tribe called Slave is AchetO'tinncJi, or "People living out of the wind."

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'That's a Rubbaboo'
Slavey Jargon in a nineteenth century Subarctic speech community

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Abstract:

A contact language called Broken Slavey or Slavey Jargon flourished among the Gwich'in in the nineteenth century. Slavey Jargon absorbed elements of at least five source languages: French, Gwich'in, South Slavey (Dene-Tha'), Chipewyan, and English. Analyzing historical sources and recorded ethnographic texts from fluent speakers of Gwich'in, I offer an explanation of how the lexicon and grammar of this kaleidoscopic language converged regionally in the small subarctic communities of Fort McPherson, La Pierre's House, and Fort Yukon. I also conclude that there is no internal textual evidence that Slavey Jargon was used as a trading pidgin. The polyglot form of most Slavey Jargon texts represents a curious inseam of linguistic democracy, suggesting that a measure of social equality was negotiated between the speakers of its diverse component tongues.

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