

The Origin of the Different Languages

From *Folk-tales of Salishan and Sahaptin Tribes*, collected by James Alexander Teit, Livingston Farrand, Marian K. Gould, and Herbert Joseph Spinden; edited by Franz Boas; published for the American Folk-Lore Society by G. E. Stechert & Co. in Lancaster, PA, 1917.

Franz Boas (1858–1942) was a German-American anthropologist who lived for a time in the Pacific Northwest. It was collected by Marian K. Gould from the people of the Sanpoil Tribe, one of the 12 confederated tribes of the Colville Indian Reservation in the Okanagon area of Washington State.

Part IV. Sanpoil Tales, By Marian K. Gould

14. THE ORIGIN OF THE DIFFERENT LANGUAGES. In a certain place in the winter months, the ducks (lullullo) collected in great numbers. When any one approached them, they would rise and fly away, making a whistling-noise. One morning two hunters went down to a river to kill some ducks. They had each obtained one, when a dispute arose over the question whether the whistling-noise was made with the bill or with the wings when they rose to fly. Neither could convince the other, and the words became bitter. Finally they agreed to take it to the chief, and let him settle the dispute. The chief heard the story, and looked at the ducks. Both of them were dead and could not make any noise. Therefore he called a council to listen to the dispute. The people came from all around to deliberate. They spoke one language and had only one chief. The ducks were brought in, and the chief explained the question. The people said, "We do not wish to be unjust, we will go to the river and hear for ourselves. These ducks can do us no good." So they went down to the river and frightened the ducks which flew over their heads. Part of the Indians said the noise was made with the bills; part said it was made with the wings. They could not agree. Therefore the ducks were made to fly once more. The people began to quarrel violently, and separated in an ugly mood. All during the winter the feeling grew, until in spring the mutual hatred drove part of the Indians south to hunt for new homes. This was the first division of the people into tribes. They selected a chief from their own division, and called themselves by another name. Finding new objects, and having to give such objects names, brought new words into their former language; and thus after many years the language was changed. Each split in the tribe made a new division and brought a new chief. Each migration brought different words and meanings. Thus the tribes slowly scattered; and thus the dialects, and even new languages, were formed.

Questions for discussion

Why do you think that there are so many different languages in the world?

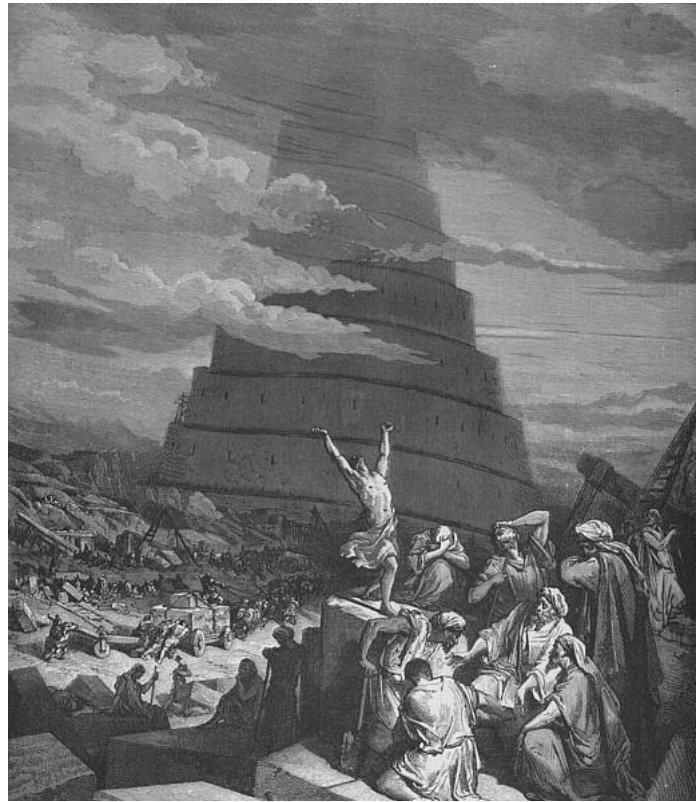
How does this story compare to other stories you have heard about the origin of languages?

People have long tried to create a universal language. Why do you think these efforts have failed?

More myths about the origin of language

This story is found in [Genesis 11:1-9](#) and appears in the King James Version as follows:

1 And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech. **2** And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar; and they dwelt there. **3** And they said one to another, Go to, let us make brick, and burn them thoroughly. And they had brick for stone, and slime had they for mortar. **4** And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth. **5** And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children built. **6** And the Lord said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do; and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do. **7** Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech. **8** So the Lord scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city. **9** Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because the Lord did there confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the Lord scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth.



The “confusion of tongues” by Gustave Doré, a woodcut depicting the Tower of Babel. Image is in the Public Domain.
From *Wikipedia Commons*.

A Mexican story was that after the Deluge the sole survivors Coxcox and Chichequetzl engendered many children who were born dumb but one day received the gift of speech from a dove which came and perched itself on a lofty tree: but the dove did not communicate to them the same language, so they separated in fifteen companies. And Gemelli Carrer and Clavigero describe an ancient Mexican painting representing the dove with thirty three tongues, answering to the languages and dialects he taught.

At Cholula they related that Xelhuaz began to build a tower on Mount Tlalok to commemorate his having been saved along with his brothers from the Flood. And the tower he built in the form of a pyramid. The clay was baked into bricks in the province of Tlamanalco, at the foot of the Sierra Cocotl, and to bring them to Cholula a row of men was placed that the bricks might be passed from hand to hand. The gods saw this building whose top reached the clouds with anger and dismay and sent fire from heaven and destroyed the tower (Baring-Gould 1881).

Research and Writing Opportunity

Investigate more stories about the differences in language. A Hindu myth tells of the Tree of Knowledge, punished for its pride, whose severed limbs form the basis of new expressions of culture, including language, as they emerge as new Wata trees.

Punishment seems to be a common theme among the stories about the diversity of language. Do all such myths involve punishment? Perhaps you can write a story of your own, which reflects a less punitive account of language diversity.

