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Omaha Metals, Coinage, and Syntax: Outside Influence?*

Rory Larson

Abstract: A study of acculturation terms for metals and money in Omaha and some of the neighboring native languages related to it sheds light upon the historical circumstances in which these terms were coined.

Native American languages are a sadly under-utilized source of information bearing on the cultural history of this country. Each language contains a wealth of terminology reflecting its people's particular experiences, not only prior to European contact, but also during the various phases of their relationships with the Old World peoples who increasingly dominated their own world. Powerful insights into the historical processes that shaped our country can be gained to the extent that native languages are understood, recorded, and compared, not only with colonial European languages, but with one another.

This paper will focus on a single people and a limited topic of acculturation: that of their early experience with metals and money. The people I have chosen are the Omaha, who have been native particularly to northeastern Nebraska since early in the 18th century. The Omaha belong to a much larger family of languages, broadly known as Siouan. An important subdivision of this family is Mississippi Valley Siouan (MVS). MVS is divided into three or four branches, each perhaps about as distant from the others as English is from German, or French from Italian. One of these branches is Dakotan, the languages of the "Sioux" proper, including Santee or Dakota, Yankton, Teton or Lakhota, Assiniboine and Stoney. These languages seem to be rooted in southern Minnesota, but extend from there across the northern Plains and well into Canada. A second branch is Dhegihan, including the Quapaw of eastern Arkansas, the Osage of central and southern Missouri, the Kaw or Kansa of eastern Kansas, and the closely related Omaha and Ponka of northeastern Nebraska.

* The body of this paper is cribbed from a section of an upcoming Master's thesis by the same author examining Omaha acculturation terms in general.

The Chiwere branch includes the Iowa, Oto and Missouri peoples, the former of which seem to have been closely allied with the Omaha in the early 18th century and for a long time before that. More distantly related to the Chiwere are the Hochunk or Winnebago, originally from southeastern Wisconsin.

For purposes of this study, I will summarize the account of Omaha history offered in my thesis and divide it into several arbitrary but convenient periods. The dividing dates given are not intended to be precise.

Pre-Contact (to 1670)

This is Omaha history prior to encountering any elements of European culture. Essentially, it is everything prior to them becoming directly aware of either whites or horses. While it is likely that they heard rumors of whites through the grapevine of other tribes going back to the 1500s, they probably had no direct contact until late in the 17th century, when the French explored the Mississippi. From about the 1670s, the French seem to have known of the Omahas, then living on the Big Sioux River, and the Omahas must surely have known of the French as well. I consider the Pre-Contact period to end at about 1670.

Early Contact (1670-1750)

In this period, the Omaha had only minimal and sporadic contact with whites. They seem to have moved around quite a bit, experimenting with different techniques and locations for making a living. Starting with a woodlands adaptation on the Big Sioux River at the beginning of this period, they seem to have first shifted to an earthlodge mode of life on the White River and the west bank of the Missouri, and finally to a classic Plains adaptation based in northeastern Nebraska with the adoption of horses. Late in this period, an internal conflict split the tribe in two for a generation, but the two groups were reconciled and reunited at the end. This period approximately coincides with the French period of the Louisiana Territory.

Middle Contact (1750-1800)

In this period, the Omaha were well-established as the dominant tribe in northeastern Nebraska. Based in an earthlodge village near the Missouri, the tribe seasonally migrated into the western Plains to hunt buffalo. Though locally dominant, the Omaha had

regular contact with white traders from St. Louis, the Great Lakes and Canada, and sometimes traveled themselves to visit their bases. By the end of this period, the Omaha nation had become a regionally powerful chiefdom, and was rather dependent on the guns and other trade goods bought from the Europeans with furs. This period approximately coincides with the Spanish period of the Louisiana Territory.

Late Contact (1800-1846)

This period saw a series of catastrophes that decimated the Omaha people and drove them repeatedly from their home. Smallpox and fighting nearly wiped them out at the beginning of the 19th century, and attacks by Sauks and Sioux drove them first west and then south from their home village. Resources were becoming scarce for the Omaha and other tribes in the region. American explorers, traders, trappers, soldiers and finally settlers moved into their territory. The first treaties were signed, and the first annuities were handed out. By the end of the period, the Omaha were reduced to beggary and dependence upon the Bellevue trading post for supplies and safety. This period approximately coincides with the American period of the Louisiana Territory and the age of the American Fur Trade.

Bellevue (1846-1856)

In this period, the Omaha became intimately acquainted with whites of the westward movement, as the wagon trains moving up the Platte River road passed almost directly by their home base. They must also have been on especially intimate terms with the Otos, who were based in the same area, and it is likely that the two groups shared many acculturation terms at this time. This period also coincides with their first association with the Presbyterian mission, which was established in the Bellevue area at nearly the same time as the Omahas arrived. The first Omaha children received education at the mission school, and the first Omaha who was fluent in English is recorded from this period. Numerous acculturation terms must have entered the Omaha vocabulary during this period.

Late 19th Century (1856-1900)

In this period, the Omaha were forced to sell most of their lands, and were confined to a small reservation in northeastern Nebraska. The buffalo hunt failed, the land around them was settled by whites, and the Omaha were threatened with removal or starvation.

Substantial chunks of land were stripped from their original reservation and sold or given to other people. Survival seemed to require assimilation, and a substantial movement developed among progressive Omahas to adopt the white man's way. Omaha children were sent to school to learn Euro-American skills and English.

Early 20th Century (1900-1950)

In this period, the Omaha participated in new cultural developments as a somewhat depressed rural region along with the rest of the country. Some farmed, but much of their land was sold or leased to white farmers. Most adult Omahas were bilingual in Omaha and English by this time.

Late 20th Century (1950-present)

After World War II, Omaha children were generally brought up speaking English as their first language. The population of fluent speakers of Omaha shrank to a small, and elderly, minority. Efforts to preserve and revitalize the Omaha language were mounted. Few, if any, acculturation terms entered the vocabulary in this period.

Background

For my thesis project, I collected all of the words I could find that could be considered acculturation terms. The bulk of these were found in the massive "Dorsey Dictionary" (Dorsey 1894), an unpublished work of index cards produced by the 19th century missionary James Owen Dorsey. There are perhaps about 20,000 words contained on these cards, which needed to be scanned in Omaha alphabetical order from microfilm owned by my thesis advisor, Mark Awakuni-Swetland. From these, I culled perhaps about 500 distinct acculturation items, and rather more distinct terms, as a language may have more than one term referring to the same item or concept. This list was augmented by acculturation vocabulary taken from "The Omaha Tribe" (Fletcher & La Flesche 1913), an ethnographical report by Alice C. Fletcher and Francis La Flesche, and from the "Umo"ho" iye of Elizabeth Stabler" (Swetland 1991), a modern dictionary of Omaha produced in 1977 by the young Mark Swetland and his Omaha grandmother. Dictionaries and vocabulary items for other MVS languages, notably including Dakota (Williamson 1902; Riggs 1890), Osage (La Flesche 1932) and Iowa-Oto-Missouria (Good Tracks 1992) were also used.

Several strategies for forming acculturation terms are commonly recognized. First, the term may be borrowed phonetically from the language of the people that introduced the acculturation item; in this case, it is called a *loanword*. Second, the term may be borrowed conceptually with its constituent parts translated into native elements, as with Spanish “rascacielos” or German “Wolkenkratzer” from English “skyscraper”; in this case, it is called a *loan translation* or a *calque*. Third, the term may be formed by simply giving a new or expanded meaning to a prior native word; in this case, it is called a *semantic transference* or *semantic extension*. Fourth, the term may be a brand new native coinage.

These four classes are designed to accommodate all possible means of producing acculturation terms in a simple binary culture-donor/culture-borrower association. When numerous languages of both types and varying degrees of genetic relationship are thrown into the mix, the system of classification may become more complex.

Metals and money

The native term for metal in Omaha is *mó^aze*, which is cognate to the term in other MVS languages. Presumably, it originally referred to copper, which was the only metal commonly known in the Midwest prior to Old World contact. In the historically attested languages, however, it seems normally to mean ‘iron’ if it is unqualified.

Implements of iron may have been one of the first salient features about white men from the Indian perspective. Fletcher and La Flesche (1913: 81) record a story from the Sacred Legend concerning the Omahas’ first encounter with whites. It seems that some strange white objects floated to shore, dropped off a white man, and departed. The Indians were frightened, and watched from hiding for a few days. Then, as the man seemed to be starving, they approached and cautiously extended a stalk of corn to him. The man took it and ate, expressing gratitude by signs. They treated him kindly and kept him as a guest until his companions returned. “Thus the white people became acquainted with the Omaha by means of one whom the latter had befriended. In return, the white people gave the Indians implements of iron. It was in this way that we gained iron among us” (Fletcher & La Flesche 1913: 81).

We can guess that the Omaha first knew iron in the Early Contact period. Whether the semantic extension of the old term for ‘copper’ to mean ‘iron’ took place then or in the following period is less certain. It is clearly an international phenomenon, as the cognate

of this word seems to mean the same in all MVS languages for which I have this information, and the Omahas and Ponkas are not likely to have been the first MVS speakers to use the term. Since the móⁿze word for ‘copper’ or ‘metal’ was probably the only sensible word to use for ‘iron’ in any of these languages, however, the obvious choice could have been made independently in every language, without assuming transference from one group to another as a calque or loan. I tentatively ascribe this word to the Early Contact period.

Another universal metal term in MVS is the word for ‘silver’, móⁿzeska or “white metal” in Omaha. The French and Spanish had been actively seeking this metal among the Indians since the Early Contact period or before. This is certainly an international calque. It was probably originally coined by the MVS tribes on the lower Missouri in the Early Contact period, but perhaps not used by the upper Missouri tribes until the Middle Contact period when they were incorporated into stable trading relationships directly with the Europeans. I will tentatively ascribe this word to the Middle Contact period, but likely quite early in that period.

Dorsey records a number of types of metals known to the Omaha. For most of these, the pattern is to qualify the móⁿze word with a color term. Thus, ‘copper’ is móⁿzeží de, “red metal”; ‘brass’ is móⁿzezí, “yellow metal”; ‘lead’ is móⁿzetú, “blue metal”; and ‘iron’ (proper) is móⁿzesá be, “black metal”. The word for ‘gold’ is secondarily founded on the word for ‘silver’, showing an appreciation of the monetary function of the two metals: móⁿzeskazi, meaning “yellow silver”. All of these words seem to be generally shared with Osage and Dakotan. A possible direction of transference can be inferred by the fact that Dakotan has a variant term for ‘lead’, máⁿzasú, or “metal seed”, perhaps through misunderstanding the Omaha word. (Omaha-Ponka is characterized by the shift of MVS *[o] to [u], and MVS *[u] to [i]. Thus, the Dakotan word for ‘blue’ is t^hó and for ‘seed’ is sú. In Omaha-Ponka, the word for ‘blue’ is tú and for ‘seed’ is sí. A Dakotan speaker might easily have misunderstood the Omaha element tú to be sú, ‘seed’, rather than t^hó, ‘blue’.)

‘Pewter’, móⁿzená skóⁿthe, is the one Omaha metal term listed by Dorsey that breaks the pattern. This term means “melted metal”. It could be a calque with the Dakota term, though it is just as likely a coincidental equivalence of two native verbal descriptions of this substance. It probably comes from the Late Contact period or later in the 19th century; I will tentatively assign it to the Bellevue period.

Money terms require some discussion. Our standard American monetary system was established late in the 18th century, not long after the American Revolution. Prior to this, there was no official

monetary standard in America. The most commonly used and recognized monetary unit was the Spanish peso, or “piece of eight”. This was a round silver coin that could be divided like a pie into halves, quarters and eighths. The minimal piece was an eighth, called a “bit”, and equated to the basic Spanish coin, the real. A picture of some of these coins, including three that have been subdivided, is shown on page 10 of James Hanson’s article “Spain on the Plains”, published in Nebraska History (Hanson 1993).

The American dollar was a silver coin intended to be equivalent to the peso. Unlike the peso, it was not to be subdivided with a hammer and chisel. Instead, special coins would be minted that would carry the fractional value both formally and by weight of silver. But rather than binary subdivision as with the old Spanish system, the American dollar was being subdivided decimally into “dismes”, or dimes.

The problem with this was that fractional values less than half would not convert between the two systems. To match two bits, the authors of the American system needed to coin either a quarter dollar or a half dime, both of which they did. The silver half dime was the original American 5 cent piece, but was replaced by the nickel after the Civil War. The Founders went on to mint one of the world’s first copper coins, the penny, as one tenth of a dime in value. Even that did not allow them to match a single Spanish real (12½ ¢), which they managed only with the introduction of the half-penny.

According to Fletcher and La Flesche, the smallest unit of value among furs for the Indians to barter to the traders was the raccoon skin, “rated at twenty five cents” (1913: 617). This would have been two bits under the Spanish system. The word for a quarter (dollar) in Omaha then and now is *mí ká hā i thá wa*, or “raccoon skin counter”.

For Omaha and other MVS languages, the usual counting term for dollars is *móⁿ zeska*, “silver”. In Omaha, however, there are traces of a different system. The word for a single dollar is *wí^h bthú ga*. Dorsey also records a word for “two dollars”, *nóⁿ ba bthú ga*. The word *wí^h* means ‘one’, *nóⁿ ba* means ‘two’, and *bthú ga* means “all; round; cylinder; entire; whole” according to the Stabler-Swetland dictionary (Swetland 1991:214). None of these three terms are normally nouns, and the construction is odd for Omaha. To make it work grammatically, we have to assume that ‘one’ and ‘two’ are being cast as nouns, which makes the terms refer to a “whole one” and a “whole two”. This makes little sense. I believe that something even more outrageous has occurred: it is the “whole, round” element that has been nominalized, and the numbers are being used out of order for Omaha, but in correct order for English, French or Spanish. In other words,

these words for “one dollar” and “two dollars” were coined, not by native speakers of Omaha, but by white traders who knew a few basic words in Omaha, but not how to put them together properly. These words are the fossils of a trade jargon, which in this form I am classifying as type *native_f*, meaning that the word is composed of native elements but coined by a foreigner.

The word *bhú ga*, which means both ‘round’ and ‘whole’, would be an excellent choice to refer to a whole (undivided), round, piece of eight, which equals a dollar. The other side of the Spanish system would be the word for a real, or “bit”. The Omaha word *hé be*, or ‘portion’ of a whole, comes to mind, but does not occur. Their words for ‘dime’ and ‘half dime’, however, are as strange as their word for “one dollar”. ‘Dime’ is *shú ga zhi^h ga*, or “little thick”, while ‘half dime’ is *bhé ka zhi^h ga*, or “little thin”. The word *shú ga* means ‘thick’, *bhé ka* means ‘thin’, and *zhi^h ga* means ‘little’. Again, all of these are normally stative verbs rather than nouns. The translations given above assume proper Omaha word order, and imply that ‘thick’ and ‘thin’ are being used as nouns. Again, the result does not seem to make sense. However, if we suppose the same sort of reversal of Omaha syntax as was proposed above for ‘dollar’, then it would be the *zhi^h ga* term that is nominalized. This very common term, meaning ‘little’, would be a fairly good choice for ‘bit’ for a foreigner whose knowledge of Omaha did not include the less frequent word *hé be*. This analysis would give us “thick bit” for a dime, and “thin bit” for a half dime, which makes much more sense. The word order is English, as we would expect for the subject matter. It is not likely French or Spanish, because in these languages most adjectives follow the noun as they do in Omaha.

Thus, the words for ‘one dollar’, ‘dime’ and ‘half dime’ must have entered Omaha via American traders in the Late Contact period or later. Their formulation, however, implies that the Omaha had a prior recognition of two technical terms likely dating to the preceding period: *bhú ga*, which meant a whole, round, undivided Spanish peso; and *zhi^h ga*, which referred to one of the pie-slice pieces of a peso, perhaps in particular a single bit. They also must have had a tradition that a raccoon skin got them two bits. When the Americans attempted to convert their Omaha trading partners to the American monetary system, substituting dimes for bits, there must have some awkward moments. Eight bits gets you a dollar, but you need ten dimes. What is a two-bit raccoon skin worth in dimes? At this point, the American traders probably had to carefully explain the difference, and relative buying power, of dimes and half dimes. Two thick dimes, *shú ga zhi^h ga*, plus one thin dime, *bhé ka zhi^h ga*, is a fair price for a raccoon skin, and four raccoon skins still gets you one dollar, *wi^h bhú ga*.

Osage, Kaw, and Dakota show different, but comparable developments. The Osage word for a dollar recorded by La Flesche is *bthó ga wiⁿ xtsi*, “one whole/round”, in proper Osage order. The word *ga špé*, intrinsically meaning “a piece struck off”, is listed as “bit; a small coin valued at about 12½ cents”, which shows up in their word for a quarter, *ga špé thoⁿ ba*, literally “two bits”. In Kaw (Kaw Nation of Oklahoma 2003), the word for dollar is again *bthó ga*, while *ga špé* is used for ‘quarter’. These words seem to confirm the underlying Spanish system, with the *bthú ga* term being the international Dhegihan word for a peso. Dakota doesn’t seem to have a good cognate for *bthú ga*, and just uses the countable term *má zaska*, “silver”, for a dollar. Its word for a dime, however, is *ka špá pi* (Williamson 1902: 49; Riggs 1890: 269), which is approximately equivalent to Osage *ga špé*. A nickel is *ka špá pi o ki se*, a “half dime”. This seems to confirm that the original international term for a bit among the MVS languages along the Missouri was a variety of *ga špé*, “a piece struck off”, and that the Americans had to reinterpret the Spanish bit into the American dime. Omaha probably had the *ga špé* term originally too, as the Omahas lived between the Osages and the Sioux. Perhaps the *zhi^á ga* term was coined on the fly by Americans anxious to avoid the precise value implications of *ga špé*.

Dorsey records the Omaha word for a half dollar as *moⁿ sóⁿ thiⁿ ha*, and the Ponka word as *ma sá ni*, both defined as “side” or “half (of a pair)”. Elsewhere, the term seems to indicate something like the other side of a river. This designation seems apt if we picture a round silver dollar cut in two down the middle. With this addition, we can tentatively reconstruct the Omaha view of the Spanish monetary system, probably established in the Middle Contact period:

- *moⁿ zeska* - silver, money, generally divided as countable units into pesos
- *bthú ga* - a whole, round, cylindrical silver peso
- *moⁿ sóⁿ thiⁿ ha* - one half, or side, of a peso
- *mi ká ha i thá wa* - raccoon skin counter, a quarter peso, equal in value to a raccoon skin, the minimal Omaha unit of value
- *ga špé* – a piece struck off, a bit, one real, the minimal Spanish unit of value

Besides reinterpreting the gašpé, or zhi^hga, into dimes and half dimes, the Americans added pennies to the system. The Omaha word for ‘penny’ is wé tha wa, “counter”, “cent”, móⁿzeska zhi^h de, “red money”, or wé tha wa zhi^h de, literally “red cent”. These developments would seem to date to the Late Contact period or Bellevue period. It turns out, however, that the monetary naming system of the Iowa-Oto-Missouria is strikingly close to that of the Omahas in some respects. They too have ‘raccoon skin counter’ as their name for a quarter, and they use the equivalent ungrammatical term sógayi^hñe / sógayiⁿñe, “little thick” for ‘dime’. This term is too improbable to be a coincidence. Apparently terms for the American monetary system were fixed at a time when the Omahas were especially closely associated with the Otos. This would argue in favor of the Bellevue period, when the Omahas and the Otos were living together next to the trading post, where monetary values had a high salience.

The case of Kaw may undercut the Bellevue interpretation, however. This language also uses shúga hiⁿga, “little thick”, “thick-little”, or “thick bit” for ‘dime’. Its words for ‘penny’, zhújehiⁿga, “little red”, “red-little”, or “red bit”, and for ‘nickel’, skahiⁿga, “little white”, “white-little” or “white bit”, show the same pattern of formation. Considering the ungrammatical nature of this pattern, it seems likely that the terms all entered the vocabulary at about the same time, including the equivalent ‘dime’ terms in Omaha and Iowa-Oto-Missouria and the corresponding ‘half-dime’ term in Omaha, coined by the same American traders. Since this was surely no later than the Bellevue period for the Omaha, and at least as early for the Kaw as for the Omaha, it follows that the Kaw term “white bit” now used for ‘nickel’ must originally have applied to the half-dime, since the nickel was not yet in existence.

In 1846, the same year that the Omaha moved to Bellevue, the Kaw sold much of their land and moved west from the Missouri to a reservation starting about ten miles west of Topeka, Kansas. The lands in eastern Kansas that they had vacated were divided into reservation strips for various tribes of Indians forced out of eastern North America by Euro-American settlement. So from about that time on for several decades, the Kaw were separated from the Omahas, Otos and Iowas by reservations for Sauks and Foxes, Kickapoos, Delawares and Wyandots. If the “thick-little” formulation was coined in the Bellevue period, then it should have involved these other tribes as well. If this formulation is not found in the languages of these other tribes, then it must have been coined and common among Siouan tribes along the Missouri from northeastern Kansas to northeastern Nebraska prior to 1846. Future research may tell. For now, I am inclined to place the

origin of the “thick bit” and “thin bit” terms for dimes and half-dimes in the Late Contact period, as being easier to square with the equivalent term for ‘dime’ in Kaw.

One other tribe also uses a “little thick” term for an American coin, however. The Tetons use *shókala* for ‘quarter’. This one is not so easy to explain as a grammatical garbling, because the *-la* is a functional diminutive which makes it clear that the expression is indeed intended to be “little thick”, not “thick bit”. This could be a reasonably fluent translation of the Omaha term. The difference in the referent (‘quarter’ rather than ‘dime’) suggests that the categories were not fixed as American coins at the time the calque occurred. This would suggest a very early date for the “little thick” expression, possibly in the Middle Contact period, perhaps originally using this term for a quarter of a peso rather than a dime.

The terms for ‘penny’ in MVS languages are more disparate, usually using the term ‘red’. In Kaw, it is a “red bit”; in Iowa-Oto-Missouria it is a “red metal” or simply a “red”. In Omaha, it is a “red counter” or just a “counter” as it also is in Osage. In Dakota, it is a *má za sha daⁿ*, a “little red metal” or “little copper”, or, intriguingly enough, a *Sag dá shiⁿ má za sha daⁿ*, a “little British copper” (Williamson 1902). The Dakotans, of course, would have been more familiar with the British in Canada than the more southern MVS tribes. Perhaps they used the qualified form to distinguish British pennies from American pennies. Williamson, however, mentions the qualified form first. He spent most of his career on the Santee reservation in Nebraska and was heir to the work of his father Thomas Williamson and other missionaries who had been writing down the language of the Dakota in Minnesota since 1834 (Williamson vi, vii). This suggests that the term *Sag dá shiⁿ má za sha daⁿ* may have been coined well before the middle of the 19th century, very likely around the period of the War of 1812 when the Santees were on friendly terms with the British. It follows in turn that if Kaws and Santees both knew the penny by the Late Contact period, then the Omahas probably did too.

The Omaha term “raccoon skin counter” for ‘quarter’ is apparently shared only with the Iowa-Oto-Missouria, which makes it possible that it was a bit of local Bellevue jargon involving primarily the Omahas and Otos. More likely though, because the term implies that they were actively involved in trapping for the fur trade, and that the terms of the trade were immediately derived from the preceding Spanish bit system, *miká hai thá wa* substantially antedates the Bellevue period. In fact, all of these American monetary terms seem most comfortably attributable to around the age of Manuel Lisa, or

about the second decade of the 19th century. Hence, I will place them all in the Late Contact period.

The Omaha word for ‘thousand’ is *kú ge*, or ‘box’. Dorsey lists the term *móⁿ zeska k^hú ge wiⁿ*, or “one money box”, as meaning a thousand dollars. Fletcher and La Flesche (1913: 617) explain that this term came from the custom of packing one thousand silver coins in a box for ease of transportation. This term undoubtedly came into use with United States government annuity payments to the Indians, which started for the Omahas with the Treaty of Prairie du Chien in 1830. We can consider it to date from the latter part of the Late Contact period.

Finally, paper money or bank notes were added to the system, presumably in the Late 19th Century period. The Omaha word is *móⁿ zeska wa xi^h ha*, “money paper”, or literally “white-metal small-animal-skin”, a semantic absurdity that reveals its own conceptual history.

This paper has tried to illustrate a small piece of the wealth of cultural historical information contained in one Native American language. Its interpretations are speculative, but confidence can be improved to the extent that neighboring languages and other historical sources are recorded and brought into consideration. I hope that it provokes interest in pursuing the questions and possibilities it raises through interdisciplinary lines of evidence.

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