

# 10 Words with Indigenous Origins

By Sheri Radford

*Pinpointing the exact origins of language is an imprecise art, but these 10 English words are commonly acknowledged to have Indigenous roots.*

## Caribou

*Caribou* is derived from the Mi'kmaq word *qalipu*, which means “shovel snow,” referring to the animal’s habit of searching for food by using its front feet to push snow away. In Europe and Asia, *reindeer* is used more often than *caribou* to refer to the *Rangifer tarandus* deer species.

## Toboggan

The Mi'kmaq word *tepaqan*, meaning “drag made of skin,” was borrowed by Canadian French as *tobogan*, then English as *toboggan*.

## Totem

Totem comes from the Ojibwe word *ototeman*, which means “his kinship group.”

## Chipmunk

Originally spelled *chitmunk*, the name for this striped, bushy-tailed rodent is derived from the Ojibwe word *jidmoonh*, meaning “red squirrel.”

## Igloo

*Igloo* comes from the Inuit word *iglu*, meaning “house.” Though the English word refers specifically to a shelter built out of snow, in Inuit languages *iglu* can be used for homes constructed from any material.

## Kayak

*Kayak* is derived from the Inuit word *qajaq*, which means “hunter’s boat.”

## Sasquatch

*Sasquatch* comes from the Halkomelem word *sásq'ets*, meaning “hairy man.” Also known as Bigfoot, this mythical ape-like creature is said to be tall and smelly, with glowing eyes.

## Sockeye

*Sockeye* is derived from the Halkomelem word *suk-kegh*, which means “red fish.”

## Muckety-Muck

*Muckety-muck*, sometimes written *high-muck-a-muck*, comes from *hayo makamak* in Chinook Jargon, a pidgin trade language of the Pacific Northwest. The expression originally meant “plenty of food,” then it came to refer to anyone who lived well, and now it indicates someone of authority, especially an arrogant person.



## Skookum

The Chehalis word *skukm*, meaning “powerful evil spirit,” took on an array of more positive connotations in Chinook Jargon: big, strong, powerful, great, solid, genuine. Now the versatile slang word *skookum* can be used to compliment everything from a reliable person to a well-constructed piece of furniture. Many places in the Pacific Northwest are named Skookumchuck, which combines *skookum* with *chuck* (“water” in Chinook Jargon) to refer to places with powerful tidal rapids or whitewater.

