

Wordorigins.org

Dave Wilton, Monday, June 23, 2014

Redskin, a now disparaging term for a Native American, is nearly two and a half centuries old. It is first recorded in a transcript of a speech given by Chief Maringouin, an Indian of the Illinois people, on 26 August 1769. It was interpreted by a Frenchman from the Illinois language and transcribed and translated into English by William Johnson:

I shall be pleased to have you come to speak to me yourself if you pity our women and our children; and, if any redskins do you harm, I shall be able to look out for you even at the peril of my life.

The French that *redskin* is translated from is *peaux Rouges*, and the original Illinois word is assumed to be **e•rante•wiroki•ta* (person with red skin), but we don't have a record of the original Illinois speech.

The term *red man* is older, dating to 1740, when it appears in the journal of John Wesley, and the French *homme rouge* dates to at least 1725. And the English use of the adjective *red* to refer to Native Americans is older still, dating to an appearance in the journal of Colonel George Chicken on 31 October 1725:

They desire always to be at peace with [sic] the White people and desire to have their own way and to take revenge of the red people.

Like many ethnic slurs, *redskin* and *red man* did not start out as derogatory, but they acquired the disparaging connotation over time. The original reference is to skin color. Tales that the term *redskin* refers to the practice of scalping or the use of red dye by native peoples are false.

Regarding use of the name *Redskins* by the Washington, DC National Football League team, the name was never intended to be disparaging, and is part of a long tradition of using Native Americans as mascots of sports teams. Other examples in this genre include the NFL's Kansas City Chiefs, and baseball's Atlanta Braves and Cleveland Indians. (Not to mention my own high school teams, which were the Toms River South Indians.) But while the *Redskins* name was never intended to be so, it is nevertheless considered offensive by many Native Americans. Polls of Indians who live on reservations or are officially enrolled in tribes typically record 35–45% as wanting the Washington team to change its name. Polls that record the opinion of those that self-identify as having Native American heritage generally record a much lower figure, as many of those who self-identify as such have only a tenuous connection, at best, to actual native heritage and are seldom, if ever, subjected to the racist attitudes that those who are enrolled in tribes experience regularly.

The use of images and names of an oppressed minority as a sports mascot is, in and of itself, problematic. But the use of the name *Redskins* by the NFL is especially so, given the history of that particular word's use in offensive contexts. Since the name offends a large segment of the Native American population, the NFL should change the name of the team.