

The polysynthetic nature of Salish  
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The Salishan languages, spoken (or formerly spoken) on the Northwest Coast of North America, are usually characterized as "polysynthetic" by different scholars studying them. The number of morphemes within a (morphological) word, however, does not get as high as, for example, the Eskimoan languages.

Salish certainly shows many of the usual characteristics that cluster together in polysynthetic languages; it is head-marking and agglutinating in word formation; predicate morphology is rich and includes transitivity and valency altering suffixes, pronominals, lexical affixes, markers of tense/aspect, plurality, diminutives, and still others. Although the average number of morphemes in a word does not appear to be high, the morphology that predicates shows certainly agrees with the label "polysynthetic". Another important aspect of polysynthesis seems to be the flexibility of word in its form, that is, a word is not fixed as regards the number of syllables contained, as in the case of (ancient) Chinese, or the number of morphemes it is composed of. A word in polysynthetic languages can be short, conveying very simple meaning, or very long with complex and elaborated meaning. For non-obligatory categories, speakers have choices as to what to include in a single word; many concepts can equally well be expressed analytically. This alternation of analytical versus synthetic structuring of phrases and clauses is well-attested in Salish.