Mohawk and the Iroquoian Languages

Mohawk is a language of the Iroquoian family. The family consists of two major branches: Southern Iroquoian and Northern Iroquoian. Southern Iroquoian is represented by just one language, Cherokee, now spoken primarily in North Carolina and Oklahoma.

Northern Iroquoian has several sub-branches. The first offshoot of Northern Iroquoian developed into Nottoway, Meherrin, and Tuscarora. The Nottoway people were first encountered by Europeans near the Virginia coast in 1650. The language, which disappeared during the mid-nineteenth century, is known through just two wordlists from the early part of that century. The Meherrin people were first encountered in 1650 near the North Carolina coast, but by 1730 they had merged with the Tuscarora. All that remains of their language are two town names. The Tuscarora were first encountered in eastern North Carolina. Early in the eighteenth century, most began to move northward, where their descendants reside today in two locations: near Niagara Falls in eastern New York State and at Six Nations in southern Ontario. Few speakers remain.

The second offshoot of Northern Iroquoian was Huron. The earliest mention of the Huron people is in Champlain’s account of his 1615 visit to what is now southern Ontario. The Huron Confederacy, consisting of four tribes, was decimated in 1649 by attacks from the Five Nations Iroquois. Some survivors fled toward Quebec City, where their descendants live today at Lorette. The language is no longer spoken there. Others settled with other Iroquoian groups in the area. Some of these groups were subsequently defeated as well, and the survivors, a mixture of Huron, Petun, Erie, and Neutral, moved west to Sandwich, Ontario, and became known as the Wyandot. Many subsequently moved southward, ultimately ending up in Oklahoma. The Wyandot dialect of Huron was last spoken in the mid-twentieth century. French missionaries among the Huron, particularly during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, left rich records of the language. Wyandot texts and lexical and grammatical material were recorded in the early twentieth century. Petun, Neutral, Wenro, and Erie are known only through some names.

Five of the remaining Northern Iroquoian groups, the Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga, Oneida, and Mohawk, formed a strong political alliance known as the League of the Five Nations Iroquois. Their territories stretched essentially from the western edge of modern New York State, where the Senecas were known as the Keepers of the Western Door, to the eastern edge, where the Mohawks were the Keepers of the Eastern Door. Another group to the north, now known as the Laurentian, was not part of the League, nor was a group to the south, the Susquehannock. The Laurentians met Jacques Cartier in 1534 at the mouth of the St. Lawrence River, but they had disappeared from the area by the time of Champlain’s arrival in 1603. Vocabulary lists of their languages remain from the time of Cartier’s voyage, and it is from them that we have the name Canada, a term that persists in the modern Five Nations languages today meaning ‘settlement, town’. The Susquehannock to the south, also known as the Andaste, suffered during the colonial period from European diseases and attacks from colonists and the other Iroquois until the last survivors...
were murdered in 1763. Their language is known
trough a wordlist recorded by a Swedish missionary
in his journal published in 1696.

The Five Nations languages are all still spoken
today primarily by elders, although all communities
have language classes. Seneca is spoken in three
communities in western New York: Cattaraugus, Allegany,
and Tonawanda. Cayuga is spoken at Six Nations in
southern Ontario, where many Cayugas fled after the
American Revolution. Other Cayugas moved into
Oklahoma, where the language was spoken until the
late twentieth century. Onondaga is spoken in central
New York south of Syracuse and at Six Nations. Some
Oneidas remain in New York State, but most moved to
southern Ontario near London, and to Wisconsin near
Green Bay. There are six main Mohawk communities:
Six Nations in Ontario; Tayendinaga near Deseronto in
Ontario; Akwesasne with territory in Ontario, Quebec, and New York State: Kahnawake at Oka to
the northwest of Montreal; Kahnawake on the south-
ern shore of the St. Lawrence across from Montreal;
and Wahta at Gibson in Ontario. There are several
thousand speakers of Mohawk, more than any of the
other Northern languages. The ages of the youngest
speakers vary from community to community, but
there are immersion schools in four of them, at Six
Nations (Ohsweken), Akwesasne, Kanesatake, and
Kahnawake. A number of speakers of Iroquoian lan-
guages reside outside of these communities as well.

Although the languages are not mutually intelligi-
ble, their basic structures are similar. They are illus-
trated here with examples from Mohawk.

The consonant inventory is small: t, k, k', ts, s, n, r,
y, w, h, t. There is a notable absence of labials (such as
p, b, or m). The vowel inventory is similarly small: i,
e, a, o, ŋ, ā. The Mohawk communities have agreed on
a practical orthography, which represents the conso-
nants as k, kw, ts, s, n, r, i, w, h, and ' (with i for the
glide [j] and apostrophe for glottal stop). The vowels
are spelled i, e, a, o, on, and en, with nasalization indi-
cated by a following n. Stress originally occurred on
the penultimate syllable of a word, although the pat-
tern can be obscured by the addition of vowels within
the word. The stressed syllable carries distinctive tone
(pitch). An acute accent marks high or rising tone (ð),
and a grave accent marks falling tone (ô). The falling
tone appears where a stressed vowel immediately pre-
ceded a laryngeal (such as h), as in *ihratôrok',
which became ihatô:roké 'he climbed under there'.
If a syllable ended in a laryngeal, the laryngeal was
lost, which was compensated by lengthening the
vowel. Open, stressed syllables are lengthened, as in
kîlek 'this'. Length is marked orthographically with a
colon:

Nouns are based on a noun root, which may be a
noun root or a nominalized verb stem. Morphological
nouns begin with a noun prefix. In unpossessed nouns,
the prefix encodes the gender of the referent, like the
Neuter o- in q-tsihkw-á 'fist, knot, knob, puck'. If the
noun is possessed, the prefix encodes the person, num-
ber, and gender of the possessor, as in akw-atsihkwá-
'my puck'. Different sets of possessive prefixes are
used for Inalienable and Alienable possession. The
prefix akw- 'my' in 'my puck' indicates Alienable pos-
session (meaning that the possessed is not an integral
part of the possessor). The prefix k- 'my' in k-atsihk-
wââke 'my fist' indicates Inalienable possession
(meaning that the possessed is an integral part of the
possessor). Inalienable possessions include most body
parts, but not hair or internal organs such as the heart
or stomach. Separated body parts such as eyelashes or
fingernails are Alienable. Terms for most kinsmen do
not describe possession, but rather the relationship,
such as ruke 'my father', literally 'he is father to
me', or the reciprocal qe-jara:sê: 'a' my cousin', liter-
ally 'we two are cousins to each other'.

Morphological nouns end in a noun suffix. The
most common is -a' as in otsihkw-á' 'knob'. Various
grammatical particle can be added to words serving as
nomininals, as in Kahnawa'kehrnon-kênhâ 'former
Kahnawake residents': ka-hnaw-a'=ke= hronon'= kenhâ' NEUTER-rapid=NOUN=SUFFIX=LOCATIVE=RESI-
DENTIAL= DECESSIVE.

Verbs are potentially the most complex words and
by far the most frequent in speech. All verbs contain a
pronominal prefix, a verb stem, and, apart from com-
mands, an aspect suffix. This structure can be seen, for
example, in katerohrkha' 'I watch': k-aterohrok-ha'
I-watch-HABITUAL. The pronominal prefix represents
the core arguments of the clause, that is, the one or two
major persons or objects involved. These specify per-
son (first, inclusive, exclusive, second, or third), num-
ber (singular, dual, or plural), and in third person,
gender (masculine, neuter-zaic, or feminine-indefi-
nite). The grammatical roles of the arguments are
specified as well, but not in terms of subjects and
objects, but rather as grammatical Agents (typically
those performing actions and controlling situations)
and grammatical Patients (typically those affected by
the situation but not in control.) and Patients (the enti-
y undergoing an event or state). The categories are
semantically based, but they are crystallized in the lex-
icon and the grammar, so that speakers have no choic-
es about degrees of agency as they speak. Verb forms
are simply learned with the appropriate prefixes. The
intransitive verb enjâkwaterôhrikha' 'we'll go watch
it' contains the Agent pronominal prefix iakw- 'we all'.
The intransitive verb ionkwênten 'we are poor'
has the Patient pronominal prefix ionk-w- 'we'. The Agent and Patient components of transitive pronominal prefixes are often fused. The transitive verb *shak-wi:tkswa*- ‘we called him’ has the transitive pronominal prefix shakwa- ‘we/him’. The transitive verb *enionkhiia*‘she will dress us up’ contains the pronominal prefix ionkhi- ‘she/us’.

The verb stem may itself be complex. This stem -erohrok ‘watch’ contains a Middle prefix -ate-. Verbs stems may also contain an incorporated noun stem, like -nahskw- ‘domestic animal’ in *ra-nahskwi:tonhne* ‘he was a beautiful animal’: ra-nahskw-iio-bne’ ‘masculine.Agent-animal-be.beautiful.STATIVE-PAST’ (‘he was beautiful in the way domestic animals are’). Incorporated nouns qualify the meaning of the verb. Nouns are incorporated both to create single words for recurring concepts, as above, and to manipulate the flow of information. When speakers wish to direct special attention to an object, they generally designate it with a separate, independent noun. If the object is an established part of the scene, or incidental to the point at hand, it may be backgrounded by incorporation.

Verbs may contain various additional prefixes and suffixes. Among the prefixes are a Contrastive for unexpected situations, a Coincident for similarity or simultaneity (‘the same, when’), a Partitive ‘so’ that appears in a variety of syntactic constructions, a Negative ‘not’, a Translocative ‘thither’, a Factual typically used for past events, a Duplicative that indicates various kinds of ‘two-ness’, including repetition of an event or a shift in position or state, a Future tense ‘will’, an Optative ‘might, should, would, could’, a Circlocative ‘hither, there’, and a Repetitive ‘again, back’.

Among the suffixes are an Inchoative ‘become’, several Causatives (‘cause’), Instrumental Applicatives (‘do with ...’). Benefactive Applicatives (‘do for’), Reversives (‘un-’), Distributives (‘here and there’), and Purposives (‘go in order to ...’). All verbs except commands contain one of the three basic aspectual suffixes: Habitual, Punctual, or Stative. The Habitual is used for recurring events and, with some verbs, for ongoing activities. The Punctual is a Perfective, used for events viewed as wholes. The Stative is used for states. With some verbs, it is also used for activities in progress, and with some verbs it is also used as a Perfect. The Habitual and Stative may be followed by a postaspecital suffix: Past, Continuative, or Progressive.

Because all verbs contain pronominal reference to their core arguments, they can serve as complete sentences in themselves: *wa’onkwanahskwi:tonhne*‘we got a pet’ (*wa’onkwa-nahskw-a-i:nt-a’-ne’ FACTUAL-1.PL. PATIENT-domestic.animal-STEM.JOINER-PUNCTUAL*). The same verb can be part of a larger sentence: *wa’onkwanahskwi:tonhne*‘we got a dog’. Verbs can serve other syntactic functions as well. They can function syntactically as nominals, much like nouns. Some are lexicalized as nominals, so that speakers understand them first as names for entities, such as *te-wa’draton* ‘lacrosse stick’ (te-w-a’ar-a-t-on CIRCLOCATIVE-NEUTER-NOM.JOINER-be.in-STATIVE ‘it has a net in it’). Some are used alternately as predicates or nominals, like *tahontsihkw:aks* ‘they hit the puck, they play lacrosse’ or ‘they hit the puck’ (ta-hon-tsihkw-a-‘ek-s CIRCLOCATIVE-MASS.C. PLURAL.AGENT-puck-STEM.JOINER-hit-HABITUAL). Full verbs are also used for many functions served by adjectives and adverbials in other languages.

Because the verb provides a full grammatical skeleton of the sentence, word order is used for purely pragmatic purposes. Nouns are strikingly rare in connected speech; sentences most often consist of just a verb and various particles. When independent nominals are present in a clause, all possible constituent orders can occur, although not all would be pragmatically felicitous. After various orienting particles, the most important elements tend to occur early in the clause, with successively more predictable and peripheral information expressed later.

Some of these structures can be seen in the excerpt below from an anecdote told by Watshenní’ne’ Sawyer of Kahnawake. (Abbreviations include M for MASCULINE, N for NEUTER, PL for PLURAL, PRT for PARTITIVE, SJ for STEM JOINER, and ST for STATIVE.)

*Nene ò:nen*

it is now

‘Now then’

wa’-onkwa-nahskw-a-i:nt-a’-ne’ è:rhá:r.

FACTUAL-1.PL PATIENT-ANIMAL-SG-LIE-INCHOATIVE-PUNCTUAL
dog

we acquired a dog.

Ra-nahskw-iio-bne’ ken’=k ni-va-a è:rhá:r.

M.AGENT-animal-little-just PRT M.SG. dog
be.nice.ST-PAST AGENT be.a.size

He was a beautiful little dog.

*Butch ronwed: tat-s-kwe’*

3.PL/M.SG.call-HABITUAL-PAST

His name was Butch.

*Toka’ kí:ken Ka-hnaw-a=ke-hró:non’*

and this NEUTER-rapidis-NOUN.SUFFIX=place=RESIDENTIAL

And folks in Kahnawake,
MOHAWK AND THE IROQUOIAN LANGUAGES

that 1.PL.PATIENT-be-poor formerly just TAG we were poor then, you know,

one-only just I guess I guess we only had one

wa'-'i-hon-tsihkwa-'ek-st-ha'
FACTUAL-DUPLICATIVE-M.PL.AGENT-puck-sj-hit-INSTRUMENTAL-APPLICATIVE-HABITUAL ball (‘they hit the puck with it’, i.e. ‘they played lacrosse with it’).

Ahkwesáhs=ne n-en-i-hón:n-e:'
Ahkwesáhs=place PARTITIVE-FUTURE-CISLOCATIVE-M.PL.AGENT-go-PUNCTUAL

They would come from Ahkwesahne,

ta-hon-tsihkwa-'ek-s
CISLOCATIVE-M.PL.AGENT-puck-hit-HABITUAL the lacrosse players

aw-ent-a-tokenhiti-'=ke io-t-ohetson n=entie'.
N-day-sj-be.holy-NOMINALIZER N.PATIENT- the=noon
=place MIDDLE-pass-ST
Sunday afternoon.

So then my mother would dress us up

sok i-en-ionkhi-ia't-énhaw-e'
then TRANSLOCATIVE-FUTURE-INDEFINITE/1.PL.BODY-take-PUNCTUAL and then she'd take us over there

References


See also Noun Incorporation

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