Iroquoian Languages

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The Iroquoian Family

The Iroquoian languages are indigenous to southeastern and northeastern North America. The family consists of two major branches, Southern Iroquoian and Northern Iroquoian.

Southern Iroquoian is represented by just one language, Cherokee, spoken today primarily in Oklahoma and western North Carolina. There are clear dialect differences between western and eastern Cherokee and within each, many of which predate the forced march of the Cherokee from North Carolina to Oklahoma in 1838.

Northern Iroquoian consists of several subgroups. The first to break away from the main branch developed into Tuscarora, Nottoway, and Meherrin. The Tuscarora were first encountered in eastern North Carolina, but early in the 18th century most moved north to rejoin other Northern Iroquoians. Their descendants now live primarily in two communities, one at Six Nations on the Grand River in Ontario, the other near Niagara Falls in New York State. Nottoway and Meherrin were once spoken near the Virginia and North Carolina coasts. All that remains of Nottoway are two wordlists recorded during the early 19th century. The only record of Meherrin is two town names, sufficient to identify the language as Iroquoian. The Meherrin merged with those Tuscarorans who did not migrate north in the 18th century.

The next group to separate from Northern Iroquoian became the Huron. They comprised a confederacy of four nations totaling around 20,000 people when they encountered Champlain in 1615 in present southern Ontario. In 1649, they were decimated by the Five Nations Iroquois. Some survivors formed a settlement at Lorette near modern Quebec City. Others joined the remnants of neighboring Iroquoian nations, the Tionontati (Petun), Erie, and Neutral, and migrated west toward Detroit and ultimately into Oklahoma. This group became known as the Wyandot. Both Huron proper at Lorette and Wyandot in Oklahoma were last spoken in the 20th century.

The remaining Northern Iroquoians separated into several subgroups, whose territories extended across present New York State. These were the Five Nations (with Tuscarora, the Six Nations), members of the Iroquois League of the Iroquois. To the west were the Seneca and Cayuga. In the center were the Onondaga, near...
modern Syracuse. To the east were the Oneida and the Mohawk. The languages are now mutually unintelligible, though they share many structural features. Seneca is now spoken in three communities in western New York: Cattaraugus, Allegany, and Tonawanda. Most Cayuga left New York State after the Revolutionary War, some going to Six Nations in Ontario, and others to Oklahoma. The language is now spoken primarily at Six Nations. It was last spoken in Oklahoma late in the 20th century. Onondaga is spoken at Six Nations and at Onondaga south of Syracuse. Oneida is spoken near London, Ontario, and Green Bay, Wisconsin. There are six Mohawk areas: Kahnawá:ke and Kanéhsatá:ke in Quebec; Akwesáhsne, which straddles Quebec, Ontario, and New York State; and Ohswé:ken (Six Nations), Thaientaná:ken, and Wáhta in Ontario. Most speakers now live in the first three. Several other Iroquois languages are known to have existed as well. In 1534, Jacques Cartier encountered people along the St Lawrence River around present Quebec City. Vocabulary in his ship's logs and appended wordlists indicate that these people, now known as the Laurentian, spoke several Northern Iroquoian languages, at least one of which was not ancestral to any of the modern languages. When Champlain returned to the area in 1603, these people had disappeared. They are, however, the source of the name Canada. Another group, the Susquehanna or Andaste, were encountered by Captain John Smith about 1615 in the lower Susquehanna Valley in Pennsylvania. Their language, known through a wordlist recorded by the Swedish missionary Johan Campanius in 1696, was last spoken in the mid-18th century.

**Phonology**

The consonant inventories of the languages generally consist of one series of obstruents (reflexes of *t, *k, *q, *w, *s), one of nasals (*n, *m, *ñ, *w), and one of laryngeals (h, j). Voicing is not distinctive. Note-worthy is the lack of labials. Most of the languages have four oral vowels (*i, *e, *a, *o) and two nasal vowels (*e, *o). In Proto-Northern-Iroquoian, stress was penultimate, and open, stressed syllables were lengthened. There have been several innovations of interest. One is stress in Cayuga. Cayuga stress placement depends on syllable count from both edges of the word. Primary stress falls on the penultimate syllable, providing that it is even-numbered counting from the beginning of the word: satkâhthoh 'Look!' If the penult is odd-numbered, it is stressed only if it is open: senbójtkob 'Open the door!' If the penult is odd-numbered and closed, stress is antepenultimate: sasaky'atawibsib 'Take your shirt off!' Epenthetic vowels, added after the establishment of basic penultimate stress in Proto-Northern Iroquoian, are not counted, like the -a- stem joiner in saky'atawit's 'Put your shirt on!' Stress on the second of two adjacent vowels moves to the first: sasanghdowek 'Put your hat back on!' If conditions are not met for penultimate stress, and there is no antepenultimate syllable, the word carries no stress: sâhsy'wog 'you returned.' Cayuga shows another interesting innovation. In odd-numbered syllables closed by a laryngeal, the laryngeal feature spreads leftward over the entire syllable. If the laryngeal is h, the full syllable is devoiced. (Devoicing is shown orthographically by underlining.) If the laryngeal is glottal stop, the full syllable carries creaky voice, indicated here by a wavy underline: wâhs'â:hi'h 'on its foot.' Several of the languages have developed distinctive tone under the effect of laryngeals. In Mohawk, stressed syllables generally show high pitch (if short) or rising pitch (if long). Stressed syllables closed by a laryngeal (glottal stop, or h followed by a resonant), however, developed a special pitch contour: a rise followed by a deep fall. The triggering laryngeal subsequently disappeared before a consonant. There are now contrasts, such as oká:ra' 'story' (with rising tone) and oká:ra' 'eye' (oká:ra'). (Mohawk examples are given here in the community orthography. Nasalized vowels a and u are written en and on respectively, glottal stop with an apostrophe ', vowel length with a colon :, stress accompanied by high or rising tone with an acute accent, and stress accompanied by falling tone with a grave accent. The palatal glide j is represented by i. Other symbols have approximate IPA values.) Western Cherokee underwent more complex changes resulting in tone. Fealing (1975) distinguishes three level tones (2, 3, 4), a rising tone (23), and two falling tones (32, 21, written 1), as in a'bye: 2j ki' di'jya 'he's capturing him.'

**Morphology and Syntax**

All of the languages are polysynthetic. Verbs in particular can be composed of large numbers of meaningful parts (morphemes), like Mohawk en-hske-rhar-âst-en: 'you will promise me' (FUT-2. sing/1.sing-expect-caus-ben.appl-per). All verbs contain at least three parts: a pronominal prefix, a verb root, and an aspect suffix. The pronominal prefix refers to the core arguments of the clause: -hske-'you/me' in the verb above. The prefix appears in the verb whether or not there are coreferential independent nominals in the clause as well, but it is fully referential in its own right.

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There is little evidence of Subject or Object categories. The pronominal prefixes show grammatical Agent/Patient patterning. The semantic basis underlying the system is still clear. Agent prefixes typically represent participants who are actively in control and instigating events or states, as in Mohawk ra-tah6n6s6atsa't 'he is listening,' ra-n6is6 'he is conceived,' or ra-her6se's 'he is chasing it.' Patient prefixes typically represent participants who are affected by a situation but not in control: ra-th6n6s6te 'he hears it,' ro-ta 'he is sleeping,' or ro-her6se's 'it is chasing him.' The system is now fully routinized, however. Speakers do not judge degrees of control as they speak; they simply learn which set of prefixes to use with each verb.

Agent prefixes are used in both events and states (jump, be conceived), and Patient prefixes are used in both events (boller) and states (be poor). The system is thus basically Agent/Patient rather than Active/Static. Superimposed on it, however, is one element of Active/Static patterning. Some verbs occur only in the Static: rahn6s6ton6 'he is quick-tempered,' r6ten 'he is poor.' Others occur in all three aspects: Habitual rate:kwan6 'he escapes,' Perfective wah6t6ko 'he escaped,' Static rate:kwen 'he has escaped.' With verbs like escape, which describe a change of state, the Static aspect form typically has a Perfect meaning: he has escaped. All Perfect Static verbs occur with Patient prefixes, whether their Habitual and Perfective forms appear with Agents or Patients.

The Northern Iroquoian languages show extensive, productive noun incorporation. The Southern language Cherokee shows traces of incorporation embedded in the lexicon, indicating that incorporation was productive in Proto-Iroquoian. Incorporation is a process whereby a noun stem is compounded with a verb stem to form a larger verb stem: -itsker-ontii- 'saliva-throw = to spit.' There is no explicit specification of the semantic role of the incorporated noun; it simply indicates the involvement of a type of entity, often as a semantic patient, but sometimes as an instrument, location, source, or goal. Examples can be seen in Mohawk wa-bo-n-itsker-ontii- 'factual-MASC.SING.AGT-MIDDLE-saliva-throw-PER 'he saliva-throw = he spit' and ka-her6s6rie't-tnen-en 'neuter-cord-tie-static it is cord-tied.' Incorporation is used pervasively to create new vocabulary and also to manipulate the flow of information through discourse. Important new participants are typically introduced with independent nominals, but those that are already part of the scene or of peripheral importance may be carried along as incorporated nouns.

Lexical categories are clearly distinguished by their internal morphological structure. Particles, by definition, are morphologically unanalyzable (t6ka 'maybe,' ob 'what,') though they may be compounded (neq tsi 'the only' for 'because'). Nouns contain a prefix specifying the gender of the referent or its possessor, a noun stem, and a noun suffix: ka-n6t6tsi'-a' neuter-kettle-noun-suffix 'kettle,' ake-n6t6tsi'-a' 1.sing.alienable.poss-kettle-noun-suffix 'my kettle.' Alienable and inalienable possession are distinguished. Verbs follow an entirely different pattern, and can be quite complex morphologically. In addition to the obligatory pronominal prefix, verb root, and aspect suffix, they may contain various prepronominal prefixes. In the Northern languages, these are the Partitive, Contrastive, Coincident, Negative, Translocative, Factual, Duplicative, Future, Optative, Cislocative, and Repetitive. They may contain a Middle, Reflexive, or Reciprocal prefix. As seen above, they may contain an incorporated noun stem. Following the verb root, there may be one or more derivational suffixes, such as an Inchoative, Reversive, Causative, Instrumental Applicative, Benefactive Applicative, Distributive, or Purposive. After the aspect suffix, there may be a postaspectual suffix: a Past, Continuative, or Progressive. Such structure can be seen in the Mohawk a-khe:nihonhr-ik s-a't-e' 'I would insult someone,' or ia'-te-iako-hah-a-hiia'k-on-hdtie' 'she was crossing the street.'

The morphological composition of particles, nouns, and verbs is thus entirely distinct. Noun stems never appear in the verb stem position of verbs, and verb stems never appear in the noun stem position of nouns. The match between internal morphological form and external syntactic function, however, is not isomorphic. Some morphological particles function syntactically as predicates, as nominals (without further derivation), or as full clauses, as below.

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Nah6n6ne'    tehniahse
n-a-honn-e'    te-hni-iahse
PART.OPT.MASC.PL.AGT-
go-PER
they would go there

the two (males) are
together

niristisere's ne = a-shakoti-hah-onni-en
ne = a-shakoti-hah-onni-en
ne = a-shakoti-hah-onni-en

MASC.DU.AGT-steel-
drag-stat-dist
they (males) steel
drag around

'they would go serve as guides for two surveyors.'
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Finally, there is no basic, syntactically defined word order. In part because of the richness of the verbal morphology, the proportion of verbs to nouns and of predicates to nominals is much higher in Iroquoian languages than in many languages of Europe and Asia. There are few oblique or adjunct nominals. When clauses do contain multiple constituents, all orders are not only possible, they can also all be seen to be pragmatically motivated by the discourse at hand.

See also: Oneida; United States of America: Language Situation.

Bibliography


Islam and Arabic

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Arabic today is the main language of nearly 300 million people in the Middle East and North Africa. Since 1974 it has been recognized as one of the official languages of the United Nations. Like Hebrew, Aramaic, and Syriac, Arabic belongs to the Semitic group of languages. In the course of history it has been the language of a religion, a transnational state, and a widespread centuries-long civilization that has produced a rich heritage of knowledge, wisdom, and culture. It is used for religious purposes by 1.3 billion Muslims worldwide, and it is the language in which Islamic knowledge at its highest level has always been conducted. This status was achieved as a result of its connection to Islam through its sacred scripture, the Qur’an. The effect of the Qur’an on the Arabic language was, to an extent unknown for any other language of the world, dramatic, profound, and lasting.

The Impact of the Qur’an

Before the spread of Islam, Arabic was confined to the Arabian Peninsula, where it was spoken and used as a literary language by the native Arab population. Very little written material survives from the early centuries of the Christian era, the earliest being the Namara inscription in the Syrian desert, dated 328 C.E.; the output of the Arabs, particularly in poetry, was preserved as an oral tradition. In fact the Qur’an, when it was compiled in one volume, about 14 months after the death of the Prophet Muhammad (632) under his successor Abu Bakr, was the first book in Arabic. Thereafter, however, in line with the first revelation of the Qur’an in 610 C.E.: Read! In the name of your Lord who created: … Read! Your Lord is the Most Bountiful One who taught by
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