

Mohawk is an endangered language that is very important to linguistics and to the indigenous heritage of North America. It has been around since before any European settler stepped foot in the New World, and its polysynthetic nature may hold the key to how human language works. Mohawk has been studied extensively for over one hundred years, but it wasn't until the 1990s that Mohawk began a renaissance of revival and development.

The Mohawk language, known natively as Kanien'kéha (Lewis, 2009), is primarily spoken by members of the Mohawk Nation, a Native American tribe. The Mohawk Nation is split up into several communities that are distributed across parts of upstate New York in the United States and Québec and Ontario in Canada. In 1993, there were six communities of Mohawk: Kahnawà:ke, Ahkwesáhsne, Tyendinaga, Ohswé:ken (Six Nations), Wáhta, and Kanehsata'ke. (Jacobs et al., 1993)

In the early 1970s, there were about 5,000 Mohawks living on the Kahnawà:ke reservation in southern Québec, and about half of them spoke the Mohawk language fluently. Additionally, there were women who were fluent speakers but were living off the reservation because they had married outside of their community. Some of these women's children were also fluent in Mohawk, but were similarly excluded from the reservation. (Beatty, 1972, pp. 7–9)

At the time, many Mohawk men travelled away from the reservation during the week to work with iron and steel in New York City and elsewhere. This travel would have introduced them to a large amount of English, which they may have spoken amongst themselves when they returned home. Perhaps as a result of this, children living on farms within the reservation were more likely to be fluent in Mohawk than their counterparts living in town. (Beatty, 1972, p. 8)

The Iroquoian family of languages is divided into the Northern and Southern branches, which, according to an estimate by Floyd Lounsbury, are separated by a time depth of about 4,000 years. The Southern branch consists completely of Cherokee, while the Northern

branch holds Tuscarora, Onondaga, Seneca, Cayuga, Oneida, and Mohawk. (All extant Iroquoian languages are endangered (Moseley, 2009); other Iroquoian languages, such as Nottoway (Lewis, 2009), are already extinct.) (Beatty, 1972, p. 10)

Dialects of Mohawk are generally named after the territory on which they are spoken, but not all are completely distinct. Beatty (1972) only mentions by name the Caughnawaga (Kahnawà:ke) and St. Regis (Ahkwesáhsne) dialects of Mohawk. The Mohawk Standardization Project (Jacobs et al., 1993), which sought to unite the various dialects under one system of rules while preserving dialectal differences, also involved the Tyendinaga, Ohswé:ken (Six Nations), Wáhta, and Kanehsata'ke dialects. UNESCO (Moseley, 2009) lists an additional two dialects: Ganienkeh and Kanatsiohareke. (The latter community appears to have arisen after the standardization conference was held—and, thus, was not mentioned in the proceedings. The former community appears to be a controversial off-shoot of the Ahkwesáhsne nation that was likely deliberately excluded from the conference.) The differences between these dialects are mainly phonological, and Beatty (1972, p. 9) notes that some dialects even have internal differences.

Beatty (1972, p. 7) estimates that there are about 2,000 speakers of the Kahnawà:ke dialect. Ethnologue, citing census data, claims there was a total of about 3,760 Mohawk speakers in the United States and Canada around the turn of the 21st century (3,000 in 1990 and 760 in 2001, respectively). (Lewis, 2009) Corroborating these figures, UNESCO classifies all dialects of Mohawk as “definitely endangered”, which they define to mean that “children [are] no longer learn[ing] the language as [a] mother tongue in the home”. (Moseley, 2009)

Mark C. Baker has done extensive research on Mohawk and has very thoroughly analyzed its polysynthetic nature. He has written an entire book on what it means to be a polysynthetic language, and he proposes a Polysynthesis Parameter, or Morphological Visibility Condition (MVC), to define just that. His MVC involves a distinct relationship between the visibility of a phrase and the theta-role assignment of another head. (Baker, 1996, p. 17)

Noun Incorporation is one of the most fundamental features of Mohawk and other

polysynthetic languages (especially those in the Northern Iroquois family), having been observed by linguistic anthropologists Franz Boas and Edward Sapir as early as 1911. The phenomenon operates exactly how it sounds: by incorporating a noun into a verb, turning a sentence such as “I bought a bed” into “I bed-bought”. In Mohawk, both of these sentence formations would be grammatical, in the right contexts. (Baker, 1996, Ch. 7, p. 279)

Mithun (1986, pp. 33–35) argues that, in spontaneous discourse, nouns remain unincorporated when they are first being introduced as the topic, but become incorporated once their context has already been established. In fact, there are occasions where a specific verb already implies a certain noun, so using that verb is sufficient enough to introduce the topic and allow even the first mention of the noun to be incorporated. Mithun cites an example of a Mohawk conversation, where one speaker used the verb “slurp” in the context of discussing what the speaker had had for lunch. In this context, the verb “slurp” implies that it was soup that was being eaten, so “soup” could be incorporated into the verb whenever it was subsequently mentioned—without having first appeared unincorporated.

Stress is relatively predictable in Mohawk, usually falling on the penultimate syllable. However, Mohawk often makes use of epenthetic vowels—that is, vowels that are inserted to ease the pronunciation of what would otherwise be complex consonant clusters (which can easily arise in a polysynthetic language, where morphemes are attached to other morphemes in countless different ways). (Beatty, 1972, pp. 20–21) In Mohawk, these epenthetic vowels, though pronounced, are not always taken into account when calculating where to place stress. Thus, in some circumstances, what would otherwise be called the antepenultimate syllable is considered by Mohawk stress rules to be the (regular) penultimate syllable. To make the situation even more complex, there are also cases where the epenthetic vowel actually *is* included in the syllable count and then winds up getting the stress on itself. Michelson (1989) lays out a detailed theory as to what drives the complex relationship between epenthetic vowels and stress in Mohawk.

Around 1970, almost as soon as the Mohawk people realized a significant decrease in

use of the language was occurring, the Mohawk language was introduced into the education system of the Mohawk communities, marking the beginning of the revival effort. (Jacobs et al., 1993) It was around this time that Beatty (1972, p. 9) noted the introduction of a non-credit course in Mohawk at a local high school on the Kahnawà:ke reserve, which most of the teens attended. At the time, Beatty cited confusing orthography as a major hurdle for learning the language.

Ironically, as Beatty's thesis was being published, educators and linguists were developing an orthography for use in Kahnawà:ke schools. That orthography continued to evolve and improve over the years. Mohawk was first introduced into education in the Tyendinaga community in 1984, and Ohswé:ken adopted the Kahnawà:ke orthography in 1988 for its Mohawk Immersion School. By 1993, it was being used by all six of the (major) Mohawk communities. (Jacobs et al., 1993)

In that year, Mohawk scholar Marianne Mithun organized a conference to standardize the Mohawk language across the six communities. This process involved alleviating some of the ambiguities in the orthography while continuing to preserve the distinctions among the dialects. It also sought to define the procedure for creating new words in Mohawk. The conference incorporated input from elders and linguists across the Mohawk Nation, allowing native speakers and trained professionals to agree on rules and policies by diverse consensus. It appears to have been extremely successful and productive. (Jacobs et al., 1993)

But Mohawk is endangered, and there are multiple reasons why. One major reason is that the overall number of Mohawk Nation members has significantly decreased, along with all other Native American tribes, since the arrival of European settlers to the Americas in the 16th through 18th centuries. Disease and warfare wiped out thousands of the original speakers of Mohawk and the other North Iroquoian languages.

But, while the malice of the European settlers decreased, the socioeconomic benefits of learning their languages increased. Those looking to conform to society outside of their shrinking indigenous community eventually had to learn English or French—or both. And

this increase in common European language fluency meant a decrease in the need to use the native Mohawk language—another major reason. If most tribe members already spoke English or French, what benefit would there be to learning Mohawk?

By the early 1970s, most adults were bilingual with Mohawk and English, and many were even trilingual, with the addition of (Québécois) French. At that time, there were only a few monolingual Mohawk elders, though even they had a small degree of comprehension of English. In the younger generation, the reverse was true—the children were growing up speaking English as their native language. (Beatty, 1972, p. 8)

According to Beatty (1972, p. 8), the turning point for this change came around 1940. Those born before that year were more likely to have learned Mohawk as their native language, but those born after that year were more likely to have learned English. Beatty also noted that many Mohawks attribute the change to the introduction of television, which increased the amount of English that younger people were exposed to.

Like many other Native American languages, Mohawk is under constant threat of extinction, due to the encroachment of English (and French). Given the unique typological properties of those languages, it would be quite a shame to lose them, as they provide extraordinary insight into how language works. Polysynthetic languages, at first glance, appear to stand in stark contrast to the more common isolating and analytic languages that linguistic theory is used to. But, when analyzed more closely, as Baker (1996) does, it becomes clear that polysynthetic languages only differ from other languages by a few small features that just so happen to have far-reaching repercussions throughout the language.

Luckily, Mohawk appears to be in an excellent position to stay alive. It is widely studied by linguists, has been fully standardized, is the official language of the tribal government it was originally spoken under, and has the full cooperation of immersion schools in all Mohawk communities. It is not likely to re-attain the prominence it may have once had, but it is fully equipped to experience a hearty revival within the Mohawk community.

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