



An Important Mahican Vowel

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The Mahican language program has promoted a change in the pronunciation of certain vowels which affects our tribal name. According to the hired language consultant, the word for a Mohican Indian should be pronounced as <Ma'AY-kun-NAY-u> instead of the way Hendrick Aupaumut would have said it which is <Ma-HEE-kun-NEE-u>. The language learners, eager to honor the elders by adopting a 20th-century manner of speech, were provided with an erroneous representation of the speech patterns of our elders. This document intend to show the facts which prove that our elders did not have a consistent way of pronouncing this vowel. A short explanation is necessary to explain the difference between these two sounds.

Modern linguists use /i:/ for the sound <ee> as in English "heat." /e:/ is used for the sound of the vowel in the word "hate." Early 20th-century linguists often used their own set of phonetic symbols which differed from those in use today. In some cases it is only possible to be certain of the linguist's intent by comparing their manner of notating words from one language to another. For example, Truman Michelson's Mahican language field notes¹ are best interpreted by consulting Michelson's Munsee language field notes^{2,3} since we know exactly how Munsee words are pronounced.¹³

Non-linguists, such as Hendrick Aupaumut⁴ or Jonathan Edwards Jr.⁵, used letters commonly used in English words to represent the sounds of the Mahican language. Johann Schmick⁶ used letters from German words. When deciphering texts, it is important to become familiar with the specific ways each writer chose for the expression of different sounds.

For this document, forward slashes // enclose phonetic representations of words and sounds using symbols from the International Phonetic Alphabet.

/phonetic transcriptions/

Square brackets [] enclose forms cited from reference materials such as the writings of Hendrick Aupaumut in Mahican or the field notes of researchers collecting information from Stockbridge-Munsee tribal members.

[cited words or sounds]

Angle brackets < > are used to enclose words spelled using English phonemes.

<EENG-lish>

A semi-colon after a vowel indicates that its sound is protracted.

“sea” /si/ <SEE> ; “say” /se/ <SAY>
“feet” /fi:t/ <FEET>; “fate” /fe:t/ <FAYT>

LCC is an abbreviation for the Stockbridge-Munsee Community’s Language and Culture Committee.

Background Information

How did /i:/ <EE> get mixed up with /e:/ <AY> in the Mahican language?

Jonathan Edwards Jr. in 1788 used “e” to represent the /i:/ <EE> sound. We know this is so because Edwards provides a pronunciation key in his publication.⁵ Edwards wrote a few common words known to have a prominent /i:/ <EE> sound, and provides cognates from other languages which also use the same sound.

[**neesoh**] ‘two’ <NEE-sah>
[**seepoo**] ‘river’ <SEE-po>
[**nemannauw**] ‘man’ <NEE-mun-now>
[**Muhhekaneew**] ‘a Mohican’ <Muh-HEE-kun-NEE-u>

In the late 18th century and the early 19th century, Hendrick Aupaumut wrote a number of documents in the Mahican language.⁴ As an educated fluent speaker, the quality of the language content in his writings is superior to that of any other source available. Aupaumut wrote for a reading audience comprised of fluent Mahican speakers, therefore he often spelled words in slightly different ways, knowing that his readers would have no trouble identifying the words and pronouncing them exactly right. It is not difficult to recognize the words Aupaumut wrote down for us and some of the sounds he failed to indicate such as nasalized versus non-nasalized vowels can be deduced by the analysis of other source materials. Aupaumut wrote many words which featured <EE> sounds, or /i:/ and he notated them using “e” or “ee” just like Edwards.

[**nemonnau**] ‘man’ <NEE-mun-now>
[**Muh-hea-ken-neew**] ‘a Mohican’ <Muh-HEE-kun-NEE-u>

In 1804 John Konkopot Jr. supplied words with this sound.⁷

[**thepow**] ‘river’ <THEE-po>
[**neesoh**] ‘two’ <NEE-sah>

In 1914, Truman Michelson (TM) wrote [ē] for a number of words where /ī/ was expected, especially in the Sot Quinney/William Dick stories.¹ Did he do this because tribal members had evolved a new manner of pronunciation or is there some other explanation? In 1949, Harrington noted Michelson's use of this vowel and was surprised by it.⁸ Harrington has started to rewrite the Sot Quinney stories using modern phonetic symbols but never completed this project.^{8a} Michelson normally wrote the IPA /e/ as [ä] <AY> so perhaps he used /ē/ to represent a vowel similar to /i:/ but with different sound qualities.

To better understand this, a list was extracted from the field notes of TM known to have a long /i:/ sound as in English "heat." Words in **bold** are words unambiguously written with an /i:/ <EE> sound. Sounds written using a writing system indicating /e:/ <AY> are in *italics*. The same word as notated by other writers or transcribers is also listed for comparison.

Data Analysis

Word #1: /**ni:mΛna:w**/ 'man'

Michelson 1914

[**nīmanáú**] <NEE-mun-now> 2 instances, Sot Quinney^{1a}

[**nīmānau**] <NEE-main-now> Sterling Peters^{1b}

[*nēmāñāo*] Alfred Miller^{1c}

[*nēmānau*] <NAY-mun-now> William Dick; 9 instances^{1d}

[**nīmānau**] <NEE-mun-now> William Dick; 3 instances^{1e}

[*nēmana*] <NAY-mun-na> William Dick^{1f} (same sentence as preceding)

[*nēmanau*] <NAY-mun-now> William Dick^{1g}

[**nīmanau**] <NEE-mun-now> William Dick^{1h}

Four informants uttered this word to Truman Michelson. Three of the four used the /i:/ <EE> initial vowel. One of the four, William Dick, varied in his pronunciation of this word. In one instance the word /**ni:mΛna:w**/ was said twice in the same sentence, and Michelson wrote the first one using /e:/ <AY> and the second time using /i:/ <EE>. There is proof within Michelson's transcriptions, proof that Mahican had not developed a diachronic shift in the pronunciation of the vowel /i:/ <EE>. (Diachronic is an adjective used to describe changes in language over time)

This same word 'man' was used by Dennis Turkey, and in a story transcribed by Estes and published by Prince in 1905⁹. As listed below, the final endings reflect its uses as a plural or an obviative. The initial vowel was sometimes written down using /i/ or <EE> and other times with /e/ or <AY>.

[**nimána**] x4 <NEE-mun-na>

[*nemanaák*] x5 <NAY-mun-naak>

Swadesh transcribed the word also in the 1930s.¹⁰

[**ni·m̩na·u**] <NEE-mun-now> Julia Palmer

[*né·manaó*] <NAY-mun-now> Avery Miller

Harrington in 1949 recorded this word:

[**n̩m̩na·w**] <NEE-mun-now> Webb Miller^{8b}

Reference data from fluent speakers

[**nemannauw**] <NEE-mun-now> Jonathan Edwards Jr., 1788⁵

[**nemonnauw**] <NEE-mun-now> Hendrick Aupaumut, circa 1795-1820⁴

There is no factual support for the hypothesis that Mohicans had established a 20th-century style of pronunciation for this vowel. The hypothesis should be rejected in favor of using /i:/ <EE>. Dr. Goddard was consulted about this topic. (The LCC has diligently and routinely fact-checked all of our recent assertions concerning the Mahican language with both of the two uniquely qualified and experienced linguists who possess knowledge of the Mahican corpus of written materials, Carl Masthay and Ives Goddard. Their contributions to the Mahican language knowledge base, compiled by the LCC language officer, have been numerous and extensive.)

Goddard explained by email earlier this month that the second vowel of our tribal name was absolutely not /e:/ or <AY> and is properly the “lower high” version of the vowel /i:/. This vowel is produced by setting the throat and tongue in a position to say the English word “hit” and then producing the sound <EE>. In his 2008 paper, Goddard recorded at least two words using the phoneme /e/ <AY> citing Michelson’s notes and in both cases he wrote his phonetic transcription of the words as /i:/ <EE>.¹¹

/k̩s̩ɔx/ [kesoch] ‘sun’ Wm Dick; /θ̩p̩ɔw/ [thepow] ‘river’ Wm Dick (p255)

Sounding out Goddard’s interpretation of these word entries yields:

<KEE-SOOCH>¹² ‘sun’

<SEE-PO> ‘river’

In the same paper, Goddard lists a catalogue of the sounds of Mahican from all time periods. /e:/ or <AY> is not listed. In 2010, Goddard provided a handout during a conference on language reconstruction in Ann Arbor, Michigan and he was kind enough to provide a copy to the LCC. The phoneme /e:/ <AY> is also absent from the list of Mahican phonemes in that document.

It has been suggested that the Mahican language project should adopt the manner of speech of the elders who last spoke the language. A factual analysis of the 20th-century data, however, clearly shows that our recently departed elders, varied in their pronunciation of the Mohican

ancestral language one from another and from individual elders varied in their manner of speech from one day to the next. It is not possible to derive a “20th-century pronunciation guideline” from the discordant data available. In other words, no matter what is taught in the language classes, the ways that some elders pronounced Mahican words have been dismissed as erroneous or distorted. The argument that the LCC is somehow disrespecting the elders has no factual merit. The LCC contends that the best way to honor our ancestors is to teach a linguistically correct version of the language, using the highest quality texts written in Mahican (Aupaumut’s writings) and seeking guidance from the world’s foremost expert in Algonquian languages, Dr. Ives Goddard.

For those seeking additional reassurance of the assertions made in this document, two other words have been analyzed.

Word #2 /**niisah**/ ‘two’ <NEE-sah>

Michelson 1914

[*nēsā^é*] <NAY-sah> William Dick Story^{li}
[**nīsá**] <NEE-sa> Alfred Miller^{lj}
[**nīsa**] <NEE-sa> Sot Quinney^{lk}
[**nīswāk[‘]**] <NEE-swuck> Sterling Peters^{ll}
[**nisa^é**] <NEE-sah> Bernice Robinson^{lm}
[**nisa**] <NEE-sa> Edwin Miller folder^{ln}

Dennis Turkey in Prince 1905⁹

[*nethwak*] <NAY-thwuck>

Swadesh from 1937¹⁰

[**ni·sna**] <NEES-na> Avery Miller

Harrington data from 1949

[**ni·swak**] <NEE-swuck> Webb Miller^{8c}
[**ní·sá’**] <NEE-sah> Webb Miller^{8d}
[**ni:sa**] <NEE-sa> Bernice Robinson^{8e}

Reference data from fluent speakers

[**Neesoh**] <NEE-sah> Edwards, 1788⁵
[**nesah**] <NEE-sah> Aupaumut, 1795-1820⁴

This word demonstrates the preponderance of the <EE> sound, /i:/ and adds additional evidence against its use as the “20th-century” way of speaking Mahican.

Word #3 /siipuw/ ‘river’

Michelson 1914

[θēpōk^c] <THAY-poke> William Dick ‘at the river’¹⁰

[θēpō] <THAY-po> William Dick ‘river’^{1p}

[sīpōk^c] <SEE-poke> Sterling Peters^{1q}

[θīpō] <THEE-oo> Alfred Miller^{1r}

[θīpō] <THEE-oo> Edwin Miller^{1s}

Prince 1905

[thépo] <THAY-po> Dennis Turkey⁹

Swadesh 1937

[θi·pō·k] <THEE-poke> ‘at the river’¹⁰

Harrington 1949

[θí·pō] <THEE-po> Webb Miller^{8f}

[θí·pō·k] <THEE-poke> Webb Miller^{8g}

[sīpō] <SEE-po> Bernice Robinson^{8h}

Reference data

[sepoo] <SEE-po> Edwards, 1788⁵

Abundant additional 18th-century data supports the /ii/ sound of Mahican. Words recorded by Thomas Jefferson, Barton, Heckwelder, Konkapot, Schmick, Buttner and others support the <EE> pronunciation of this important Mahican sound.

Other words than the three words chosen for analysis could have been chosen and the results would have been the same.

One phrase in particular which many of us have heard from our elders is:

wusih nduyaaw <wəSEEH DEEaaw>
‘Get out dog!’

Informants for this phrase include Elmer Davids, Dorothy “Aunt Dot” Davids, Dee Dee Shubinski, née Davids, Elmer Davids Jr. and Webb Miller.⁸ⁱ No one heard this phrase as:

<OO-SAY DAY-aaw>

Conclusion

It is reasonable to assert that there was no established pattern suggesting pronunciation shift from /i:/ to /e:/ among 20th-century speakers, and that generalizing such a pronunciation based on the Sot Quinney stories was an error.

References

- 1) “Truman Michelson Stockbridge notes and texts, with copies by Frank Speck circa 1940s-1950s”: NAA MS 2734, folders 1-4: 1914, *National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution*
 - 1a) Folder 3.2 (typewritten); folder 1.21 (handwritten)
 - 1b) Folder 1, 6
 - 1c) Folder 2, 8
 - 1d) Folder 4, 16; Folder 4, 11-13; Folder 4, 14-15
 - 1e) Folder 4, 16 x2
 - 1f) Folder 4, 16
 - 1g) Folder 4, 18-23
 - 1h) Folder 4, 18-23
 - 1i) Folder 4, 16
 - 1j) Folder 2, 7
 - 1k) Folder 2, 5
 - 1l) Folder 1, 5
 - 1m) Folder 2, 6
 - 1n) Folder 1, 17
 - 1o) Folder 4, 11-13
 - 1p) Folder 4 Images 18-23
 - 1q) Folder 1, 6
 - 1r) Folder 1, 9
 - 1s) Folder 1, 18

- 2) “Linguistic and ethnological notes on Ottawa and Munsee”: Truman Michelson, 1922; NAA MS # 1635 *National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution* (available online)

- 3) “Field notes from the Munsee in Kansas and the Delaware in Oklahoma”: Truman Michelson, 1912-1913, NAA MS 2776, folders 1-13, *National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution* (available online)

- 4) “The Assembly’s Catechism”: Hendrick Aupaumut 1795, Stockbridge, Mass. (available online at <https://content.wisconsinhistory.org/digital/collection/tp/id/29141>)

- 5) “Observations on the language of the Muhhekaneew Indians”: Edwards, Jonathan; 1788 (available online at <https://archive.org/details/observationsonla01edwa/page/n11/mode/1up>)

- 6) “Schmick’s Mahican Dictionary” Carl Masthay; Philadelphia, *American Philosophical Society* (December 31, 1991)

- 7) "Language of the Moheagans," William Jenks, *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, vol. IX (1804), pp. 98-99. Vocabulary collected from John Konkapot Jr.
- 8) "Papers of John P. Harrington": NMNH-Harrington_mf6_r10, r11 and r12, *National Museum of Natural History, National Anthropological Archives* (available online at <https://edan.si.edu/>)
- a) Reel 12, 1257, 1213-end
 - b) Reel 10, 597
 - c) Reel 10, 411
 - d) Reel 11, 1057
 - e) Reel 12, 735
 - f) Reel 10, 1253
 - g) Reel 10, 1247
 - h) Reel 12, 760
 - i) Reel 11, 645, 735, 989
- 9) "A Tale in the Hudson River Indian Language": J. Dyneley Prince, *American Anthropologist*, New Series, Vol. 7, No. 1 (Jan. - Mar., 1905), pp. 74-84 (11 pages) (available online, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/659336>)
- 10) "Mahican Section of the ACLS Collection": Morris Swadesh: *American Council of Learned Societies Committee on Native American Languages, American Philosophical Society*; Mss.497.3.B63c, items A1k.1-4
- 11) "Notes on Mahican: Dialects, Sources, Phonemes, Enclitics, and Analogies": Ives Goddard: *Papers of the 39th Algonquian Conference*, eds. Karl S. Hele & Regna Darnell (London: The University of Western Ontario, 2008), pp. 246-315.
- 12) <CH> is a guttural sound like the German pronunciation of 'Bach'
- 13) <https://globalrecordings.net/en/program/17751> - Note the number of aspirated "h" sounds and clear enunciation in many but not all instances of /wə/ prefixes and /wə/ word initial phonemes.