



Timeline of the Glottal Stop in Mahican

Pre-contact era: No glottal stop. Before and after 1492, population estimates of American Indians draw on multiple sources of information and cite multiple causes for the abrupt and catastrophic “demographic collapse” noted during the first one hundred years of European colonialism. Deadly diseases such as smallpox, typhus and measles explain some of the population decline, but the other effects must be not forgotten, Colonists disrupted every aspect of Native culture, language and spirituality with missionary efforts by some and genocidal agendas for others. Indians who survived the diseases were exploited for a number of wars fought in the New World, or were enslaved. Broken treaties, forced removals and relocations from established territories and systemic racism caused additional wounds to the indigenous people.^{1,2,3}

Number of fluent Mahican speakers before 1492 (conservative estimate): 30,000⁴

1600s: No glottal stops. Dutch traders referred to the Mohicans as the Mahikanders.

Number of fluent Mahican speakers in the 1600s: 3,000⁵

1700s: No glottal stops.

Number of fluent Mahican speakers in the 1700s: 500-1,000⁶

1800s: No glottal stops. During this time the tribe relocated to Wisconsin. Thirty families made the move, although others joined later. Sources do not provide exact numbers.

Number of fluent Mahican speakers in the 1800s: fifty to two hundred⁷

1903: Questionable evidence of glottal stops. Dennis Turkey’s story was transcribed without explicit marking of aspirated h sounds by a Dakota Indian without linguistic training. The text does not constitute evidence of glottal stops and contains a disclaimer about the phonetic quality of the transcription.

Number of fluent Mahican speakers in 1903: Two⁸

1914: Questionable evidence of glottal stops. Truman Michelson, a world class linguist, transcribed Mahican words and stories from a number of informants. The primary informant for the stories, William Dick, had “difficulties” forming sentences according to Michelson and his words lacked consistent pronunciation. Mr. Dick corrected some of his words. For example, a journalist who interviewed him in 1932 noted that Mr. Dick no longer felt confident in his ability to conjugate verbs or to inflect nouns correctly, by his own admission.⁹

LCC Note: The above observations do not criticize our cherished elder; His language difficulties merely reflect the fact the absence of others with whom he could converse. Michelson’s notes are

best interpreted by referring to his Munsee notes, since we know the proper pronunciations of Munsee. In his Munsee notation, Michelson used a superscript epsilon, his way of noting glottal stops, wherever an aspirated /h/ occurred. Munsee speakers aspirate these /h/ sounds and have never used glottal stops. Consider further that Michelson's transcriptions of the Illinois-Peoria language also had phonetic inaccuracies, especially when notating stories.¹⁰

Number of fluent Mahican speakers in 1914: One¹¹

1938: Unconvincing evidence of glottal stops in Mahican. Morris Swadesh collected words from four primary informants and marker "h" sounds in some instances but contrarily glottal stops in others. Swadesh himself characterized the skills of his informants as follows, "In 1938 there were four or so who knew some words of it. These people as children spoke the language with their grandparents, but this was so long ago that not one was still capable of speaking more than isolated words and a limited number of set phrases.¹²" The informants rarely pronounced the same words exactly the same as one another and often needed reminders from Swadesh before they could recall Mahican words for common objects or actions.

LCC Note: The assumption that the LCC has somehow dishonored tribal elders by rejecting incongruous speech patterns is incorrect, because words collected in the 1900s were discordant among the informants themselves. Some pronounced their vowels one way, others a different way; and, it varied from day to day even for the same informant. No matter what parts of Mahican speech were examined, the elders had their own distinct utterances of a word, with varying degrees of similarity or concordance with older written forms of the longtime ancestral language.

Number of fluent Mahican speakers in 1914: Zero¹²

1949: John P. Harrington came to Wisconsin and interviewed two of the same informants as Swadesh. He recorded about twenty words with aspirated "h" sounds and about twenty others with glottal stops. In some cases Harrington interviewed each informant twice on separate days to double-check their original responses. In some cases the informants corrected "glottal stop" words to aspirated "h" versions of the word. The Mohican tribal name is one of those words. There are no instances of the opposite change recorded. In no instances were aspirated words corrected to glottal stops by the informants. Similar to Swadesh's experience, the informants readily admitted doubt.

LCC Note: The grandfather of the LCC's own language officer, Elmer Davids, supplied words to Harrington. Mr. Davids served as the tribe's historian for many years, yet he expressed personal doubt whether the words were of Mahican or Menominee origin. His memory was cherished and honored, and his contributions to the Mahican word lexicon remain a national treasure. Correcting language mistakes in no way diminishes any elder's personhood or legacy.

Number of fluent Mahican speakers in 1949: Zero

1949-2017: No words with glottal stops were supplied by any living or recently departed elders to the best of the LCC's knowledge. The Mohican tribal name chosen and displayed in official tribal documents and on a prominent road on the Stockbridge-Munsee Community's reservation has demonstrated a continuity of absence regarding the recent question of glottal stop use in the Mahican language.

2018: The Mahican language program promoted widespread use of the glottal stop without consulting the LCC as stipulated in the original grant specifications. Outside linguists of the highest calibre, those with extensive knowledge of Mahican, objected to no avail. Language decisions were routinely made with no linguistic accountability leading to considerable changes to the structure and grammar of the Mahican language. The voices of concerned tribal members were not heeded and the hired language consultant declined to collaborate with the three people most knowledgeable about the Mahican language, Carl Masthay, doctorate in linguistics, Ives Goddard, Ph.D and Robert Shubinski, MD. Dr. Shubinski is the language officer of the LCC, and he has examined and analyzed every Mahican text in collaboration with Carl Masthay and Ives Goddard. He has also worked with John O'Meara on projects involving the Munsee language including a word by word transcription of a Munsee story and the development of a complete grammar of the Munsee language.

2023: Accountability must be added to both of the language programs, with multidisciplinary oversight to ensure historical, cultural and linguistic accuracy and excellence for the Mahican and Munsee language programs.

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References

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- 2) "Estimating Aboriginal American Population. An Appraisal of Techniques with a New Hemispheric Estimate": Henry F. Dobyns: *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 7 (1966), 395-416
- 3) "The Native Population of the Americas in 1492": William M. Denevan: *University of Wisconsin Press*, 1976
- 4) "Counting the Dead: Estimating the Loss of Life in the Indigenous Holocaust, 1492-Present": David Michael Smith: *University of Houston-Downtown; Proceedings of the Twelfth Native American Symposium*, 2017.
- 5) "The Aboriginal Population of America North of Mexico": James Mooney: Washington, D.C.: *Smithsonian Institution, Miscellaneous Collections*, Vol. 80, No. 7, 1928
- 6) "Mahican" by Ted J. Brasser: *Handbook of North American Indians*: ed. Bruce G. Trigger, vol. 15: Washington, DC, 1978, 198-206.

- 7) "Hendrick Aupaumut: Christian-Mahican Prophet": Rachel Wheeler: *Journal of the Early Republic*, Vol. 25, No. 2, Summer, 2005, pp. 187-220: University of Pennsylvania Press
- 8) Note: William Dick (a once-fluent speaker per Ives Goddard) and Dennis Turkey are the only two confirmed speakers of Mahican. Undoubtably there were a few other elderly Mohicans still alive then, whose identity is unfortunately unknown.
- 9) <http://wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Newspaper/BA747>
- 10) "The Miami-Illinois Language": David Costa: *University of Nebraska Press (2003)*; see also <http://mc.miamioh.edu/ilda-myaamia/documents/9>
- 11) "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*; See folder 4, image 25
- 12) "Sociologic Notes On Obsolescent Languages": Morris Swadesh: *International journal of American linguistics*, 1948, Vol.14 (4), p.226-235