



## A brief history of why the Mohicans say “wuniiwih” and not “oneewe”

[10-minute read]

The word for “Thank you!” in the Munsee dialect of the Delaware language, “anúshiik,” has become a commonly used and well understood word in our community. It is properly pronounced with an emphasis on the second syllable.

The Mahican word for “Thank you!” was written down for us by Jonathan Edwards Jr., a fluent speaker of the language in 1788. He wrote the word as “Wneeweh” meaning “I thank you.”<sup>1</sup> This word is pronounced as ‘wə-NEE-weh’ and the final ‘h’ is but a slight puff of air expelled after the vowel. “Wuniiwih” is the same word using the Munsee orthography (Note: Double “ii” or “i.” is the way the phonetic alphabet writes the long “e” as in the English word “knee”).

So why do some people write this word as “oneewe?” This slip-up, identified by the tribe’s Language and Cultural Committee (LCC), finds its origins in the writings of Johann Jacob Schmick, a German Moravian missionary who recorded a large number of words in the Western dialect of the Mahican language in the mid 1700s. Linguist Carl Masthay meticulously deciphered Schmick’s handwritten notes for publication in response to a request of our tribe.<sup>2</sup> To Schmick’s German ears, the sound “wə” was written as “o” no doubt because his ear was not finely attuned to the unfamiliar sounds of an indigenous language. We know that his Mohican informants were not actually saying “o” in lieu of “w” because Schmick also used “o” for some Unami Delaware “w” words. It should be noted that Schmick was not a fluent speaker of Mahican, nor a linguist. At least two members of the Moravian community where Johannes Schmick collected the words for his dictionary wrote the word as “oneewe” in letters. As these Mohicans were fluent speakers, they would have pronounced the word correctly as “wuniiwih” in the same way that fluent English speakers say words like “tough” or “salmon” differently than their spelling seems to indicate.<sup>13, 14</sup>

Another source of this error was the misinterpretation of some of the idiosyncratic phonetic symbols used by the linguist Truman Michelson who transcribed a collection of Mahican words and stories in 1914.<sup>3</sup> The consultant hired for our language program interpreted Michelson’s transcriptions in such a way that he concluded that Mahican pronunciation ‘had changed’ among speakers in the 20th century.

Michelson also used the same set of symbols for his writings in the Munsee language.<sup>4,5</sup> Since Munsee is still spoken and we have recordings of fluent speakers from the 1980s, we know how it is pronounced. This allows us to use his Munsee transcriptions as a *Rosetta Stone* for interpreting his Mahican words. In both languages, Michelson often used “u” instead of “w” at the beginning of words. Detailed information is available by consulting the references.

Evidence in support of the use of “w” rather than “o” is available in the papers of Morris Swadesh,<sup>6</sup> a linguist who visited the tribe in the 1930s, and those of the distinguished linguist John P. Harrington.<sup>7</sup> Swadesh’s unfinished Mahican dictionary, a partial listing of words starting with “w,” included the word for “thank you” written as “wniwi.” We know Swadesh based the accuracy of his list on a 20th-century analysis because he rigorously listed variants and the older word forms alongside his entries. The typewritten dictionary lists scores of other words which he analyzed as beginning with a “w,” directly substantiating that modern Mahican speakers had NOT changed their pronunciation. Additionally, Harrington who visited the tribe in the 1940s recorded words from his informants who used “w,” not “o.”

Regrettably, our tribal language program lessons have been substituting “o” for a large number of words that should begin with “w.” Imagine an English teacher telling students to say “ork” instead of “work” or “all” instead of “wall.” The Mahican word for “young man” is “wuskiinuw,” pronounced /wūs-KEE-no/ or /wũth-KEE-no/. Unfortunately, our recent curriculum has taught this word as “oskeenow” (sic) even though NONE of the 20th-century, or earlier, materials support substituting “o” for “w,” as listed below:

- In the late 1700s or early 1800s, Thomas Jefferson wrote this word as “wthkenooh.”<sup>8</sup>
- In 1905, Dennis Turkey said the same word as “withk·enow.”<sup>9</sup>
- In 1914 Michelson wrote it as “uskēnō” in the Owl Story<sup>3</sup> but we know that word initial “u” should be interpreted as “w” because of the Munsee “Rosetta Stone” Michelson left for us.<sup>4,5</sup>
- In 1937, Swadesh wrote it as “waski·naw.”<sup>6</sup>
- In 1949, Harrington heard it from his informant Webb Miller as “wıθkænɔw.”<sup>7</sup>

These linguistic findings reveal that our 20th-century elders, the last speakers of Mahican, deviated very little from the language used by Hendrick Aupaumut when he penned the Mahican catechism in 1795.<sup>10</sup> They used “w” sounds, and produced soft guttural “h” sounds as in earlier days. A few minor pronunciation variations are easily explained by the uncertainty they expressed when interviewed. Several fully qualified and experienced linguists who have reviewed the 20th-century sources concluded that the patchy recall of a small number of Mahican language rememberers is best used to bolster our knowledge of the earlier sources, and not to override them.<sup>11,12</sup> The knowledge of our elders may have been fragmentary, but nonetheless, whenever one of them confidently reported a solid memory of a word, its similarity to the same word written in centuries past was remarkable. The references provided (below), some of which are available online, must be consulted to substantiate the facts.

In addition to adjusting the curriculum of our language lessons, care must be taken to identify incorrect words which have spread nationwide as well as those previously shared with many associations and alliances outside the Nation. Since the LCC is tasked with the preservation of our cultural and linguistic legacy for ALL tribal members, not just language learners, we would like to offer a path forward.

A cornerstone of our culture is showing the utmost respect for both our elders and grand elders. The LCC believes that the best way to honor their legacy is to reclaim our language and bring life back to all the existing words and phrases we can with integrity. Although some tribal citizens may wish to learn only a few words, and others to become linguistic scholars, it is essential to provide ALL members of our community with proper word forms. Mahican words and phrases must be carefully scrutinized by a group of motivated and hard-working enrolled citizens under the auspices of the LCC with guidance from established non-tribal scholars possessing the title of *linguist emeritus*. The ill-advised lone wolf model should be abandoned, in favor of a clan.

We believe the preservation of our language to be a “language emergency” that requires swift and effective remediation. As a Nation we should stand united to insist on a quality curriculum derived from the very best of all available sources. The Mohican people deserve a language for which every word and inflected word has been lovingly vetted by a group of enrolled citizens double-checking the work of the consultants. The Stockbridge Munsee Community deserves to be informed of the difference between language *reconstruction* (the use of non-Mahican words to fill in the gaps of a limited vocabulary) versus Mahican language *preservation* (the teaching of our language using the data left behind by our elders).

We the people, the Stockbridge-Munsee band of Mohicans, deserve a language which is well documented with all linguistic uncertainties clearly marked as such; and whenever possible, references to specific sources of data must be specified. Doing so will ensure that future generations will know why we say “wuniiwih” and not “oneewe.”

(Note: It is okay to write this word as “wniiwih” or “wniiwii” or “wneewe.” The LCC prefers “wuniiwih” as the most accurate version because it uses the spelling the least likely to be confused with English sounds.)

## References and Notes

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

2) *Schmick's Mahican Dictionary*; Carl Masthay; Philadelphia, American Philosophical Society (December 31, 1991)

3) *Stockbridge notes and texts, with copies by Frank Speck*; Truman Michelson, 1914; NAA MS 2734, folders 1-4; National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution (available online)

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

5) *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)

6) *Mohican Lexical Materials*, 1939, item A1k.1; ACLS Collection (American Council of Learned Societies Committee on Native American Languages, American Philosophical Society) (Mss.497.3.B63c) (Microfilmed as: Film 372, reel 6)  
<https://indigenousguide.amphilsoc.org/> (materials are not available online)

7) *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/>) (see p69 of reel 10)

8) *Comparative vocabulary: 'Mohiccon' and unidentified languages*, Thomas Jefferson, 1793-1808, text:156410, American Philosophical Society, (available online at <https://diglib.amphilsoc.org>)

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

11) *Sociologic Notes on Obsolescent Languages*, Morris Swadesh, 1948, *International journal of American linguistics*, 1948, Vol.14 (4), p.226-235

12) *Notes on Mahican: Dialects, Sources, Phonemes, Enclitics, and Analogies*, Ives Goddard, 2008, *Papers of the 39th Algonquian Conference*, eds. Karl S. Hele & Regna Darnell (London: The University of Western Ontario, 2008), pp. 246-315.

13) *Generalia Indians, Christian letters and Declarations II*, 1746; Box 319 T2; Moravian Archives, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania (letter by Rachel, an illiterate Mohican woman, transmitted orally and written down by Frederick Post); Contributed by Rachel Wheeler

14) *Generalia Indians, Christian letters and Declarations II*, 1746; Box 319 T2; Moravian Archives, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania (letter by Johannes); Contributed by Rachel Wheeler. Carl Masthay also transcribed and self-published this letter.