

**Philology and endangered languages:
the case of Western Abenaki**

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1 Documentation and philology

Often our knowledge of languages depends completely on documents that were produced for reasons that have nothing to do with linguistics. Without the corpus of Gothic from Bishop Ulfilas (IV. Century), consisting of fragments of a bible translation and religious commentaries, we would know very little about that language. More recently, knowledge of the Eastern Algonquian language Massachusett is based largely on the translation of the bible by John Eliot, deeds and town records and the like. The Massachusett example is especially apposite here as this material has formed the basis for the current revival of the language, now called Wampanoag.

Often in current fieldwork situations, linguists will come across various kinds of documents and records (sometimes recordings). The main point to be made here is that the study of such records can play a crucial role in efforts to document and strengthen endangered languages. Such study falls under the heading "philology", or 'love of the word'. I wish to illustrate this point by looking at the case of another Eastern Algonquian language, Western Abenaki (WA).

After giving some basic information on Western Abenaki, I will give four "snapshots" of documenters and documentation of the language stretching back several centuries, and then show how several gaps in our knowledge of the language can be filled by looking at this material.

2 Western Abenaki

Algonquian is one of the largest linguistic families in North America (present day Canada and United States), both in number of languages and in geographical spread. It is distantly related (under the family name Algic) to Yurok and Wiyot (Northern California). The languages of the Algonquian family spread from the northeast of the continent (historically down the eastern seaboard as far as what is now Virginia) all the way across the northern parts of present day US and throughout Canada. Some of the better-known languages and groups of the family are Cree (various languages), Anishinabe (Ojibwa /Chippewa), Blackfoot, Menominee, Lennape (Delaware).

Linguistically, the Algonquian languages are well known for the grammatical category of obviation, intricate verbal morphology and agreement systems. Some highlights of Western Abenaki follow:

Syntax: word order pretty free. Some second position clitics: **ji** 'future,' **ba** 'conditional'. Complex verbs can include a preverb, which carries subject prefixes (in the relevant categories) and a kind of ablaut ("changed conjunct"). The two parts of a complex verbal construction can be separated by other material.

Noun classes / gender: ANimate, INanimate. Reflected in verbal morphology with big four-way distinction between Animate Intransitive (AI), Inanimate Intransitive (II),

bemôzô [sic for *bemôwzo* in GDD]: *she* lives (3, 3') [Day 1964]

Ives Goddard in the major work on the Algonquian Independent Indicative (Goddard, 1967) cites Laurent's paradigms for WA, includes no AI 3' forms nor any inverse Obvative on Proximate (3' - 3) TA forms.

Phonological attrition has made the obvative inflections either invisible or very unobtrusive: 'horse' *ases*, obvative form *asesa*; 'woman' *phanem*, obv.: *phanemo* (<...mw-a); 'man, male' *zanôba* obv.: *zanôba*.

In general, many final vowels, especially *a*, were lost, some restored by analogy.

In verbal paradigms, one mark for obvative arguments is *-a* / *-i*. The choice depends on morphological environment, the variable vowel is coded usually as *-V*, occurring also in the plural inflections *-Vk* / *-Vi* (AN / IN).

So there are two questions: (1) has the obvative been lost from modern WA, remaining perhaps only in vestigial form (possessed animates, see below)? (2) if lost, when did the loss take place? These are philological / historical questions.

In a book published in 1932, Henry Lorne Mastia (another Abenaki educator and chief) gives paradigms for nouns in which he calls the obvative forms "accusative". But this identification is belied by the texts in the same book.

5 ...and regained

1. Obvative AI forms. Here is a general Algonquian fact about the obvative: in 3rd person possessing forms, the possessed noun is always in the obvative form. Compare from Laurent, 1884:

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|---------------------|-----------|
| 1. <i>W'kaozema</i> | 'his cow' |
| 2. <i>N'kaozem</i> | 'my cow' |

Note: *-em* marks possessed items, 'cow' is *kaoz*.

So we should be able to make up easy examples with possessed nouns as subjects to test for distinctive inflections? There are in fact some such examples in Laurent 1984:

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| 3. <i>Wibguigo n'-d-aason</i> . | 'My horse is grey.' |
| 4. <i>Wibguigo w'-d-asoma</i> . | 'His (her) horse is grey.' |
| 5. <i>W'melajassa wazabizoa</i> . | 'His (her) mitens are thin.' |
- (mitens are Animate, notice lack of sg / pl distinction: 4 also means 'his horses'.)

Compare also these examples from Laurent, 1884:

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|-------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| 6. <i>N'kaozem -ji ônkohôn</i> . | 'My cow will be sold.' |
| 7. <i>W'kaozema -ji ônkohônna</i> . | 'His cow will be sold.' |

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| 8. <i>N'kaozemak -ji ônkohônak</i> . | 'My cows will be sold.' |
| 9. <i>W'kaozema -ji ônkohônna</i> . | 'His cows will be sold.' |

(These examples are actually historically a different category: indefinite subject TA forms, with the *-a* marking the obvative object, the analysis in WA is somewhat up for grabs.)

So it looks in fact, contra Day, that WA, at least in 1884, could inflect AI verbs for obvative subjects.

6 The other gap: TA inverse 3' - 3 forms

Joseph Laurent (1884) includes a section in his paradigms called "Relative Conjugation". It includes what are disparate forms (from a contemporary analytic point of view): ThemeSign 2 forms for 3 and 3p subjects and "Me and You" forms (ThemeSigns 3 and 4). Some examples (from Laurent 1884):

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|-----------------------------|-------------------|
| 10. <i>K'kezalmel</i> . | 'I love thee.' |
| 11. <i>K'kezalmelbena</i> . | 'We love thee.' |
| 12. <i>K'kezalmegw</i> . | 'He loves thee.' |
| 13. <i>K'kezalmegok</i> . | 'They love thee.' |
| 14. <i>K'kezalmi</i> . | 'Thou lovest me.' |
| 15. <i>K'kezalmi</i> . | 'You love me.' |
| 16. <i>N'kezalmegw</i> . | 'He loves me.' |
| 17. <i>N'kezalmegok</i> . | 'They love me.' |

Of these forms only those with 3 and 3p subjects show ThemeSign 2 *(e)gw* (underlying *-gok* < *-gw* *(-Y)k*).

As reflected in Goddard's 1967 summary, there are no examples in his source, Laurent 1884. These forms in the Independent Indicative should be built on the ThemeSign 2 *(e)gw*, inverse TA are all those with 3 or 3' subject and 1st or 2nd object, or 3' (obvative) subject and 3 or 3p objects. Or are there none?

However, in other older sources we find lots of examples of 3' - 3 and 3' - 3p forms.

Mark (1830) (cf. above for the first two):

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| 18. <i>wzognebôlgonôssa</i> | 'he baptized them' [Indlnde Preterite 3' - 3p] |
| 19. <i>oskikôgon 3' - 3</i> | 'descending on him' |
| 20. <i>wdhigo</i> | 'he said to him (3' - 3) Mark 1.40 |

Mastia (1932):

- | | |
|---------------------------|--|
| 21. <i>wmilgon</i> | 'gives' 3' - 3 (in return receives...) |
| 22. <i>weskolôgonôssa</i> | 'they were intercepted by the Iroquois' 3' - 3p Pret |
- (note: 8 = 0)

These forms in *-go(n) 3' - 3* and *-gonô 3' - 3p* appear regularly in Mark, Masta, and in Day's manuscript materials. Still, there are many mysteries (to EB at least) in how to analyze these forms synchronically and diachronically. Comparing Penobscot paradigms (Voorhis, 1979) there seems to be a mixing in of an old definite-indefinite ('finite-absolute') distinction and forms from 'indefinite subject' and inanimate subject patterns.

From these dates, spanning the work of J. Laurent, I conclude that the absence of these forms in 1884 is fortuitous, but there is still conflicting evidence, some hard to interpret.

FINAL MORAL: Multiply the philological and linguistic work to be done on Western Abenaki thousands-fold. There is a huge need for workers and work! The intellectual rewards are tremendous.

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* (EB Website: <http://www.unix.oit.umass.edu/~ebach/papers/linglen.htm>)