

# AMERICAN LANGUAGE REPRINTS

VOL. 20

# ELLIOT'S VOCABULARY OF MOHAWK

by  
Adam Elliot



Evolution Publishing  
Southampton, Pennsylvania.

Reprinted from:

Henry Rowe Schoolcraft. 1846. *Report of Mr. Schoolcraft, to the Secretary of State*. NY State Senate Document 24 (Jan. 22, 1846).

This edition ©2000 by  
Evolution Publishing and Manufacturing,  
Southampton, Pennsylvania.

This book was electronically typeset and printed on  
archival quality 24 lb. paper.

Manufactured in the  
United States of America

ISBN 1-889758-18-3

### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Elliot, Adam.

Elliot's Vocabulary of Mohawk / by Adam Elliot.

p. cm. — (American language reprints ; vol. 20)  
English and Mohawk.

"Reprinted from: Henry Rowe Schoolcraft. 1846. Report of Mr. Schoolcraft to the Secretary of State. NY State Senate document 24, (Jan. 22, 1846)"—T.p. verso.

Includes bibliographical references (p. 6-7).

ISBN 1-889758-18-3 (alk. paper)

1. Mohawk language—Glossaries, vocabularies, etc. I.

Title: Vocabulary of Mohawk. II. Title. III. Series.

PM1883 .E55 2000

497'.55—dc21

00-045619

# CONTENTS

Preface to the 2000 edition .....	1
Excerpt from “Notes on the Iroquois” .....	9
Letter from Wm. McMurray to Henry Schoolcraft .....	13
Mohawk—English .....	17
English—Mohawk .....	31
Numerical Table .....	43
Classification Table .....	45

## Preface to the 2000 Edition

Perhaps most well-known of the Five Tribes of the Iroquois League or Confederacy were the Mohawks, who lived along the banks of the Mohawk River about fifty miles upstream from its junction with the Hudson River. With the other Iroquois tribes to the east of them, and the Eastern Algonquians immediately to their west along the Atlantic coast, the Mohawks were known as the “Keepers of the Eastern Door” to their confederate allies. The full import of this location could not have been evident when the League was first founded: but when European explorers, missionaries and traders began to frequent the Atlantic coasts, the “Keepers of the Eastern Door” found themselves in a prime position to benefit.

Throughout the seventeenth century, when they are first encountered in the historical record, the story of the Mohawks is one of interwoven trade and warfare. The Mohawks launched wars against their northern neighbors such as the Algonquin, Montagnais, and probably also the St. Lawrence Iroquoians, who had all enjoyed a lively trade with the French, which the Mohawks wanted to participate in on their own terms. Similarly, they defeated the Mahican to the east in the 1620’s for direct access to the Dutch trading post at Fort Orange (later Albany NY and a British colony).

The Iroquois tribes were always known more for their military prowess rather than their trading ability, but after having handily defeated their enemies, the Mohawks grew

to be an exception to the rule. The new access to Fort Orange allowed them to become middlemen in the trade between the Dutch and the Iroquois, a lucrative position which was not particularly appreciated by the other Iroquois. But at the same time the Mohawks were prevented from exploiting this relationship, since they depended on their western allies, particularly the Seneca, for furs. So the balance of power between the members of the Confederacy held fast, creating a solid alliance that was respected and feared by European powers. As a whole the Iroquois profited, rather than suffered, from European colonialism (Tooker 1978; Wallace 1978); a state of affairs that lasted throughout the series of conquests known as the Beaver Wars of the mid-1600's until after the American Revolution, when the League's power (though not, significantly, the alliance) was finally broken forever by the newly independent "thirteen fires."

Mohawk is a northern Iroquoian language, most closely related to the other Five Nations languages and Susquehannock which was spoken along the Susquehanna river. Traditionally, these have all been assumed to have stemmed from a common ancestor which began to differentiate about 1000 to 1500 years ago (Lounsbury 1978; see also the classification table on pg. 45, reflecting the traditional view). But a more in-depth study of Cayuga, which shows evidence of branching off earlier, has made scholars more cautious about that assessment (Goddard 1996). We can say at least, that Mohawk and Oneida share an especially close bond, closer than any other two Five Nations languages.

French Jesuit missionaries in the 1600's were the first to come in regular contact with Iroquoian-speaking people, and noticed the strong similarities within that group. It was the Dutch however, settling along the Hudson River, who first recorded the Mohawk language in the middle part of that century. The 1700's saw a number of Mohawk texts published: remarkably for this early date, literacy became "widespread" among the members of the tribes (Goddard 1996. p. 24).

This vocabulary is one of a set of Iroquoian vocabularies collected at the request of Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, an Indian agent who was appointed by Congress in 1847 to collect statistical and other data on the North American tribes. A letter from William McMurray to Schoolcraft, reproduced on page 13, indicates how the Mohawk terms were collected. Schoolcraft first devised a schedule or questionnaire containing more than 300 English words arranged topically—kinship terms, body parts, cultural objects, and so on. These schedules could be used to elicit equivalents for many different native languages, allowing not only for easier collection but also for more ready comparison.

One such schedule was sent to William McMurray no doubt with instructions to provide Mohawk equivalents for each word. McMurray in turn passed it onto the Rev. Adam Elliot in Canada, who provided equivalents in both Mohawk and Cayuga and sent it back. Elliot may have had some knowledge of the languages, though his remarks to McMurray suggest he did not—particularly "the difficulty of getting suitable persons to give him the Indian". We are

not given any information about who these suitable persons were.

Schoolcraft reprinted Elliot's vocabulary in three of his subsequent publications. It first appeared in his *Report to the Secretary of [NY] State* (1846), as a single vocabulary on pages 264-275. There are a total of 320 English words sequentially numbered, though a printer's error has the last seven words misnumbered as 214-220 instead of 314-320. Mohawk equivalents are given for all of these English words but five. A note after the vocabulary, obviously a direction to the collector, states "If there is no infinitive, insert verbs in their original form, as, He eats, &c."

A year later the Elliot vocabulary was printed as the first of seven Iroquoian languages in a table, on pages 393-400 of *Notes on the Iroquois* (1847). It is cited at the end as "(1) By Rev. Adam Elliot, Canada."

A slightly abridged version was then printed in volume II of Schoolcraft's *Indian Tribes of the United States* (1851-1857), as the first column after the English in a four-language table on pages 482-493. A note at the beginning echoes that of the Notes: "Mohawk. By Rev. Adam Elliot, Canada." All of the numerals are missing in the *Indian Tribes* version, and there is a space between each syllable which is not found in the two earlier editions. Presumably these spaces did not occur in Elliot's original transcription, and were added later by Schoolcraft.

The headwords in this modern edition are taken directly from the version in the 1846 *Report*, but the other editions are cited whenever they differ. Citing all such

discrepancies has the advantage of minimizing the effects of printer's errors in any one version. The variant terms are marked in the Mohawk—English section only, with the abbreviations “Notes”, “I.T.” (Indian Tribes), or both when the sources agree.

I have not made it a point to cite the intersyllabic spacing that occurs in the *Indian Tribes*. Where it is necessary to include a word from the *Indian Tribes* because of some other, more important spelling variation, I have preserved it. But I have not thought it useful to include variants whose only difference is spacing, since it does not seem to be linguistically significant or even original to the vocabulary.

Today the largest groupings of Mohawks are in Canada and New York State. About two decades ago their language was still being spoken by a few thousand people (Mithun 1977). More recent surveys (Goddard 1996) have found it is spoken almost exclusively by adults; one of hundreds of ancient American languages which is likely to go from a living idiom to a historical treasure during the 21st century.

—Claudio R. Salvucci, series ed.