

An Analysis of Orthographic Variations among Oneida (Iroquoian) Sources

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Oneida is the language of the Oneida people and is traditionally passed down orally only with no orthography system. While it has been recorded, documented, and studied by several scholars and researchers, without a uniform standard, the orthographies used by them often vary. According to Michelson et al. (2016), the spelling of the Oneida utterances as well as the usage of the diacritics can vary greatly among works of different authors. Moreover, according to Abbott (2016), the orthographic variations not only occur across works by different authors, but the orthography used by a single researcher who has worked on documenting Oneida can be fluid as well. Below is one set of examples that illustrates the two different ways of spelling of the word “Oneida” in the Oneida language:

- (1) a. OnAyote'a·ká· (Twatati 2017)
 b. OnAyota'a:ka (Oneida Language & Cultural Centre 2023)

In these two examples, different symbols are used to indicate the lengthening of the vowel they follow: the interpunct symbol <·> in (1a) and the colon <:> in (1b). The different spellings also lead to differences between the pronunciations of the word. According to (1a), the fourth vowel of the word is /e/ and the last vowel of the word is lengthened. Meanwhile, according to (1b) the fourth vowel of the word is /a/ and the last vowel of the word is not lengthened.

In my research, I compare nine different sources of Oneida data based on different Oneida dialects, in different formats, and during different time periods. The two oldest works among the nine date back to the 1800s, while the seven more modern works date from the late 1930s to the recent years. I present the results of these comparisons by summarizing and illustrating the orthographic variations among the materials in regard to both the graphemes and the diacritics.

Through my analysis, I discovered that the orthographic conventions are much more consistent among the seven more modern works. Variations in these works occur for the consonants, glides, and the suprasegmental features but not for the vowels. Meanwhile, the two older works contain lots of inconsistency within themselves and compared to the other works. These variations have potentially been triggered by multiple factors, such as time, dialectal differences, contextual differences, and the language background of the authors.

Oneida has a very small number of native speakers and there is not a large number of documentation or texts available. The inconsistency among the orthographies used for documenting the Oneida language can create many obstacles and confusions for Oneida teachers and learners, as well as researchers. Therefore, the results of this study can help users of these Oneida materials to overcome these obstacles, and to better decipher and interpret the different graphemes and diacritics used in each of the resources available. Meanwhile, this study can also help us better understand the value of legacy materials, as well as how documentation and materials of endangered Indigenous languages from the past can help us better study and revitalize these languages today.

References:

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