The Lenape and Munsee Dialects of Delaware, an Algonquian Language[1]

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Over thirty years ago, in an extensive comparative study of Algonquian languages, Michelson found that information on the Delaware language as given by Zeisberger was "not good." The weakness which concerns us is that "The forms of the various dialects are given without assigning each form to its proper dialect.... (1, p. 275)." Michelson supposes that the three Delaware divisions, Munsee, Unami, and Unalactigo, were separate tribes but, nevertheless, spoke mutually intelligible dialects. As a result of some field experience with the Munsee of Kansas and the Delaware of Oklahoma, Michelson revised his conjectures of resemblances between Delaware and other Algonquian languages but did not compare Delaware dialects as such (1, p. 290a).

We have, as the basis for the present study, two sources. The first is an important manuscript of lexical materials, recorded by Dr. Frank Siebert, who says, "My Munsee material was collected from Nicodemus Peters in June, 1938 (aged 77), at Smoothtown, Six Nations' Reserve, Ontario. However, some of that material was collected at the same place in September, 1931, and later revised in 1938. My informant in 1931 was Nicholas Powless (2)." Since both informants mentioned are now dead and since the remaining Munsee speakers of Smoothtown have only a partial command of their native language, it is quite possible that much of this material is now irreplaceable.

The second source is my own field notes of Delaware as spoken by Willie Longbone of Dewey, Oklahoma. The Oklahoma dialect represented is known locally as Lenape.[1]

Neither Dr. Siebert nor I regard our records to be in final phonetic form. Phonetic explanations are made as special problems in orthography arise.[2] The Munsee forms are cited as M., the Lenape forms as L.

1. Initial *wa-* and postvocalic *-wa-* in Munsee appears in Lenape as *o*. M. *wak*, L. *o:k* 'and' (the colon after vowels marks vocalic length) ; M. *wa:sLew*, L. *ó:sële:w* 'light' (capital L marks a voiceless L) ; M. *ëwa:n*, L. *aón* 'fog'; M. *pa:wá:law* 'guardian spirit', L. *mpaó:la* 'my guardian spirit'; M. *e:Mhëwá:nës*, L. *e:mhó:nës* 'spoon'. Possibly instances like M. *chihxa:ma:kan*, L. *chi:xamó:kkan* 'comb' imply an underlying *-ëwa:-* for the Munsee *-a:-* which corresponds to the Lenape *-o:-* (doubled consonants, as *-kk-*, are written for a single long phoneme). Instances of Munsee *-wa-* after the consonant *-k-* also appear in Lenape as *-o-*. M. *tëk*a:x*, L. *tahkóx* 'turtle'; M. *ëpí:k*an*, L. *ahpí:kkon* 'flute';

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[1] Field funds for work in Oklahoma were administered by DePauw University; work with informant at Ann Arbor was sponsored by the Linguistic Institute of the University of Michigan.

[2] In place of special phonetic characters, *ë* is used for the schwa symbol (turned *e*), and when no other stress is marked in a given Lenape word, the stress falls on this vowel; *sh* is used for the *s*-wedge symbol (aspirant English 'ship') ; *ch* is used for the *c*-wedge (an affricate as in English 'church').

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M. *takwáppo* 'he is married', L. *ntakohpu:ha:lkéhena* 'I married her'. In these correspondences, Munsee appears to be the more archaic dialect.

2. However, in preserving *-we:-* and *-wi:-* after *-m-* and *-k-*, Lenape is the more archaic, for in these sequences correspondences show Munsee *-o:-*. L. *kwënaskwé:e:*, M. *kʷëna:skó:tew* 'high weeds'; L. *eha:pchalá:mwi:s*, M. *a:pëchá:li:mo:sh* 'diving duck'; L. *mwe:kkané:yok*, M. *mo:këne:wak* 'dogs' (L. develops *-y-* between *-e:-* and *-o-;* the *-o-* is from *-wa-*, as 1, above).

3. Some Munsee forms with *w* and *wa-* before consonant correspond to Lenape forms without the preceding *w*, *wë-*, which leaves its trace in *-o-* instead of *-a-* after the consonant. Both metathesis of preconsonantic *-w-*, and contraction of *wa-* to *-o-* (see 1, above) are productive features of Lenape phonology. M. *wshayp'e*, L. *shóhpe* shore; *wëla:kan*, L. *ló:kke:ns* 'wooden bowl' (*-n-* before *-s-* or *-sh-* in Lenape nasalizes the preceding vowel); M. *wëla:këna:ho:Nshi*, L. *lo:kkanahú:nshi* 'elm'.

4. A "floating" *-h-* sometimes appears after a vowel in Munsee, but before the corresponding vowel, either in postconsonantic or word-initial position in Lenape. M. *ahpi:s*, L. *hápi:s* 'tumpline'; *M. ohpën*, L. *hópëni:s* 'potato'; M. *wcháppihk* 'medicine', L. *chëphik* 'root'; M. *mohk*, L. *mhúkw* 'blood'; M. *wa:hpán*, L. *hópan* 'lung' (cp. also 1, above). Less regular instances of "floating" *-h-* are M. *ma:kahkw*, L. *mahká:kw* 'leech'; M. *wihsëkhi:m*, L. *wísahki:m* 'grape'.

5. Quite frequently Lenape has a plain stop (less frequently a long stop) where Munsee shows a preaspirated stop. L. *mé:chi*, M. *mehchi* 'now'; L. *tú:pan*, M. *tohpan* 'frost'; L. *ke:tanëttú:wi:t*, M. *keht:nëtto:wi:t* 'god'; L. *nu:wá:ttam* 'I have good sense', M. *nëwewáhtam* 'I know' beside M. *nëwewíhtam* 'I am wise'; L. *tëwé:kw*, M. *tëwehkw* 'lizard' (preaspirated stops never occur in word-final clusters in Lenape; but cp. L. *tëwé:kkok* 'lizards'; L. *wëlakshía*, M. *wëlákshi* 'guts' (the cluster *-hksh-* is not permissible in Lenape; but cp. the relative form, when the cluster is interrupted by the *-ë-* vowel: L. *nu:lahkëshia* 'my guts'). The reverse is also found: Lenape shows preaspiration lacking in Munsee. Incidental examples of this can be found under 1, above. Preaspiration is phonetically clear; impressionistic errors are less probable here than in recording other sound types in Delaware dialects.

6. Munsee retains a word-initial vowel lacking in a few Lenape words. M. *óxkʷew*, L. *xkwe:w* 'women'; M. *a:sëná:mëNshi*, L. *sëna:më:nshi* 'sugar maple'; M. *ëskʷonde*, L. *skóntay* 'doorway' (the use of *-d-*, *-t-* is merely a matter of orthography: in both dialects, the dental stop after *-n-* is voiced). In one instance Lenape retains the initial vowel lacking in Munsee: L. *a:nsí:kkëme:s*, M. *shi:xi:kímëNshi* 'red maple', but this comparison presents other difficulties also.

7. The *-ë-* vowel recorded between consonants in some Lenape words does not appear in the Munsee record. This may reflect a different phonetic interpretation of the phonetic facts. Or it may indicate that Munsee has actually travelled further along the road to developing new clusters. Munsee *-l-* as the second member of such clusters is *L*, while the corresponding *-l-* in Lenape is fully voiced. L. *këla:hí:kkan*, M. *kLa:hí:kën* 'trap'; L. *sú:kkëla:n*, M. *so:kLa:n* 'it is raining'; L. *pëlé:ni:kw*, M. *pLe:n* 'flying squirrel'; L. *we:mahté:kkëni:s*, M.

we:mëtëkni:s 'dwarf'. An instance or two is found in which Lenape develops a consonant cluster interrupted in Munsee by a -*ë*- vowel (see example under 2, above).

8. Some Munsee words in *më-*, *m-*, and *n-* appear in Lenape without the initial nasal. M. *mësi:m*, L. *si:mi:n* 'hickory nut' beside L. *shi:më:nshi* 'hickory nut tree'. Some pairs show also the "floating" -*h*- which appears after a given vowel in Munsee, before the vowel in Lenape (see 4, above): M. *mihLóhsëss*, L. *hilú:sës* 'old man'; M. *mihtëk* 'tree' with *mihtëkwak* 'trees' and L. *hittukw* 'tree', *hítku:k* 'trees'; M. *ptëkkwi:mëNshi* (underlying M. **mtëkkwi:mëNshi*), L. *tëkkwi:më:nshi* 'walnut tree'; M. *n(ë)gwëtën*, L. *kwëttën* 'once'.

9. Lenape appears to tolerate word-final -*kw* in some instances where Munsee reduces -*kw* to -*k*. L. *shëkw*, M. *shëk* 'but'; L. *mi:xá:kkana:kw*, M. *mi:xá:kënak* 'white ash tree' (but with plural suffix, the M. form still lacks postconsonantic -*w*, while the L. form shows the regular change from -*wa-* to -*o-*: L. *mi:xa:kkaná:kok*, M. *mi:xa:kënakal* 'white ash trees'); L. *mhukw*, M. *mohk* 'blood'. But -*kw* is found in word-final in Munsee (see 4, above). The sequence *xwa-* in Munsee appears in Lenape as *xa-* where one would expect to find *xo-* (according to 1, above): M. *xwa:sk^wi:m*, L. *xáskwi:m* 'corn'.

10. The class of Lenape inanimate nouns in -*ay* is irregular in having beside singular -*ay* an underlying -*e:w*- which yields -*e:(y)o* before the plural suffix -*a* (by regular phonology). The corresponding nouns in Munsee do not undergo either the irregular development of a special singular form in -*ay*, nor the regular phonology of deriving -*o*- from -*wa-*; furthermore the plural suffix in Munsee appears in the full form -*al*. Compare L. *kwshá:tay* with plural *kwsha:té:yo*, and M. *kwsha:tew* with plural *kwsha:te:wal* 'smoke'. See also the example under 6, above.

11. Some animate noun endings appear in reduced form in Lenape, in full form in Munsee. Thus L. *alánkw* with plural *alánkok*, and M. *ëla:nk^wew* with plural *ëla:nk^wewak* 'star'.

12. The glottalized stop is a specialized development in the Munsee dialect. Michelson reported that every stop might be glottalized, but did not assign this development to any specific dialect (1, p. 290a). Our examples show two cases of glottalized *p* in Munsee which correspond to *p* in Lenape. M. *wshayp'e*, L. *shóhpe* 'shore'; M. *shwëpp'i*, L. *shuwánpi* 'salt water'.

13. In general, vowels of the two dialects are the same. An occasional vowel of one dialect may be reduced to a -*ë*- vowel in the other (see 11, above), possibly as a result of fast speech. In the following example, Lenape -*ë*- is probably phonemically -*ë*-; it is, at least, subject to the regular syncope of -*ë*- in syllabic-final before suffix: L. *pu:pú:kkwësh* with plural *pu:pú:kwshak*, and *popokwi:s* 'oriole'.

14. Lenape -*u-*, -*u:*- is recorded where Munsee shows -*o-*, -*o:*-. This fact is perhaps not unrelated to the derivation of some Lenape -*o-*, -*o:*- from -*wa*, -*wa:*-, a development which is not shared by Munsee. If such derivation, with analogical extension, will account for the origin of Lenape, -*o-*, -*o:*-, then Lenape -*u-*, -*u:*- can really be said to be identical with Munsee -*o-*, -*o:*-. The difference between Lenape -*u*- and Munsee -*o*-

is orthographic, not phonemic. Phonemically then, Munsee has only one high back vowel, -o-, while Lenape has the same vowel which in our orthography is written -u-, and in addition Lenape has a second high back vowel, -o-, not to be confused with Munsee -o-. L. *yúkwe*, M. *yo:kwe* 'now'; L. *kwënënuxkw*, M. *kʷënëmoxkʷ* 'otter'; L. *mënú:tte:s*, M. *mënó:te:s* 'pouch'; L. *ká:kku:n*, M. *ka:kon* 'leggings'; L. *mëkú:s*, M. *mëko:s* 'awl'; L. *wiyú:s*, M. *wëyó:s* 'meat'; L. *mu:s*, M. *mo:s* 'elk'; L. *hu:s*, M. *hohs* 'kettle'; L. *ku:n*, M. *ko:n* 'snow'; L. *kí:shu:x*, M. *ki:shox* 'sun'.

15. Many words in the two dialects are identical, if we discount orthography and count only the phonemic facts (see 14). Additional examples may be cited at random: *wte:* 'heart'; *ke:kw* 'wampum'; *wi:nínkwës* 'mink'; *énta* 'there'; *é:li* 'because'.

16. Words which are otherwise identical in the two dialects may differ in inflectional endings. Thus, the inanimate plural suffix appears as -*al* in Munsee, but without the -*l*, as -*a*, in Lenape. Both dialects give *mi:n* 'huckleberry', but M. *mi:nal*, L. *mí:na* 'huckleberries'. Both dialects give *wí:na:kw* 'sassafras tree', but the gender of this word, as marked by plural suffixes, appears to be animate in Lenape, inanimate in Munsee: L. *wi:na:kok*, M. *wi:na:kwal* 'sassafras trees'. Both dialects give *ménkwew* 'Seneca', and the animate plural suffix for both dialects is -*ak*, but in suffixation the sequence of phonemes is preserved only in Munsee; in Lenape it is phonologically contracted (see 1, above): M. *menkwé:wak*, L. *menkwé:yok* 'Senecas'. Beside the participle suffix -*t*, there is an agentive suffix -*s*. This may be reflected in the correspondence of nouns in -*s* and in -*t*. L. *hémpës*, M. *he:mbët* 'shirt'.

17. Some instances of partial similarities may be classified. Compound words may have one stem identical in the two dialects, the other not. M. *ëmangëme:kw*, L. *xínkome:kw* '[one] big fish'; cp. L. *amankamé:kkok* '[many] big fish'. A stem which appears freely in initial position in one dialect may be restricted to non-initial position in the other dialect. M. *toLpew* 'turtle', L. *pi:sëlatú:lpew* 'soft shell turtle'. Both dialects give *lënu* 'man', and in the non-initial by-form both dialects show syncope of the -*ë*- vowel, but in Munsee a consonant cluster results while in Lenape the neighboring consonants contract to a single long phoneme. M. *lëpëwe:wí:lno*, L. *lëpwe:ínnu* 'sage, wise man'; M. *ma:nëtwí:lno*, L. *manëttu:winnu* 'shaman, spirit man'. Specialized meaning may result in one dialect, not in the other. M. *mohkëtonës* 'salamander', L. *mhukwtú:ne:* 'he has a bloody mouth'. Both dialects give *manëttu* 'spirit'; Lenape, but not Munsee, has developed a non-initial by-form. L. *mahtánTu*, M. *me:tsi:t manëtto* 'no good spirit, devil'. Analysis of partial similarity is far from easy: L. *xe:s*, M. *xay* 'hide'; L. *aé:sës*, M. *ëwe:yëyës* 'animal'; L. *kwi:ppëlënay*, M. *ëkʷi:pLa:wën* 'hoe'; L. *maná:tay*, M. *mëna:hën* 'island'; L. *panshpe:kw*, M. *shpáNshpex* 'muskmelon'; L. *chi:skúkku:s*, M. *ki:shko:sh* 'robin'.

18. Instances of complete lexical dissimilarity between the dialects are relatively infrequent.

Literature Cited

1. Michelson, Truman, 1906-07. Preliminary report on the linguistic classification of Algonquian tribes. Bur. Amer. Ethnol. Rept. 28:221-290b.

2. Personal communication. I am grateful for permission to use this material.