Some Considerations of the Shape of Meaning,
Algonquian Understandings of the Expression of Self ©¹
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The Wôpanâôt8âôk, “Wampanoag language” was not used from the early nineteenth century
until the Wôpanâak Language Reclamation Project was initiated in 1993. This is the first
American Indian Language, with no living speakers, that has been reclaimed (spoken once
again). For Algonquian linguists, Wôpanâôt8âôk offers a unique, conservative snapshot into
the languages of the eastern branch of the family. By study of Wôpanâôt8âôk, Algonquian scholars
can consider how their ancestors understood themselves including their relationship to the
natural world over 150 years ago. One of the primary sources for the Reclamation Project is the
“Eliot Bible” translated by Wôpanâak people in 1663 as well as hundreds of Native written
texts. Therefore, in this paper, we discuss Wôpanâôt8âôk morphology arising from a language
that was “frozen” and then look at Waponahki (Wabanaki) languages that were continuously
used and thus evolving. In this way, through a study of the morphology of possessive word forms
that contain an “M-marker,” we will demonstrate how understandings are passed generation to
generation and continue to inform people, even during a time when they no longer used their
Native languages.

Algonquian languages² are forty languages that share a common original ‘mother language’ in
the distant past. Even though they share the same base, they have evolved to create different
languages and within those languages, distinct dialects. Yet, meanings and concepts in many of
the languages remain close in structure when compared to the original mother language. For
example, all four Waponahki languages are very close with differences in pronunciation and
many consistencies in grammar (morphology, syntax, semantics, and phonology). Algonquian
languages spread across North America from the Atlantic shores to the Rocky Mountains; from
Hudson Bay to the Carolinas. There are even two Algonquian-speaking Tribes in California, the
Yurok and Wiyot.

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² Society for the Study of the Indigenous Languages of the Americas (SSILA)
ISO 639-3: wam; Alternate Names: Massachusett; Massachusetts; Natick
Classification Algonquian, Eastern Algonquian
In this paper, we will demonstrate that Algonquian speakers have a commonly understood knowledge of self that is antithetic to the understandings of English-speakers. Algonquian speakers understand that “self” is an inalienable component of lands and waters. Water is considered inalienable and part of one’s physical self, by extension, because of water’s contact with the earth below it. Self, for the Wôpanâôt8âök and the Waponahki, is also inalienable from law and nation.

The “M-marker” denoting inalienable relationship

All of these concrete and abstract terms: land and land features, bodies of water, nation, law, leaders, and self are included in a class of nouns that, when possessed, mark the relationship by a special sound referred to as the “M-marker” that means each of these items, when referencing the relationship to the speaker, are one and the same item as the speaker. As such, all agreements dealing with any of these separately understood items in English must be understood as being inclusive to the Algonquian speaker. Where the English speaker understands that land, land features, bodies of water, law, nation, and leader are separate alienable items from “self,” it is the opposite case for Wampanoag, Wabanaki and other Algonquian language speaking peoples. Even though the M-marker is included in the possessive form, it does not convey ownership in the way that the English possessed form does. This possessive form indicates what self is a part of the noun being referenced.

This paper will examine the very specific set of words that take on the M-marker through morphology: the study of internal structure of words that form the core of meaning for that word. Algonquian words construct meaning by combining, in a prescribed order, smaller units of

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3 The Waponahki languages are so distinct in grammar and structure that Passamaquoddy was used in World II by the navy to carry messages between ships.
speech, each having their own meaning, creating a ‘word’. A word in Algonquian languages is often an entire sentence in English. In fact, *Algonquian* comes from a Passamaquoddy-Wolastoq word, Elakumukik, meaning *those that are our relatives*. This word includes the M-marker in the middle of the word (in bold type) that denotes relationship, not ownership. It is placed before the animate plural suffixes.

Throughout this paper we begin with the Wôpanâôt8âôk morphology. This is intentional because Wôpanâôt8âôk was not spoken for a period of 150 years so that the morphology that has been reclaimed through the Wôpanâôt8âôk Language Reclamation Project does not reflect the level of evolution that Waponahki languages reflect and it hones closer to the Waponahki that was spoken at the first two decades of the nineteenth century. By using both Wôpanâôt8âôk and Waponahki morphology we are able to demonstrate how deeply these linguistic markers are embedded in the cultural understandings of Algonquian peoples.

**The M-Marker and land:**

The sound taken at the end of a noun that indicates an intimate relationship is the sound “M.” This M-marker sitting directly at the end of the noun only shows up when the noun’s relationship to self is expressed. This marker is never taken on nouns that do not express this special inalienable relationship with the speaker. In other words, if for example, in Wôpanâôt8âôk, if the word is, ahkee, ‘land’, it will be expressed as seen here in its singular form. If, however I want to say, ‘your land’, the phrase is, ‘kutahkeem’ and the ‘m’ here expresses the intimate relationship with the land. This is consistent with the Waponahki word ahkik which is one of the many morphemes denoting *land*. This Waponahki form is what is called a bound morpheme which means it cannot be said by itself and needs to be in relation to something else. We can further explore in Wôpanâôt8âôk as follows: ku(t) your; ahkee *land*; m (*inalienable*); -uw (*plural person*) kutahkeemuw, ‘your (plural) land (that is also yourselves)’. ‘Another example in Waponahki languages is Tahkhkanomuwa: the garden of a group of people. ‘tah: prefix denoting we are speaking of a 3rd person, kihkan: *land set aside for planting or garden*, om: *denotes inalienable relationship of land to the person we are speaking of*, uwa: plural morpheme *meaning more than one person in relationship to the subject*. In Wôpanâôt8âôk, there are also non-relational forms; ahkee, *land*; ahkeeash, *lands* but these forms would not be used when talking about a person’s relationship to the land and so we can see that the relational M marker is absent in both forms.

Another way to describe this relationship of ‘self as land’ is to say that once this relationship is expressed and understood, anything that comes between land and self, is now included in the one whole being. Below we see this understanding at work in the English word for plowshare: Takateekenhtyäq kupleowsharesumash, kah qunuhtuquhtyäq… *beat your plowshares into swords…*4 Ku, your; plowshares, plowshares; um, *inalienable*; ash, *plural*. Here we see that the plowshare, by extension, becomes part of oneself when possessed due to its’ relationship to the land. Since the plowshare, as an item, was not part of the Wampanoag world prior to sustained European contact, the word is borrowed into the language in its entirety and is then used.

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4 1663 Mamusee Wuneetupnutamwee UBiblum joel 3:10
according to cultural appropriateness. For this reason, examples like this are strong evidence of how the language makes meaning in many cases.

The M-marker and law:
In Wampanoag, the term for ‘law’ and other terms relating to the law also incorporate the M-marker showing and intimate relationship with the speaker. The word for ‘law’ is built upon: unômâyuw [m], reason, argument 5 unöm, internal; âyuw, abide/live at; Nutunômâyuwm, ‘My internal reason/argument’, Non-relational form; unômâyuw, reason; unômâyuwash, reasons. To break it down further, unômôâtuwôkan [m], law. Nutunômôâtuwôkanum, ‘My law’ Nut, my; unöm, internal; ôatu, reciprocal; wôkan, noun; um, inalienable; ’my internal reasoning with self that is self. Non-relational forms: unômôâtuwôk, law; unômôâtuwôkanash, laws. In Waponahki languages, the morphology would be: Nt: prefix denoting I am speaking of myself, 1st person, olotahke: what one does. wakon: Nominalizer to convert the previous verb into a noun um: inalienable. M also denotes that this is intimate, in other words, for the Waponahki speaker, a person is usually obliged to do this.

The M-marker and Nation:
Another clear example of the M relational marker is in the item for the geo-political term for nation. -wutahkeemôwun, ‘nation’ NId (Noun, inanimate, dependent) This item displays two very key markers that denote a relationship to the speaker beyond simple possession of the item. First, it must be said that all nouns, in the language, that are kinship terms, such as mother, father, cousin, sibling and so on, begin with a ‘portion’ of the word and then must show possession in order to be a complete word. For example: -8hsh, ‘father’ This phrase is only part of a word. It is never said as seen alone. It must be completed by indicating whose father:

N8hsh, ‘my father’
K8hsh, ‘your father’
8hshah, ‘his/her father’.

For a kinsman that is acting as one’s blood relative, even though they may not be related by blood like a stepfather, the relationship is shown by using the base of the noun; here -8hsh, and turning it into a verb meaning, ‘have as one’s X’; Wut8hshunu- , ‘have as a father,’ Nuwt8hshun, ‘my stepfather.’

The unique thing with -wutahkeemôwun, ‘nation’ is that this word is NId; that is, in linguistic terms, a noun that is inanimate and dependent. This means that the item cannot be expressed as a complete phrase without showing possession by someone, just like the dependent nouns that are kinship terms. But even though this term is a noun, it is using the VERB structure used to show a relationship to an ANIMATE noun that is not necessarily as intimate as that of one’s blood

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5 1663 Mamusee Wuneetupânutamwee UBiblum Job 23:4 Wah n8nhta tō nutunômâyuwm ut ânuhqâput, wah nunumwahtô nut8nut unômâyuwash. I would order my cause before him, and fill my mouth with arguments. I would order my cause before him, and fill my mouth with arguments.

6 The letter, 8, in the language is an orthographic convention from the 17th century indicating the vowel sound heard in English, boot
relative, yet still intimately connected to self and the phrase is made up of these components of meaning, wut, his/her; ahkee, land; m ‘as self; òwn, subordinative verb ending combing with the first syllable, wut to mean ‘have as one’s blood when this may not be the case’.

Also, this word has incorporated the M into the standing noun, regardless of who possesses it, showing that a ‘nation’

1. Must always show an intimate relationship as ‘self’ and
2. Can never be expressed without showing possession;

This demonstrates that the concept of ‘nation’ cannot exist without a direct tie to person/self and does not necessarily mean the land upon which one lives, but a wider territory.

**M-Marker and the River and Island**

Seepuw [m], river7 nuseepumunônash, ‘our rivers’; nu, my; seepuw, (lit. something stretched out long) river; m, inalienable; unôn, our; ash, plural; ‘our inalienable rivers.’ Munahan [m], island8; umunahanum, ‘his/her island’u, his/her; munahan, island; um, inalienable; ‘his/her island that is part of him/her.’ Non-relational forms; munah, island; munahanash, islands.

Passamaquoddy is similar as “sip” is the word for river and when it is possessed it becomes, for example, “ntosipum” for my river. This shows the same use of M, river being equal to self. The Passamaquoddy word for lake is: qosperm and it will take the M characteristic when possessed and show as ‘qosperm (‘ in the front shows relationship to a third person) Passamaquoddy is similar as “monihq” is the word for island and when it is possessed it becomes “monihkum.” In Penobscot the words are násipom, ‘my river’ and nánêpim, ‘my water.’

Water bodies’ relationship to self is derived from the self’s relationship to the land beneath the water and once this relationship is acknowledged, that self also includes the water. We can see this because whenever an item touches the land this M-marker is attached because the marker indicates relationship to the land. Since the water and the self are inseparable because the water covers the land, when bodies of water are considered boundaries, the totality of that water feature (water and the land beneath) are reflected in the possessed phrase. The relationship is so primary that once the relationship is acknowledged, the ‘self’ is inclusive of the boundary and all of the waters upon the land below. Thus, rivers derive their intimate relationship solely because they touch the land beneath. Conversely, things that touch the water don’t tend to take this marker like a net. However, in all Waponahki languages there is a variant exemplified by the Penobscot morphology for canoe, natâkʷitônomin my canoe takes the M-marker indicating an inalienable relationship between the person and the canoe. This is similar to the example of the “Plowshare” above. The seventeenth century “Rale” Abenaki dictionary contains a very discreet set of words that use the M-marker, in fact it is only recorded with ‘water’ and ‘earth’. Because the M-marker is also used discreetly in both Wôpanâôt8âök and Rale, this shows that M distributed widely today across possessed nouns is indicative of a normalization and that the M-marker during the early 1800’s was still indicative of land being connected to oneself.

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7 1752 Mashpee Wampanoag petition to the General Court, Goddard and Bradgon 1988, 370-371
8 1663 Mamusee Wuneetupânatumwee UBiblum job 22:30 Nah peesh pahqâhwutô umunahanum mata wâshkuheuwâk…and he will deliver to him, the innocent, his island
M-marker and leadership

Even though this special marker shows up on words when they are in the possessed form, it does not mean, ‘ownership’ because it also shows up on nouns like, sôtyum, sachem, leader and is indicative of the representative relationship that the leader has with the speaker. Sôtyumôw, male chief; nusôtyumôwum, ‘my sachem’ nu, my; sôtyum, sent out; òw, by someone unspecified; um, inalienable; ‘my male leader sent out who is part of me’. Non-relational forms; sôtyum, sachem; sôtyumôak, sachems. Examples in Waponahki languages would be: Nsakom: the Sakom representative and translator. N: 1st person possessive prefix. sak: stem word for a strong and able person. om: inalienable relationship to the 1st person. The Sakom and the 1st person denoted in Nsakom have a relationship and responsibility to one another. In this example, the idea of this relational M-marker is not about ownership but rather explains the relationship between the speaker and the other noun mentioned. Additionally, body parts do NOT take the M-marker and this is good evidence that the marker is not just simply about inalienable possession.

Place names in Algonquin Languages

Many Algonquin place names describe a place as if seen from the water. This makes sense because most Algonquin peoples lived in heavily forested areas and traveled by water. Villages were located for their proximity to the necessary fresh water. Their names were derived from descriptions so that the traveler could recognize them from the water. For example, [Kcisipuk] or what is now known as Chesapeake is an Algonquin word that means the great river, Kci: adjective meaning great, sip: river, uk: locative. The word describes the water, not the land. [Qonatokot], what is now known as Connecticut, is another Algonquin word describing something very long, not the state but the river. [Kepek] or today known as Quebec is an Algonquin word meaning where the big water ends, not the province, the river. These examples show that Algonquin people were water people, describing their existence by or from the water.

Waponahki place names are often descriptors of the riverine world they inhabited. The Penobscot River [pənɔw̃aw̃hpskw̃t̃okʷ] is not a village, not a spot on the land, it is a river. The entire river, its shores, and its people are named in reference to the river. In Penobscot this is pənɔw̃aw̃hpske, the rocks widen, spread out, there is a widening or opening rocky terrain; conj. pənɔw̃aw̃hpskek where the rocks widen, spread out (Penobscot, region of Verona Island and Orland, Maine, the name of Penobscot village at Orland.) Pənaw̃aw̃hpskw̃t̃okʷ INAN Penobscot River [lit: river of rocks opening or spreading out], loc. Pənaw̃aw̃hpskw̃t̃okok. The river is described from the perspective of someone who is sitting in a canoe in the middle of the River travelling north. The conjunct form, Pənaw̃aw̃hpskek “where the rocks open or spread out,” originally referred to the Penobscot village at present Orland and the district about Verona Island at the mouth of the Penobscot River. This village apparently was destroyed about 1615 during the Abenaki-Micmac war, and the name was later applied to one or more villages upstream.

Other Penobscot place names are:

- wal̃amanaskʷ INAN red ochre clay, crude red ochre, wal̃amanəss INAN red ochre quarry, loc. wələmənəsək at the..., PN Olamon Island, wələmanəssɨhtəkʷ INAN stream of the red ochre quarry, PN Olamon Stream. The land and water are intertwined in this word.
- [Kinpek] or Kennebec, the river flowing into the big water.
• [pəsɪtəmik] or Passadumkeag. In Penobscot [əmik] refers to a group of solids that flows like a liquid or in this case, small rocks and sand. In a canoe (oqit) it can be difficult to get over the sand bar caused by the erosion of the tributary river.

• The conjunct verb nálαčwak “where the current flows in a channel” is the correct source of English Norridgewock. It was a major Abenaki village located on the east side of the Kennebec River in present South Madison, Maine. The inhabitants were called nálαčwahkwyak “people of the land in which the current flows in a channel.”

• [Neqotkuk] Or what is known as Tobique (Ktopek) First Nation in Canada (Kanata) describes a place where one river flows underneath another. One of the rivers at that location is called [Wolastoq], the river with beautiful waves, not the land, the river. The entire river valley is considered Wolastoq, not just one village. The river still retains its name in Northern Maine – the Aroostook River. There is even a county, Aroostook named after the [Wolatoq] river. [Keskopekek] or Gaspe or where the river widens into the big water or ocean (supeq).

• [Motahkomikuk] or what is known today as Indian Township in Washington county is not a name but a description from the water’s perspective meaning land coming down the hill in reference to the lake.9

The Waponahki, in particular, have always seen the world from the water, not the land. In a traditional story told by elders in Sipayik (on the shore of the river), the elder said “Yalhucit not putep sonuciw ahtoli ‘tpinuwat pomawsuwinu.” (The whale stayed around the edge of the shore watching the people.) In this teaching, ‘sonuciw’ refers to the edge of the shore, not from the land but from the water.

A Wabanaki creation narrative told by the Mi’kmiaq shows how water is central to creation when the first man, Gellulaskiv meets his family. His grandmother was created from the dew on a rock, his nephew was created from the foam on the ocean and his mother was created from a drop of water on a leaf. Without water, there would be no People.10

9. Another fact about the people who live there is that they were traditionally called [Nolomkewiyik] which meant upriver people.

10 https://www.historymuseum.ca/history-hall/origins/_media/Mikmaq-Creation-Story-EN.pdf