Tag-Questions in Penobscot

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As matters stand at present the grammar of interrogation in the Algonquian languages has been neglected.¹ Some Algonquian languages have interrogative inflexions and some do not. Apparently most Algonquian languages have interrogative clauses or phrases which are introduced and identified by interrogative particles. In addition, another type of interrogation may be characterized by tag-questions. In some languages, for example English, tags can be classified according to whether they involve positive or negative polarity. Tag-questions of positive polarity correspond to the English tags did you? and did it?, and those of negative polarity are equivalent to English didn’t you? and didn’t it?. On the other hand, some languages have tags which disclose the speaker’s motive for interrogation, so that the tag may imply a simple desire for information, involve an accusation, or give an indication that the speaker believes he already knows the answer and is seeking confirmation. Penobscot and perhaps most other Algonquian languages seem to follow this second group.

In the Penobscot dialect of Eastern Abenaki ordinary interrogation is indicated by one of the three suprasegmental phonemes of intonation (or prosodemes) whose domain is the phrase. Interrogative intonation is specified by sentence prosody in which the end or final syllable of a phrase or sentence regularly undergoes a pitch rise above the general melodic level of the utterance. The prosodic interval varies from a major second (one whole tone) to a major third (two whole tones). However, there are some situations in which the interrogative intonation may occur on the final syllable of a word within a phrase, and some sentences may receive two successive interrogative intonations. Also, the interrogative prosodeme is

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often associated with mutations of the accompanying suprasegmentals of primary accent, changing them from atonic to tonic. All the details of ordinary interrogation are described in full elsewhere (Siebert 1988).

Tag-questions are the topic of this article and form a special class of interrogative forms. They are seldom encountered in texts. In my Penobscot texts they are found sparsely and they occur only rarely in the published texts of other Algonquian languages. In Penobscot they are characterized by occurring only in final positions in a phrase or sentence and by uniformly receiving the suprasegmental phoneme of interrogative intonation on their final syllable.

Tag-questions have not been described in the literature or grammatical accounts dealing with any of the Algonquian languages. There are two very brief and incomplete mentions of tags in Cree by Howse (1844:279) and Bloomfield (1934:154, footnote). Bloomfield gives Cree tsì ‘Isn’t that so?’ as a particle serving as a regular sign of a yes-or-no question, and Howse records the same particle as che and says it is added to a positive or negative sentence, apparently without any polarity association. Howse also mentions na as a Cree tag but gives too little information to enable one to define its function.

Matching polarity and opposite polarity are more significant than positive and negative polarity in Penobscot. Gender, number, person and tense-aspect, including the animate and inanimate contrast, are not involved in the selection of tags by the speaker. In essence positive and negative polarity are also of no consequence. Consequently English translations of Penobscot tags must be adjusted to the grammar of the Penobscot verbal forms which are used, and have no precise translation equivalents. The tag particles are to be viewed as instances of discourse particles that encode the speaker’s opinion of the truth of the assertion and his belief concerning the addressee’s opinion.

Penobscot appears to have three tags which are found as interrogative discourse particles at the end of phrases and sentences. They are presented with examples, the sentences being numbered consecutively:

I) nàkkà. This tag exhibits opposite polarity in translation, and implies that the speaker feels certain that he knows the answer and asserts that the addressee surely agrees, even though the addressee might wish to deny it. Consequently the tag is frequently employed to convey an accusation.

(1) kokawítdàmi, nàkkà
   ‘You forgot me, didn’t you?’
(2) kàsàpàcòmi ni eli-woylíma, nàkkà
   ‘You admit that I’m right, don’t you?’

II) kùyùna. This tag is the one in most common use, and has the most general application and meaning. It behaves as an interrogative particle only in
phrase or sentence-final position. In phrase medial it is not a tag but a non-interrogative intensive particle meaning ‘in truth, truly, indeed, in earnest’. As a tag it may have either matching or opposite polarity and often signals a yes-or-no question. The speaker expresses either a desire for information, or some doubt and a reluctance to commit himself, and requests confirmation of what he considers to be doubtful.

(3) wákátohsəmin nəpison, kwina’
   ‘He drank the medicine, did he?’
(4) apákikən pənəhpskʷ, kwina’
   ‘The rock is flat, is it?’
(5) kiskatam, kwina’
   ‘He got married, did he?’
(6) kčitámikən, kwina’
   ‘It is important, is it?’
(7) nihki, kwina’
   ‘That’s right, is it?’
(8) tan eht elákwihlat, kwina’
   ‘He has gone off somewhere, has he?’
(9) na səkəma wiikáwo, kwina’
   ‘The chief is fat, is he?’
(10) áhtəma álewí, kwina’
    ‘It isn’t correct (true), is it?’
(11) áhtəma álewí, məhčopeht kwina’
    ‘It isn’t correct by any chance, is it?’
(12) áhta kiskatámowi, kwina’
    ‘He didn’t get married, did he?’
(13) áta wəməsseli-pečiptowi, kwina’
    ‘He didn’t bring much, did he?’
(14) áhtəma kčitamikənowi, kwina’
    ‘It is unimportant, is it?’

III álhtań. This tag has no clear involvement with polarity of any sort. The speaker is more or less confident of his facts, assumes that the addressee agrees, and solicits confirmation.

(15) na səkəma wiikáwo, álhtań’
    ‘The chief is fat, isn’t he?’ [compare (9)]
(16) nihki, álhtań’
    ‘That’s right, isn’t it?’ [compare (7)]
(17) áhtəma álewí, álhtań’
    ‘It isn’t true (correct), isn’t it?’ [compare (10)]
(18) wákátohsəmin nəpison, álhtań’
    ‘He drank the medicine, didn’t he?’ [compare (3)]
(19) kiskatam, álhtań’
    ‘He got married, didn’t he?’ [compare (5)]
(20) apákikən pənəhpskʷ, álhtań’
    ‘The rock is flat, isn’t it?’ [compare (4)]
(21) wəməsseli-pečipton, álhtań’
    ‘He brought a lot, didn’t he?’
(22) áta nəkisi-namih投降, ni eli-ččowi-ali-təpihlək, álhtań’
    ‘I can’t see that it matters, does it?’
This account describes the chief features of Penobscot tag-questions. It is to be hoped that further information may be elicited in other Algonquian languages.

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