

A Basque etymology for the amerindian tribal name *Iroquois*

PETER BAKKER
(UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM)

The origin of the word *Iroquois*, the name of a group of Amerindian nations in Northeastern North America, has been the subject of discussion among Amerindianists for more than a century¹. *Iroquois* is a name for a group of Amerindian tribes speaking related languages, living mostly in the Northeastern United States. The Mohawk, the Tuscarora and other tribes formed the Six Nations Confederacy of the Iroquois. Algonquian tribes living along the Atlantic seacoast, of whom we can mention the Micmac, the Delaware and the Montagnais tribes, often were their neighbours and also their traditional enemies. The two groups speak languages of different families, called *Iroquoian* and *Algonquian*. The Iroquois were mostly agriculturalists (and thus more or less settled), the Algonquians were mostly hunters and gatherers and (more or less) nomadic.

This paper will first deal briefly with some of the etymologies proposed of the word *Iroquois*, and then will plead for a Basque etymology which is in every respect the most likely origin.

The discussion on the etymology of *Iroquois* was summarized by Gordon Day (1967). Day first discusses some etymologies that have been proposed which should be considered impossible. Some of these are nonexistent words or words with a nonsensical meaning, all rejected by Day. The only one that is to a certain extent acceptable to Gordon Day is the one proposed by Father Ch. Arnaud, who proposed *irno kué* from Montagnais *irno kué-dack* 'terrible people'. Day mentions the following objections to this etymology: first, there is no exact phonological match between the forms, and second, the Algonquian word *irino*, in itself a strange form, means 'human, Montagnais'. This word is never used for other tribes, who are not granted full human status in the language. We can add that the suffix *-quois* is added to a great number of other tribal names in the region in the earliest French sources (some examples: *Armouchiquois*, *Charioquois*, *Excomminguois*). This makes this interpretation of *-kué* as 'terrible' unlikely. The *Handbook of North American Indians* is therefore not convinced of this proposal, and considers the etymology of *Iroquois* unresolved, stating: "No such form [Iroquois] is attested in any Indian language as a name for any Iroquoian group, and the ultimate origin and meaning of the name are unknown." (Goddard 1978: 320).

(1) Research for this paper was made possible through a grant of the Canadian Embassy in Holland, and by the Foundation for Linguistic Research, which is funded by the Netherlands Organization for

In regard to two points, however, Day must be on the right track: it is recorded in French spelling, and it must have come via the Algonquians who conversed with the French. Or, as the *Handbook* puts it: "The name Iroquois was learned by Champlain [a French explorer in what is now Canada, P.B.] as early as 1603 from speakers of an unidentified but probably Algonquian language spoken on the Saint Lawrence River" (Goddard 1978: 319). By that time the Iroquoian speaking band inhabiting the north bank of the Saint Lawrence River (the Saint Lawrence Iroquoians) had already vanished (Trigger & Pendergast 1978). In this paper the term Iroquois is taken to refer to the Five Nations Iroquois, not the Saint Lawrence Iroquoians.

Among the European people visiting Canada's east coast, the Basques had the most intensive contacts with some of the Amerindian nations of the East Coast, notably with the Micmac, Montagnais and Maliseet from the late 1540's to the first decades of the seventeenth century in the Gulf of Saint Lawrence and the Atlantic seacoast. A period of peaceful Basque-St. Lawrence Iroquoian and Basque-Inuit contact may also have taken place in an earlier period (cf. Martijn (1989)). These groups of natives assisted the Basque fishermen in their activities in subsequent periods, and traded with them and shared social activities (for sources, see Bakker (in press)). Recent historical and archaeological research has greatly expanded our knowledge of the Basque influence in Canada.

At least from the early 1600's the Iroquois (but possibly not the Saint Lawrence Iroquoians) were the traditional enemies of the Algonquians of the east coast. In some of the Eastern Algonquian languages, the Iroquois are called something like 'murderers'. It is possible that this opinion was taken over by the Basques, being allied with the Algonquians and that Basques and algonquians referred to the Iroquois as killers.

Communication between the Basques (and the early French) and Algonquians happened by means of a trade language which was a mixture of Basque and Algonquian (Bakker 1988, 1989; Bakker, in press). This language was used, from Southern Labrador to New England and to a lesser extent along the shores of the Saint Lawrence Gulf, probably with local varieties. Some forty words and phrases that have been written down in the early contact period by missionaries and travelers as being uttered by the Micmac and Montagnais, are without any doubt Basque phrases and words (see Bakker 1988, 1989). This trade language was also used by the French, who were the first to record the word *Iroquois*, with various spellings. There is no doubt that the now common English spelling is of French origin. A Basque etymology for the word *Iroquois* is therefore among the possibilities.

Knowing that the spelling is that of the intermediary language French, the first problem we have to face is the pronunciation of the suffix *quois*. There are two possibilities: /kwa/ and /kew/. /kwa/ is the modern European pronunciation and /kew/ was common in older stages of French, and still in Canadian French dialects.

An argument for the existence of the pronunciation /kwa/ for *-quois* comes from the variety of spelling of the related word *Souriquois*, which was commonly used by the French to denote the Micmacs. Apart from the spelling in *-quois* we also find

-*coua* or -*coa*². Likewise for *Canadaquois* 'native Canadian' we also find *Canadaquoia*. If the *kwa* pronunciation was not the only pronunciation in the first decade of the 17th century, it did exist without any doubt³. A more careful research of these early French sources will no doubt yield more evidence of the pronunciation /kwa/ or /koa/ '-quois'.

The element -*koa* is a very common Basque noun ending. It actually consists of two parts: -*ko* is a kind of local genitive, -*a* is the determiner which is suffixed to the noun phrases in Basque. The ending -*koa* can be used after the name of any city, country or place, to denote where a person comes from. In Basque one can say things like *Kanadakoia*, meaning 'Canadian' or *Quebec-koa* 'a Quebecois'. This ending was also used in the Basque-Algonquian pidgin around 1600, for instance in the word *Souriquois* 'Micmac' possibly meaning 'people from the Souris river' or 'people of the white people' (Basque *zuri* 'white') and the just mentioned *Kanadakoia* for 'Canadian', and a number of others. In the Basque pidgin of the area the ending -*koa* was presumably generalized into meaning 'person' or 'people'. Just as in other nautical pidgins the ethnic origin may be expressed by a special suffix⁴. Considering this, we suggest that this -*koa* ending of *Iroquois* is of Basque origin and that it was used in the pidgin for a tribal or geographical origin.

There is some variety in the spelling of the word *irocoa* in the earliest sources (cf. the list in Hodge 1907). Some of the earliest forms start with an *H-*. Samuel de Champlain, who was the first to record *Iroquois* also used *Hyroquois* in later publications, which were both used by others too. So we have the alternatives *hirokooa* and *irokooa*. Where does the word *hiro* or *iro* come from?

This first part of the word *iroquois* is likely to be derived from the Basque word *hil* which means 'to die' or 'to kill'. Some Basque dialects, roughly those spoken on the Southern coast, do not pronounce the *h* in *hil*, in contrast with the Northern dialects, where the *h* is pronounced. So there are the variant pronunciations *hil* and *il*, which coincides with the early French sources. The fact that we have *hirokooa* and not the Basque-based form *hilokooa* (an /r/ in stead of an /l/) is easily explained. The native languages of the area around 1600 (Micmac, Montagnais, St. Lawrence Iroquoian) all lack the /l/ sound. European /l/ is automatically replaced by /r/ in such languages (see also below). This is a well documented sound change.

The proposed etymology of the word *Iroquois* then is that it is a Basque pidgin word *hilokooa* and that it means "the kill(er) people". Before discussing the historical background, there is one element in the shape of word *hirokooa* that we have not explained yet: where does the *o* between *hil* and *koa* come from? In the Basque language there is no ending -*o* that could be the source⁵. But there is evidence that

(2) In Basque as well as in Algonquian languages the sounds /o/ and /u/ can often both be used without change of meaning.

(3) The Latin texts written by Father Pierre Biard, published in the first volume of Thwaites (1896-1901), in which he mentions the Iroquois, unfortunately do not provide a clue to the pronunciation. In these texts he uses the root *Iroquae-* for 'Iroquois', which could represent the pronunciation /irokwai/ or /irokwe/. (Thwaites I: 236, 250, 268). Other forms used by him include *Europae-* and *Ilinae-*.

(4) For example, the suffix -*man* is used this meaning in at least two North Atlantic maritime pidgins: *Russenorsk*, the half Russian, half Norwegian pidgin of the North Cape trade of the 19th century has *Russmann* 'Russian' and *Filmann* 'Lapp' (Broch & Jahr 1984: 37), and the Scandinavian-French maritime pidgin of Iceland in the 19th century has *Flandermann* 'Flemish' and *Islandsman* 'Icelander' (Bakker 1989b).

(5) Many Basques sailors also spoke Spanish, Gascon or French. It is possible that the -*o* ending is the Spanish masculine adjective suffix, but there are no other examples of this ending in the material.

there was a form *hilo* in another Basque nautical pidgin in the same period, which might provide a very plausible explanation of this *-o-*. Around the same time when *hirokoa* was first recorded, Icelandic fishermen meeting with Basque whalers also used a Basque-based trade language (Hualde 1984, 1988; Bakker 1987). At least three Basque-Icelandic word lists have been written down in the first decades of the seventeenth century. Deen (1937) and Oregi (1988) provide complete editions of what is left of these three vocabularies. In one of these word lists we find, among a number of short pidgin sentences, the word *hilu* as the word for 'dead' (in list number II nr. 192; Deen's numbering). *Hilu* is not a Basque word; it must be a pidginized form of Basque *hil*. As stated above, /o/ and /u/ are closely related sounds and they can often be used both without change in meaning both in Basque and in Algonquian. *Hilu* and *hilo* can be equated with each other. So we have the same deviant from *hilo* with the same meaning as in the word *Irokoa* in another contemporary Basque pidgin. In short, although it is still not clear where this *-o* in *hilo/hilu* comes from, the same word is also attested from contemporary sources recorded in similar circumstances.

We have identified the word *Iroquois* as a pidginized Basque word learned by the French via some native intermediary language. What native language could this have been? In principle there are four possibilities: Micmac, Maliseet, Montagnais (all Algonquian languages) or Saint Lawrence Iroquoian. These had the closest contacts with the Basques in the relevant area. This language should have the following features:

- 1) it lacks /l/ but it has /r/ (since *hil* → *hir*)
- 2) it must allow words to start with /h/.

The first feature is shared by all languages except (modern) Maliseet⁶. Modern Micmac has only /l/, but all the all sources from around 1600 give *r* where modern Micmac has *l*. The /r/ is relatively rare in Cartier's word lists of Saint Lawrence Iroquoian (Hoffmann 1961 is the most careful edition of the several sources of the vocabularies), and a few words have /l/. These lists also contain words from Iroquoian dialects other than Saint Lawrence Iroquoian too (Trigger & Pendergast 1978: 360). The early sources for Montagnais all give /r/ (Pentland 1978). The Montagnais as spoken at Tadoussac (a Basque trading place) in any case had /r/.

The second feature (words can start with /h/) is only known from Saint Lawrence Iroquoian. In principle it would have been possible that the term was coined by them to denote the Five Nations Iroquois. But a conclusion that consequently Saint Lawrence Iroquoian must have been the intermediary language is too rash. The form *hirokoa* shows up only decades after the first appearance of *irokoa* in print (1603).

Furthermore the Saint Lawrence Iroquoians must have vanished several decades before 1603. It is very unlikely that the (presumably) Saint Lawrence Iroquoian form *hirokoa* was preserved by speakers of other languages that do not have words that start with /h/, for so many decades after their disappearance.

In short, the question of the intermediary native language should be considered unresolved yet.

Summarizing, the word *Iroquois* is built up of two Basque elements: (*h*)*ilo* meaning 'kill' and *koa* meaning 'person', thus 'killer people'. It must be emphasized that it is not the normal Basque word for 'killer', the most common of which is *hil-tzaile*. The word *hirokoa* is a word from the Basque-Algonquian pidgin, broken Basque

(6) I have no data on early Maliseet. It cannot be excluded that Maliseet too changed /r/ to /l/ in the last centuries, as attested for Micmac and some Montagnais dialects (Pentland 1978).

used in trade contacts, as it was spoken by several native groups in their contacts with the Basques, the French missionaries, French travelers such as Samuel Champlain and Marc Lescarbot, and the first French settlers (Bakker, in press). The shape of the word is readily explainable, even including the variations noted in the early sources. Its meaning also makes sense from the viewpoint of the Eastern Algonquians, who acted as guides of the French in the early 1600's (Bourque and Whitehead 1985).

This etymology has several advantages over Day's etymology:

— it is in the language which was used, according to contemporary missionaries and travellers, in communication between Europeans and Natives in the relevant time period.

— it shows an exact phonological match, even with variant forms.

— its meaning makes sense from the viewpoint of the Algonquians who were the most important contacts of the French who recorded the term first

References

- Bakker, P. 1987, "A Basque Nautical Pidgin: a missing link in the history of *Fu*." *Journal of Pidgin and Creole Languages* 2.1: 1-30.
- , 1988, "Basque Pidgin Vocabulary in European-Algonquian Trade Contacts." *Papers of the Nineteenth Algonquian Conference*, ed. by W. Cowan. Ottawa: Carleton University, p. 7-15.
- , 1989a, "Europa-Algonkiar merkatalgo harremanetako Euskal Mordoilo Hiztegia." *Tantak. Euskal Herriko Unibertsitateko Hezkuntz Aldizkaria* 1: 67-77. [Basque translation of Bakker 1988].
- , 1989b, "A French-Icelandic Nautical Pidgin." *Journal of Pidgin and Creole Languages* 4.1: 129-132.
- , in press, "The language of the coast tribes is half Basque'. A Basque-Amerindian pidgin in use between Europeans and native Americans in North America, ca. 1540 - ca. 1640." To appear in *Anthropological Linguistics*, [= *ASJU* xxv-2, 1991, 439-467].
- Bourque, B. & H. Whitehead, 1985, "Tarrentines and the introduction of European trade goods in the Gulf of Maine" *Ethnohistory* 32: 327-341.
- Broch, I. & H. Jahr, 1984, "Russenorsk: a new look at the Russo-Norwegian pidgin in Northern Norway." *Scandinavian Language Contacts*, ed. by P. Sture Ureland & I. Clarkson. London etc: Cambridge University Press, p. 21-65.
- Day, G. M., 1967, "Iroquois: an etymology." *Iroquois Culture, History, and Prehistory. Proceedings of the 1965 Conference on Iroquois Research*, ed. by E.J. Tooker, p. 57-61. Albany: New York State Museum and Science Service. Also in *Ethnohistory* 15 (1968) 389-402.
- Deen, N. G. H., 1937, *Glossaria duo Vasco-Islandica*. Amsterdam: H. J. Paris [= *ASJU* xxv-2, 1991, 321-426].
- Goddard, I., 1978, "Synonymy". *Handbook of North American Indians*, Vol. 15. *Northeast*, ed. by G. Trigger. Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 319-321.
- Hodge, F. W., 1907-1910, *Handbook of American Indians North of Mexico*. Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 30. 2 parts. Washington.
- Hoffmann, B. G., 1961, *Cabot to Cartier. Sources for a Historical Ethnography of Northeastern North America, 1497-1550*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Hualde, J. I., 1984, "Icelandic Basque Pidgin." *Journal of Basque Studies in America* 5: 41-59 [= *ASJU* xxv-2, 1991, 427-437].
- , 1988, "Euskararen ume ezezaguna: Euskal Herriko bale arrantzaleen truke-hizkuntza." *Jakin* 48: 53-61.

- Martijn, Ch. A., 1989, "The Iroquoian presence in the Estuary and Gulf of Saint Lawrence River Valley: a re-evaluation."
- Oregi, E., 1987, "Tres glosarios vasco-islandeses del siglo XVII" [Three Basque-Icelandic glossaries from the 17th century], *Los Vascos en el Marco Atlántico Norte. Siglos XVI y XVII*, ed. by S. Huxley, p. 313-336. Donostia / San Sebastián: Etor.
- Pentland, D. H., 1978, "A historical overview of Cree dialects." *Papers of the Ninth Algonquian Conference*, ed. by W. Cowan. Ottawa: Carleton University, p. 104-126.
- Trigger, B. G. & J. F. Pendergast, 1978, "Saint Lawrence Iroquoians" *Handbook of North American Indian*, Vol. 15. *Northeast*, ed. by B. G. Trigger. Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 357-361.
- Thwaites, R. G., 1896, *The Jesuit Relations and allied documents*. Cleveland: Burrows Brothers.