

Virginia Algonquian (Powhatan) Phonetic and Grammar Rules

Introduction

This document outlines the reconstructed phonetic and grammatical features of the Virginia Algonquian (Powhatan) language based on historical sources and comparative analysis with related Algonquian languages. The reconstruction draws primarily from William Strachey's vocabulary (1610-1611), Captain John Smith's word list (1607-1609), Frank Siebert's "Resurrecting Virginia Algonquian from the Dead" (1975), and Blair Rudes' reconstructions for the film "The New World."

Phonological System

Consonants

Virginia Algonquian likely had the following consonant inventory:

Sound	Phonetic Symbol	Examples
p	/p/	<i>pohkhan</i> (fire), <i>appoans</i> (bread)
t	/t/	<i>netap</i> (friend), <i>attonce</i> (arrow)
k	/k/	<i>keshowaugh</i> (sun), <i>macock</i> (pumpkin)
kw	/kʷ/	<i>sequtack</i> (fire), <i>aquintan</i> (canoe)
ch	/tʃ/	<i>mecitchêh</i> (eat), <i>chehip</i> (bird)
s	/s/	<i>keshowaugh</i> (sun), <i>assoone</i> (stone)
sh	/ʃ/	<i>nepausche</i> (moon)
m	/m/	<i>monacock</i> (bear), <i>nameeth</i> (fish)
n	/n/	<i>netap</i> (friend), <i>nehessayew</i> (red)
w	/w/	<i>winger</i> (good), <i>wompsipim</i> (white)
y	/j/	<i>yehawkan</i> (house), <i>yekûth</i> (talk)
h	/h/	<i>pohkhan</i> (fire), <i>ohke</i> (earth)

Vowels

The vowel system likely included:

Sound	Phonetic Symbol	Examples
a	/a/	<i>anna</i> (mother), <i>attan</i> (corn)
e	/e/	<i>netap</i> (friend), <i>mêttock</i> (head)
i	/i/	<i>ningh</i> (two), <i>nuss</i> (three)
o	/o/	<i>ohke</i> (earth), <i>monacock</i> (bear)
u	/u/	<i>nuss</i> (three), <i>attum</i> (dog)
â	/a:/	Long 'a' as in <i>mêheock</i> (hand)
ê	/e:/	Long 'e' as in <i>mêttock</i> (head)
î	/i:/	Long 'i' as in <i>seip</i> (river)
ô	/o:/	Long 'o' as in <i>ottehocannough</i> (heart)
û	/u:/	Long 'u' as in <i>nummies</i> (fish)

Phonological Rules

1. **Stress Patterns:** Primary stress likely fell on the first syllable of root words.
2. **Vowel Harmony:** Evidence suggests some degree of vowel harmony, where vowels in suffixes harmonize with vowels in the root.
3. **Consonant Clusters:** Limited consonant clusters were permitted, usually involving a nasal followed by a stop (e.g., *mp*, *nt*, *nk*).
4. **Final Devoicing:** Word-final obstruents were likely devoiced.
5. **Vowel Reduction:** Unstressed vowels often underwent reduction.

Morphology and Syntax

Nominal System

1. **Animacy Distinction:** Like other Algonquian languages, Virginia Algonquian likely distinguished between animate and inanimate nouns.
 - Animate: Humans, animals, spirits, certain plants, important objects
 - Inanimate: Most objects, abstract concepts, natural phenomena
2. **Number:** Nouns marked for singular and plural.
 - Animate plural suffix: *-ak* (reconstructed from comparative evidence)
 - Inanimate plural suffix: *-ash* (reconstructed from comparative evidence)
3. **Possession:** Nouns marked for possession through prefixes:
 - First person: *ne-/n-* (my)
 - Second person: *ke-/k-* (your)

- Third person: *we-/w-* (his/her/its)

Examples:

- *noughs* (my father)
- *netap* (my friend)
- *neputtishow* (my son)

4. **Obviation:** Like other Algonquian languages, Virginia Algonquian likely had an obviation system to distinguish between multiple third-person referents in a discourse.

Verbal System

1. **Verb Types:** Two main classes of verbs likely existed:

- Intransitive: Action performed by a single actor
- Transitive: Action performed by one actor on another

2. **Person Marking:** Verbs were likely marked for person and number through prefixes and suffixes.

- First person: *ne-/n-*
- Second person: *ke-/k-*
- Third person: Several markers depending on animacy and obviation status

3. **Tense/Aspect:** Evidence suggests markers for:

- Present/ongoing actions
- Past/completed actions
- Future/intended actions

4. **Mood:** Different verb forms likely existed for:

- Indicative (statements of fact)
- Imperative (commands)
- Subjunctive (hypothetical situations)

5. **Negation:** Negative verb forms were likely marked by a circumfix *ma-...-wi*.

Word Order

Based on evidence from related Algonquian languages and the limited sentential data available, Virginia Algonquian likely had a basic Subject-Object-Verb (SOV) word order, though this could vary for pragmatic purposes.

Example (from Smith's records):

- *Kekaten pokahontas patiaquagh niugh tanks manotyens neer mowchick rawrenock audowgh.*
- "Bid Pocahontas bring hither two little baskets, and I will give her white beads to make her a chain."

Derivational Morphology

1. **Noun Incorporation:** Like other Algonquian languages, Virginia Algonquian likely allowed nouns to be incorporated into verbs.
2. **Compounding:** Evidence suggests productive compound formation:
 - *matchcôat* (blanket) may be a compound of *match* (large) + *coat* (covering)
3. **Diminutives:** Suffixes to indicate smallness, such as *-iss* or *-ens*.
4. **Locatives:** Suffixes to indicate location, such as *-nk* or *-ing*.

Syntax

1. **Complex Sentences:** Based on related languages, Virginia Algonquian likely had subordinate clauses marked by special conjunctions or verb forms.
2. **Questions:** Questions likely formed through intonation patterns and specific question particles or word orders.
3. **Topic-Comment Structure:** Algonquian languages often employ a topic-comment structure where the topic (what is being talked about) precedes the comment (what is said about it).

Semantics and Pragmatics

1. **Evidentiality:** Like many Algonquian languages, Virginia Algonquian may have had grammatical markers to indicate the source of information (direct experience, hearsay, inference).
2. **Kinship System:** Complex kinship terminology reflecting the social organization of the Powhatan people.
3. **Spatial Orientation:** Likely had a rich system of spatial terms and locatives.
4. **Honorifics:** Special forms for addressing persons of high status, such as chiefs (*werowance*).

Sample Reconstructed Paradigms

Possessive Prefixes with Kinship Terms

Person	"Father"	"Mother"	"Child"
1st singular (my)	<i>noughs</i>	<i>nanna</i>	<i>neckaupot</i>
2nd singular (your)	<i>koughs</i>	<i>kanna</i>	<i>keckaupot</i>
3rd singular (his/her)	<i>woughs</i>	<i>wanna</i>	<i>weckaupot</i>

Number System

Number	Virginia Algonquian
1	<i>ne kut</i>
2	<i>ningh</i>
3	<i>nuss</i>
4	<i>yowgh</i>
5	<i>paranske</i>
6	<i>comotinch</i>
7	<i>toppawoss</i>
8	<i>nusswash</i>
9	<i>kyketawe</i>
10	<i>cassacomêh</i>
20	<i>ningecuttaughwunshquenekâttough</i>
100	<i>nekateywsapooeksku</i>

Notes on Dialectal Variation

Frank Siebert's analysis suggests possible dialectal variation within Virginia Algonquian, though the limited documentary evidence makes precise mapping of dialects difficult. Strachey's material shows some lexical and minor phonological variation that may indicate dialect differentiation.

Conclusion

This reconstruction of Virginia Algonquian phonology and grammar represents our best understanding based on limited historical documentation and comparative analysis with related languages. The reconstructed system shows Virginia Algonquian to be a typical Eastern Algonquian language with features characteristic of that branch of the language family, while also displaying unique innovations that distinguished it from its relatives.

As more comparative work is done and archaeological evidence continues to shed light on the movement and interaction patterns of Algonquian-speaking peoples in the region, our understanding of Virginia Algonquian will continue to be refined.

