Kanien'kéha (Mohawk) (United States and Canada) - Language Snapshot

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Language Name:	Kanien'kéha (Mohawk)
Language Family:	Iroquoian → Northern Iroquoian → Lake Iroquoian → Mohawk-Oneida
ISO 639-3 Code:	moh
Glottolog Code:	moha1258
Population:	about 3,800 speakers
Location:	New York State, Ontario, Quebec
Vitality rating:	EGIDS 6b (Threatened)

Summary

Kanien'kéha is an endangered Northern Iroquoian language historically spoken in what is now the Mohawk Valley of central New York state in the United States of America. Today, it is spoken by about 3,800 people in six communities in upstate New York, USA, and in Ontario and Quebec provinces, Canada: Akwesasne, Kahnawake, Kanesatake, Six Nations, Wahta, and Tyendinaga. The varieties spoken in these communities differ slightly in terms of phonology, vocabulary, and orthography. Robust language revitalisation efforts are ongoing, and the language is of great cultural importance to the Kanien'kehá:ka people.

1. Overview

Kanien'kéha is an endangered Northern Iroquoian language historically spoken in what is now the Mohawk Valley of central New York state, in the United States of America. Today, it is spoken by about 3,800 people in six communities in upstate New York, USA, and in Ontario and Quebec provinces,

Canada: Akwesasne, Kahnawake, Kanesatake, Six Nations (also known as
Ohswé:ken), Wahta, and Tyendinaga.[1] The varieties spoken in these
communities differ slightly in terms of phonology, vocabulary, and
orthography. The estimated number of speakers in these communities is
provided by Golla (2007: 63), and mostly reproduced below; Kanesatake is
updated with reference to the Mohawk Language Custodian Association (2019):

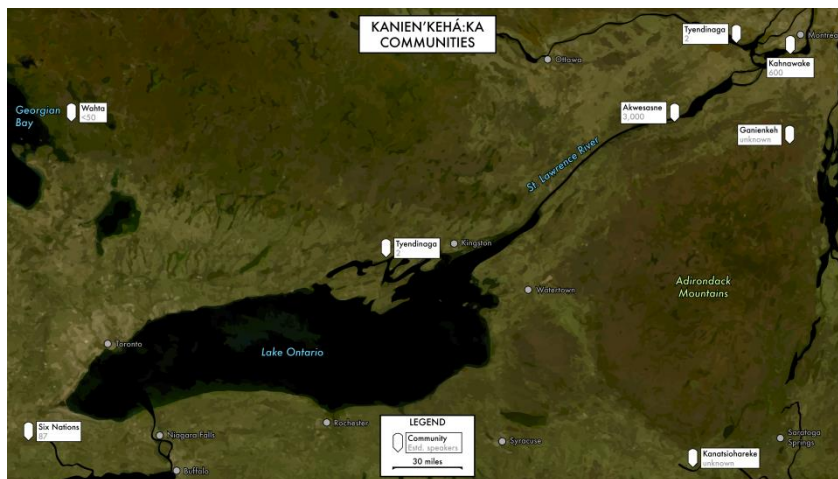|	
Akwesasne	3,000
Kahnawake	600
Kanesatake	<60
Six Nations	87
Wahta	<50
Tyendinaga	2

Figure 1: A map of Kanien'kehá:ka communities. © 2020 Joseph Pentangelo.
Some materials provided by U.S. Geological Survey, National Geospatial
Program. Full-scale version of this map on page 8.

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[1] Variant spellings of some of these names are widespread and the choice of one
spelling over another can be contentious. I have adopted spellings that seem to be
the most widely used. In the past, Kanesatake was more often referred to as Oka,
Wahta was called Gibson, and Kahnawake was often spelled Caughnawaga.
Akwesasne is sometimes referred to as St. Regis, especially in historic materials,
and the St. Regis Mohawk Tribe represents the portion of Akwesasne in the
United States. A referendum on renaming this to the 'Akwesasne Mohawk Tribe'
was scheduled for 2020, but postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic
https://bit.ly/3l6vxOH (accessed 2020-09-29)

Dialectal differences between Akwesasne, Kahnawake, and Kanesatake are discussed by Bonvillain (1984), and Julian (2010: 218-221) summarises sound changes in the different varieties. Some vocabulary differences between Kahnawake and Akwesasne are mentioned in Mithun (1979). The Kanesatake variety has been described as having 'a huge vocabulary of words that are usually not heard in the other communities'; the *Kanehsatà:ke Mohawk* app was released in 2019 to help maintain this variety (Deer 2019). There is much dialectological research to be done.

Two other communities, Ganienkeh and Kanatsiohareke, were established in the late 20th century by members of other Kanien'kehá:ka communities. Both are geographically located in upstate New York. Information on their speaker populations, and the variety or varieties of the language spoken there, is lacking.

In terms of grammatical structure, Kanien'kéha is a polysynthetic language characterised by a rich templatic morphology (Mithun 2016: 150), noun incorporation, pitch accent, and a fairly small phonemic inventory with an extremely limited distribution of labials, which are found almost exclusively in loanwords. Morphologically, there are three classes of words: particles, nouns, and verbs. Morphological verbs can function as predicates, referents, and complete sentences. In speech, particles occur the most often, followed by verbs, and then, distantly, nouns (Mithun 2017: 237). The most recent grammar of the language is Bonvillain (1973); a grammatical sketch is given in Mithun (1996). For further information see Michelson (1973), Deering & Delisle (1976), Hopkins (1988), Michelson (1988), Baker (1996, 2001), Mithun (2011, 2014), and Ontario Ministry of Education (2011), as well as Pentangelo (2020). Woodbury's (2018) grammar of Onondaga, a language closely related to Kanien'kéha, is informative. A bibliography of Kanien'kéha research is given in Mithun (1999: 424-425).

Kanien'kéha has been documented since the early 17th century. A wordlist of numbers and month names was printed in a newspaper by Nicolaes Janszoon Van Wassenaer (1624: 147 recto). Another early wordlist, described as 'the earliest known philological treatment of the Mohawk language in existence', was written by Harmen Meyndertst Van den Bogaert between 1634 and 1635 (Michelson 2013: 55). Important historic dictionaries include Bruyas (1862 [late 17th-century]) and Cuoq (1882). For texts, see Hewitt (1903), Hale (1883), Williams (1976), and Mithun & Woodbury (1980). Today, Kanien'kéha is used online in a variety of textual registers, ranging from casual social media posts to pedagogical content.

Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, orthographies were separately developed by English-speaking and French-speaking missionaries. French missionaries introduced the use of ⟨en⟩ and ⟨on⟩ for /ʌ̃/ and /ũ/, a practice still used today (Lazore 1993). In the 1970s, educators, translators, and Elders in Kahnawake and Kanesatake developed a new orthography to improve literacy and facilitate language learning. It used the French tradition as a basis, but formalised the use of ⟨'⟩ for /ʔ/, called for the consistent marking of /h/, and

added diacritics to mark stress, length, and tone. These are all features missing from the then-current orthography (Lazore 1993; Mithun 1979b: 347; Beatty 1972: 122-124). In the early 1990s, this writing system was further refined, with a built-in acknowledgment of community differences, like the use of ⟨g⟩ and ⟨d⟩ for the voiced allophones of /k/ and /t/ in Six Nations and Tyendinaga, which are written ⟨k⟩ and ⟨t⟩ in the other communities (Lazore 1993).

The population of first-language Kanien'kéha speakers is aging, but sustained interest in cultural revitalisation, which grew precipitously in the 1970s, has led to a growing population of younger second-language speakers of Kanien'kéha (Bonvillain 1973: 10-11). Most Kanien'kéha speakers are also fluent in English, and casual conversations often contain a significant amount of switching between the two languages.

Although the language is endangered, ongoing revitalisation efforts have found success, and Kanien'kéha is, along with Cherokee, one of only two Iroquoian languages not considered critically or severely endangered by UNESCO (Moseley & Nicolas 2010: maps 8–11). The language is of extreme cultural importance to the Kanien'kehá:ka people, and its use is strongly supported both officially and at the grassroots level in many communities.

2. Current research

There are a number of ongoing revitalisation projects, some of which began in the 1970s. Language classes are offered by several entities, including the St. Regis Mohawk Tribe in Akwesasne, and Six Nations Polytechnic in Six Nations. Immersion programs include the Akwesasne Freedom School, Rotiwennakehte in Kanesatake, and Karihwanoron in Kahnawake. This list is by no means conclusive; see Okura (2017) and Gomashie (2019) for more information.

Digital technology has been embraced for language education. Kontinónhstats Mohawk Language Custodian Association has a number of free vocabulary lessons with streaming audio available on their website.[2] In 2017, Six Nations Polytechnic released *Speak Mohawk*, an app for learning words and phrases in the language; inspired by this, the *Kanehsatà:ke Mohawk* app was released in 2019, a collaboration between the Rotiwennakehte immersion school, the Kontinónhstats Mohawk Language Custodian Association, and Tsi Ronterihwanónhnha ne Kanien'kéha Language and Cultural Center (Deer 2019). Another noteworthy digital resource is kanienkeha.net, a crowdsourced online dictionary.

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[2] http://www.kanehsatakevoices.com/lessons/lesson-1/ (accessed 2020-09-24)

In my own research, I have been using 360° video to develop a virtual reality corpus of Kanien'kéha as spoken in Akwesasne since the autumn of 2018. The technology of 360° video has not been used for language documentation before, so this project has two aims: to contribute towards a more robust documentation of Kanien'kéha, and to assess the value of 360° video for language documentation. The corpus contains nearly eleven hours of video recorded with twenty-seven participants. The majority of videos contain naturalistic conversations; others contain songs, stories, and conversations between myself and one or two other participants. After all participants have had a chance to review and approve the videos in which they appear, the corpus will be uploaded online where it may be publicly viewed and used for education and research. In addition, the unedited video and audio files will be provided to the community for use in creating pedagogical materials. Future goals include the full transcription and translation of this corpus. A discussion of this project, and its significance both for Kanien'kéha studies and documentary linguistics more broadly, forms the basis of my PhD dissertation, Pentangelo (2020).

Acknowledgments

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KANIEN'KEHÁ:KA
COMMUNITIES

Tyendinaga
2

Montréal

Kahnawake
600

Georgian
Bay

Wahta
<50

Ottawa

Akwesasne
3,000

St. Lawrence River

Ganienkeh
unknown

Tyendinaga
2

Kingston

Watertown

Adirondack
Mountains

Toronto

Lake Ontario

Six Nations
87

Rochester

LEGEND

Community
Estd. speakers

30 miles

Niagara Falls

Syracuse

Saratoga
Springs

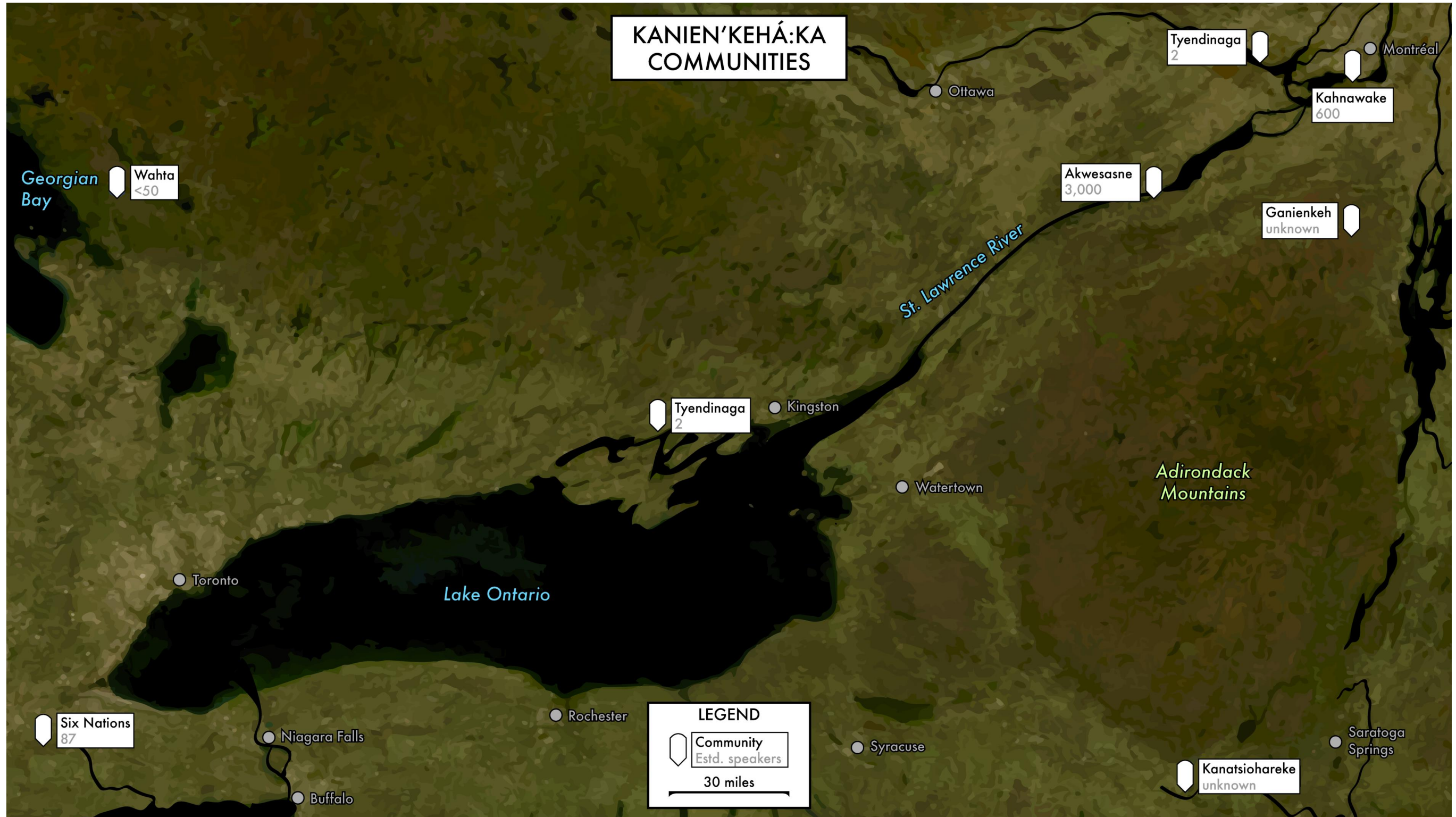Kanatsiohareke
unknown

Buffalo

Figure 1: A map of Kanien'kehá:ka communities. © 2020 Joseph Pentangelo. Some materials provided by U.S. Geological Survey, National Geospatial Program.