Appendix IV: *WE or *O in Proto-Algonquian?

As mentioned in both the post on Proto-Algonquian (PA) and the post on reinterpreting PA and Proto-Algic (PAc) vowels, the traditional reconstruction of PA, which I follow in this respect, is that it had *we (= my */wɑ/) for what is reflected in Proto-Eastern Algonquian (PEA) as *wə in some contexts and *ō (← intermediate *o) in others, and is reflected in the non-Eastern languages as intermediate *o in all contexts.

By contrast, Ives Goddard now reconstructs *o instead of *we for PA in almost all cases, and not only due to the principle that Eastern Algonquian languages should be assigned innovations, but on other considerations as well. That PEA does not reflect this as *wə in all cases is one consideration; in Goddard’s current view it does so regularly only word-initially and after *k, and elsewhere the regular outcome was *ō. Additionally, there are a few very limited instances in which Meskwaki and Shawnee have /we/ sequences between consonants, instead of /o/; Goddard would reconstruct the latter cases as PA *o, but implies that the former might reflect rare instances of PA surface *we contrasting with *o (Goddard 2018:102, n. 2). See further below for more discussion of both these points.

Regardless, there is in my opinion a significant amount of evidence in favor of *we.

The Evidence for *WE

First of all, there is the consideration that originally motivated people to reconstruct *we instead of *o, which is that it's often continued by PEA *wə, though as Goddard notes, these mostly seem to be in specific phonological contexts. This will be discussed in the next section, on page four.

The most important additional evidence in favor of *we over *o comprises three independent facts which all point to the clear conclusion that this segment, however it's reconstructed, was *we = */wɑ/ at the very least in pre-PA. Therefore, while it is possible that PEA had the conditioned change *o → *wə rather than the conditioned change *we → *(o) → *ō, it is considerably more economical to assume that the segment(s) in question remained mostly *we in PA, merged with *o only in western Algonquian (thus filling a notable gap in the vowel inventory), and merged with *ō in some cases in Eastern Algonquian as part of a broader restructuring of the PEA vowel system—as opposed to pre-PA *we becoming *o and then turning back into *we in one branch of the family in many environments. These three facts will be noted in turn. There are also some more minor points supporting the reconstruction of *we, which will be covered afterwards.

First, in many cases, *we has Algic cognates reconstructing to **wə or **wə, such as #24 LIVER (PA *we-θkweni “his/her liver” : Wiyot wátwar : Yurok /wəlkwən ← PAc **wə-lkwən-). This is the most obvious case: even if I were wrong about reconstructing **ə for PAc instead of something like **e, Algonquian words like these clearly descend from forms in which there were /wV/ or /wV/ sequences.
Second, *w+e across a morpheme boundary results in this segment or sequence, e.g., *meʔ tekwe- “tree; stick” + *-enki “LOCATIVE” → *meʔ tekwenki “on the tree/stick.” Once again, this must have originally been a sequence */wə̆/ (or */we/), under the traditional model of PA even if one believes it later coalesced to *o.

Third, as mentioned in both posts (further down in the Proto-Algonquian post), PA had a process, known as “initial change,” in which the initial vowel of a verbal word was ablauted or took a preceding infix/prefix in some morphosyntactic contexts. In initial change, PA *e changed to *e:, while *we changed to *we:. In other words, it changed in exactly the way we would expect a sequence of the consonant *w plus the vowel *e to change—the consonant remained unchanged and the *e regularly became *e:. Although the fact that all Algonquian languages which retain productive initial change (except Arapaho and Gros Ventre) also retain this pattern, not just the Eastern Algonquian languages (i.e., languages like Ojibwe have alternations like onaagoshin “it’s evening” ~ initial changed we naagoshigin “whenever it’s evening” ← PA *weθa·kw- ~ initial changed *we·θa·kw-) shows that such a pattern could exist long after *we changed to *o, the pattern still must derive from a *w + *e sequence at some point in Algonquian’s history or prehistory. It makes little sense otherwise.

Meanwhile, as mentioned, there are also a few more specific or minor contexts in which it’s clear *we was at least the pre-PA (or in one case pre-PEA!) value and where reconstructing *o leads to difficulties, even beyond a vague lack of parsimony.

In particular, stems which begin in *we-, when preceded by a personal prefix (which end in *-e) contract the *|e-| to *o-, as in *wexpwa-kana “pipe” → *ne-wexpwa-kana = *no-xpwa-kana “my pipe.” Assuming the stem began in *we- makes this a simple, phonetically natural rule and one that parallels other PA contractions of V-glide-V sequences; assuming it begins in *o- makes it unlike any other phonological process or morphophonemic rule in Proto-Algonquian, and specifically makes it unlike the otherwise entirely regular rules which applied when personal prefixes were added to stems beginning in a vowel: in dependent stems the prefix vowel was deleted, and in other cases an epenthetic *-t- was inserted between the vowels, a rule which can be traced back to Proto-Algic. Again, one could argue that words like this once began in *we- (which would explain the differing rules) but had become *o- by the actual PA period, but as before this carries the problem of a sound change being reversed in PEA, as well as positing a synchronic PA system with one very anomalous morphophonemic rule in precisely these words.

This state of affairs is for the most part directly reflected only in Eastern Algonquian, the languages which still reflect an initial *w- in these words rather than an initial vowel, though there are traces in other languages, including at least some older Shawnee and some varieties of Cree (e.g., marginal/older Plains Cree nôspwâkan [Lacombe 1874:16, phonemicized; cf. Pentland 1979a:109]). In the western Algonquian (WA) languages, which changed *we- to *o-, this rule became aberrant and opaque—just as it would have been had it really existed in PA—and the WA languages came to treat these stems like other vowel-initial stems: they now inserted an epenthetic *-t-. Thus, pseudo-Common WA (except partially Shawnee and Cree) “pipe” and “my
pipe” became *oxpwa·kana, and *|ne-oxpwa·kana| = *neto-xpwa·kana. Note that not only have the WA languages repaired this anomaly, but that the original vowel lengthening still remains after the intercalated *-t-, proving the PA date of the contraction to *o-.

If we instead assume, following Goddard, that stems like “pipe” already had initial *o- by the PA period, we would then have to make the following additional assumptions. In PA itself, *o-initial words like “*oxpwa·kana,” unlike all other vowel-initial stems, would have combined the prefixes with the initial vowel of the stem to create a lengthened vowel: *|ne-oxpwa·kana| = *no-xpwa·kana (rather than *netoxpwa·kana with otherwise regular epenthetic *-t-). The possessed form continued into PEA unchanged as *nōĥpwākan, while the non-possessed form would become the attested *wəĥpwākan by a regular sound change of *o- → *wə-, thus incidentally and fortuitously creating a synchronic rule (*|ə-wa| → *ō) which perfectly matched other vowel contraction rules, but deriving from a PA rule which had no parallels. (And note that this PA rule with no parallels would virtually have to have derived from a pre-PA contraction of *e-we, since the lengthened vowel is inexplicable any other way—another case under Goddard’s model of a pre-PA situation disappearing in PA before reappearing in PEA!) Meanwhile, in the WA languages in this view, the anomalous PA form would have been repaired by changing *n- and the other prefixes to their normal forms before a vowel-initial stem (*net-, etc.) but again retaining the old vowel length of the possessed form.

While the WA developments here in Goddard’s model would not be hard to justify, the evolution to PEA would be considerably harder to justify, or rather, it would be hard to justify the PA reconstruction given the PEA result. Assuming instead that PA possessed word-initial *we- in all cases, and not *o-, still allows us to explain the unusual behavior of *o-initial stems in WA languages (lengthening the vowel after a prefix, or in some Cree/Shawnee having forms that can alternate between just n-/k-/Ø- + a lengthened vowel or a regular prefix + t + a lengthened vowel), while the PEA situation would require no explanation at all, and would simply reflect the PA state of affairs unchanged.

Another piece of evidence for *we in PA involves the PA Initial *kenw- “long”; the reflex of this in PEA is *kwən-, with metathesis. (The PEA form is definitely an innovation, incidentally, as shown by the Yurok cognate kwən-, pointing to PAc **knw-.) While this metathesis might seem to be explainable under either model, note that in many cases PA *kenw- was followed by an element beginning in *e—very often, in fact, given that *-e- was one of the epenthetic vowels in PA. Examples like *kenwesiwa “s/he is long; tall” (with *-esi “be, have property (AI)”), *kenwesite·wa “s/he has a long foot” (with epenthetic *-e-, Medial *-sit- “foot,” and *-e- “have (AI)”), etc. would have been very common, alongside forms before other vowels like *kenwa·xkwiwa “s/he is very long, tall; it (a tree or wooden/sticklike object) is long/tall” (with the Medial *-a-xkw- “wooden; thoroughly”). Note that a metathesis in such a state of affairs would not be unusual: the form of the Initial was always *kenw- in PA, and by the time of PEA the *w had moved backwards to the onset of the preceding syllable, *kwən-.
Under Goddard’s model, though, the Initial in PA would have frequently been of the form *ken(o)-, not *kenw-: for instance, the above examples would be “*kenosiwa” and “*kenosite-wa.” And it is much harder to imagine how a metathesis could possibly have taken place in this scenario. Only a subset of the words containing *kenw- would have had a shape amenable to metathesis, and it’s very dubious that any speakers would metathesize an underlying *|w|—in fact it’s probably impossible. Metathesis should only be expected to target segments that are actually phonetically present. Yet the Goddard model would require speakers to have indeed deconstructed and transformed words like “*kenosiwa” = *|kenw-esi-w-a| to *kwenesiwa = *|kwen-esi-w-a| (→ PEA *kwaṇasəw, e.g. Unami kwaṇu “s/he is long (such as a fish)” ) and “*kenosite-wa” = *|kenw-e-sit-e-w-a| to *kwenesite-wa = *|kwen-e-sit-e-w-a| (→ PEA *kwaņasitēw, e.g. Unami kwaņasite “s/he has long feet”), thus rearranging a “segment” they did not pronounce. This simply is implausible or impossible, whereas assuming that speakers made a straightforward phonetic metathesis (*kenwesiwə → *kwenesiwa → PEA *kwaņasəw, etc.) not only fits with the other evidence in favor of *we, but requires no unusual assumptions about linguistic change whatsoever.

Note that this is not merely evidence in favor of *we against *o in Proto-Algonquian, but of *we remaining into the post-PA unity period, since the metathesis of *kenw- in (pre-)PEA can only have occurred after the breakup of PA.

One final very tenuous and minor piece of evidence against *o in PA might be the fact that traditional *we does not undergo neutralization to *e in initial syllables. Recall that PA *i neutralized to *e in initial syllables, a process most reasonably explained as unstressed reduction of pre-PA *i to *e /ə/. If *o, which was the back counterpart of *i, had existed in initial syllables at the time that this reduction occurred, we might expect it to reduce to *e as well, as happens in a number of languages (both unstressed |i| and |u| reducing in parallel patterns). However, this is a weak argument for at least two reasons. For one, there is good reason to think that PA surface *o (and all additional instances of *o reconstructed by Goddard, had they occurred) varied from phonetic [û] to [ʊ], while *i either had a slightly narrower range of variation (something like [ɀ] to [Ɂ]) or just had lower variants occur less frequently. In other words, *o would not have been/was not the precise back equivalent of *i in phonetic terms. And more importantly, there is at least one attested language in which |i| neutralizes to [ə] when unstressed, but |u| does not: Pavlikianski Bulgarian (Crosswhite 1999:170, 283).

Goddard’s Views

Goddard’s revised views on *we versus *o are difficult to evaluate because as far as I know he has not yet published any justification for the idea that the regular PEA reflex of “*o” was *ō other than word-initially and after *k. In his previous published work, he has made several different statements on the environments in which PA *we (= his *o) became PEA *ō as opposed to *wa, which don’t always agree with one another.
Goddard (1979a:96) just says *ō is from *we “in some environments” (and similarly, Goddard [2002:45, n. 2] just says **o > PEA *wə (in most environments”). Goddard (1980:147-148) says that “[i]n some cases PA *we between consonants gives PEA *ō, but analogy and new formations have obscured the details,” and that otherwise *w (including in the sequence *we) is lost after *t, *n, *θ, or *r, though he would later note that this was incorrect and many *twV, *nwV, and *rwV sequences at least were retained (Goddard 1981:60, 99, n. 3, 1982a:51). One regular exception is that in PEA expected *wə after any consonant is dissimilated to *ə preceding a labial (*C)p, (*C)k, *(h)m, *w). Goddard (1981:60, 99, n. 3) does not really discuss the environments that give *wə versus *ō, saying only that in Massachusett “PA *w is generally retained after a consonant” with “exceptions” that are “unexplained”; the examples he gives involve the PA sequences *twə· (*w retained in <natwontam> †/nātwântām/ “s/he considers (it)” ← PA *natwa·tamwa) and *twi (*w lost in <wunnatinneahwhoh> †/wānâtânjiawáh/ “s/he seeks him/her” ← pseudo-PA *wenatwine·hwa·hi; both of these have the Initial “natw- “seek”). Finally, Goddard (2001b:181) mentions “evidence that PEA *wə (< PA *we) fell together with PEA *ō (< PA *o·) in some environments, perhaps after certain consonants,” but “[t]he languages disagree on the specifics, and analogy and sound law have not yet been sorted out.”

Goddard (1982b:23-24, earlier than and cited in the 2001b quote above) contains the most detailed discussion of the question of any of his publications. In the context of a historical phonology of Munsee, he states: “PEA *wə (< PA *we) after certain consonants fell together with PEA *ō (< PA *o·); a shortage of clear examples, the effects of analogy, and the problem of the status of PA *o conspire to make the details of this change uncertain, but it seems that the consonants that provided the environment for it included *s, *š, *θ, and perhaps *h and *t, and excluded *p, *m, and *k.” And there are indeed examples in which PEA reflects PA *pwe and *mwe as *pwə and *mwə (e.g., Massachusetts “his wife/ves” cited in the post: <ummittumwussoh> †/m̩m̩t̩m̩w̩s̩h̩s̩h/ ← PEA *wəmatəwəhs- + Mass. obviative suffix ← PA *wemetemwehs[ari] “his old woman”; Munsee nzupwotooméxiin |nsapwato-ne-xi-n| “I close my mouth” [Goddard 1982b:23] ← pseudo-PA *nesepweto-ne-hsine; Narragansett (Coweset) <Mau̞chepwut> †/mahtás̪p̪w̪ːt̪/ “When he hath eaten” [Williams 1643:13; Pentland 1992b:2] ← PA *meʔčiʔp̪w̪ːte· “if s/he eats everything” [with later collapse of the conjunct indicative *-i “when…” and subjunctive *-e· “if…”]. Goddard says in the same article (pg. 22) that in Munsee “in general PA *w is retained in all environments in reflexes of *kw… and prevocally in *pw and *mw.”

Without knowing more about what precise examples Goddard had in mind of retention versus merger with *ō versus analogical reshapings of *we (and the source of those reshapings), and without knowing how he would now explain retentions like those just given, it’s hard to evaluate the situation further. In principle it would be easy enough to just assume that PEA broke supposed PA “*o” to *wə word-initially and after grave consonants, instead of just word-initially and after *k, but again the lack of detail—including whether there are examples of PEA *wə after PA *h or *t or other consonants—means I don’t know to what extent such a generalization would actually hold. All of this is additionally complicated by the fact that the sequence *we in PA overwhelmingly occurred in precisely the environments where it was retained as *wə in PEA
(under the traditional model and my own), namely word-initially and following *k. Otherwise *we was quite rare.

One final point that Goddard (2018:102, n. 2) mentions, as noted earlier, is that Meskwaki and Shawnee both distinguish /o/ (or /oː/, another realization of underlying [w+e] in certain cases) from a small handful of /we/ sequences at morpheme boundaries, which could suggest that the /o/ goes back to a PA “*o” but the /we/ goes back to a PA sequence *we which was contrastive with *o.

The non-contracted /we/ evidently occurs in the same contexts in both Meskwaki and Shawnee, viz. in primary derivation before only four morphemess in Meskwaki: -ekâ “dance (AI),” -etonêmo “talk (AI),” -esihî+am “hunt (AI),” and -ehpo “snow (II),” e.g., ahkwetonêmowa |ahkw-etonêmo-w-a| “s/he ends his/her talk” versus tahkoshkawêwa |tahkw-eshk-aw-â-w-a| “s/he encounters him/her” (Goddard 2001b:174-175, second example from pg. 171). Goddard (2018) points to Shawnee attestations of non-contraction of [w+e] with the cognates of two of these suffixes: pekweka |pekw-ekaa-| “he dances dust dance” (Voegelin 1938:81) and nikwakwešimo |ni-kwakw-esi-mo| “I ran off” (Voegelin 1939:333; -ēšimo is derivationally related to Meskwaki -esihî+am).

There are various issues here. First is the incredibly restricted occurrence of these non-contracting [w+e] sequences (as noted by Goddard 2001b:175); the sequence /CweC/ otherwise never occurs in Meskwaki, except in reduplication, and these same suffixes follow the regular pattern and contract with a preceding [w-] to /o:/ when the preceding morpheome is one which normally causes [w+e] to contract to /o:/, e.g., nishōkewaki |nishw-ek-w-ã-ki| “they dance as a pair.” Second, as Goddard observes on the same page, while -etonêmo “talk” lacks contraction of [w+e], it is derived from a Medial(+Final) -eton(ê)- “mouth,” and this does undergo normal contraction: kepotonēshkêwa |kepw-etonê-shk-â-w-a| “s/he closes his/her (own) mouth” (ibid., pg. 171).

Third, there are several cases where certain suffixes contract with a /w/-final Initial to /o/ instead of to the /o/ which that Initial normally contracts to, such as -eshê “ear; hear”: kakânoshêwa |kakânw-eshê-w-a| “s/he has long ears” vs. kakânōsiwaki |kakânw-esi-w-ã-ki| “they are long, tall” (ibid., pp. 173-174); Goddard suggests some possible explanations for these divergent treatments, such as in this case a need to avoid homophony with -ôshê “have young (AI).” Although he finds the cases of non-contracting /we/ “unexpected and unexplained” (ibid., pg. 180), it seems to me more reasonable to assume that Meskwaki is showing some sort of similar irregular treatments of *w-e in these very small number of cases in which /we/ appears instead of /o(:)/, even if we don’t know the precise reasons behind them, rather than to project this back to PA as a contrastive sequence that only appeared across morpheme boundaries and only before some four or so Finals. The contraction vs. non-contraction of the cognate suffixes -eton(ê)- and -etonêmo is particularly striking, and certainly suggestive of some process that arose after the creation of the latter suffix.

I would lastly observe that Meskwaki-Sauk-Kickapoo (MSK) and Shawnee seem to be each other’s closest relatives within Algonquian, a point of view which Goddard shares, so a shared feature like this in the two of them is not really more significant than the feature appearing in just one language; if it were shared with some distantly related Algonquian language with no history of contact with MSK-Shawnee, that would be another matter.
Sources Used

(“AIL” = Algonquian and Iroquoian Linguistics)
(“AL” = Anthropological Linguistics)
(“IJAL” = International Journal of American Linguistics)


• Williams, Roger (1643). *A Key into the Language of America.* . . . London: Gregory Dexter.