The Grammar of Oneida: Less is More
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Writing a reference grammar of a language is a challenge because it is a catalogue of everything the researcher has learned about the regular patterns of the language and, at the same time, it should convey the “genius” of the language.

The question addressed in this presentation is how much of what we posit in our grammar is truly universal to all languages and thus indispensible in the linguistic description of a particular languages. This is an issue regardless of who the description is intended for — typologists, syntacticians, general linguists, language teachers, second language learners. In our research we have adopted what we call “methodological minimalism,” i.e. an analysis of (unusual) data that does not rely on pre-existing linguistic categories; we not simply adopt a structure or concept because it seems so obviously to hold universally. Here we consider parts of speech, which are argued to be universal in every framework we are aware of.

We show that in Oneida there is no need for “nouns” and “verbs.” The morphology and the syntax can be described solely in terms of the strictly semantic notions of entity and situation.