

***Chikashshanompa'*: The Language of the Chickasaw People**

Amy M. Gantt  
Southeastern Oklahoma State University

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*Halito! Sah holchifo ut Amy Gantt. Southeastern Oklahoma State University ah toksali.*

*Chickashsha saya.* Hello, my name is Amy Gantt. I am an Associate Professor at Southeastern Oklahoma State University, and I am Chickasaw.

The Chickasaw Nation is located in the southeastern portion of Oklahoma. The Chickasaw Nation is headquartered in Ada, Oklahoma with the boundaries of the Nation covering a 13-county area. Current estimates show the tribal enrollment to be approximately 76,000 citizens worldwide (State of the Nation, 2022). *Chikashshanompa'*, the language of the Chickasaw people, is spoken fluently by approximately 35 individuals (Chickasaw Times, 2022).

*Chikashshanompa'* belongs to the Muskogean Language family. Muskogean Languages are generally divided into Western and Eastern Muskogean groups. *Chikashshanompa'* is a Western Muskogean language, as is the Choctaw language (Davis, 2015). Other Muskogean languages include Seminole, Muskogee Creek, Mikasuki, Alabama, Koasati, and Apalachee (Fitzgerald, 2016; Haas, 1956). Each of these languages are used today to some extent, with the exception of Apalachee which currently has no fluent speakers (Fitzgerald, 2016; Goddard, 2005; Haas, 1956). The Chickasaw and Choctaw languages are closely related, with speakers of one language often able to understand speakers of the other language. The same is true of the Muskogee Creek and Seminole languages, as well as the Alabama and Koasati (Hardy & Scanarelli, 2005). All of the Muskogean languages are considered endangered, although there are pieces of documentation including dictionaries and/or reference grammar of some type for each of the languages (Fitzgerald, 2016). Most speakers of Muskogean languages live in

present-day Oklahoma, with some speakers living in Louisiana, Mississippi, Texas, and Florida (Hardy & Scanarelli, 2005).

### **Chikashshanompa' as a Minoritized Language**

A minoritized language is defined as a language that has historically encountered prejudice and even attempts at eradication. Minoritized languages are often the languages of Indigenous peoples (Slapac & Coppersmith, 2019). *Chikashshanompa'* falls into that category as a language that is endangered and whose users were subjected to prejudice and even punishment for many years. However, this was not always the case.

### **Chikashshanompa' Prior to the Arrival of the Europeans**

The traditional homelands of the Chickasaw people are commonly referred to as the Mississippian homelands. The Mississippian homelands covered approximately 38,000 square miles in parts of present-day Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee, and Kentucky. The Mississippi River ran through the early homelands and the Chickasaw lived in towns along the river and other waterways. They were adept at navigating the Mississippi and other smaller waterways in the homelands via dugout canoes. In addition to the Chickasaw, many traders and travelers, both other tribal members and non-Natives, travelled up and down the Mississippi. In fact, the Chickasaw name for the Mississippi was *Balbasha' Okhina'*, or the river where foreign speakers are (roughly translated) (Dyson, 2014).

*Chikashshanompa'* was solely spoken among the Chickasaw people prior to the arrival of the Europeans. Hernando de Soto was the first European to have contact with the Chickasaw People. His arrival in North America in 1540 would eventually lead to the disruption of the language and culture of North American tribes, including the Chickasaw (Gibson, 1971). The

Spanish stayed with the Chickasaw through the winter of 1540-1541. Soon, the Chickasaw became weary of the demands made of them by the Spanish and drove them out. It would be approximately 150 years until further contact with Europeans (Dyson, 2014; Gibson, 1971). The French were the next group of Europeans to make contact with the Chickasaw, followed by the English (Dyson, 2014; Gibson, 1971). Once the European colonizers began arriving in North America, the Spanish, French and English languages were introduced to Chickasaw territory (Davis, 2016). Even after the Europeans arrived in North America, *Chikashshanompa'* was the only language spoken by the majority of the population until the "1720s and 1730s, [when] some English traders had married into the Chickasaws, becoming bilingual and raising mixed-blood children" (Ozbolt, 2014, p. 22). It really was not until the 19<sup>th</sup> century that it was common for Chickasaws to speak English, thus raising a group of bilingual Chickasaws (Davis, 2016; Hinson, 2019; Ozbolt, 2014). In fact, there is evidence of wide-spread intermarriage among the Chickasaw and the British that can be seen in the number of Chickasaw signers of an 1801 treaty who had English surnames (Dyson, 2014). This decline in the knowledge and speaking of *Chikashshanompa'* has reached the point where currently, the vast majority of Chickasaw citizens are monolingual English speakers (Davis, 2016).

### **Indian Removal Act**

By the 1830s, life in villages for the Chickasaw had mostly gone by the wayside. Most of the once-thriving towns encountered by the early Europeans had been abandoned (Dyson, 2014). The Indian Removal Act of 1830 served to further minoritize *Chikashshanompa'*. This act allowed for the US President to take the land of the tribes living east of the Mississippi River in exchange for lands west of the Mississippi River (Cobb, 2007; Gibson, 1971). While this practice

of moving Indians from land east of the Mississippi River to lands west had been going on for some time, the Indian Removal Act made this practice an official policy of the US Government and sped up the process of removing the eastern tribes from their homelands. The states of Alabama and Mississippi had also enacted policies aimed at eroding Chickasaw sovereignty during this time. New state laws abolished tribal governments and removed power from tribal leaders (Gibson, 1971). The Treaty of Pontotoc in 1832 specified that the Chickasaw would cede their Mississippian lands to the Federal Government (Goodin, 2017).

Removal to the lands west of the Mississippi River, which became known as Indian Territory (now present-day Oklahoma), proved detrimental to the eastern tribes for many reasons. First of all, many tribal members died as a result of the arduous journey. With removal also came a great loss of traditions. The Chickasaw, like many other tribes, were closely connected to their homelands in both cultural and spiritual ways. This meant that being forcibly separated from their lands proved detrimental to both cultural traditions and language (Goodin, 2017).

Removal from their homelands came with a change in the plants and animals that the tribes had known for generations. This led to great loss of Chickasaw vocabulary (Dyson, 2014). For example, prior to removal, the Chickasaws had an estimated 3-5 words for waterways depending on the size of the waterways. This variety of vocabulary was reduced to one word after removal (Dyson, 2014). For their extensive travelling on various waterways, the Chickasaw used yellow poplar, longleaf pine, and bald cypress for making their dugout canoes. Sadly, when the Chickasaw were forcibly removed to Indian Territory, the names of these particular trees dropped from conversational language as they did not grow in Indian Territory.

Furthermore, several other varieties of trees that were present in the Mississippian homelands did not grow in Indian Territory. Therefore, the names of those trees, which were culturally important to the Chickasaw, have also been lost to time (Dyson, 2014).

### **Indian Territory**

Upon removal to Indian Territory, the Chickasaw originally settled in the territory of the Choctaw. The 1837 Treaty of Doaksville meant that the Chickasaw would have their own district within the boundaries of the Choctaw territory. This was intended to be a temporary solution, with the Chickasaw eventually having their own territory. However, a census taken in 1844 revealed that there were 4,111 Chickasaws, with the vast majority still living within the territory of the Choctaw (Gibson, 1971). Finally, by 1853, most Chickasaws were living apart from the Choctaw. This co-mingling of the tribes is important in terms of language because linguistically, *Chikashshanompa'* and Choctaw are closely related (Davis, 2016).

According to oral history, the Chickasaw and Choctaw were once one tribe. This idea is supported by the fact that their migration stories are almost identical and linguistically, the tribes are very similar (Dyson, 2014). At some point along the way, the tribes became separate entities, but they continued to live near each other. This close proximity has continued to modern times. In terms of language, Goddard argues that it has only been recently that the languages of the Chickasaw and Choctaw have become separate (2005). However, according to Munro, a Chickasaw linguist, *Chikashshanompa'* is unique, demonstrated by a lack of understanding by most Choctaw speakers of Chickasaw language (Munro, 2005).

### **The Boarding School Era**

*Chikashshanompa'* was further minoritized with the era of boarding schools. Boarding schools had been present since the 1820s, prior to the tribe being removed to Indian Territory. In addition to boarding schools, there were also day schools attended by Chickasaw students. In the beginning, schools received funding from the federal government and were primarily run by religious groups. Chickasaw families seemed to welcome schools as there was an interest in literacy among the people (Cobb, 2007). At that time, there were four boarding schools present in the Chickasaw Homelands with most of the students being of mixed blood at first (Ozbolt, 2014). Once the schools became more established in the communities, more full-blood students started to attend. Eventually, the Chickasaw Nation began to contribute to these schools using tribal funds (Cobb, 2007). One product of the pre-Removal boarding school years was the fact that they produced many bilingual Chickasaws, who became important in dealings with the United States Government (Hinson, 2019). However, a detrimental aspect, which contributed to the minoritization of the Chickasaw language was the fact that this “generation would often choose to withhold *Chikashshanompa'* from their children” (Hinson, 2019, p. 34).

Upon arrival in Indian Territory, the Chickasaw established their own schools. In conjunction with Methodist missionaries, Bloomfield Academy was established in 1852 (Cobb, 2007; Goodin, 2014). It was common for students to leave home for boarding school around age 6 and stay for 10-12 years. During that time, they were away from their culture and traditions and were unable to speak their language. It really came as no surprise that those students often did not pass their language on to their own children (Cobb, 2007).

## Historical Importance of this Language

### Lingua Franca—Mississippi River

During the early 1700s, there was a lingua franca spoken in the Mississippian homelands, featuring aspects of several Muskogean languages as well as words from the Algonquin language family. The possibility exists that this lingua franca was in use prior to European contact, but there are no written records to support this idea (Drechsel, 1983). It makes sense for there to have been a trade language throughout the Mississippian area since the tribes who inhabited those areas spoke a variety of languages. This lingua franca came to be known as the Chickasaw/Choctaw trade language or Mobilian jargon (Drechsel, 1983; Sturtevant, 2005). According to Drechsel (1987), “there can be no doubt ... that Chickasaw once played a significant role in the history of Mobilian jargon” (p. 25). The last known speakers of this pidgin were interviewed in the 1970s and were living in Louisiana and Texas (Sturtevant, 2005).

The Mobilian jargon had several interesting features in its own right. First, there is no evidence that it was ever learned by children as a first language. Rather, it was acquired later in life to be used as a communication aid for traders and travelers. Next, the Mobilian jargon was used as a socially acceptable means of communication between groups of Native people and later Europeans for at least two hundred years (Drechsel, 1983). Over the course of time, the Mobilian Jargon shifted and changed in accordance with the needs of the users.

### Language Features

As previously mentioned, *Chikashshanompa'* is part of the Western Muskogean language family. The most closely related language to *Chikashshanompa'* is Choctaw. The two



languages share a great deal of vocabulary, but there are many grammatical differences between the two (Munro, 1994 & 2005). When the first Chickasaw dictionary, compiled by Jesse and Vinnie May Humes, was published in 1973, it represented the first time the *Chikashshanompa'* had been published in written form. Since neither of the authors were linguists, they spelled all the included words phonetically (Humes, 1973). While this dictionary was a good start, there were several inconsistencies in the spellings of the same words, as well as inclusion of words that were considered to be Choctaw by many Chickasaw speakers. When the Munro and Willmond dictionary was published in 1994, the authors attempted to standardize the spelling system, so that each sound in *Chikashshanompa'* would have just one spelling (Munro and Willmond, 1994). In creating a standardized spelling system, or orthography, Munro and Willmond looked at other orthographies, such as that of the Choctaw language.

*Chikashshanompa'* is written using the same letters as English and has many of the same sounds found in English. One exception of this is the “lh” sound, which does not have an English equivalent. Munro (2008) suggests that in order to make the “lh” sound, one should put their, “tongue behind their top teeth and making a breathy “h” sound” (p. 10). Another feature of Chickasaw language is the glottal stop. The glottal stop is denoted by “ ‘ “. While in English, that would just look like punctuation, in Chickasaw, the ‘ functions as a consonant and has the power to change the meaning of a particular word. For example, *hilha* means to dance, while *hilha'* means a dancer (Munro, 2008).

The word order in *Chikashshanompa'* is subject-object-verb (Munro, 2008). For example, if one wished to say, “I see a snake” in *Chikashshanompa'*, the word order would be

*Sinti* (snake) *pisali* (see and I are combined into one word-*pisa* with *-li* on the end translates to “I see”). In order to make this sentence past tense, one would simply add *-tok* to the end of *pisali*. Therefore, *Sinti pisalitok* translates to, “I saw a snake”.

### **Current Circumstances and Future challenges**

After the traumatic experiences brought by the European arrival to North America, *Chikashshanompa'* experienced years of decline. As the Chickasaws interacted more with Europeans, many Chickasaw people became bilingual. However, as the years went on, more and more Chickasaws became monolingual, with English being their only language. Chickasaw parents were not always willing to share the Chickasaw language with their children. The prevailing attitude of the time was that those parents wanted their children to be successful in a white man’s world. The parents felt like emphasizing the use of English would only help their children (Chew, 2016; Hinson, 2019; Ozbolt, 2014).

For the generation of Chickasaws born in the early 1900s, it was common for parents to believe they were doing their children a disservice by teaching them *Chikashshanompa'*. In the 1940s, a few children were still learning *Chikashshanompa'* as a first language, but not many. By the 1950s, very few children were growing up speaking *Chikashshanompa'*. Beginning in the 1960s, Chickasaw people began to become cognizant of the fact that the future of *Chikashshanompa'* was questionable (Ozbolt, 2014).

It was because of this uncertain future that Governor Overton James of the Chickasaw Nation urged his mother, Vinnie May Humes, and his stepfather, Jesse Humes, to create the first Chickasaw Dictionary. Fearing the loss of *Chikashshanompa'*, Mr. and Mrs. Humes set out to preserve their language in written form (Humes, 1973). This was the first time

*Chikashshanompa'* had been written down and the book *A Chickasaw Dictionary* became a very useful tool in the preservation of the language. As neither Mr. nor Mrs. Humes were linguists, they wrote down the words phonetically, with the hopes of helping non-speakers pronounce the words correctly (Humes, 1973). The Humes dictionary contains a number of words not commonly used today (Munro and Wilmond, 2008).

In addition to the Humes dictionary, early learners of *Chikashshanompa'* also had access to recordings of both the Chickasaw and Choctaw languages that had been made by missionaries in the 1800s. The missionaries were dedicated to learning the Choctaw language, and to a much smaller degree the Chickasaw language, so that they could preach to and convert tribal members. In fact, the missionaries developed a system for writing the Choctaw language which is very similar to what is used today. One missionary even translated the Bible into Choctaw, along with many hymns. For this reason, and because the Chickasaw never had a Bible in their own language, many Chickasaws have used the Choctaw Bible and hymnals in their religious services. This is why many speakers of Chickasaw have a working understanding of Choctaw language (Munro & Wilmond, 2008).

### **Current circumstances**

As is common for languages of the Southeast, *Chikashshanompa'* speakers have been declining in number for many years. At this time, there are approximately 35 fluent speakers still living (Chickasaw Language, 2022). Considering the Chickasaw Nation has over 76,000 citizens, the percentage of those citizens who can speak their language is infinitesimal (Chickasaw Nation, 2022). Given that the fluent speakers of *Chikashshanompa'* represent an

aging population, the Nation as established many programs to ensure that the language survives, and even thrives, into the future.

As early as the 1960s, there was fear that the language would eventually be lost (Humes, 1973). In 2007, the Chickasaw Nation established the Language Revitalization Program. By 2009, this program had grown into its own department: The Department of Chickasaw Language (Chew, 2016; Ozbolt 2014). The language department has sponsored many language programs and learning tools over the years, including community classes, language flash cards, and a Master/Apprentice program.

A Master/Apprentice program pairs fluent speakers of an endangered language with language learners in a one-on-one setting. The Master/Apprentice program was created in 1992 by linguist Leanne Hinton, PhD (Hinton, 2002). The program was created in California and aimed at potential language learners who did not necessarily have access to a formal language course. These learners did however have access to a fluent speaker. Hinton (2002) refers to the language to be learned as either a “target language” or a “heritage language” (p. xii). The Master/Apprentice model has been used in settings all over the world because it allows for flexibility and adjustments to be made based on the needs of a particular community.

The Chickasaw Nation launched a Master/Apprentice program in 2007. There were sixteen fluent speakers (masters) and 24 learners (apprentices) in the first group. This difference in numbers was because some of the master speakers had more than one apprentice. From this group of 24 learners, there emerged two conversational speakers. Unfortunately, many of the participants dropped out due to time constraints and other

reasons. Each of the masters and apprentices were paid for their time and were under contract to meet for 10 hours each week (Hinson, 2019).

After the initial launching of the Master/Apprentice program in 2007, there was a second group that launched in 2010. The author of this paper was in the second group of language learners and was paired with a fluent Chickasaw speaker named Hannah Pitman. The author and Mrs. Pitman, along with other pairs of speakers and learners were also paid a stipend each month for their time. Amy Gantt and Hannah Pitman worked together for about five years and Gantt achieved an intermediate proficiency level in Chickasaw. As one can imagine, this was very difficult at first, but as time progressed, it became easier. This program was discontinued in 2017. According to Joshua Hinson, Executive Officer of the Division of Language Preservation within the Chickasaw Nation, the Master/Apprentice program was discontinued because they “were not seeing the proficiency levels we needed to sustain the language in that model” (Personal correspondence, February 27, 2023). In fact, the success rate was around 10 percent (Hinson, 2019).

The ending of the Master/Apprentice program eventually brought about the creation of The Chikasha Academy Adult Immersion Program (CAAIP). The CAAIP pilot program began in 2015 and was in part based on the Master/Apprentice program. The main difference was in the formatting. Rather than a one-on-one setting, the CAAIP created a group setting in which three language experts worked with three language students in an immersion environment (Francis, 2022). Another difference was rather than working together for 10 hours per week, the speakers and learners were working together for 40 hours per week as full-time employees of the Chickasaw Nation.

Another program that has been implemented by the Chickasaw Nation is Rosetta Stone Chickasaw. This program was produced as a combined effort between the Chickasaw Nation and the Rosetta Stone company. The Rosetta Stone program uses audio and video recordings to help learners with their conversational Chickasaw. The video series features *Chikashshanompa'* speakers and Chickasaw citizens as the actors. The first set of 40 lessons, Rosetta Stone Chickasaw 1, was released in 2018. There are currently 3 levels, with a level 4 set to be released in the Fall of 2023. The lessons are available in CD format or on-line. The program is available for free to any Chickasaw Citizen. Chickasaw Nation employees can purchase the program for a nominal fee, and non-Chickasaws can also purchase the program for around \$150. Currently, there are approximately 9,000 users of Rosetta Stone Chickasaw (Hinson, personal communication, February 27, 2023).

### **The Future of *Chikashshanompa'***

In his 2022 State of the Nation address, Chickasaw Nation Governor Bill Anoatubby proclaimed 2023-2033 to be the “Decade of Chickasaw Language” (Decade, 2022). Considering this declaration, the Language Department has received additional funding for expansion of the programs offered by the Nation. These expansions include up to 100 new paid positions, in which language learners’ full- or part-time job is to learn Chickasaw in an immersion setting. There will also be a virtual option, which will allow people who live outside of the Ada, Oklahoma area to participate (Hinson, personal communication, February 27, 2023). This is an expansion on the current CAAIP program which currently has seven language learners (Chickasaw Language, 2022).

## Challenges

Bringing a language back from the brink of being lost comes with a number of challenges. For *Chikashshanompa'*, one of the main challenges is the age and number of fluent speakers. Of the estimated 35 fluent speakers of *Chikashshanompa'* left, most are quite elderly. Many do not have the good health to be able to teach on a consistent basis (Chickasaw Language, 2022).

Another potential barrier comes with the amount of time required to learn a new language. However, with the Chikasha Academy Adult Immersion Program, new speakers are being developed. The learners from the pilot program are now the teachers in the CAAIP (Francis, 2022). Currently, there are seven full-time learners in the program, who should be conversationally fluent by 2025 (Chickasaw Language, 2022). There are plans in place to add 12 participants in the summer of 2023. There are further plans to add four more cohorts with 12 students each by 2025. These cohorts will be spread out within the boundaries of the Chickasaw Nation (Hinson, personal communication, February 27, 2023). The ultimate goal of this immersion program is to create new conversational speakers who will continue to be employed by the Chickasaw Nation as language teachers or in other closely related fields (Francis, 2022).

## Conclusion

The history of *Chikashshanompa'* shows the effects of minoritization as a result of the arrival of European explorers and colonists. The language has been through years of active attempts at eradication at the hands of the US Government in the form of the removal and boarding school eras. However, beginning with small attempts at writing down the language in

hopes of preserving it for future generations, there is now a sense of hope and optimism when it comes to keeping the language thriving for generations to come.



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**Links:****Chickasaw Nation's Language Page**

The Chickasaw Nation has compiled many videos regarding the language, fluent speakers, and language learners. Many of the sources referenced by this paper are featured in one or more of the videos. On page 7-8 of this paper, the author refers to Hannah Pitman. She is featured on two of the videos under the name Hannah Corsello. There is also a video of some Chickasaw elders singing Choctaw hymns. Finally, there is a link to the Rosetta Stone program.

<https://www.chickasaw.tv/language>

**Online Chickasaw Dictionary:**

[https://www.achickasawdictionary.com/?utm\\_source=cntv](https://www.achickasawdictionary.com/?utm_source=cntv)

**Questions for Further Study:**

Undergraduate:

1. What are three ideas for increasing interest in learning *Chikashshanompa'*?
2. What are your attitudes about language programs? Do you consider the learning programs to be a "token effort" or a real move toward fluency?
3. How can you make connections with fluent speakers?
4. What programs have been offered by other tribes to increase fluency? How successful have those been? Do you think those would be effective for *Chikashshanompa'*? Why or why not?
5. What are the three tribal groups in the US with the largest number of fluent speakers? Why do you think those tribes have been able to keep so many fluent speakers?

Graduate:

1. How can tribes reverse the damage to *Chikashshanompa'* caused by the boarding school era?
2. What have been the historical attitudes towards language preservation? How are those attitudes the same or different when compared to attitudes of today?
3. What are three compelling reasons to keep *Chikashshanompa'* alive and thriving?
4. What role, if any, does a tribal language play in tribal identity? Can a person be considered a tribal member if they do not know their language? Why or why not?
5. Looking at tribes with thriving language programs and revitalization efforts, what have been the benefits of such programs to tribal members?