

Name: Chantelle Standefer

Affiliation: Language instructor at the School of Choctaw Language/Southeastern Oklahoma State University

Language: Chahta anumpa (Choctaw Language)

Language Family: Muskegon language

Geographic Location: Mainly located in southeastern Oklahoma and Mississippi, dispersed throughout the United States

Estimated population: 10,000 (Simmons, 2015, as cited in Brixey et al.,2020). However, this number would be difficult to truly estimate due to a variety of factors including United States federal policies of moving tribal members away from Native communities and potential cultural wariness of surveys/census taking.

1.

The Choctaw people originally inhabited lands in what are now parts of Mississippi, Louisiana, and Alabama. They are acknowledged as the most populous group of the tribes classified as Muskogean speaking (Debo, 1961). Debo also describes the Choctaw as agricultural, growing mainly corn, pumpkins, beans and melons. Their farming methods created such levels of efficiency and success that, with less land, they outproduced their neighbors. DeRoiser (1970) concurs that of the tribes east of the Mississippi River, the Choctaws were one of the largest and most advanced tribes. He extols the Choctaw political structure as democratic and efficient. His speculation includes that in the Choctaw, the arriving Europeans encountered “a proud and powerful race, stable, democratic, and economically sound” (p.13). Such population and economic prominence would have made Choctaw language important for communication throughout the area in and surrounding their original homelands. This influence was recognized by the French as early as the 1720s, in Louisiana, who regarded Choctaw language as the most universal and extensive (Crawford, 1978). However, the lessening of prominence for both the Choctaw people and their language was greatly expedited by United States (US) federal government agendas and policies.

Removal from their homelands was one of the most decisive blows to Choctaw language and culture. This was sparked by a series of land cessation treaties from 1801-1830. The first Choctaw/US treaty to relinquish land was the Treaty of Fort Adams (1801) which ceded approximately 2.5 million acres for the creation of a road from Nashville, TN, to Natchez, MS (Pate, 2017). The idea of relocating Indians residing east of the Mississippi is recorded as early as the administration of President Thomas Jefferson. In a letter to William Henry Harrison, Jefferson (1803) outlines a plan by which the United State could gain influence over and lands from tribes residing east of the Mississippi. One tactic mentioned included encouraging Indian leaders to incur exorbitant debt at federally owned trading houses. They then could be induced to trade land in payment of the arrears. Use of this ploy can be seen in the Treaty of Hoe Buckintoopa (1803) and the Treaty of Mount Dexter (1805). In 1820, the Treaty of Doak’s Stand saw Choctaw lands exchanged for lands in Arkansas and Indian country. DeRoiser (1970) states that “the Treaty of Doak’s Stand, ‘the first treaty embodying steps toward removal west and the actual assignment of lands in the Indian territory’ (Linguist) foreshadowed the removal and degradation of all Indians” (p. 69). A decade later, the US federal goal to annex the whole of Choctaw original homelands was realized. Almost immediately after the passage of the contentious Indian Removal Bill in May of 1830, President Andrew Jackson and his secretary of war, General John Easton devised plans to meet with Indian delegates regarding removal (Foreman, 1972). Subsequently, the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek (1830) was signed September 28th. In the treaty provisions, two choices for Choctaw tribal members were outlined. Those who wished to remain could accept a land allotment in Mississippi and thereby accept citizenship from the United States. For the Choctaw uninterested in becoming American, the US government would provide travel accommodations to and equipment for farming in lands west of the Mississippi (modern day Oklahoma). Thereby, a schism of the Choctaw and, subsequently, their language was initiated. For those who moved west, further decimation would occur. The combined forces of government inefficiency and natural disasters such as blizzards and epidemics caused significant loss of life and resulted in a permanent decrease of Choctaw population (Debo, 1961).

Governmental annexation and administration of Native school systems served as another tool in dismantling tribal nations, cultures, and languages. For the Choctaw people, formal education settings were initiated by their leaders and assisted by missionaries. The famous Choctaw politician, Pushmataha, is said to have suggested in 1816 the setting aside money from land cessation annuities for educating tribal children. It is speculated that he thought engaging with white man’s education would enable

Choctaws to keep their independence, lands in Mississippi, and racial identity (Morrison, 2016). Notable Choctaw families such as the Folsoms, Le Flores, and Pitchlynns reportedly had similar sentiments. Debo theorizes that they “felt that the only hope for their people lay in education and the adoption of civilized institutions” (1961 p. 42). Thus, missionaries were invited, and the first school opened at the Eliot Station in April of 1819. Eventually, over twenty neighborhood schools operated in Choctaw lands east of Mississippi (York, 2012). These educational endeavors, as were all Choctaw institutions, were thrown into shock and disorder by removal. After serious consideration by missionaries and their overseeing boards, several decided to eventually follow the Choctaw west of the Mississippi (Morrison, 2016). As the Choctaw settled into their new territory, school systems were quickly reestablished. Debo (1961) relates that by 1836, missionaries of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions reported the existence of eleven schools with over 200 Choctaw students enrolled. Then, in 1842, the tribal council sanctioned the establishment of a comprehensive school system. This led to the formation of nine tribally-funded boarding schools by 1848. The partnership between Choctaw leaders and missionaries was the impetus for the written version of Choctaw. Choctaw students were taught in both Choctaw and English. In 1825, the first book in Choctaw and English, *A Spelling Book*, was printed (York, 2012). As a result of many tribal members becoming literate, many materials were printed in the Choctaw language including religious materials, newspapers, almanacs, and political advertisements (Broadwell, 2006). By 1843, the printing press at Park Hill (located within the Cherokee Nation) had generated almost a million pages in the Choctaw language (Morrison, 2016).

Originally thought to dovetail with their assimilation policy, the US officials became disenchanted with formal education institutions overseen by the missionaries and tribal leaders. One of the critiques was that the missionaries were teaching students in their native tongues. Therefore, in 1880, the Indian Bureau mandated that schools must give all instruction in English or risk losing their government funding. But some missionaries were adamant that Native students would have greater success if first taught in their native tongue. The Board of Indian Commissioners received testament from a Dr. Alden who stated:

Our missionaries feel very decidedly on this point, and that is as to their work in the teaching of English. They believe that it can be better done by using Dakota also...it is true that by beginning in the Indian tongue and then putting the students into English studies our missionaries say that after three or four years their English is better than it would have been if they had begun entirely with English. (as cited in Reyhner & Elder, 2004, p.79)

Some missionaries specific to the Choctaw seemed to have concurred with Dr. Alden and disregarded the federal decrees. Henry Halbert, a Catholic missionary and teacher to the Choctaws in Mississippi, is documented as using a bilingual educational approach as late as 1894. In a letter, he remarks on the students’ strong preference of Choctaw for learning and the quickness with which they picked up reading and writing in it (York, 2012).

Those who did support and perhaps spurred such government edicts included J.D.C. Atkins, Commissioner of Indians Affairs 1885-1888, and Captain Richard Pratt, founder of the first government-operated boarding school (Carlisle Indian Industrial School). Atkins wrote in an 1887 report that “The instruction of the Indians in the [native] vernacular is not only of no use to them, but is detrimental to the cause of their education and civilization, and no school will be permitted on the reservation in which the English language is not exclusively taught” (as cited in Reyhner & Eder, 2004 p.77). Pratt also scorned the missionaries’ bilingual approach. He describes missionaries and their work as such:

The missionary goes to the Indian; he learns the language; he associates with him; he makes the Indian feel he is friendly, and has great desire to help him; he even teaches the Indian English.

But the fruits of his [the missionary] labor, by all the examples that I know, have been to strengthen and encourage him [the Indian] to remain separate and apart from the rest of us. (Pratt, 1892, para. 16)

Instead, Pratt espouses an approach to engagement with Natives as follows:

A great general has said that the only good Indian is a dead one, and that high sanction of his destruction has been an enormous factor in promoting Indian massacres. In a sense, I agree with the sentiment, but only in this: that all the Indian there is in the race should be dead. Kill the Indian in him, and save the man. (1892, para. 1)

Thus, the English-only regulations were often enforced on students in a strict manner, including harsh physical punishments (Reyhner & Eder 2004).

It was this educational landscape into which the Choctaw Nation schools were annexed by the Department of the Interior. These schools had evaded the control of federal officials until 1899. The change inadvertently came as Choctaw leaders sought to secure funding for their schools. A provision of the Atoka Agreement of 1897 directed that tribal income from coal and asphalt leases be sent to the United States treasury and allocated for schools in Choctaw and Chickasaw Nations. Ethan Allen Hitchcock, then Secretary of the Interior, felt this gave him the latitude to bring the tribal schools under federal control. (Morrison, 2016). Subsequently, John D. Benedict was appointed as superintendent of the schools in Indian Territory. He denounced focus on cultural subjects as unsound and unsuitable and instead favored vocational training for Choctaw education (Debo, 1961). Less than a decade later, the educational administration for the majority of Choctaw students would change hands again. With Oklahoma statehood in 1907 and the simultaneous dissolution of tribal governments, Choctaw neighborhood schools were discontinued. Many former students, teachers, and buildings of the Choctaw Nation were incorporated into the state school system. (Morrison, 2016)

The Indian Removal Act of 1830 instigated physical and geographic separation of tribal and language communities. The diaspora of Native people continued to grow and was furthered by the Indian Relocation Act of 1956. Some regard the post WWII era as one in which white Americans reaped the benefits of the post war economy and left their minority counterparts far behind (*US history primary source timeline: The postwar United States 1945-1968, overview*, n.d.). However, a contrasting view is that Choctaw communities eschewed economic pursuits in favor of clinging to their cultural traditions and identity. To observers judging by 1950s Western values and standards, the tribal lifestyle seemed socially and economically appalling and degrading (Debo as cited in Kidwell, 2007). During this time, the US government agenda was one of complete assimilation of Native people and termination of tribal governments (Gaede, n.d.). As Indian land trusts were being extinguished and tribal assets dispersed, the issue of what do with Natives arose. Perhaps perceived as in need of economic and cultural rehabilitation, the Native population was aggressively recruited for federally-sponsored job training and relocation programs. These programs sought to take young Natives out of their rural traditional communities and place them in large cities for training and employment. In the 1940s, 56% of white Americans were living and working in urban areas, compared to 6% of the Indian population. By the 1970s, the proportion of Native people living in cities had skyrocketed to half. (Treur, 2019). Specific to the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, a 2011 Oklahoma Indian Affairs Commission reported only about 38% of CNO members lived within Oklahoma, much less the section designated as the Choctaw reservation or service area (*2011 Oklahoma Indian nations: Pocket pictorial directory*, 2011). Furthermore, the relocation programs hastened the decimation of Native languages as tribal members were largely surrounded by non-Indian people or those from other tribes. As tribal members forged new lives in the urban setting, inter-tribal and

inter-racial relationships formed (Treur, 2019). English would have served as a communicative common ground for these emerging communities, relegating tribal languages to the background.

2.

At the invitation of Choctaw leaders, missionaries came to start schools for Choctaw students. However, this led to much more, including the written version of Choctaw language. Cyrus Byington, missionary to the Choctaw, said with regards to teaching:

...the Choctaw children to read English the easiest and quickest way was to teach them to read their own language first. It was desirable, too, that adult Choctaw should have Christian truth on record in their houses in a language they could understand (as cited in York, 2012, p. 178).

Therefore, many of the first printed materials in Choctaw were related to school curriculum or church life. The first hymn was written in 1824, and the first hymnal printed in 1829 (“Chahta Vba Isht Taloa”, 2014). The first edition of the New Testament was printed in 1848 (York, 2012). These works have proven to be enduring and a touchstone for Choctaw language and culture. After removal and Oklahoma statehood, churches became the center of expression for Choctaw language and culture. Milligan (2003) describes revival meetings that included traditional foods and activities such as building brush arbors and smoking tobacco. During Sunday services, sermons were preached or translated into Choctaw, and hymns were sung in Choctaw. Kidwell (2007) describes Christian influence in Choctaw life as pervasive and “...a last bastion of Choctaw language, since many young people were not learning Choctaw in their own homes. In churches, hymns, preaching, and scripture-reading used the Choctaw language.” (p. 206). In modern times, tribal people still gather at churches and get-togethers for “gospel singings” to eat traditional foods and speak and sing in Choctaw.

A contribution of the Choctaw language of international consequence is that of the World War I code talkers. World War I is significant in multitudinous ways, such as it was the first instance of the US military sending soldiers abroad for the defense of foreign soil. In April 1917, the US army had less than 130,000 officers and soldiers. By the end of the war, over four million had served in the US Army (*A World at War: The American Expeditionary Forces*, n.d.). Although not legally compelled by the Selective Service Act of 1917, nearly 20% of the eligible Indian male population were drafted or heavily recruited for military service. Included among these Native soldiers were a group of Choctaw men, some of whom were to be hailed as the first code talkers in US history (Selcer, 2018). However, Meadows (2021) posits that the Choctaw were not the first tribe in the WWI timeline to send messages in a Native tongue. Yet, he does acknowledge that, during World War I, Choctaws are the only ones that are known to have formed intentionally coded vocabulary. The Choctaw Code talkers’ time of serving in such a capacity was brief but impactful. The first known use of Choctaw to send coded military communications was October 26th, 1918 (Selcer, 2018). Less than 3 weeks later, the Armistice was signed to conclude WWI. Yet the success of their venture likely contributed to its brevity. Some speculate that the Choctaw Code Talkers could be credited with shortening the Great War by several months, if not years (Red-horse, 2010). Despite growing up in an era that fostered eradication of tribal language and customs, these Choctaw soldiers contributed their skills to promote the overall good. As Milligan (2003) states, “The language that had been outlawed by the American schools system and compared to “cursing” by some white preachers and teachers was used to save thousands of lives” (p.251). They also paved the way for Native code talkers that were to follow. In 2008, the Code Talker Recognition Act was passed to award medals in recognition of tribal language military contributions. As of the time of this writing, 35 different tribes have been recognized (United States Mint, 2023).

3.

Phonetics

The Choctaw alphabet has a very similar syllabary to the English alphabet due the fact that the first written form was developed by English speaking missionaries (Haag & Willis, 2001). Unlike English, however, most letters represent a singular sound.

Although the pronunciation of consonants is similar between the two languages, some differences do exist. One is the unique sound “hl/lh” sound. The “hl/lh” sound is similar to the English “th” sound (which is now used by some modern speakers), but formation of a more authentic sound is achieved by tongue placement behind the upper teeth and touching the hard palate as air is sent through the mouth and vocalization is made.

When a consonant is doubled, unlike in the English language, pronunciation is affected. Haag & Willis (2001) refer to these as “geminate consonants” and observed that when a consonant is geminated the time holding the consonant is approximately doubled. The meaning can be significantly affected as seen when spelling and speaking the words:

hannali ‘six’

hanali ‘leg

Haag & Willis (2001) identify nine Choctaw vowel sounds, as opposed to eleven in English. The three main distinctions in the vowels are [a], [i] and [o] sounds. However, further iterations of pronunciation are affected by length and nasality.

[a]

The letter ‘a’ represents the longer sound of “ah”, whereas the Greek letter upsilon “u” represents the short sound. Some writers use the typeset “v” in lieu of the Greek letter.

[i]

For this vowel, the letter ‘i’ can be used for both the short and long sound. However, the letter ‘e’ solely uses the long sound.

[o]

The letter ‘o’ represents the lengthier “oh” sound and the letter ‘u’ represents the shorter. This can be confusing for English speakers as they tend to insert “oo” or “uh” sounds for the letter ‘u’.

The last distinction is nasality. Nasalization is used with all three of the main categories of vowels [a], [i], and [o]. This sound is achieved by closing the soft palate while forming the vowel sound.

Written system

For Choctaw language, although published dictionaries exist, a single orthography does not. Broadwell (2006) notes that most of the differences are in the way the vowels are written, the unique “hl/lh” sound and the phonetic symbols for “sh” and “ch” sounds. A contributing reason for lack of single spelling system is that at large, Choctaw language/tribal communities experienced long separation (i.e. Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma and Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians), facilitated by U.S. federal government agendas and policies in the 1800s and 1900s. Therefore, different tribal language communities have been evolving separately for over a century. Another is that in the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, many first

language Choctaw speakers have had little to no interaction with Choctaw in its written form. These first language speakers learned at home and only used Choctaw among their family and fellow tribal community members. Second language speakers often start in a formal education setting with a heavy use of the written form. Therefore, when a second language speaker seeks to communicate in written form with a first language speaker, the former is likely depending on spelling learned in a classroom and the latter using solely a phonetic spelling.

4.

Endangered languages face common challenges. Our increasingly globalized world and rapidly changing socioeconomic landscapes push for assimilation and reduction of expressive diversity, which is especially detrimental to minority languages (Turin, et al, 2013). Two major challenges are identified by Hinton et al (2002). The first is the fact that language tied to traditional acts of communication, like songs and stories, may no longer be active in the community and possibly lost. Secondly, our modern world has daily interactions and conversations with situations for which heritage languages may not have terms.

Some challenges may be specific to Native American languages. One such challenge is that a large majority of members live outside of their rural and reservation communities (McCarty, 2013). Therefore, tribal members are often surrounded by majority language speakers and lack opportunities to learn and/or transmit their native language. Another challenge particular to Native American populations is trauma from US government policies enacted to assimilate tribal people into majority culture hindered the transmission of language from generation to generation:

“Parents did not teach the [Native} language because they loved us and they didn’t want us to suffer, to be abused, or to have a tough life.... they tried to protect us from the humiliation and suffering that they went through” (Kipp, 2000 as cited in McCarty, 2013, p. 156)

Another phenomenon among tribes is concern over intellectual property of language and distribution of developed resources (Turin, et al, 2013). Tribal elders, especially, may voice concerns of this nature. These elders have observed and been told by preceding generations how tribal cultures and customs have been exploited by the majority culture and perhaps even other tribal members for monetary and political gain. This can lead to hesitancy to consent to being recorded or helping create resources such as books and music.

However, as Beatrice Medicine (2001, as cited in McCarty, 2013), a Lakota anthropologist states “The very persistence of viable language speaks immensely to the vitality of Native life in the United States” (p. 1). Despite immense pressure from the US federal government and surrounding culture, the Choctaw people have maintained tribal culture and language and seem to have no intentions of losing it now. As such, all three of the federally recognized Choctaw tribes are actively seeking to engage tribal members in preserving and/or learning the Choctaw language.

One aspect of language revitalization among the Choctaw tribes is school and community-based education programs. Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians (MBCI) Language Department, Chahta Immi has engaged with tribal members through community classes. The tribally run schools on the MBCI reservation have Choctaw language teachers available to their students. The Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma (CNO) has deployed several education programs. Choctaw language has been taught in several high schools and higher education institutions for over 20 years. These educational endeavors have expanded into the tribally run early childhood care centers. In 2022 a language apprentice program was initiated. Also recently added is a family program that connects elders to family units in hopes of

promoting more Choctaw being spoken within the home. The Jena Band of Choctaw Indians has a language teacher on staff and provides recorded lectures online free to the public.

The Choctaw tribes are actively collecting and preserving recordings of first and fluent language speakers. The MBCI has been actively recording and posting videos of fluent language speakers on mediums such as You Tube. CNO actively pursues grants and funds initiatives to create audio and video recordings of first language speakers. Language speakers also provide voice accompaniment to daily lessons sent through various mediums, such as Vimeo, and the online dictionary available on the CNO website. These written and recorded artifacts will help give future generations the tools to perpetuate our language. The safeguarding of these vital materials will stave off the fate experienced by other indigenous languages, such as reduction to a small group of speakers frantically tasked with preservation and revitalization or complete extinction.

Lastly, our predecessors have left us with a plentiful supply of written artifacts. This includes works by our missionaries and early church leaders like the first dictionary, portions of Holy Scripture, hymnals and catechisms in Choctaw language. Educational curriculum, government laws and actions, and archived newspapers can also be found.

Overall, through community and school programs, generations of written materials and recordings, and an enduring desire to maintain cultural identity and sovereignty, the Choctaw tribes are positioning themselves and the world to hear the sounds of Chahta anumpa in perpetuity.

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B. Questions for further study

I. Undergraduate

1. What are some ways Choctaw culture and values differ from Western culture?
2. What parts of Choctaw culture are alive and well? What parts are endangered or lost?
3. What place names throughout the SE United States are of Choctaw origin (i.e. Oklahoma okla-people homma-red)
4. Who are some of the important Choctaw political leaders, past and present?
5. How do the Choctaw tribal nations exercise sovereignty in modern times?

II. Graduate

1. What distinctive traditions or values in the Southeastern United state could have been derived from tribal culture?
2. When overseen by Choctaw leaders, how have school and church settings been used to encourage language use and preservation?
3. Choctaw language and culture has shown itself to be highly adaptable. In what ways have the Choctaw people adapted? In what ways has cultural distinctiveness been maintained?
4. What cultural, social or political threats to tribal sovereignty are Choctaw tribes facing today?
5. How are the Choctaw tribal governments positioning their tribes to continue in culture and language through policies, programs and economic endeavors?

C.

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Sealy, L. R., & Gregory, G. A. (2022). *Chahta anumpa ya anumpa ikbi : making Choctaw sentences, simple & compound*. Native Daughter Publishing.

D.

Other Resources

Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma Online Dictionary (with pronunciations)

<https://dictionary.choctawnation.com/word/>

Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma School of Choctaw Language website:

<https://choctawschool.com/>

Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma Vimeo Language Lessons (under “Educational” heading)

<https://vimeo.com/choctawnation>

Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma You Tube channel

Sounds of Choctaw playlist: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLPZ_FIC5CLYpp5R-W5pOaV-ef2qsJu3XL

Dora Wickson Shilop Nanvnnoa:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AFSve6Fd1sw&list=PLPZ_FIC5CLYploEujKwtaXLr8YjoFgVe5&index=9

Jena Band of Choctaw Indians website

Beginner Language lessons

<https://sites.google.com/jenachoctaw.org/jbcilanguage/language-classes/beginnerchildren>

Intermediate Language Lessons

<https://sites.google.com/jenachoctaw.org/jbcilanguage/language-classes/intermediate>

Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians Choctaw Language Learning Resources page

<https://www.choctaw.org/culture/cllr.html>

Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians Choctaw Cultural Legacy You Tube channel

<https://www.youtube.com/@ChoctawCulturalLegacy>