

Heritage Voices: Language – Choctaw

About the Choctaw Expert



My name is Roger Scott, of the Choctaw Tribe of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma. I was born in my home in Tushka, Oklahoma, in the wintertime. I attended school at Tushka (Choctaw word meaning “warrior”) and graduated in 1973. My mother knew very little English, so she spoke her native tongue as her everyday language. My father, who spoke Choctaw and English, was a World War II veteran and told many stories of his time in service to our country. We come from a long line of veterans in our family, and I am also an Army veteran. Now the next generation of nephews are in (or going into) the military.

Our father taught us native Choctaw songs and even the shaped-note Southern Gospel music. Some of the Choctaw songs we now sing are incorporated into the Southern Gospel style of music. Spirituality and family were, and continue to be, very important parts of our lives, so we carry on the tradition of singing and family history at our gatherings.

Assistance from the Veterans Administration helped me attend Southeastern Oklahoma State University and Eastern State College. I received my degree in management and marketing and began work in the Choctaw Nation in 1987, but I felt the calling to work in the ministry and began in 1994 to work with other tribes beyond the Choctaw people. I believe this helps me to see our people from a new perspective, especially in the area of language. In 2010, I began working with Richard Adam, a full-blood Choctaw, in the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma Language Department. We travel throughout the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma and as far as Kansas, California, and Alaska to support our teachers who teach the Choctaw language in their communities. Our goal is to

instill in our people the language that God gifted us with, so that we can pass it to future generations and be the people whom Chihowa (God) intended us to be.

The Choctaw People

The Choctaw people are native to the southeastern United States, have a rich history in North America, and continue to thrive here. Today, the Choctaw nation is composed of over 200,000 people, making the tribe the third largest in the country.

The Choctaw people originally lived in the Mississippi, Alabama, and Louisiana regions and prospered, along with the Choctaw language, in the Mississippi River Valley for more than 1,000 years before the Europeans made contact. Most of the tribal members were uprooted and relocated to southeastern Oklahoma during what is now known as the "Trail of Tears." In 1830, Congress passed the Indian Removal Act, and the Choctaw were among several tribes of the southeastern United States that were forcibly moved west. Also moved were the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Seminole, and Creek tribes. The Choctaw people were the first to be removed, and that relocation served as a model for the other relocations. As they were forced west, many Native American people suffered from disease, exposure, starvation, and violence at the hands of soldiers, and many died. A small number of Choctaw people resisted this relocation and remained in the Mississippi area, while a new nation of Choctaw people arose in Oklahoma. As a result, there are now two main Choctaw groups: the Oklahoma Choctaw and the Mississippi Choctaw.

The Choctaw Language

Choctaw is a Native American language in the Muskogean language family. Both Choctaw and the closely related Chickasaw language are classified as Western Muskogean languages.

The Choctaw language is intricate and elegant, but like many other Native American languages, it faces endangerment. Efforts through schools, nonprofit organizations, and tribes have been established to revitalize the language. Although tribes still face obstacles, such as finding teachers and education materials, many programs, including [the School of Choctaw Language](#) in Oklahoma, have been very successful and continue to thrive.

It is estimated that only about 30% of Oklahoma Choctaw people are Choctaw speakers, but approximately 90% of Mississippi Choctaw people speak the language. Most of the current Choctaw speakers are over 45 years old, but efforts are being made to change this, and Choctaw schools are springing up to reverse language shift. After the Indian Self-Determination and Education

Assistance Act was passed in 1975, the tribal government launched a movement to enroll more Choctaw people in the tribe, increase voter registration, and maintain the Choctaw language.

Choctaw Dialects

The Mississippi Choctaw speak three primary dialects, based on community of residence: Bogue Chitto (Northern Mississippi Choctaw), Central Mississippi Choctaw, and Southern Mississippi Choctaw. Oklahoma Choctaw has an unknown number of dialects due to the fact that differences among these dialects are primarily idiolectal (i.e., unique to individuals) rather than regional (Broadwell, 2006).

Dialect differences in modern Choctaw are minor and are primarily lexical. For example, the word for *onion* is different in the Oklahoma dialect, the Bogue Chitto (Northern Mississippi) dialect, and the other Mississippi dialects:

[hatōfala:ha]	Oklahoma Choctaw
[na:koso:ma]	Bogue Chitto (Northern Mississippi)
[fatʃonna]	Other Mississippi Choctaw

Some dialect differences that appear to be idiolectal rather than regional include the following:

Initial short vowels dropped in some words
e.g., [iskali] vs. [skali] "money"

Alternations of /s/ and /ʃ/ in word-final position
e.g., [issif] vs. [issis] "blood"

Assimilation of /h/ to a following consonant
e.g., [chahta] vs. [chatta] "Choctaw"

Variation of short vowels in the first syllable
e.g., [kowa:fa] vs. [kawa:fa] "to be short"

(Adapted from Broadwell, 2006)

Phonology

Consonants

Choctaw has 16 consonants. Most are pronounced similarly to English consonants. These consonants are represented in the chart below using the International Phonetic Alphabet.

		Labial	Alveolar		Alveo-Palatal	Velar	Glottal
			Central	Lateral			
Nasal		m	n				
Plosive	Voiced	b					
	Voiceless	p	t			k	ʔ
Fricative		f	s	ʃ	ʃ		h
Affricate					tʃ		
Lateral			l				
Approximant		w			j		

Choctaw Consonants (adapted from Broadwell, 2006)

There are no voiced counterparts to /t/ and /k/ (/d/ and /g/) in Choctaw, because whenever a voiced consonant occurs immediately after one of these sounds, epenthesis occurs—that is, a schwa-like vowel sound is inserted between the two consonants to break up the consonant cluster and prevent voicing of the earlier consonant (e.g., *ikbi* “to make” is pronounced as [ikəbi]).

Vowels

Choctaw has 9 vowels, distinguished by length and nasality. In this chart of Choctaw vowels, long vowels are indicated with a colon, and nasal vowels are indicated with a tilde. Vowel length is not a contrastive feature of Choctaw. (That is, using a short or long vowel does not change the meaning of a word.)

	Front	Central	Back
Open		a a: ã	
Mid-Closed			o o: õ
Closed	i i: ĩ		

Choctaw Vowels (adapted from Broadwell, 2006)

Tenseness, a feature that describes the relative height and tension of the tongue during pronunciation, is also not a contrastive feature in Choctaw. In English vowels, tenseness is a phonologically contrastive feature; for example, the word *beet* has a tense vowel, and *bit* contains its lax counterpart. Vowels in Choctaw are phonologically tense but can be pronounced as lax in certain environments. Long vowels are usually tense, open syllables vary in tenseness, and closed syllables are usually lax.

Other Phonological Features

Choctaw is a pitch accent language, which means it uses pitch variations to give prominence to specific syllables (much like stress is used in English). Pitch alone does not differentiate otherwise similar words, with one exception:

tanáp = war
tánap = turnip

Pitch accent is predictable in verbs but unpredictable in nouns. Pitch accent is written only when it occurs on a non-final syllable.

Choctaw exhibits a rule of rhythmic lengthening. Even-numbered, non-final consonant-vowel (CV) syllables are lengthened. This rule encounters many complications, such as determining where the syllable count begins and ends, but generally the rule manifests in this way:

¹ ² ³ ⁴
/sa.la.ha.-tok./ → [sala:hatok] "He was slow."
¹ ² ³
/no.ko.wa-h./ → [noko:wah] "She is angry."

(example from Broadwell, 2006)

Orthography

Choctaw uses the Roman alphabet and is composed of the following letters:

Letters	Phonetic Key
A a	<i>a</i> as in <i>father</i> , <i>above</i> , and <i>tub</i>
B b	as it is in English
Ch ch	<i>ch</i> as in <i>church</i>
E e	<i>e</i> as in <i>they</i> and short <i>e</i> as in <i>met</i>
F f	as it is in English
H h	as it is in English
I i	<i>i</i> as in <i>marine</i> and short <i>i</i> as in <i>pin</i>
K k	as it is in English
L l	as it is in English
L l	<i>l</i> as in aspirated <i>l</i> (pronounced like <i>lth</i> in <i>health</i> but with more aspiration, air expelled)

M m	as it is in English
N n	as it is in English
O o	<i>o</i> as in <i>note</i> and <i>go</i>
P p	as it is in English
S s	<i>s</i> as in <i>sir</i> , never as in <i>his</i>
Sh sh	<i>sh</i> as in <i>shall</i>
T t	as it is in English
U u	<i>oo</i> as in <i>wool</i> or <i>u</i> as in <i>full</i>
W w	<i>w</i> as in <i>war</i> and <i>we</i>
Y y	<i>y</i> as in <i>you</i>

Diphthongs

Ai ai	<i>i</i> as in <i>pine</i>
Au au	<i>ow</i> as in <i>now</i> and <i>how</i>

Nasalized Vowels

an	Nasalized vowels are written differently in the different dialects and are marked by writing a nasal consonant after the vowel, placing a line over the vowel, or underlining the vowel, as in the examples shown here.
ō	
<u>u</u>	

Three main orthographies are Traditional Choctaw Orthography, Mississippi Choctaw Orthography, and Modified Traditional Orthography (Broadwell, 2006).

Traditional Choctaw Orthography was used by 19th century missionaries in producing translations of the Bible. This writing system did not mark vowel length but did mark a tense/lax vowel distinction. Nasal vowels were marked by underlining or by writing a nasal consonant after the vowel. Traditional orthography would sometimes break up long words into shorter units, so that in certain phrases the orthographic units do not correspond to morphemes.

Mississippi Choctaw Orthography was designed in the 1970s by the bilingual education program of the Mississippi band of Choctaw Indians. This writing system was used in producing materials for the reservation schools. Nasal vowels are represented with a line over the vowel, and vowel length is irregularly indicated by an accent or a macron; the sounds /ʃ/, /tʃ/, and /ʔ/ are represented orthographically as š, č, and † respectively.

Modified Traditional Orthography is the writing system most often used by linguists writing Choctaw. This writing system uses only *o*, *a*, and *i* for vowel sounds and marks vowel length by doubling letters. Nasalization is indicated by underlining, and word divisions reflect those in the spoken language. Pitch is marked by an acute accent, and glottal stops are marked by an apostrophe.

Letter	Phoneme
a	/a/
aa	/a:/
i	/i/
ii	/i:/
o	/o/
oo	/o:/
sh	/ʃ/
ch	/tʃ/
lh	/ʔ/
'	/ʔ/

(Adapted from Broadwell, 2006)

Here is a Bible passage written in the three orthographies.

“Suffer the little children to come unto me...” (Bible, Matthew 19:14)
 /alla tʃipōta-jat am-al-ahi: -jā haʃ -im-ahni/

Traditional Orthography	ulla chipunta yut um ula hi a hush im ahni
Mississippi Orthography	alla čipōta amalahiyā hašimahni
Modified Traditional Orthography	alla chipotayət amalahiiya hashimahni

Grammar

Choctaw usually exhibits subject-object-verb (SOV) word order when there are both overt subjects and overt objects. OSV and SVO sentences are uncommon but possible. (See Broadwell, 2006, for discussion.)

References

Broadwell, G. A. (2006). *A Choctaw reference grammar*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska.

Additional Resources

Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma website: <http://www.choctawnation.com/culture-heritage/>

Native Languages of the Americas. (n.d.). Muskogean language family. In *Preserving and promoting American Indian languages*. Retrieved from <http://www.native-languages.org/fammus.htm>

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[Search](#) for Choctaw heritage language programs in the Alliance programs database.

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This Heritage Voices (Choctaw) Profile was prepared by Sandra Lamplugh, Jacqueline López, and Corinne Seals for the Alliance for the Advancement of Heritage Languages, Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL), Washington DC.

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