

CHIKASHSHANOMPA' ILANOMPOLA'CHI

[WE WILL SPEAK CHICKASAW]:

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CHICKASAW LANGUAGE

DECLINE AND REVITALIZATION



KARI A. B. CHEW
UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA



YAKHOOKAY [THANK YOU] TO THE CHICKASAW FOUNDATION AND
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December 30, 2013, marked a monumental loss for the Chickasaw Nation as it mourned the passing of its last monolingual speaker. Born in the 1920s, this valued elder surely witnessed unprecedented and relentless change within her community as mainstream American values were increasingly imposed on and even embraced by other Chickasaws. In the face of hostile federal policies that sought termination of tribal governments and the assimilation of Native people into mainstream society, the continued use of the Chickasaw language—*Chikashshanompa'*—as a sole language of communication reflects, in many ways, a remarkable act of resistance.

Of approximately 55,000 Chickasaw citizens, only sixty to seventy elders speak *Chikashshanompa'* as a first language.¹ These numbers mark a significant decline from the estimated one thousand speakers in 1994.² Recognizing the critical need to preserve *Chikashshanompa'* for future generations, language revitalization has emerged as a small and dynamic project fueled by a dedicated group

of Chickasaw citizens and allies. This article begins with a historical overview of language decline followed by a discussion of past and contemporary *Chikashshanompa'* preservation and revitalization. With this context in place, the author argues that to learn, teach, and speak *Chikashshanompa'* is a choice, albeit one complicated by a history of oppression. By making this choice, Chickasaw citizens demonstrate resistance, honor their ancestors and elder speakers, and ensure the continuance of language and culture for future generations.

Language Decline in the Chickasaw Community

The story of language decline in most communities is inseparable from a larger narrative of the oppression by dominant groups.³ For many Indigenous peoples, the story begins with the invasion of their homelands by Europeans. For the Chickasaws, this contact first occurred in the 1540s and was not as immediately

detrimental to the language as it had been for other nations whose populations were drastically reduced by foreign diseases. In fact, the decline of *Chikashshanompa'* occurred relatively slowly for more than two hundred years following Hernando de Soto's first expedition through Chickasaw homelands in the Tombigbee Highlands of what is now northeastern Mississippi.⁴

¹Kat Chow, "What Happens When A Language's Last Monolingual Speaker Dies?" *National Public Radio*, January 8, 2014, <http://www.npr.org/blogs/codeswitch/2014/01/07/260555554/what-happens-when-a-languages-last-monolingual-speaker-dies>.

²Joshua D. Hinson and JoAnn Ellis, "Master Apprentice Program at the Chickasaw Nation," *National Indian Education Association News* 39, no. 4 (2008): 22.

³Anna Ash, Jessie Little Doe Fermino, and Ken Hale, "Diversity in Local Language Maintenance and Restoration: A Reason for Optimism," in *The Green Book of Language Revitalization in Practice*, ed. Leanne Hinton and Ken Hale (San Diego: Academic Press, 2001), 19-35.

⁴Richard Green, "The Road to Sovereignty: The Chickasaw Grassroots Movement of the 1950s," in *Chickasaw Lives*, vol. 1: *Explorations in Tribal History*, ed. Richard Green (Ada: Chickasaw Press, 2007), 169.

By the turn of the nineteenth century, however, the political climate in the United States was hostile and federal Indian policy was becoming increasingly aggressive toward American Indian peoples. Thomas Jefferson actively pursued a vision of Manifest Destiny by encouraging American traders to extend credit to the Chickasaw and other Nations with the hope that accumulated debt would force them to cede their lands.⁵ Through four treaties signed within the first two decades of the nineteenth century, Chickasaws lost twenty million acres to the federal government, diminishing their once extensive homelands to 495,000 acres in northern Mississippi and northwest Alabama.⁶ Scholar Duane Champagne (Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa) writes that, having been pressured to sell their lands, many Chickasaws “became homeless and destitute.”⁷

In 1830, President Andrew Jackson issued an ultimatum: the Chickasaw people either relocate to Indian Territory (now Oklahoma) or surrender all political autonomy as a nation. Concerned with their survival as a people, Chickasaws entered into a seven-year period of negotiation with the federal government to identify a suitable land base. The search proved futile. With few remaining alternatives, Chickasaw leaders consented to have their people join the Choctaw Nation in Indian Territory as Choctaw citizens.⁸ Between 1837 and 1839, Chickasaws made the long journey from their homelands in the southeast to unfamiliar land west of the Mississippi River. This tragic era of Chickasaw history resulted in overwhelming change in every aspect of Chickasaw life, including language. Tribal historian Richard Green writes: “The divide between

the Chickasaw spoken in the eighteenth century and that spoken today is particularly wide because of the profound disruption to the Chickasaw’s continuity caused by their forced removal.”⁹

Deprived of resources and national identity, Chickasaws struggled to rebuild their lives in Indian Territory. A faction of less conservative Chickasaws recognized that the ability to communicate with and understand the dominant Anglo society could ensure stability during uncertain times. The late Reverend Jesse Humes, a *Chikashshanompa*’ speaker, explains: “Ever since the Chickasaws gave up their homes east of the Mississippi River to move to an unknown land called Indian Territory, now part of the state of Oklahoma, they have been determined that their children must be educated in order to be able to understand the white man’s ways.”¹⁰ Chickasaws turned to education as a means to increase English literacy among their youth.¹¹

The first of the Chickasaw schools was founded in 1844 through a partnership with missionaries.¹² By 1856, Chickasaws had reestablished their nation with a new constitution and government system,¹³ and, within three years, four additional Chickasaw boarding schools were opened.¹⁴ The Chickasaw boarding school era, which would last until Oklahoma statehood in 1907,¹⁵ greatly impacted the Chickasaw people as a whole and played a significant role in determining the fate of the Chickasaw Nation.

Notably, the boarding school era marked a complicated time in Chickasaw history. The opening of successful schools represented a significant act of self-determination during a time when the federal government was actively threatening the sover-



⁵Richard Green, “Forced Removal of the Chickasaws an Epic Tragedy,” in *Chickasaw Lives, vol. 1: Explorations in Tribal History*, ed. Richard Green (Ada: Chickasaw Press, 2007), 77.

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷Duane Champagne, *Social Order and Political Change: Constitutional Governments among the Cherokee, the Choctaw, the Chickasaw, and the Creek* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 163.

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹Richard Green, “Indiana Professor ‘Excavates’ Lost Chickasaw Words,” in *Chickasaw Lives, vol. 1: Explorations in Tribal History*, ed. Richard Green (Ada: Chickasaw Press, 2007), 202.

¹⁰Jesse Humes and Vinnie May James Humes, *A Chickasaw Dictionary* (Norman: Chickasaw Nation, 1973), ix.

¹¹Amanda J. Cobb, *Listening to Our Grandmothers’ Stories: The Bloomfield Academy for Chickasaw Females, 1852-1949* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000).

¹²*Ibid.*, 35.

¹³Duane Champagne, *Social Order and Political Change: Constitutional Governments among the Cherokee, the Choctaw, the Chickasaw, and the Creek* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 198.

¹⁴Amanda J. Cobb, *Listening to Our Grandmothers’ Stories: The Bloomfield Academy for Chickasaw Females, 1852-1949* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 35.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 53.



eighty of American Indian nations. On the other hand, boarding schools resulted in a significant cultural and linguistic shift for many students. Speaking *Chikashshanompa'* was discouraged, and English was esteemed as more effective in securing political, economic, and social success. The notion that English is somehow superior to Indigenous languages has persisted since this time and been reaffirmed for decades by mainstream schooling practices.

Language Preservation and Revitalization Efforts

The widespread conviction that *Chikashshanompa'* was not a language of value in American society endured among many Chickasaws through much of the twentieth century. In 1965, Chickasaw Governor Overton James recognized that these ideologies could result in the extinction of the language within the next few generations and commissioned a *Chikashshanompa'* dictionary.¹⁶ This important step forward, in many ways, marked the beginning of a movement to ensure the continuance of *Chikashshanompa'* for future generations.

Notably, a dictionary project had already been started in 1929 as an Oklahoma Historical Society (OHS)-sponsored project. Unfortunately, neither project director Muriel H. Wright, a Choctaw, nor OHS members had sufficient knowledge of *Chikashshanompa'* to bring the dictionary to fruition.¹⁷ Chickasaw citizens revisited the incomplete project in 1957, but it was not until James funded the project through the tribal trust fund that the dictionary was finalized.¹⁸ In 1973, Reverend Jesse Humes and Vinnie May James

Humes published the first *Chikashshanompa'* dictionary,¹⁹ which continues to function as a critical tool for language preservation and revitalization efforts.

Two decades after the Humes family made important strides in language documentation, linguist Pamela Munro and elder speaker Catherine Willmond published a second *Chikashshanompa'* dictionary. Munro worked with Willmond, along with several other *Chikashshanompa'* speakers in Oklahoma, for seventeen years to produce *Chickasaw: An Analytical Dictionary*.²⁰ This second dictionary differs most significantly from the Humes dictionary in the spelling system, detail of entries, and increased accessibility for many language learners. Recently, Munro and Willmond also published the first *Chikashshanompa'* teaching grammar—*Let's Speak Chickasaw: Chikashshanompa' Kilanompoli'*.²¹ Both texts are considered invaluable to those working to learn and teach *Chikashshanompa'*.

While linguistic materials are vital, the Chickasaw Language Revitalization Program (CLRP) is currently the driving force of language efforts. Established in 2007, the program developed in response to the growing number of Chickasaw citizens looking to language and culture as markers of Chickasaw identity. At present, the CLRP oversees a Master-Apprentice program as its primary language renewal initiative.²² Adapted to meet the needs of the Chickasaw community, the Master-Apprentice model is simple. A language learner and a fluent speaker form a pair that strives to speak only *Chikashshanompa'* together. Typically the pairs meet ten hours per week for about one year. The Master-Apprentice program is currently the Chickasaw Nation's

most effective model for adult language learning, and its capacity has been about twelve to fifteen pairs per year since its inception in 2007.

Additionally, the CLRP oversees additional language programming for children and families, including several camps and clubs. Notably, a group of Chickasaw youth competes annually at the Oklahoma Native American Youth Language Fair in Norman, Oklahoma. The Fair serves as a forum for 600 to 800 American Indian students who are learning their languages to share their work through song, skits, and other presentation. Importantly, these efforts have generated increased awareness of and excitement over *Chikashshanompa'* among youth and their families.

¹⁶Richard Green, "The Road to Sovereignty: The Chickasaw Grassroots Movement of the 1950s," in *Chickasaw Lives, vol. 1: Explorations in Tribal History*, ed. Richard Green (Ada: Chickasaw Press, 2007), 169.

¹⁷Patricia Loughlin, *Hidden Treasures of the American West: Muriel H. Wright, Angie Debo, and Alice Marriott* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006), 37.

¹⁸Richard Green, "The Road to Sovereignty: The Chickasaw Grassroots Movement of the 1950s," in *Chickasaw Lives, vol. 1: Explorations in Tribal History*, ed. Richard Green (Ada: Chickasaw Press, 2007), 169.

¹⁹Jesse Humes and Vinnie May James Humes, *A Chickasaw Dictionary* (Norman: Chickasaw Nation, 1973).

²⁰Pamela Munro and Catherine Willmond, *Chickasaw: An Analytical Dictionary* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994).

²¹Pamela Munro and Catherine Willmond, *Let's Speak Chickasaw: Chikashshanompa' Kilanompoli'* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press in cooperation with the Chickasaw Nation, 2008).

²²The Master-Apprentice model was conceptualized by Leanne Hinton to address the needs of California Indian communities working toward language revitalization. Leanne Hinton with Matt Vera and Nancy Steele, *How to Keep your Language Alive* (Berkeley: Heyday Books, 2001).

The Choice to Speak *Chikashshanompa'*

While Chickasaw ancestors made historically-situated choices to ensure their people's survival, contemporary Chickasaws face new choices as they consider what it means to progress as a sovereign and vibrant community. Gerald Vizenor calls this survivance, writing: "Survivance, in my use of the word, means a native sense of presence, the motion of sovereignty and the will to resist dominance. Survivance is not just survival but also

resistance, not heroic or tragic, but the tease of tradition, and my sense of survivance outwits dominance and victimry."²³ Survivance requires both the acknowledgement of the past and the will to move forward as a people. For many Chickasaws, this notion of survivance necessarily encompasses the continuance of the language.

One elder *Chikashshanompa'* speaker reflects on the importance of language to the Chickasaw people: "[The language] is something we need to hang on to because we were given our language by the Creator. If we don't keep speaking our language,

it will be gone... [Our language] is part of our culture [and] our heritage. [It's] what separates us from everyone else."²⁴

Like this elder, many community members are keenly aware that the language could one day cease to be spoken. To dwell on threats of language "extinction,"²⁵ however, is unproductive. Instead, it is vital to focus on areas of hope and possibility.

In the face of statistics documenting overwhelming rates of language decline, increasing numbers of Chickasaw citizens and families are answering this elder's call by making the choice to learn, teach, and speak *Chikashshanompa'*. In doing so, these Chickasaws resist historic and contemporary forms of oppression and assert continued presence. Their efforts honor the Creator, ancestors, and elder speakers, and ensure the continuance of language and culture for future generations.

²³Gerald Vizenor, *Fugitive Poses: Native American Indian Scenes of Absence and Presence* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 93.

²⁴Thesis filed under author's maiden name. Kari Lewis, "Pomanompa' Kilanompolika Chokma (It is Good that We Speak Our Language): Motivations to Revitalize *Chikashshanompa'* (Chickasaw Language) Across Generations" (master's thesis, University of California, Los Angeles, 2011), 46.

²⁵Wesley Y. Leonard challenges the use of the term "extinction" in referring to indigenous languages. Instead, he proposes that languages go to sleep, leaving open the possibility that they can one day be reawakened. Wesley Y. Leonard, "Challenging 'Extinction' through Modern Miami Language Practices," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 35, no. 2 (2011).



^ Emily Johnson Dickerson with her son, Carlin Thompson, in an undated photo. Dickerson, the last monolingual speaker of the Chickasaw Language, died in December 2013. Thompson serves on the Chickasaw Language Committee.

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