American Indian Languages of the Southeast: An Introduction

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1. Introduction

Figure 1. Some of the World War I Choctaw Code Talkers and their commanding officer. Left to right: Solomon Louis, Mitchell Bobb, James Edwards, Calvin Wilson, and Joseph Davenport, with Capt. E. H. Horner. From Choctaw Nation (2002).

Surveys of Southeastern languages: Swanton (1946), Crawford, ed. (1975), Haas (1979), Hardy and Scancarelli, eds. (in press), Sturtevant (in press), and Martin (in press).

2. The languages of the Southeast

See Table 1 —

Five families: Muskogean, Algonquian, Caddoan, Iroquoian, and Siouan

Seven language isolates: Adai, Atakapa, Calusa, Chitimacha, Tunican, Tawasa, and Yuchi

Three languages that are not included in the Smithsonian Handbook: Powhatan, Quapaw and Mobilian (also called Mohilian Jargon)2

1 Many people have contributed to this paper. William Bright, Wallace Chafe, Ives Goddard, Heather Hardy, Mary Linn, Jack Martin, Douglas Parks, and Robert Runel kindly answered questions or provided crucial material, and members of the UCLA American Indian seminar provided extremely helpful feedback on an earlier version of this talk. My presentation of information about Chickasaw in section 3 owes an incredible debt, as always, to my patient and insightful collaborator Catherine Willmond and the other Chickasaws who have taught me their language. None of us would know as much about Southeastern languages without the pioneering work of James Dorsey, Mary Haas, Horatio Hale, Morris Swadesh, John Swanton, and the others who painstakingly recorded languages that are no longer spoken. Thanks to all.

2 Mobilian is considered by e.g. Crawford (1978) to have originated after first European contact, but this view is controversial (cf. Drechsel e.g. 1997).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Languages</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adai</td>
<td>Adai</td>
<td>Texas, Louisiana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Algonquian</td>
<td>Powhatan</td>
<td>Virginia, New Jersey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atakapa</td>
<td>Atakapa</td>
<td>Texas, Louisiana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caddoan</td>
<td>CADDO (Muskogee), Natchez</td>
<td>Arkansas, Louisiana, Texas, now, Oklahoma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calusa</td>
<td>Calusa</td>
<td>Florida</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chitimacha</td>
<td>(also Chawasha, Washta)</td>
<td>Louisiana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iroquoian</td>
<td>SOUTHERN IROQUOIAN</td>
<td>CHEROKEE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(also Chochia)</td>
<td>North Carolina; now, North Carolina, Oklahoma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muskogean</td>
<td>Apalachee (also Miccosukee)</td>
<td>Alabama, Georgia, Florida, now, Florida</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CREEK (MUSKOGEE-SEMINDLE)</td>
<td>Coosa and Talapoosa Rivers; now, Oklahoma, Florida</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ALABAMA, KOASATI (COUSHATTA)</td>
<td>Middle and upper Tennessee Valley; now, Texas and Louisiana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CHICKASAW</td>
<td>Eastern Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee, now, Mississippi, Louisiana, Oklahoma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(also Chickasaw)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natchezan</td>
<td>Natchez (also Colapissa, Toama)</td>
<td>Mississippi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slouan-Catawban</td>
<td>Slouan</td>
<td>Tutelo (also Saponi-Oseechee)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(also Catawba)</td>
<td>Virginia, lower Mississippi Valley; later, New York</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ofo</td>
<td>Catawba</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Biloxi</td>
<td>lower Mississippi Valley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Quapaw</td>
<td>Arkansas; later, Oklahoma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Catawba</td>
<td>South Carolina, North Carolina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Woccon</td>
<td>North Carolina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timucuan</td>
<td>Timucua</td>
<td>Florida, Georgia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tunica</td>
<td>Alabama</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tunican</td>
<td>Tunica (also Paicha, Griga, Kora, Tion, Yazo)</td>
<td>East of the Mississippi River</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yuchi</td>
<td>YUCHI (EUCHEE)</td>
<td>Upper Tennessee Valley; now, Oklahoma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(contact language)</td>
<td>Mobilian</td>
<td>Lower Mississippi</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Documented languages of the Southeast (based mainly on Goddard 2004 and Martin in press). Names of living languages are in small capitals.
Nine living Southeastern languages (in small caps in the table)\(^1\) are now spoken in Oklahoma, Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, and Florida.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Apparent isolates</th>
<th>Alokisin, Bidu, Chacoto, Eyish, Opelousa, Pakuna, Pascagoula</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Other languages</td>
<td>Congaree, Coree, Cusabo, Guale, Mobila, Monacan, Okcha, Sewee, Shacoore-Eto, Wateroo-Chickasee, Yamassee-Tuskegee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic groups about whose languages we have no information at all</td>
<td>Ammacano, Avney, Bovangulil, Cape Fear, Chica, Hooka and Blackheels, Houna, Keyauwee, Mahtoae, Neuflak, Okelousa, Osochee, Pede, Pensaculla, Quiniba, Saluta, Santee, Sawvoodi, Sampalah, Sugere, Sutere, Tequesta (Tegesta), Toocaba, Tornashan, Waccarnaw, Wadhaw, Wetumpka, Winay</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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\(^3\) I will consider Chickasaw and Choctaw to be separate languages here, though they have been described (e.g. by Pulte 1975) as dialects of a single language. If they are dialects, they are quite divergent, and speakers of Choctaw report substantial difficulty understanding spoken Chickasaw.

\(^4\) Chickasaw, a typical Southeastern language

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### 3. Chickasaw: a typical Southeastern language

Chickasaw: perhaps 200 fluent speakers in Oklahoma.\(^4\)

**Resources:** Pulte (1976), Homes and Homes (1973), Munro and Willmond (1994; in press), Munro (in press), and many technical articles.

#### 3.1 Chickasaw's word order typology

3.1.1. Chickasaw is an SOY language, using subject-object-verb word order:\(^3\)

(1) Ofi'-at kowi'-a lhiyohli.  
   dog-nom cat-acc chase  
   The dog chases the cat

3.1.2. Chickasaw genitive (possessor) nouns precede possessed nouns:

(2) Ihoo im-ofi'-at John ibak-a kisili.  
   woman dat-dog-nom John hand-acc bite  
   The woman's dog bites John's hand

3.1.3. It is standard in SOY languages for adpositions to follow their objects: these languages use postpositions rather than prepositions. Chickasaw is problematical, however; in Chickasaw, adpositional relations are specified with verb prefixes:

3.1.4. Locations can be specified more precisely by the use of relational nouns, but these are not required for specification of the relationship and thus are not adpositions.

(5) Ofi'-at kowk-a lhiyohli.  
   dog-nom house inside-acc cat loc-chase  
   The dog chases the cat inside the house

(6) Ofi'-at kakka' anonka'-a kowi' lhiyohli.  
   dog-nom house inside-acc cat loc-chase  
   The brown dog chases the white cat

(7) *Ofi'-at kakka' anonka'-a kowi' lhiyohli.  
   dog-nom house inside-acc cat loc-chase  
   The dog chases the cat inside the house

3.2. Other typological features of Chickasaw

3.2.1. Chickasaw uses a system of "active" agreement with two groups of pronominal affixes, one (class I) used for most active or transitive subjects, the other (class II) used for most non-active subjects and for most objects. Third person arguments are not marked, but are inferred when a bare verb is used as a full sentence. (Chickasaw does not have sex gender; I use 'he' and 'him' only for convenience, but 'she' and 'her' or 'it' would work just as well as translations.)

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\(^5\) Hale and Salamons (2002) offer a similar argument regarding Minimalist
There are numerous other features that one might consider necessary for a language to be called polysynthetic, such as noun incorporation (which is possessed to one degree or another by most Southeastern languages) or inflectional as opposed to agglutinative structure, which again, all these languages show some evidence of. I am not adopting the theoretical notion of polysynthesis argued for by Baker (1996), an extremely restricted and hence less useful concept (thus, while Baker's paradigmatic example of a polysynthetic language is Mehikan, a Northern Tanoan language, Cherokee, a Southern Tanoan language, would not be considered polysynthetic by Baker's definition, probably no other Southeastern language would either).

4. Southeastern language typology

We do not, in fact, know enough about all the languages of the aboriginal Southeast to say much about their structural features, but we have enough data for many of them to present a brief comparison with the characteristic Muskogean features exemplified above by Chickasaw, showing that there is indeed a Southeastern linguistic type (cf. Rankin in press, Kimball in press). Below I compare a number of languages of the Southeast – Atakapa, Biloxi, Caddo, Catawba, Cherokee, Chickasaw as a representative of Muskogean, Chitimacha, Euchee, Natchez, Ofo, Quapaw, and Tunica – with regard to the six typological traits described above: 7

- **SOV word order is widespread in the Southeast, as illustrated by the following examples:**


  (17a) **ga** **xohi** di **a** **ya** ca xì kà **person old the people killed many when**

- **Gen N, possessor-possessed order in possessive noun phrases:**

- **N P, noun-postposition order in adpositional phrases (in some cases, these may be peripheral "postpositional" cases like that of Chickasaw, these are, at least, non-prepositional);**

- **N Adj, noun-adjective order in adjectival phrases;**

- **Active agreement marked for pronominal arguments (with one class of agreement markers indicating active intransitive and transitive subjects and a second class indicating non-active intransitive subjects and transitive objects);**

- **Poly synthetic verbal structure, in which a verb (or verb complex) may stand alone as a complete sentence, indicating pronominal subject and object as well as such other concepts as causative, negation, tense and aspect, modality, and so on.**

4.1. **SOV word order is widespread in the Southeast, as illustrated by the following examples:**

- **Biloxi** (Einaudi 1976: 168)

  (17a) *ya xohi di ya ca xì kà* **person old the people killed many when**

  (17b) *the old woman killed many people*...
Catawba (Shea 1984: 56)

(17b) tə'isi ye tchaXáire 'the dog (they say) bit the man' 
dog man BITE

Chitimacha (Swadesh 1946)

(17c) we panš kif hi getlı 'that man killed a dog'
that man dog KILL

Euchee (Linn 2004)

(17d) Sissy Sonny syothashane. 'Sissy loves Sonny'
Sissy Sonny CARE.ABOUT

Natchez (Kimball in press)

(17e) 'loheti:mu-c cantaw pego-ş-al-ık ūo-piti-ne... 
'wildcat-erg rail split-qt-aux-conj qt-be.about-when
When Wildcat was around splitting rails, so it is said....'

Tunica (Haas 1946)

(19b) ta'ri-ha'yiS 'above the house'
house-above

Quapaw (Rankin in press)

(19c) ill mathe 'under the water'
water un'der

4.4. For the most part, adjectival modifiers follow the noun, as in (20). Generally these 'adjectives' are actually stative verbs that do not appear to form a distinct syntactic category.

4.2. Next, genitive nouns precede possessed nouns, as in the following examples:

Chitimacha (Swadesh 1946)

(18a) we panš kif 'that man's dog'
that man dog

Cherokee (Pulte and Feeling 1975)

(18b) wi'ji u'je'liři da'gwə ?e'le 'Bill's car'
Bill his car

4.3. Third, these languages are postpositional rather than prepositional: generally they have separate postposed adpositions or suffixed case marking. (The Chickasaw case, as discussed in 3.14, is exceptional, yet still suggestive of non-prepositional typology.)

Catawba (Shea 1984)

(19a) sák mutti 'in the mountains'
mountain in

Catawba (Shea 1984)

(19b) 'lo'ni-Iapti 'good people'
people-good

12 Swadesh argues that 'good' is syntactically substantive here (326).
4.5. Most languages also have an active agreement system like that described above for Chickasaw, and are polysynthetic, in that verbs may function as complete sentences, marked for pronominal subject and object and numerous other grammatical elements.

4.6. However, some features of certain Southeastern languages do not fit the typological profile we have been developing; however,

4.61. Noun-adjective order is not universal.

4.62. Not all Southeastern languages use active agreement.

4.63. In various respects Cherokee – easily the best known Southeastern language – emerges as most divergent of these languages.

4.64. Table 3 below shows how 17 languages examined fit the Southeastern model. (Although there are only 11 lines in the chart, the table provides data on 17 languages.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Word Order Type</th>
<th>Active agreement</th>
<th>Polysynthetic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Atakapa</td>
<td>SOV Gen N NP N Adj</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biloxi, Ofo</td>
<td>yes yes yes no always</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caddo</td>
<td>yes yes yes only in verbal phrase</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catawba</td>
<td>yes yes yes yes</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cherokee</td>
<td>yes prig matie</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chickasaw, Muskogean (6 languages)</td>
<td>yes yes yes yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chitimache</td>
<td>yes yes yes some</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enachee</td>
<td>yes yes yes yes yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natchez</td>
<td>yes yes yes yes yes yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quapaw</td>
<td>yes yes yes yes yes yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tunica</td>
<td>yes yes yes yes yes yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Typological comparison of representative Southeastern languages. *Yes* in a cell indicates the presence of that feature. Atypical cells are shaded.

Other typical Southeastern features include a widespread absence of noun plurals, the presence of classificatory verbs, the use of directional preverbs or particles, and the extensive use of positional verbs to specify not only position but also such features as aspect.

5. The enduring presence of Southeastern languages in the South

5.1. The most immediately apparent linguistic reminder of the American Indian presence in the South is, of course, in placenames.

For example, Tuscaloosa comes from the Choctaw *Tushka Losa* 'Black Warrior'; the name has appeared on maps of Alabama territory since at least 1753 (cf. Bright, ed. in press).

One of most famous Southern placenames of Indian origin, however, is thought to have been an author's creation. Faulkner's name for "Yoknapatawpha County" came, he said, from a Chickasaw word meaning "water flowing slow through the flatland".

Kinney (1996) has connected the word, rather, to *yaakni* 'land' plus *patafa* 'split, furrowed'. But this raises a question: why should *yaakni* plus *patafa* give *Yoknapatawpha*?

(21) *yaakni a-patafa* > *yaaknaapatafa* 'Yoknapatawpha', i.e. 'where the land is split'

And, indeed, if flat land has water running through it, whether slow or fast, it will be split there – so Faulkner's translation is not so far off the mark. Where, though, did Faulkner, who presumably knew no Chickasaw, learn this word?

5.2. Most Southeastern languages are now extinct, and all those that are still spoken are seriously endangered (they are losing speakers much faster than they are gaining them). Their potential – indeed, regrettably, almost certain – loss is an important humanitarian, cultural, and intellectual concern.

Why should we care about endangered languages?

- Languages reflect much of their speakers' culture and experience. A society's knowledge and expressions are inevitably lost with the loss of language.
- Data from little known languages can prove important for scholars in a variety of fields: historians studying old records, those attempting to understand placenames and other geographical terms, linguists attempting to discover the interrelationships of related languages in a family, ethnobotanists studying popular uses for plants (which may be reflected in their names), and others surveying kinship and other cultural systems, and so on.
- Linguistic diversity is one of the most visible and important aspects of cultural diversity. Language loss thus diminishes mankind's cultural diversity.
- Differences among languages provide valuable insight into how cognitive processes are actualized in language; such differences are part of biological diversity. A language's passing reduces the diversity of human expressive power.
- The people who are affected most by the loss of a language, however, are the members of that ethnic group. I have met many Indians whose languages are critically endangered or already lost, and they feel the loss of the cultural connection and knowledge very deeply.

While introducing you to the linguistic structure of the languages of the aboriginal Southeast in this talk today, I hope I have shown you how interesting these languages are and convinced you that the indigenous languages of the Southeast are a valuable — and critically threatened — part of Southern heritage.

References


Broadwell, George A. 1990. *Extending the Binding Theory: A Muskogean Case Study*. UCLA Ph.D.

13 According to Padgett (2001), Kinney (1996: 21-22) deduces the meaning to be "plowed or cultivated land or district". That is of course possible but does not fit as well with Faulkner's rendering.