

Muskogean Languages

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Summary

The Muskogean languages are a family of languages indigenous to the southeastern United States. Members of the family include Chickasaw, Choctaw, Alabama, Koasati, Apalachee, Hitchiti-Mikasuki, and Muskogee (Creek). The trade language Mobilian Jargon is based on Muskogean vocabulary and grammar.

Keywords

Muskogean, Alabama, Apalachee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek, Hitchiti, Koasati, Mikasuki, Muskogee, Mobilian Jargon.

Distribution

When Europeans began exploring the southeastern United States, the Muskogean languages were spoken in what is now Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee, Georgia, and north Florida. In 2015 they were spoken in Oklahoma, Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Florida.

Internal classification

All linguists recognize that the Muskogean languages constitute a family of related languages thought to descend from Proto-Muskogean. Table 1, for example, shows related words for ‘foot’ and ‘dog’ in IPA showing inalienable and alienable possessive prefixes in each language.

Table 1. Inalienable and alienable possessive prefixes (Martin 2004:71).

<u>Choctaw:</u>	<u>Alabama:</u>	<u>Mikasuki:</u>	<u>Muskogee:</u>	<u>English:</u>
ijji	ijji	i:ji	ilí	‘his/her foot’
sa-jji	ʈʂa-jji	ʈʂa-:ji	ʈʂa-lí	‘my foot’
ʈʂi-jji	ʈʂi-jji	ʈʂi-:ji	ʈʂi-lí	‘your foot’
pi-jji	po-jji	po-:ji	po-lí	‘our feet’
ofi	ifa	i:fi	ifá	‘dog’
am-ófi	am-ifa	am-i:fi	am-ífa	‘my dog’
ʈʂim-ófi	ʈʂim-ifa	ʈʂim-i:fi	ʈʂim-ífa	‘your dog’
pim-ófi	pom-ifa	pom-i:fi	pom-ífa	‘our dog’

There is also agreement on the low-level grouping of languages within the Muskogean family. All linguists appear to accept the groups in Table 2.

Table 2. The Muskogean family (Martin 2004:71).

- a. Chickasaw-Choctaw: Chickasaw, Choctaw
- b. Alabama-Koasati: Alabama, Koasati
- c. Apalachee
- d. Hitchiti-Mikasuki
- e. Muskogee (Creek, Seminole Creek)

Of the five groups in Table 2, the Chickasaw-Choctaw and Muskogee groups are the furthest apart lexically and grammatically. Haas (1979:306) suggests that Alabama-Koasati and Hitchiti-Mikasuki were “more or less pulled between these two poles.” Groups (b-e), for example, appear to share a development of final *iho to /o/ (Haas 1979, Booker 1988). This group is sometimes called Eastern Muskogean; the Chickasaw-Choctaw group is then called Western Muskogean. Groups (a-d) share a development of Proto-Muskogean *k^w to /b/ (Haas 1947, Booker 1993). This group is sometimes called Southern Muskogean (Swanton 1922, Munro 1985, 1987, 1993). Finally, groups (b) and (d) are sometimes grouped into a Central Muskogean (Booker 1993).

Some of the phonological correspondences in the family can be seen in Table 3 (modified slightly from Martin 2004:72, based on Haas 1941, 1969 and Booker 2005).

Table 3. Developments in the Muskogean languages (Martin 2004:72).

	‘fish’	‘male’	‘mulberry’	‘yellow’
Proto-Muskogean	* $\text{ŋ}\text{a}\text{i}\text{h}\text{o}$	*nakni	*k ^w ihi	*lakna
Chickasaw	nani?	nakni?	bihi?	lakna
Choctaw	náni	nákni	bíhi	lakna
Alabama	łało	na:ni	bihi ‘fig’	la:na
Koasati	łało	na:ni	bihi ‘fig’	la:na
Mikasuki	ła:l-i	nakn-i	bi:h-i	lakn-i
Muskogee	łałó	honánwa	kí:	lá:n-i:

As Table 3 shows, /n/ in Chickasaw and Choctaw corresponds to /h/ or /n/ in the other languages. In this case, Haas (1969) reconstructed a voiceless nasal in Proto-Muskogean. The words for ‘fish’ show final /i(?)/ in Chickasaw and Choctaw, corresponding to /o/ in the other languages. Booker (1988) reconstructed final *iho for correspondences like this. In the set for ‘mulberry’, we see /k/ in Muskogee corresponding to /b/ in the other languages. Here Haas (1947) reconstructed *k^w.

Basic sources on the classification of the family include Booker (1988, 1993), Haas (1941, 1947, 1979), Martin (1994), and Munro (1985, 1987, 1993). Studies reconstructing aspects of Proto-

Muskogean include Booker (1980, 1988, 1993, 2005), Broadwell (1993), Haas (1941, 1946, 1950, 1969, 1977), Kimball (1992), Martin (1994), Munro (1993), and Martin and Munro (2005).

Phonology

Most of the languages in the family have the consonant phonemes in Table 4.

Table 4. Consonant phonemes in IPA.

	Labial	Alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
stops/affricate	p b	t	tʃ	k	
fricatives	f	s ʃ			h
nasals	m	n			
approximants	w	l	j		

The phoneme /f/ may be rounded in some of the languages, leading some authors to use the symbol /ɸ/. In Hitchiti-Mikasuki, the phoneme /s/ is generally palatal.

Muskogee differs in lacking /b/, the only voiced obstruent in the other languages. In this case Proto-Muskogean *k^w is thought to have developed as /b/ in all the languages except Muskogee, where *k^w merges with *k or *p (Haas 1947, Booker 1993).

Choctaw and Chickasaw differ in having an additional fricative /ʃ/. Chickasaw has a phonemic glottal stop (Munro and Willmond 1994).

The Muskogean languages all have the vowel phonemes in Table 5.

Table 5. Vowel phonemes in IPA.

non-open	i i: ï	o o: õ
open	a a: ã	

Nasal vowels are phonetically long unless followed in the same syllable by a sonorant. Nasal vowels have a more restricted distribution than oral vowels.

All the Muskogean languages make some use of tone. Tone in nouns is generally fairly limited, but all the languages make pitch distinctions in verbs to express grammatical aspect. The different pitch patterns (sometimes accompanied by nasalization, aspiration, etc.) are referred to as “grades”. In Koasati, for example, a pattern of low tone followed by high tone is used on the last two syllables of a verb for events. Rising tone on the same syllable indicates a resulting state (Gordon, Martin, and Langley 2015):

(1) *ì:sí-l*
pick.up.LOW.TONE.GRADE-1SG.AGENT
'I am picking it up' (=EVENT)

(2) *ĩ:si-l*
pick.up.RISING.TONE.GRADE-1SG.AGENT
'I am holding it' (=RESULTING STATE)

Depending on the context, a verb stem in Koasati can appear without tone, with low tone, or with rising tone.

Grammar

All members of the family have basic subject, object, verb word order. Case marking appears at the ends of noun phrases and distinguishes subjects from non-subjects (including patients, goals, and locations). In Muskogee (Creek), for example, the subject case is *-(i)t* and the non-subject case is *-(i)n* (Martin 2011:22ff, spelled here in IPA):

(3) *ifá-t* *wo:hk-ís*
dog-SUBJECT bark.LENGTHENED.GRADE-INDICATIVE
'the dog is barking'

(4) *ifá-t* *pó:si-n* *á:ssi:ʃ-ís*
dog-SUBJECT cat-NONSUBJECT chase.LENGTHENED.GRADE-INDICATIVE
'the dog is chasing the cat'

(The variants *-it* and *-in* are found after consonants; *-t* and *-n* are found after vowels.) The same suffixes appear at the ends of clauses, where they indicate switch-reference:

(5) *ifá-t* *wo:hk-ít* *pó:si-n*
dog-SUBJECT bark.LENGTHENED.GRADE-SAME cat-NONSUBJECT

á:ssi:ʃ-ís
chase.LGR-INDICATIVE
'the dog is barking and chasing the cat'

(6) *ifá-t* *wo:hk-ín* *pó:si-t*
dog-SUBJECT bark.LENGTHENED.GRADE-DIFF cat-SUBJ

á:ssi:ʃ-ís

chase.LENGTHENED.GRADE-INDICATIVE

‘the dog is barking and the cat is chasing him’

In (5), *wo:hk-ít* is used because the subject of that clause is the same as the following clause. In contrast, *wo:hk-ín* is used in (6) to signal a change in subject. In Muskogee, then, *-(i)t* is used for subject or same-subject, and *-(i)n* is used for non-subject or different-subject.

The Muskogean languages all have affixes on verbs agreeing with first and second person arguments. (Third person is generally not marked.) These person markers are divided into an agentive series (typically used for actions that are controlled) and a non-agentive series (typically used for states or actions that are not done intentionally). In Muskogee, for example, running, singing, and working are done deliberately. The first person singular agentive suffix *-ej-* is therefore used with verbs expressing these actions:

(7) *li:tk-éj-s*

run.SG.LENGTHENED.GRADE-1SG.AGENTIVE-INDICATIVE

‘I am running’

jahejk-éj-s

sing.LENGTHENED.GRADE-1SG.AGENTIVE-INDICATIVE

‘I am singing’

ato:tk-éj-s

work.LENGTHENED.GRADE-1SG.AGENTIVE-INDICATIVE

‘I am working’

In contrast, being hungry, falling, and wanting are not done deliberately. The first person singular nonagentive prefix *ʃa-* is used with verbs expressing these concepts:

(8) *ʃa-láw-i:-s*

1SG.NONAGENTIVE-hungry-DURATIVE-INDICATIVE

‘I am hungry’

ʃa-latêyk-is

1SG.NONAGENTIVE-fall.HGR-INDICATIVE

‘I fell down’

ʃa-jâ:ʃ-is

1SG.NONAGENTIVE-want.FGR-INDICATIVE

‘I want it’

Agentive and non-agentive appear to be the best semantic labels for these two series of person markers. There are uses in each language, however, where these labels may require further explanation. In Koasati, for example, *sobbǎjli-l* ‘I know’/‘I have learned’ uses the agentive series (with first singular agentive *-l(i)* in Koasati), while the negative form *ʃa-sobǎj-kō* ‘I don’t know’ uses the non-agentive series. Here the agentive series presumably reflects greater accomplishment. Similarly, most numerals are verbs in the Muskogean languages and use the agentive series for their subjects (again, possibly reflecting the idea that a certain number has been achieved).

A dative series of person markers may be used for participants that are less directly involved in a situation (typically used for benefactives, goals, sources, or experiencers). In Muskogee, the first person singular dative prefix is *am-*:

(9) *am-óna:j-ís*

1SG.DATIVE-tell.LENGTHENED.GRADE-INDICATIVE

‘he/she is telling it to me’

The non-agentive and dative series are also used for possessors on nouns. Returning to the data in Table 1, a Muskogee noun like *ilí* ‘(his/her) foot’ is inalienable. It uses the non-agentive series of person markers (10). A noun like *ifá* ‘dog’ is alienable. It uses the dative series of person markers (11):

(10) *ʃa-lí*

1SG.NONAGENTIVE-foot

‘my foot’

(11) *am-ífa*

1SG.DATIVE-dog

‘my dog’

A full noun phrase possessor precedes the possessed item:

(12) *ma hoktí: ilí*

that woman foot

‘that woman’s foot’

- (13) *ma hoktí: im-ífa*
 that woman DATIVE-dog
 ‘that woman’s dog’

Demonstratives as independent words follow nouns in Choctaw and Chickasaw, though they precede them in the other languages. Numerals and words translating as adjectives follow nouns in all the languages.

The Muskogean languages vary in the number of tense distinctions they have. Choctaw is described as having two past tenses (Nicklas 1979; Broadwell 2006:171): *-tok* ‘past, perfect’ and *-tto:k* ‘distant past’. Muskogee has five past tenses, from Past 1 (earlier today or last night) to Past 5 (very long ago) (Martin 2011).

Verbs in the Muskogean languages that refer to motion or position often also encode the number of participants involved in the action. In Chickasaw (Munro and Willmond 2008:176-177, 278-279), some verbs have a two-way distinction between singular and plural:

- (14) *malili* ‘to run (singular subject)’
tila: ‘to run (plural subject)’
- kanija* ‘to go away (singular subject)’
tamowa ‘to go away (plural subject)’

Other verbs may indicate a three-way distinction between singular, dual, or triplural (indicating more than two):

- (15) *wájjaʔa* ‘to exist, be in (a place) (singular subject)’
wájjoʔwa ‘to exist, be in (a place) (dual subject)’
wajowat má: ‘to exist, be in (a place) (triprural subject)’

Verbs in the Muskogean languages also offer an array of choices for marking applicatives, direction, and evidentiality.

Individual languages

Chickasaw

Until the 1830s, the Chickasaw were primarily concentrated in the northeastern part of what is now Mississippi. During the 1830s and 1840s, they were forcibly relocated to Indian Territory. The Chickasaw Nation was established in the south-central portion of Indian Territory, which

became the state of Oklahoma in 1907. In 2015, Chickasaw had fewer than 75 speakers (Joshua D. Hinson, p.c.).

Chickasaw did not have a widely-accepted spelling until the publication of Munro and Willmond (1994). In this system, the consonants are represented as ' /ʔ/, *b*, *ch* /tʃ/, *f*, *h*, *k*, *l*, *lh* /l/, *m*, *n*, *p*, *s*, *sh* /ʃ/, *t*, *w*, and *y* /j/. The vowels are short *a*, *i*, *o*; long *aa* /a:/, *ii* /i:/, *oo* /o:/; and nasal *a* /ã/, *i* /ĩ/, and *o* /õ/.

Humes and Humes (1973) is an English-Chickasaw dictionary. Munro and Willmond (1994) is a bilingual Chickasaw-English dictionary. Munro (2005) gives an overview of the language and an analyzed text. Munro and Willmond (2008) is a textbook. Hinson, Dyson, and Munro (2012) is a book of Christian prayers in Chickasaw and English.

Choctaw

Choctaw is spoken in the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma and in the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians. The numbers of speakers in Oklahoma have been declining rapidly: no accurate information currently exists.

Missionaries such as Cyrus Byington and Alfred Wright developed a writing system for Choctaw in the 19th century. In this system, the consonants are represented as *b*, *ch* /tʃ/, *f*, *h*, *k*, *l*, *hl* (before a vowel) or *lh* /l/, *m*, *n*, *p*, *s*, *sh* /ʃ/, *t*, *w*, and *y* /j/. The vowels are short *v* /a/, *i* /i/, *u* or *o* /o/; long *a* /a:/, *i* or *e* /i:/, *o* /o:/; and nasal *a* /ã/, *i* /ĩ/, and *o* /õ/. Mississippi Choctaw has a newer alphabet in which *lh* is used for /l/ and in which the vowels are short *a*, *i*, *o* and long *á*, *í*, *ó*.

Wright (1880) and Byington (1915) are Choctaw-English dictionaries. Watkins (1892) is an English-Choctaw dictionary. Jacob, Nicklas, and Spencer (1977) and Haag and Willis (2001, 2007) are textbooks. Nicklas (1979) is a teaching grammar. Ulrich (1986) examines phonology and morphology. Davies (1986) considers the syntax within Relational Grammar. Broadwell (2005) is a sketch of the language with an analyzed text. Broadwell (2006) is a full reference grammar. There are few published texts for Choctaw other than the New Testament (American Bible Society 1902), portions of the Old Testament, a hymnal (Wright and Byington 1872), and laws and constitutions from the 19th century (see, e.g., Pitchlynn 2013).

Alabama

Alabama is spoken alongside Koasati by members of the Alabama-Coushatta Tribe of Texas. In the earliest records, the Alabama tribe was found in what is now northwestern Mississippi.

Sylestine, H. Hardy, and Montler (1993) introduced a spelling for Alabama. In this system, the consonants are *b*, *ch* /tʃ/, *f*, *h*, *k*, *l*, *l̥*, *m*, *n*, *p*, *s*, *t*, *w*, and *y* /j/. The vowels are short *a*, *i*, *o*; long *aa* /a:/, *ii* /i:/, *oo* /o:/; and nasal *aⁿ* /ã/, *iⁿ* /ĩ/, and *oⁿ* /õ/.

Lupardus (1982) is a grammar. Sylestine, H. K. Hardy, and Montler (1993) is a dictionary. H. Hardy (2005) is a grammatical sketch and analyzed text.

Koasati

Koasati [ˌkɔwəˈsati] is spoken by members of the Coushatta Tribe of Louisiana and of the Alabama-Coushatta Tribe of Texas. In 2015, there were about 250 speakers in Louisiana (Bertney Langley, p.c.).

In 2007 the Coushatta Tribe held a community meeting to establish an alphabet. In this system, the consonants are *b*, *ch* /tʃ/, *f*, *h*, *k*, *l*, *m*, *n*, *p*, *s*, *t*, *th* /θ/, *w*, and *y* /j/. The vowels are short *a*, *i*, *o*; long *aa* /a:/, *ii* /i:/, *oo* /o:/; and nasal *a* /ã/, *i* /ĩ/, and *o* /õ/.

The main sources on Koasati are a reference grammar (Kimball 1991), a dictionary (Kimball 1994), and a collection of traditional narratives (Kimball 2010).

Apalachee

Apalachee [ˌæpəˈlætʃi] was formerly spoken in what is now northwestern Florida. The only record currently known is a letter written in Apalachee and Spanish to the King of Spain in 1688. The location of the original letter is unknown, but a facsimile was published in 1860 (Smith 1860).

The most important analyses of the language based on this letter are a grammatical sketch (Kimball 1987) and a vocabulary (Kimball 1988).

Hitchiti-Mikasuki

Hitchiti [ˈhɪtʃəˈti] and Mikasuki [ˌmɪkəˈsuki] were separate tribal towns sharing a single language, variously referred to as Hitchiti or Mikasuki (or Miccosukee). The language was formerly spoken in southern Georgia and northern Florida. Beginning in the 18th century, some speakers began moving into central Florida and identified themselves as Seminoles. Some speakers were removed with Muscogees to Indian Territory in the 19th century, where they formed the Hitchiti and Big Town tribal towns. A few others were removed with Seminoles to Indian Territory and became members of the Seminole Nation (Hitchiti band). The largest portion remained in central

and south Florida. The language is now spoken by several hundred members of the Seminole Tribe of Florida and the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida.

John David West helped develop a practical alphabet in the 1960s. In this system, the consonants are *b*, *ch* /tʃ/, *f*, *h*, *k*, *l*, *l* /l/, *m*, *n*, *p*, *sh* /ʃ/, *t*, *w*, and *y* /j/. The vowels are short *a*, *e* /i/, *o*; long *aa* /a:/, *ee* /i:/, *oo* /o:/; and nasal *a* /ã/, *e* /ĩ/, and *o* /õ/.

Gatschet (1884, 1888) is a sketch and vocabulary of Hitchiti based on the speech of Judge G. W. Stidham, Muscogee (Creek) Nation, Indian Territory.

Mikasuki as spoken in Florida has been the subject of two dissertations (Derrick-Mescua 1980, Boynton 1982), and several papers by John David West (1962, 1974a, 1974b).

Muskogee (Creek)

In the 18th century Muskogee (or Creek) was spoken by members of several dozen tribal towns in Alabama and Georgia. Some of the Lower Creek towns in Georgia speaking Muskogee and Hitchiti-Mikasuki began moving into Florida and became known as Seminoles. From 1836-1840, most Muskogee speakers in Alabama and Georgia were removed to Indian Territory, where they established the Muscogee (Creek) Nation. As a result of the Second Seminole War, 1835-1842, most Muskogee-speaking Seminoles were removed to Indian Territory where they established the Seminole Nation. In 2015, Muskogee was spoken in three locations: the Muscogee (Creek) Nation of Oklahoma, the Seminole Nation of Oklahoma, and the Seminole Tribe of Florida (where Hitchiti-Mikasuki is the dominant language).

Missionaries began developing a writing system for Muskogee in the 19th century. In this system, the consonants are *c* /tʃ/, *f*, *h*, *k*, *l*, *m*, *n*, *p*, *r* /r/, *s*, *t*, *w*, and *y* /j/. The vowels are short *v* /a/, *e* /i/, *u* /o/; long *a* /a:/, *ē* /i:/, *o* /o:/; and nasal *a* /ã/, *ē* /ĩ/, and *o* /õ/.

The main sources on Muskogee are two dictionaries (Loughridge and Hodge 1890, Martin and Mauldin 2000), a reference grammar (Martin 2011), a grammatical sketch (D. Hardy 2005), and two text collections (Gouge 2004, Haas and Hill 2015). Nathan (1977) is a description of Muskogee as spoken by Florida Seminoles. D. Hardy (1989) explores the meaning of grammatical affixes.

Mobilian Jargon

Mobilian Jargon was a trade language used in the lower Mississippi Valley. The groups that used Mobilian Jargon in Louisiana were the Biloxi, Chacato, Apalachee, Alabama, Pakana, Tunica, Pascagoula, and Taensa (Sibley 1832). Crawford (1978) and Drechsel (1997) are the major sources on the language. Drechsel (1996) is a vocabulary.

Distant relations

Several linguists have speculated that the Muskogean languages might be distantly related to other languages. Swanton (1907, 1924) and Haas (1956) saw resemblances between Natchez and Muskogean. Sapir (1929, 1949) placed a group he called Natchez-Muskogian in his Hoka-Siouan. Haas (1951, 1952, 1969) grouped all of Atakapa, Chitimacha, Natchez, Tunica, and Muskogean into a group she called Gulf. Swanton (1929) saw similarities between Timucua and Muskogean. Greenberg (1987) grouped Gulf with Yukian in Penutian (see also Munro 1994). Of these proposals, most specialists today would probably consider a connection between Natchez and Muskogean to be a promising, but as yet unproven, proposal.

Further reading

H. Hardy and Scancarelli (2005) is a book-length introduction with sketches of Alabama, Chickasaw, Choctaw, and Muskogee. Articles providing descriptions of the family include Crawford (1975), Haas (1979), Martin (2004), Sturtevant (2005), Goddard (2005), and Munro (2015). Some useful bibliographies of Muskogean and southeastern languages include Pilling (1889) and Booker (1991).

Links to digital materials

[School of Choctaw Language](#)

[Koasati Language Project](#)

[Muskogee \(Seminole/Creek\) Documentation Project](#)

[Muscogee \(Creek\) Nation Language Department](#)

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