Pishukchi:  
One Choctaw’s Examination of the Differences in English and Choctaw Language Use

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The Oxford English Dictionary defines a Choctaw as “a Muskogean tribe of North American Indians, originally inhabiting Mississippi and Alabama.” The OED goes on to provide various examples of use of the word ‘Choctaw’ in historical texts. For example, it quotes a 1736 source saying that the Choctaws are the “least polished, i.e. the least corrupted of all the Indian nations.”

At the risk of offending those of refined sensibilities, I must admit that I am a Choctaw, a citizen of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma. Perhaps we can all take some comfort from the fact that, though unpolished, I am at least uncorrupted. The Oxford English Dictionary says so.

Of course the OED says a lot more about Choctaws and indeed about the Choctaw language, which is the subject of this paper. Definition “c” gives a colloquial use of the word ‘Choctaw’: “As of a type of an unknown or difficult language.” Oxford’s competitor, Webster’s 3rd International Dictionary, amplifies on this colloquial use of the word ‘Choctaw’, saying it is “Strange or incomprehensible language: Jargon, Gibberish.”

At one time people would say, “It is all Choctaw to me,” much as they now say, “It is all Greek to me.” Choctaw was the paradigmatic foreign language, so strange, so outré as to defy human, or at least non-Choctaw, understanding. Somehow, quite mysteriously, Choctaws are able to communicate with one another. But this doesn’t even begin to describe the problem. It turns out that even when Choctaws speak English, it is still “strange or incomprehensible.” If you look at historical documents and are at all familiar with how Choctaws talk, you see instance after instance where the Choctaws fail to make themselves understood. Officials of the United
States government, try as they might, have been unable to crack the Choctaw code and are as much in the dark now as they were 200 years ago.

This paper is an attempt to bridge the gap between those who speak Choctaw and those who speak English. Since few readers are likely to speak Choctaw, we are going to examine mainly how Choctaws have used the English language. In addition, we must remember that Choctaw is a language of orators and was only written down a little more than a century and a half ago. Thus you should imagine this paper being spoken. Unfortunately, you will not be able to see the facial expressions, hear the tone of voice and sense all the other nuances that properly form a part of the work, though with luck some of the more important meanings will come through anyway. To provide the all-important context within which Choctaws use English, we’ll also examine some uses of the English language by non-Choctaws, mostly members of the U.S. government. The interaction between the U.S. government and Choctaws will provide us with a yardstick with which to judge the effectiveness of Choctaw use of English. This paper is not meant so much as an academic exercise, most of us get enough of that. It is really meant to be a Choctaw paper; we’ll learn by doing. Ultimately, some Choctaws would probably say that is the only way you can learn. To the extent that we can say that language use reflects philosophy, this paper occupies the philosophical space of at least one Choctaw. In some instances this paper won’t be very Choctaw, but if it were, probably none of us would understand it, and I’m not excluding myself from that.

To begin with, I’ll tell a story. Choctaws love stories as much as anyone. It is a story near to my heart and one that says as much about Choctaw language use as any story I’ve ever heard. Besides which, it has the virtue of being true. It happened to me.

Mr. Aleckton Davis, an elder of my tribe and a person I’m proud to call a friend, went to see a new gas station just south of the South Canadian River, inside the Chickasaw Nation. The service station is owned by the Chickasaws, who are close relatives of the Choctaws. Mr. Davis wanted to see how the Chickasaws were getting along in their new enterprise. I was lucky enough to get to go along with him. While looking over the new service station, we frequently used Choctaw words or phrases to point out or

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1 Indeed, it was originally composed for oral presentation at the 2nd Biennial Aboriginal Peoples Conference at Lakehead University in the Fall of 1997. A printed version, somewhat different from this one, appeared in *The Moccasin Telegraph* (Columbia, MO: The Wordcraft Circle of Native Writers and Storytellers) 4.5 (Aug-Sep 1996): 12-15.

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describe what we were seeing. Mr. Davis is a true native speaker, having spoken Choctaw as his first language. For my part, I’m more of a learner. Though I learned some Choctaw at my grandmother’s knee, she had already lost much of her language and I was forced to learn it more as a second language.

At one point I noted some milk on a shelf, and referred to it as “pishokshi.” Mr. Davis slowed and looked at me keenly. I stopped, sensing something of import. I looked at him. I listened to him carefully as he said, “How do you say watermelon?” I noted that he placed great emphasis on the word ‘you’. It would seem he was asking me how to say ‘watermelon’ in Choctaw. It was odd that he should ask me that. He knows how to say ‘watermelon’. He knows that I know how to say ‘watermelon’. Watermelon is virtually the Choctaw National Dessert, a great delicacy on hot days. Every Choctaw knows how to say ‘watermelon’. It is ‘shokshi’ in Choctaw.

‘Shokshi’! Of course, I had said ‘pishokshi’ when referring to milk. A sloppy mispronunciation, milk is actually ‘pishukchi’ in Choctaw. I looked at Mr. Davis, laughing at myself inwardly, and said to him, “shokshi.” Mr. Davis had corrected my pronunciation of the Choctaw word ‘pishukchi’ without ever using the word, without ever overtly correcting me.

What was even more important, he had taught me more about being Choctaw in that one minute than you could ever learn from a textbook. I was proud that I had enough of the old learning in me that I could understand him at all, and humbled by the realization that I will never be able to express myself as fully, as tersely, as politely, or as Choctaw as he can.

This story in itself probably explains all the differences between Choctaw language use and English language use. Indeed, if this were a completely Choctaw paper, I would only smile and thank you for your attention at this point and consider the presentation over. I have said all I can say. From a Choctaw perspective, from here on it is up to you. If you think hard and long, if you build up enough stories like this, you’ll eventually come to understand the differences in Choctaw and English language use. It would be almost insulting you if I were to presume to continue and explain the differences. Politeness, respect, would prevent me from ever being so presumptuous. I should let you draw your own conclusions.

Of course, the standards of respect in this forum are different. Presumably we are all engaged in an academic exercise. You are earnestly seeking knowledge and I, within my limited capacities, am supposed to help facilitate your search. So we’ll go on a bit farther.
The *Pishukchi* Story deserves some scrutiny. As described, the answer is obvious. But, strip away the explanation, and it is far from obvious. If you had been an outside observer listening to Mr. Davis and me, you would have heard our previous conversation including my incorrect mention of *pishokshi*. You would then have heard him ask me how to say ‘watermelon’. You would have heard me reply, “*shokshi*.” Without any further thought, you’d say he asked me how to say ‘watermelon’ and I told him. But that isn’t all that happened; the key here is thought and context. To understand many instances of Choctaw language use, you have to **think** about what is said and bring as much context and outside knowledge into your thoughts as possible. What is more, you have to be willing to suspend judgment about what was ostensibly said. It may not be and often isn’t the most important message.

This is hard for an academic. Much of the European tradition is devoted to clarity in language, the laudable attempt to say, in an unmistakable way, precisely what you mean. The complete meaning should be manifest in the words. Of course the European tradition is much richer than this and includes many instances of language use that require a lot of thought. Deconstructionists, among others, have been searching for meanings that have often been obscured. The European tradition is no stranger to hidden meanings, but has not been as apt at applying this understanding to reading Native American texts. So we need to search for meaning, bring our intellects and background knowledge to bear on the problem.

With this basic understanding, we can turn to some further examples of English and Choctaw language use. As we do so, I’ll remind you that I am Choctaw, and though not up to the level of Mr. Davis, this is something of a Choctaw paper. The rest of this paper, and all that came before, is not all that I’m saying. In some cases it may not even be what I’m saying. Since I am not as subtle as my ancestors, portions of this exercise will be obvious, I hope this is not insulting. It is my failing, not yours, if the answers come too easily. With luck some of the answers may not appear for years.

First we’ll look at some English use by U.S. government officials, partly because we need the background to understand some of the Choctaws that follow. We’ll turn to the U.S. Supreme Court decision handed down by John Marshall in the 1823 case of *Johnson v. McIntosh*. It provides us with a fine example of English language use by the most famous jurist the United States has yet produced. In addition, it provides us with part of the background knowledge we need to understand subsequent Choctaw texts. These are representative extracts, which could be amplified and augmented by refer-
ence to the complete text. In these extracts, Marshall is laying out the origin of land title held by U.S. citizens and the nature of title of the previous occupants, the various Indian tribes.

On the discovery of this immense continent, the great nations of Europe were eager to appropriate to themselves so much of it as they could respectively acquire. Its vast extent offered an ample field to the ambition and enterprise of all; and the nature and character of its inhabitants afforded an apology for considering them as a people over whom the superior genius of Europe might claim an ascendancy. The potentates of the old world found no difficulty in convincing themselves that they made ample compensation to the inhabitants of the new, by bestowing on them Christianity, in exchange for unlimited independence. . . .

While the different nations of Europe respected the right of the natives, as occupants, they asserted the ultimate dominion to be in themselves; and claimed and exercised, as a consequence of this dominion, a power to grant the soil, while yet in the possession of the natives. . . .

The United States, then, have unequivocally acceded to that great and broad rule by which its civilized inhabitants now hold this country. They hold, and assert in themselves, the title by which it was acquired. They maintain, as all others have maintained, that discovery gave an exclusive right to extinguish the Indian title of occupancy, either by purchase or by conquest. . . .

. . . . Conquest gives a title which the courts of the conqueror cannot deny. . . . These claims have been maintained and established as far west as the River Mississippi, by the sword. It is not for the courts of this country to question the validity of this title, or to sustain one that is incompatible with it.

. . . . However this restriction may be opposed to natural right, and to the usages of civilized nations, yet, if it be indispensable to that system under which the country has been settled, and be adapted to the actual condition of the two people, it may, perhaps, be supported by reason, and certainly cannot be rejected by courts of justice.

This document clearly states the U.S. position in perfect U.S. English. It is clear, it says what it means. The words are like the cow-catcher on the front of locomotives carrying settlers across the Plains. It is a great blunt instrument that sweeps misconceptions away and lays meaning bare. The language is one of assertion, a term that Marshall uses often. A particular view of the world is asserted; counterarguments are considered and rejected. The truth is revealed.

The Choctaw response to this is, in part, the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek, which was written in 1830. As a joint document, we may presume that the language in it is somewhat less Choctaw, but that there are elements of Choctaw usage that will appear. One might expect that stipulations in favor of the Choctaw, having been written at the behest of the Choctaws, would reflect Choctaw language use and understanding. In Article II the signatories agree, “The United States under a grant specially to be made by the President of the U.S. shall cause to be conveyed to the Choctaw Nation a tract of country west of the Mississippi River, in fee simple to them and their
descendants, to inure to them while they shall exist as a nation and live on it.”

The *Treaty of Doak Stand*, written in 1820, prior to Marshall’s decision in *Johnson v. McIntosh*, transfers land to the Choctaw, but does so as a “cession” with the type of title, the form of conveyance, unclear. After *Johnson v. McIntosh*, the Choctaw want a fee simple title, specially granted by the President. It appears that the Choctaw Nation got the message. Indian title is a possessory title, with no real value. The government of the United States expressly reserves the right to take land held under Indian title, either by purchase or by conquest. In context, with some thought, Choctaws have clearly stated that they know what it is for Indians to own land under U.S. law.

Unfortunately, this is in direct contradiction to the oft-stated view that Indians do not understand the notion of land ownership. Yes, Choctaws understand it and at the time of these treaties were willing to go along with it if it meant that they would be secure in their land and property. This does not mean that they agreed with the notion of private ownership. The *Treaty with the Choctaw, 1825* stipulates in Article 7, “... the Congress of the United States shall not exercise the power of apportioning the lands, for the benefit of each family, or individual, of the Choctaw Nation, and of bringing them under the laws of the United States, but with the consent of the Choctaw Nation.” Choctaws understood private ownership of land and rejected it.

Some might say that this marks the point at which the Choctaws, at least, understood private ownership and that no one claims that the Indians don’t now understand private ownership. But no, the U.S. government didn’t get the message; the Choctaw code remained impenetrable. The *Dawes General Allotment Act* of 1887 and the subsequent *Atoka Agreement* of 1897 and *Curtis Act* of 1898 allotted Indian land, including Choctaw land.

The stated rationale for this was to bring the benefits of private land ownership to Indian tribes. The federal government was sure that many tribes, including the Choctaw, didn’t understand just how good private ownership could be. They were to be forced to accept it so they could come to understand it.

It is interesting to note that *Article 7 of Treaty With the Choctaw, 1825*, previously quoted, specifically asks the U.S. not to apportion lands “... for the benefit of each family, or individual.” The Choctaws not only knew about ownership of land, but knew that the U.S. would help them by legislating it for their own good. Understanding these treaty stipulations was just too difficult for the legal minds of the U.S. Government, but then they
were unaware of how important context is to meaning. At this point the reader may begin to see how such misunderstanding can happen.

Such misunderstandings are rife, not just in treaties, but elsewhere. Historical use by Choctaw of the phrases like ‘Great White Father’ when referring to the President of the United States and the word ‘Brother’ when referring to the White settlers, are two prime examples. Precisely what U.S. government officials think the Choctaws mean is not clear. The importance of such phrases to White people is clear. Francis Paul Prucha, one of the most noted scholars in the field of Indian policy, entitled his landmark book on Indian policy, “The Great Father.” Frankly, my guess is that Prucha knows precisely what Indians mean when they say these things and it both is and isn’t what most people think. The common view might be arrived at by examining some of the instances of use of these phrases by various U.S. officials as quoted on the opening pages of Prucha’s The Great Father.

Friends and Brothers, You are never to forget that this is a great gift. It comes from your Great Father himself, who sends it to you by our hands. It is a new heart. Your Great Father has told us to come up here, and put it in the breast of his great Chippeway children. No bad blood belongs to this heart. It is an American heart, and is full of good blood; and if you will listen well, and never forget your Great Father’s message, it will make you all happy.

Thomas L. McKenney at treaty negotiations with the Chippewa Indians, 1826

[The Indians] look to our government for protection; rely upon its kindness and its power; appeal to it for relief to their wants; and address the president as their Great Father.

John Marshall in Cherokee Nation v. Georgia, 1831

This is a great day for you and for us. A day of peace and friendship between you and the whites for all time to come. You are about to be paid for your lands, and the Great Father has sent me today to treaty with you concerning the payment. And the Great Father wishes you to have homes, pastures for your horses and fishing places. He wishes you to learn to farm and your children to go to a good school; and he now wants me to bargain with you, in which you will sell your lands and in return be provided with all these things.

Isaac I. Stevens at a council with the Nisqually, Puyallup, and Squaxon Indians, 1854

From the foregoing, it would appear that U.S. officials think that the “Great Father” is a beneficent individual working on behalf of his “children,” the Indians. Like all parents, the “Great Father” must at times be stern and do what is really best for his children, despite their childish desires. Presumably a “Brother” is a kinsman that one wishes well and works to help.

Now we’ll turn to the Choctaw use of these words, from an address given by a Choctaw leader named Cobb to the government agent sent to help
his people move to the new homeland thoughtfully provided by a beneficent
nation for the use and betterment of the Choctaws.

Brother! We have listened to your talk, coming from our Father, the
Great White Chief, at Washington, and my people have called upon me to reply to
you.

Brother! We have, as your friends, fought by your side, and have poured
out our blood in your defense, but our arms are now broken. You have grown
large. My people have become small, and there are none who take pity on them.

Brother! My voice is become weak; you can scarcely hear me. It is not
the shout of a warrior, but the wail of an infant. I have lost it in mourning over the
desolation and injuries of my people. These are their graves which you see
scattered around us, and in the winds which pass through these aged pines we hear
the moanings of their departed Ghosts. Their ashes lie here, and we have been left
to protect them. Our warriors are nearly all gone West, but here are our dead.
Will you compel us to go too, and give their bones to the wolves?

Brother! Our heart is full. Twelve winters ago we were told our Chiefs
had sold our country. Every warrior that you now see around us was opposed to
the Treaty; and if the voice of our people could have been heard, that act would
have never been done, but alas! Though they stood around they could be neither
seen nor heard. Their tears fell like drops of rain, their lamentations were born
away by the passing winds, the pale-faces heeded them not and our land was taken
from us.

Brother! you speak the words of a mighty nation. I am a shadow, and
scarcely reach to your knee. My people are scattered and gone; when I shout I
hear my voice in the depths of the forest, but no answering voice comes back to
me. All is silent around me! My words must therefore be few. I can now say no
more.

Lowest estimates of the death of Choctaws on the trip from their
ancestral homelands to their new home in Oklahoma are 20 percent. Some
estimates are higher than 50 percent. Choctaws left the bones of their ances-
tors behind, left the great mound of Nanih Waiyah, the spiritual center of
Choctaw life. When they got to their new land, they worked hard to make a
new home. After two generations in their new home, the “Great Father”
brought the benefit of private ownership of land to the Choctaw through the
various allotment acts already mentioned. These improvements allowed the
individual Choctaws to sell their land to buy much needed food and farming
implements, allowed helpful White guardians to sell the land of Choctaw
wards for their betterment. In my own family, various family members re-
ceived land that in sum amount to thousands of acres. Today one of my
distant relatives still owns about 100 acres of this land. We’ve worked hard
and because of these great benefits, I am able to write this paper to help you
understand how Choctaws use language.
Now maybe you understand what the Choctaws mean when they say “Great Father” and “Brother.” It both is and isn’t what most non-Indians might have thought before reading this paper. It can be what you thought, if you’ll let it.

If you ask me how to understand Choctaws, I’m reminded of the railroad crossing near my home. The trains would roar by a sign reading “Stop, Look, Listen.” Stop for a moment, and think about the past, recall what you know. Look around you and try to understand. Listen to the voices. The trains don’t stop; they are a blur as they go by; their sound drowns out all else.

*Pishukchi.*