**ONOMATOPOEIAS IN CHOCTAW**

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**Introduction**

Choctaw is a Muskogean language originally spoken in the southeastern United States. It is a sister to Muskoki (Creek), Chickasaw, Mikasukki, Koasati, Alabama, and the extinct languages Appalachi and Hitchiti. This extremely endangered language has very few living first language speakers, but the two major Choctaw tribes, Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma and the Mississippi Band of Choctaws, have active language revitalization programs. In the 1830s, most of the Choctaws, along with most other southeast Native peoples, were removed to Oklahoma, in the southern plains portion of the United States.

Morphologically, Choctaw is less complex than in many other native American languages, given that it has free lexemes in all word categories. However, the verbal morphology and especially the morphology that is engaged in syntactic processes at phrase and clause level accounts for the greater part of all morphological processes. With respect to alignment, it is an active-stative language.

**Position of onomatopoeia in the language system**

There is no label for words that imitate sounds in Choctaw. Dictionary definitions and descriptions by speakers may simply stipulate: “this is the sound made by.” As such, they do not form an independent word class. The onomatopoeias catalogued here are of the primary kind, that is, it is directly sound imitative.

There is no published linguistic work that is devoted to the inventory or study of Choctaw onomatopoeias.

The onomatopoeic words described here are in the open word classes of noun and verb. Because new word formation in Choctaw has seriously diminished in the past fifty years, there could be new onomatopoeias entering the language that have not been yet collected. A modern 2016 Choctaw dictionary did not include new onomatopoeic words. The words included in this study come from Byington’s 1870 dictionary, published in 1915, the 2016 modern dictionary compiled by Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, and one word supplied by a native speaker of the language that does not appear in a dictionary.

Choctaw does not have any other obvious sound symbolism. The onomatopoeic words are not obvious borrowings from other languages. However, we must keep in mind that virtually all Choctaw speakers are fluent English speakers, and that much Choctaw language occurs in the setting of code-switching. In these speech situations, English onomatopoeia might easily be part of an utterance.

In this work I will cite onomatopoeias that are endorsed by the speakers of the language.

**Description of onomatopoeia**

I will describe the important components of Choctaw: aspects of phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics, and illustrate those components with exemplary onomatopoeia from a list of 32 that I have compiled categorized as Elements, Animals, Human Sounds, and Artifacts (see Appendix). I will also refer to words not on the master list that help to make my point.

*Phonology*

In the following three sections, I will describe Choctaw’s vowel and consonant inventory, its syllabic structure, how stress is assigned, and the appearance of tone, which may be more properly termed pitch.

*Vowel and consonant inventory*

Choctaw has three vowels, a high front vowel, a mid-to-high back round vowel, and a central-to-low back vowel.

Length and nasality are phonemic, hence there are nine phonemic vowels. These are written in IPA as /i, ii, ĩ; o, oo, õ; a, aa, ã/. Nasal vowels are phonetically longer than short vowels.

Choctaw has two diphthongs: /ai/ and /aʊ/.

Choctaw has 15 consonants: /b, f, h, k, l, ɬ, m, n, p, s, ʃ, t, w, j, and tʃ/. It is notable that there are very few voiced sounds (/b, l, m, n, w, j)/, and only one voiced obstruent /b/. In the Byington orthography, the one most used by Choctaw speakers, the fricative and affricate /ʃ/ and /tʃ/ are spelled <sh> and <ch> and the glide /j/ as <y> in the English manner. Choctaw examples in this article will use these spelling conventions.

Choctaw has phonemic geminate consonants, and all consonants may be geminated.

*Syllabic structure*

Choctaw syllables are sensitive to weight. The language has no heavy onsets but may have consonant codas of two elements and nuclei of two moras, if long vowels are considered to have two moras and nasal vowels are inherently long. The maximum syllable is CVVCC. Syllables of V or CV (those with one mora) are ‘light’ and all others, including CVV are ‘heavy.’

The language has some limited coalescence of vowels, particularly at word boundaries, such that /tʃahta anompa/ would become /tʃahtanompa/ ‘Choctaw language’.

*Stress assignment and pitch*

As described above, Choctaw syllables are either light or heavy. Heavy syllables are longer than short ones, but length is separate from stress. Stress is not assigned as a function of the phonology but at the phrase level. In the noun phrase, a stress is assigned to the penultimate syllable of the final lexical item of the phrase:

(1) a. *ˈo.fi* ‘dog’

b*. o.fi* *ˈlo.sa*  ‘black dog’

c. *o.fi ˈlo.sa mã* ‘that black dog’

In the verb phrase, a rising pitch on the final vowel of the phrase indicates a declarative sentence, while a rising-falling pitch indicates a question. The low pitch will fall on the question marker *o*, while the rising pitch will appear on the previous syllable.

(2) a. *ˈo.fi mã pi.saa.líh[[1]](#footnote-1)* I see that dog.

b. *ˈo.fi mã ish.pi.sá.hò* ‘Do you see that dog?’

c. *ˈo.fi mã ish.pi.sa.tók.ò*  ‘Did you see that dog?’

In conversation, a question can be made without the marker *o* by forming the question pitch contour over the final two syllables.

(3) *ˈo.fi mã ish.pi.sá.tòk* ‘Did you see that dog?’

*Phonological effects on onomatopoeias*

The reader will note that Choctaw has a large inventory of voiceless obstruents and very few voiced consonants. This inventory suggests the ready creation of words that imitate sounds of rustling dry plants, certain animal noises, and certain mechanical sounds, but may make other imitations more difficult. But this is not the case. In the category Human Sounds, we have from the Appendix words for ‘whisper’ (13) *shokshoa,* and ‘sound of a footstep’ (21) *kitik*, which can be well represented with voiceless obstruents. Using the more limited number of oral and nasal vowels, glides, and nasal consonants, Choctaw also has (20) *yaiya* ‘cry’, and the possible onomatopoeias *wãhachi* ‘scream’ as well as *chilĩka* ‘high pitched scream’ (marked by the high vowel /i/) and *chilãka* ‘lower pitched scream’ (signaled by the low vowel /a/). Another example is *kinnihachi* ‘hum or murmur of people at a distance’ which employs a geminate nasal. The round and back vowels /o/ and /a/ are present in (22) *koolak* ‘noise made by swallowing’ and *washokshok* ‘rumble of bowels’, which has the perhaps iconic repetition of the second syllable.

This observation is borne out in all four of our categories. Voiceless obstruents appear more frequently, as expected, but the use of voiced sounds is not precluded in any category of sound source. Water onomatopoeia include (1) *chibok ‘*noise of stone falling into water’, (2) *wishikachi* ‘noise of water spurting out,’ (3) *fopa* ‘sound of water falling (also wind in a tree). Sounds of fire include (6) *basakachi* ‘noise of a fire’, (7) *libbachi* ‘make a noise like burning sulfur’ and (8) *wimilichi* ‘roar like a blazing fire.’ (4) *bim* ‘sound of a tree falling’ is interesting in that it has a single syllable and both consonants are voiced. A similar notion ‘noise of log falling on other logs’ is *koomok*. Choctaw has four onomatopoeic words that mean ‘sound of rustling leaves’, all of them employing voiceless obstruents and no voiced consonants: (5) *kaɬahachi* (the one listed in the Appendix here), also *chashak*, *chashahachi*, and *waɬahachi*.

The Animal sounds category will likely have far more sound sources that are better imitated with voiced sounds, since mammals are included. Choctaw has many more onomatopoeias for particular bird sounds – not bird songs, but kinds of cackling: from the Appendix, (12) *kakaachi* ‘caw as a crow’, (13) *chakchak* ‘sound a woodpecker makes’, (14) *fakit* ‘sound that a turkey makes, turkey’. Others are *tãktaha* ‘cackle as a fowl’, and *chãɬchaha* ‘cackle of hen after laying an egg.’ Some other bird names that are possibly onomatopoeias are *chikchik ‘*small wren’, *shikkiliklik* ‘sparrow hawk’, and one that employs glides, *wahwali* `whippoorwill.’

Onomatopoeias of mammals are likelier to include nasal vowels and glides, such as, from the Appendix, (9) *woha* ‘howl like a dog’, (10) *ɬõka* ‘grunt as a hog’, (11) *kiliiha* ‘whinny as a horse,’ and also *chĩka* ‘squeal as a pig’. Choctaw has two onomatopoeias for snake sounds: (15) *chashak* ‘sound a rattlesnake makes,’ and (16) *washahachi* ‘make a noise like a snake. The two words that imitate insects both include /m/: (17) *timihachi* ‘buzz as bees,’ and (18) *komohachi* ‘hum as insects.’

The Artifacts category utilizes far more words with back or round vowels, such as (23) *koobooha* ‘sound of a drum’, (26) *koobak* ‘sound of something hollow,’ (31) *toh* ‘report of a gun,’ (24) *losak* ‘sound of a flapping flag’, (28) *chosoopa* ‘rattle of chains’, (25) *kabak* ‘sound of a knock’, (30) *choɬak* ‘sound of a trigger being cocked. Two onomatopoeias with high vowels are (27) *tikachi* ‘click’ and (29) *mishok* ‘sound of a saw’. Two words that imitate ringing as a sound source are (32) *komak* ‘sound of a bell’, which includes /m/, and a synonym *chobok* ‘sound of a bell’; both have round or back vowels.

It appears that only three sound sources have fairly predictable phonetic inventories: dry leaves and snakes, which utilize voiceless obstruents, and most of the artifacts, which utilize back or round vowels. Some of the onomatopoeias, particularly for the sound of fire, are not phonetically similar to each other: *basakachi* ‘make noise of a fire’, *libbachi* ‘make a noise like burning sulphur’, and *wimilichi* ‘roar like a blazing fire.’[[2]](#footnote-2)

In terms of phonological structure, including phonetics and prosody, Choctaw onomatopoeias use the phonemic inventory according to the prosodic rules of syllable structure, stress, and pitch as described above. There are no different sounds or prosodic processes that pertain only to onomatopoeias.

sounds?

*Morphology and syntax*

*Word-formation*

Choctaw has surprisingly few derivational affixes, but those few are extremely productive. Reduplication and infixation are interesting widespread morphological processes, but they are part of the inflectional morphology and thus do not participate in word-formation. Choctaw utilizes significant compounding in all word classes.

Choctaw lexemes in the major lexical classes are members of noun, verb, or neutral root classes (Haag 2017). The root classes are separate from morphological classes, which account for the shape of the resulting lexeme. The most prevalent word formation process is conversion from verb to noun, with some adjective to noun conversion. This process is so productive that the largest number of nouns is of verb to noun conversion. Nouns thus appear as lexemes with a noun root in one of the noun morphological classes, or as nouns converted from verbs. Verbs have verb roots and have membership in one of a small number of morphological classes.

(4) *hattak* (noun root, morphological class) ‘man’

(5) *kashoffi* (verb root, morphological class) ‘to clean’

(6) *kashoffi* (derived converted noun) ‘a cleaner’

All of the onomatopoeias in this study are nouns or verbs: underived nouns, nouns converted from verbs, and verbs. All of the verbal onomatopoeias in the Appendix can have an associated noun conversion:

(7) *tikachi* ‘to click’ ‘a click’

(8) *chibok* ‘sound of stone falling into water’ (no associated verb)

Determining whether a lexeme has a noun or verb (or neutral) root requires knowledge of the morphological classes and argument structure.

One note with respect to word formation is that a very few of the onomatopoeias have a single syllable: (3) *bim* ‘sound of a tree falling’ and (4) *toh* ‘report of a gun.’ Choctaw has a small number of one-syllable lexemes from the major lexical categories, but generally the minimal lexical word consists of two syllables.

*Word classes*

The major lexical word classes in Choctaw are noun and verb, with a smaller group of adjectives: the largest number of attributive lexemes are stative verbs. There are also the minor lexical categories of quantifier, postposition, adverb, and interjection. There are a number of inflectional word classes that bear very specifically on Muskogean syntax and are not the focus of this work.

As above, all Choctaw onomatopoeias are underived nouns, nouns derived by conversion, or verbs. They do not form a subclass, and are generally treated as full members of their classes, taking appropriate inflectional morphology when they appear in sentences. However, I have one example from an oral story employing *ɬõk* from *ɬõka* ‘grunt as a hog’ where the imitation of the sound does not have a grammatical function in the sentence, but rather is part of the performance:

(9) .. *shokha mĩti hãklo-li…peh… ɬõk ɬõk ahãya..* (Abe Frazier 2010)

hog come hear-1sg just *ɬõk ɬõk* go.along

‘I hear a hog coming, just going along *ɬõk ɬõk…*’

*Syntax*

The Choctaw clause is robustly verb final, with clausal inflection appearing to the right of the lexical verb. The noun phrase is head initial, with inflection and modifiers appearing at the right edge of the phrase. Onomatopoeic words appear as nouns or verbs in syntactic phrases with inflection appropriate to those categories, as in examples (10--13).

(10) *nashoba akosh woha-tok.*

wolf foc howl-pst

‘It was the wolf that howled.’

(11) *woha hopaki ii-hãklo-tok*

howl distant 1pl-hear-pst

‘We heard a distant howl.’

(12) *alla-yat loma-hosh shokshoa-h.*

child- sbj soft-adv whisper-prs

‘The child is whispering softly.’

(13) *shokshoa loma ii-hãklo-tok*

whisper soft 1pl-hear-pst

‘We heard a soft whisper.’

(9) *alla-yat chitoli-hosh chilĩka-h.*

child- sbj loud-adv scream-prs

‘The child is screaming loudly (in a high pitch).’

(10) *chilĩka chitoli ii-hãklo-tok*

high.scream loud 1pl-hear-pst

‘We heard a loud high scream.’

When an onomatopoeic word is a verb, it may be inflected as such, as in (10) and (12) and its converted noun form treated as a syntactic noun as in (11) and (13). Underived nouns such as (13) *chakchak* ‘sound that woodpecker makes, woodpecker’ will only be in the position of the syntactic noun. They may be compounded.

*Semantics*

*Overview*

There are two general organizing aspects of Choctaw onomatopoeias. One concerns the geographical facts of the southeastern inlands of North America. The other is that nearly all vocabulary was set by the end of the nineteenth century. Without a present and evolving speech community, the opportunities for creating new vocabulary are restricted. Modern Choctaw has added new words but these are overwhelmingly extended from existing words, borrowed from English, or compounded from existing words, with metaphorical extensions as shown in the following examples.

Reviewing the categories of sound sources (Elements, Animals, Human, and Artifacts) for possible onomatopoeias in a general way, Choctaw seems to have rather fewer than might be expected. Given the large number of animals in the Choctaw wooded homelands, there are few onomatopoeias that are imitative of those animals. The vocabulary for the animal names themselves is quite large, but those names are not sound imitative. Perhaps the makers of nineteenth century dictionaries put less emphasis on imitative words in favor of more abstract sound-symbol combinations. Only one of the three historical major Choctaw dialects is represented in the reliable Byington dictionary (1915), so there could be other words that were simply lost.

The richest sources of Animal onomatopoeias are bird noises, which supplied the name of the bird itself in a number of cases: (13) *chakchak* ‘woodpecker,’ (14) *fakit* ‘turkey,’ *wahwali* ‘whippoorwill’ and the possible onomatopoeias *chikchik* ‘small wren,’and *shikkiliklik* ‘sparrow hawk.’

While there are a modest number of words that are imitative of human sounds, these may also have been deemed less appropriate for inclusion in a dictionary than were more euphemistic words, such as *akiiluachi* ‘cause fire below’ for both belching and flatulence.

The Artifacts category itself has a relatively large number of members imitating sounds of striking and knocking. It is interesting that two words imitate sounds of guns, which had become part of the culture in the nineteenth century: (31) *toh* ‘report of a gun’ and (30) *chaɬak* ‘noise made by snapping a gunlock.’ But the language includes virtually no onomatopoeias having to do with machines and transportation, these modern artifacts having received names made by the processes described above: extension, borrowing, and compounding of existing words.

*Semantic relations*

The common semantic relations of synonymy, antonymy, and polysemy are present in Choctaw. The expected antonymic pairs such as ‘big, small’, ‘hot, cold’ are represented with separate lexemes, and there is a both a derivational means and a syntactic means to negate gradable concepts such as ‘many, not many’. There are ample synonyms for concepts in all three major lexical categories, such as ‘happy, content, joyful’ and the like. Polysemy is evident for a number of Choctaw words, such as *anompa*, which has meanings having to do with all extensions of speech, including ‘word,’ ‘counsel’, ‘law’, ‘report’ and numerous others.

The onomatopoeias are different in that they largely lack these kinds of relations. Since none of the words is a gradable lexeme, there are no antonyms. There are, however, synonyms with the words that mean ‘rustle’: *kaɬahachi, waɬahachi, chashak*, ‘scream’: *wãhachi, chilãka, chilĩka*, ‘rattlesnake noises’: *washahachi, chasha*, and ‘fire noise’: *basakachi, wimilichi*.

Of the words from my Appendix, the one that has developed the most extensions is *woha* ‘howl.’ It is used to express the noise made by animals other than wolves and dogs. My primary language consultant, Henry Willis (p.c.), explained to me that “*woha* is the call that any animal makes.” So cows, goats, bears, and donkeys also *woha*. It would seem that if a speaker had access to the special onomatopoeias for hogs, pigs, and horses, those would be used, but that *woha* could substitute and be understood.

This word also has a variation *wohwa*, which also means ‘howl, yelp.

**Conclusion**

Choctaw onomatopoeic words are a small subset of the vocabulary but behave according to the phonological, word-formation, and syntactic rules of the language. When they are verbs they are able to take the usual verbal inflections. For example, *kiliiha* ‘whinny’ can take the inflection for the iterative aspect: *kilihĩha* ‘keep on whinnying.’ They also are easily and frequently converted to nouns, as discussed above. Underived nouns, and converted ones, are easily compounded: *fakit oshi* ‘turkey egg.’ Even though onomatopoeias are eligible to accept derivational morphology we rarely see this.

In my investigation into onomatopoeias in Choctaw, I noticed that there are many words that signify auditory phenomena but are not sound-symbolic. For example, *kitaha* ‘groan’ is not imitative of a groan, nor is it defined as being such; it is simply the word for that action.

Onomatopoeic words are almost completely restricted to vocabulary that evolved when the speakers lived in the southeast woodlands of North America and to cultural developments occurring in or before the nineteenth century.

**List of abbreviations**

1 first person

adv adverb

foc focus

prs present

sg singular

pst past

pl plural

sbj subject

sg singular

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**Appendix**

Elements

1 chibok ‘noise of stone falling into water’

2 wishikachi ‘make noise of water spurting out’

3 fopa ‘sound of wind in a tree, or water falling’

4 bim ‘sound of a tree falling’

5 kaɬahachi ‘make noise of rustling dry leaves’

6 basakachi ‘make noise of a fire’

7 libbachi ‘make a noise like burning sulphur’

8 wimilichi ‘roar like a blazing fire’

Animals

9 woha ‘howl like a dog’

10 ɬõka ‘snort like a hog or boar’

11 kiliiha ‘whinny as horse’

12 kakaachi ‘caw as a crow’

13 chakchak ‘sound that woodpecker makes, woodpecker’

14 fakit ‘sound that turkey makes, turkey’

15 chashak ‘sound that rattlesnake makes’

16 washahachi ‘make a noise like a snake’

17 timihachi ‘buzz as bees’

18 komohachi ‘hum as insects’

Human sounds

19 shokshoa ‘whisper’

20 yaiya ‘cry’

21 kitik ‘sound of a footstep’

22 koolak ‘sound of swallowing’

Artifacts

23 koobooha ‘sound of a drum’

24 losak ‘sound of a slap or flap, like a flag’

25 kabak ‘sound of a knock’

26 koobak ‘sound of something hollow’

27 tikachi ‘click’

28 chosoopa ‘rattle of chains’

29 mishok ‘sound of a saw’

30 chaɬak ‘noise made by snapping a gunlock’

31 toh ‘report of a gun’

32 komak ‘sound of a bell’

1. A process of vowel lengthening in certain environments accounts for the long /aa/. (Ulrich 1986) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Perhaps because my native language, English, has no or few primary onomatopoeias for fire, it is difficult for me to hear these words as imitative. ‘Crackle’ means ‘make small sharp sudden repeated noises’ to describe a fire, but also describes walking on ice (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 10th Edition, p. 269). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)