

Cherokee language ^[1]



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A Look at the Cherokee Language

by Ben Frey

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Cherokee is very different from European languages. Many European languages—French, Spanish, and Italian, for example—relate in some way to each other, Cherokee has no basic relationship to these languages at all.

One of the things that is so different about Cherokee is the way it forms sentences and expresses ideas. In English, for example, we say sentences such as “I see a bear.” In this type of sentence, the subject, I—the one doing the action—comes first. Next, we tell what sort of action is happening. In this sentence, we’ve used the verb see. Finally, the last part of the sentence is the part that receives the action of the verb, the object: a bear. Many European languages work in this order—first the subject, then the verb, and then the object. In Cherokee, however, it is common to say: Yo-na tsi-go-ti-ha, or “A bear, I see it.” In Cherokee, the first thing to be expressed is the object. After the object comes the subject, I, and then the verb, see. Some elders claim that this is because in Cherokee, we focus first on things outside of ourselves, and only secondly on ourselves and our actions. Cherokee differs fundamentally from many other languages.

Although Cherokee is not related to European languages, linguists (people who study languages and how they work) have observed that it does seem to be related to some other American Indian languages. Far from all being alike, American Indian languages can be grouped into families, or groups of languages that are related to each other but not to other groups. Cherokee is part of the [Iroquoian language](#) ^[2] family. Today, the Iroquois are a group of six tribes living in the Great Lakes region of the United States and Canada. Linguists say that at some time, around 3,500 years ago, the Cherokee people lived there as well. Some moved south. By the time the Spanish encountered the Cherokee in the 1500s, the tribe was living in parts of what are now North Carolina, South Carolina, Kentucky, Virginia, West Virginia, Tennessee, Georgia, and Alabama. Firmly established in their new home, the Cherokee represented the only group of Southern Iroquoian speakers. When Europeans arrived, American Indian tribes in what is now North Carolina spoke languages from three main groups: Southern Iroquoian, [Algonquian](#) ^[3], and [Siouan](#) ^[4].

Today, about 22,000 people speak Cherokee. Because of their ancestors’ removal from their homes in North Carolina and other states in the late 1830s on the [Trail of Tear](#) ^[5]s, many of these speakers now live in Oklahoma. Before the Trail of Tears, the language experienced a period of great growth and development. Through the efforts of a man named [Sequoyah](#) ^[6] (1776–1843), Cherokee began learning for the first time to read and write in their own language. Sequoyah invented the Cherokee syllabary in 1821. The syllabary divides up the sounds of the language into eighty-five symbols. Each symbol represents a single syllable—most often one consonant and one vowel. (Six symbols, however, represent only vowels, and one represents only a consonant, s.) In 1828, Cherokee began using the syllabary to publish a newspaper, the *Cherokee Phoenix*, which was distributed throughout the Cherokee nation.

Unfortunately, the success of the language was not to last as long as it might have. Many speakers died along the Trail of Tears, during a time when many American Indian tribes were forced to travel on foot from their homes to reservations, or areas set aside by the federal government, in the West. People were allowed to take only what they could carry. Most of the rest of their possessions were stolen, sold, or destroyed. In the time after the Trail of Tears, the United States government placed many Cherokee in Oklahoma, as well as those who had stayed behind in North Carolina, into boarding schools in an attempt to “civilize” them. During this period, much of the language’s strength was lost. Teachers at boarding schools would wash out Cherokee children’s mouths with soap if they caught them speaking their native language. They taught that the language was wrong and immoral, and that the only language that American Indians should speak was English. Because of the mental and emotional trauma these children went through, most grew up believing that the Cherokee language could only cause harm, and they did not teach it to their own children.

In recent years, both the [Cherokee Nation](#) ^[7] of Oklahoma and the [Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians](#) ^[8] in North Carolina

have taken steps to reclaim their language. With the help of documents from anthropologists (scientists who study human beings and their ancestors over time, including physical traits, environment, social relationships, and other factors) such as James Mooney and linguists such as Durbin Feeling, William Pulte, William Cook, Duane King, and Janine Scancarelli, and efforts by both tribes' cultural resource departments, progress is being made toward that goal. Because most speakers today are older, the Eastern Band has created a classroom for infants in which only Cherokee is spoken. This way, the tribe hopes to raise a new generation of people who will speak Cherokee as a first language. Many older speakers are rising to the challenge of teaching the language to other adults and to children who are no longer able to learn it as a first language. Small informal language classes have been forming recently in many community centers on the Qualla Boundary ^[9]—land held in trust today for the Cherokee by the federal government—in western North Carolina. In order to be successful as new speakers, students need to understand the grammar and structure of the language, but they also need to be able to use it to communicate in everyday life.

One of the biggest early supporters of the importance of grammar in teaching the Cherokee language was Robert H. Bushyhead ^[10], who died in 2001 at age eighty-six. Bushyhead—who was born and raised in the Qualla Boundary community of Birdtown—worked with Cook, a linguist from Yale University. Together they tried to discover how Cherokee sentences are formed and how Cherokee words mean what they mean. Bushyhead emphasized the importance of the particular sounds of the language, its pronunciation, and its unique rhythm. To preserve these qualities, he worked with his daughter Jean and son Eddie to create recordings of the language and of the lessons he designed with Cook. Close to the same time, Cherokee speaker and language teacher Laura Pinnix was working with King—a linguist from the University of Georgia—toward similar goals. Through the efforts of these teams, much was written and recorded about the language and its grammar. One of the tribe's goals today is to find a way to present that information so that anyone can use and understand it. In time, these efforts should enable the Cherokee to teach and preserve their language in the best way possible.

At the time of the publication of this article, Ben Frey was a graduate research assistant in the Department of Cherokee Studies at Western Carolina University ^[11]. He is a member of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians.

Video credit:

"Cherokee language from Our State TV." 2010. UNC TV. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DgD5STNvKSs> ^[12]. Our State: The On-Air Magazine: <http://www.unctv.org/ourstate/episode507/index.html> ^[13]

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