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Writing Chiwere: Orthography, literacy, and language revitalization

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ABSTRACT

Like other Native American communities left without fluent speakers of their indigenous languages, Ioways and Otoe-Missourias now rely on texts to learn Chiwere, their heritage language. This epistemological shift from speakers to texts has increased pedagogical pressures on orthographies since literacy has become the primary means of heritage language socialization and revitalization. Comparing language learning materials in use today to nineteenth-century missionary primers reveals that Chiwere orthographies and literacy have long been used to promote enculturation. While missionaries employed Chiwere literacy in their effort to convert and “civilize” Ioways and Otoe-Missourias, current language revitalization resources seek to socialize language learners to a nostalgic notion of “traditional” culture rooted in recursive entextualizations and recontextualizations of elders’ words.

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Once, when I was down at the Ioway tribal offices west of White Cloud, Kansas, a man who knew of my interest in their language and had a reputation for knowing something of the old ways asked me if I knew how to say ‘Ioway’ in “Indian.”

“Yeah, I think I know it,” I said.
“Well, how do you say it?” he said.
“[baxodʒe],” I said

He nodded approvingly. “Not bad. You make that [x] sound. You know, a lot of the younger ones these days, they say it [baksodʒe] or [bakodʒe] because they see it written that way with an <x> or a <k>. The spelling has them all confused.”

Luckily, my familiarity with linguistic notation and years of Hebrew school meant that I was able to recognize and pronounce the Chiwere voiceless velar fricative with relatively little trouble. And as a participant observer in a domestic Chiwere language nest, I practiced the sound every day. But most members of the three federally recognized tribes for whom Chiwere is a heritage language—the Iowa Tribe of Kansas and Nebraska, the Iowa Tribe of Oklahoma, and the Otoe-Missouria Tribe of Indians—have limited exposure to spoken Chiwere.

Chiwere is a Siouan language with three historically attested dialects: Ioway, Otoe, and Missouria. According to linguists, these dialects are distinguished by phonological and lexical “tendencies” (Greer, 2016:219–220) and diverge “only in the pronunciation or form of a few words” (Whitman, 1947:233–234), though some tribal members maintain that “Ioway and Otoe are different languages” (see Dobrin and Schwartz, 2016:267). Following a long process of domain contraction, Chiwere

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was used primarily in religious contexts by 1950 (Davidson, 1997; Furbee and Stanley, 1996, 2002), and many Ioways and Otoe-Missourias consider prayer to be the most appropriate and prestigious occasion for Chiwere and other indigenous language use today (cf. Kroskrity, 1998). While there have been no recognized fluent speakers since the 1990s (Iowa-Oto, 2016; Parks and Rankin, 2001), a handful of semispeakers and their interlocutors use Chiwere for endonyms, salutations, valedictions, alimentation (especially water and common or traditional foods), elimination, kinship terms, and personal names. Some tribal members involved in the arts, grantwriting, and community programming incorporate Chiwere into their professional activities. Many of these uses are performative (Ahlers, 2006) or postvernacular (Shandler, 2006) forms of linguistic fetishism (Kelly-Holmes, 2000, 2014). They draw on Chiwere's status as an "associated language" (Eastman and Reece, 1981; Thieberger, 2002) to position a person, product, or program as traditional, authentically indigenous, and distinctively Ioway or Otoe-Missouria through the symbolic value of the code itself rather than the referential content of the language tokens employed. Finally, participants in language revitalization activities use Chiwere in interactions where the goal is explicitly framed as language learning. Currently, two of the three tribes for whom Chiwere is a heritage language offer language classes and other educational resources for those who live on or near their reservations: Sky Campbell is the language coordinator for the Otoe-Missouria Tribe of Indians, and Lance Foster runs the language program for the Iowa Tribe of Kansas and Nebraska in his capacity as Tribal Historic Preservation Officer. The Iowa Tribe of Oklahoma does not currently offer classes, but they do maintain a page on their website dedicated to resources for language learners (see below).

My introduction to the world of Siouan language preservation came in 2009, when I began assisting Jimm Goodtracks with his Ioway, Otoe-Missouria Language Project, a community-based Chiwere documentation and revitalization effort (Goodtracks et al., 2016). While Jimm is not a tribal member himself, some of his children and grandchildren are Otoe-Missouria, and he has close ties with a number of Ioway and Otoe-Missouria families (Furbee and Stanley, 2002:118; cf. Baldwin et al., 2013:10–13). In the 1960s, Jimm began working with the last generations of fluent Chiwere speakers to learn and preserve the language in between a professional career as a social worker. He is now considered to be one of the few remaining semispeakers. Though Jimm is not formally affiliated with academic or tribal institutions, he has collaborated with both over the years. His documentary work has been funded by the National Science Foundation's Documenting Endangered Languages program since 2007, first through a grant to the Iowa Tribe of Kansas and Nebraska to prepare a dictionary and then through a grant to Jimm himself to support ongoing work on an annotated corpus. Since 2009—and over the course of fourteen months of participant observation fieldwork based in White Cloud, Kansas, from 2011 to 2012—I have assisted Jimm with his dictionary and corpus projects, helped develop pedagogical materials for language learners, and spent time living in Jimm's household language nest, in which he was raising his grandson to speak Chiwere as a native language. I have also conducted archival research on Chiwere language documentation, interviewed Sky and Lance about the tribal language programs they direct, and participated in the activities of the Siouanists, a network of academic and community linguists dedicated to documenting, describing, and revitalizing Siouan languages.

While Jimm, Sky, and Lance often consult and collaborate with each other (and with other Siouanists), they are ultimately accountable to different constituencies. Jimm sees himself as responsible to the deceased speakers he worked with who wanted their language to continue. Jimm is also responsible to NSF, his primary funder, and is subject to the academic regimes of grant oversight and evaluation such funding entails. Sky and Lance, as tribal employees, are accountable to the Otoe-Missouria Tribe of Indians and to Iowa Tribe of Kansas and Nebraska, respectively. While there have been conversations about standardizing Chiwere orthographies so that resources can be more easily shared across communities, Jimm, Sky, and Lance currently employ different writing systems, which reflects a lack of consensus in their pedagogical priorities and views on literacy.

Literacy plays a particularly prominent role in Chiwere revitalization efforts since there are no fluent speakers and few opportunities to hear the language spoken, especially for tribal members who either by choice or circumstance have no contact with ceremonies, semispeakers, and reservation-based revitalization programs. As a result, many Ioways and Otoe-Missourias have regular access to their heritage language only in written form. Chiwere is written using various orthographies that draw letters primarily from the Latin alphabet. Since many of the same letters are also used to write English, some tribal members have a tendency to pronounce homoglyphs as they would sound in English. Thus, Ioways may see their endonym written <baxoje> or <bakhoje> and pronounce it [baksodʒe] or [bakodʒe], substituting an English <x> or <k> sound for [x]. This is what allows the man mentioned above to use the question "How do you say 'Ioway' in Indian?" as a shibboleth to test whether his addressees' primary Chiwere channel is oral or written based on the accuracy of their pronunciation.

As this anecdote illustrates, spelling is often held responsible for phonological interference from a dominant language in cases where literacy has become the primary means of teaching community members their heritage language. I begin below by describing how my analysis is informed by previous research on language socialization and literacy ideologies, focusing on the interlingual dimensions of writing systems in situations of language shift and revitalization. I then illustrate the historical resonance of these themes in the Chiwere case by turning to the missionaries who developed the first Chiwere orthographies and books in the 1830s and 1840s in order to convert and "civilize" Ioways and Otoe-Missourias. Chiwere literacy is thus linked with a history of missionization and colonization even as it is the medium for language revitalization today. Current orthographic conversations and controversies, described in the next section, presuppose and seek to reverse legacies of literacy as an instrument of language shift and cultural loss. While Jimm, Sky, and Lance promote contrasting orthographies and literacy ideologies, their approaches to writing all aim to repair rupture and reestablish continuity with the language of previous generations. Finally, I connect discourses on writing Chiwere with processes of entextualization and enculturation, showing how current pedagogical materials invite readers to identify with a nostalgic notion of traditional culture rooted in

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