

The Yuchi Language Primer; a Brief, Introductory Grammar

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The Yuchi Language has no alphabet or syllabary for its explicit orthography. In the 1970s James Crawford and Addie George worked out a phonetic transliteration, and it has been honed and polished by Yuchi speakers and linguists, Mary Linn et al, into a suitable written system in the last decade of the Twentieth Century. A simplistic version is used here. While it is entirely late in getting started, an effort to both study the language and to teach and preserve it has been begun just as the last of the fluent speakers could contribute. There are only a couple elderly, fluent speakers remaining at present, but a number of young people are hard at learning the language. While it may survive its brush with extinction for now, it certainly has lost some of its vibrance in its near demise.

The Yuchi Language is a little bit daunting and has a reputation of being difficult to learn. This is in part due to the 49 phonetic sounds -- 38 Consonant sounds and 11 vowel sounds. This is twice the number of most other Indigenous languages from the Southeast. By comparison though English has 44 (24 Consonants and 20 vowels) sounds. About half the consonants are sounded essentially the same as in English, but some of the remaining ones require a good ear and more than a little practice to master. More than a few have failed to hear the phonological difference that make one word into quite different word. Early reports often reputed Yuchi to be tonal, or because of many glottal stops, that it involved clucking of clicks. In reality it just contains a number of quite different consonants from those that non-Yuchi speakers are accustomed.

The language more than has gender -- in fact it is very nearly two different languages -- a men's speech and a women's speech. The way something is said in these two variations is often quite different. Further, Yuchean not only has tenses, but it varies its structure according to whether a Yuchi is talking or a non-Yuchi is talking, preserving contexts of time and circumstance. All these variations can add a number of complicating layers to the grammar and the effort needed to master it.

Basically the language is morpheme agglomerative, with words composed of an assemblage of morphemes strung together to make new words. Morpheme modifiers are generally appended as suffixes, and its word order is subject-object-verb. The word for Dinosaur or Great Lizard, which is a part of the ancient mythic creatures in Yuchi stories and ceremonies, is made up of the morphemes for "lizard," "face," "orifice," "red," and "big" (*sothl'an ahsh'ee chahthlah'a*) in that order. Prefixes and Suffixes are also often added to the stems and root morphemes. One common prefix alerts one to the word being in the nature of (or having to do with) man/human/being by starting with the morpheme *go/co* (ko)-- as in Coweta (man-hawk) and Catawba (men-strong). Another is the prefix "*tso*" (cho) which means "Sun" or "sacred" as in *tsotici* (medicine = sacred-power-soup) or Echota (tobacco-sacred-fire). Suffixes include "*waneo*" with the meaning of spirit/dream/shadow (*Shawano* -- snake-spirit), and "*fa*" for direction or locative (*fafa* -West). While this is straight forward enough, the morphemes are often contracted, and phoneme transitions occur making it a bit more difficult at times.

One of the many mysteries involving the Yuchean is the "Isolate" nature of the language. How does a language remain an isolate without any physical barriers to protect it from encroaching influence? Three things have contributed to this being a lasting language isolate. First the staunch pride and traditionalism of the Yuchi people who have guarded and protected the language in a way the French would envy. The language has not changed appreciably in the several hundred years that word lists have been collected. There are very few words borrowed into the Yuchi Language, while more than a few have been borrowed from it into neighboring languages. Second, the language is just difficult enough that it was not learned by outsiders, and thus has remained rather pure. If it is related to any other Indigenous language, it is suitably distant as to not show any great affinity. This can only mean it has been separate for quite long time. Third, the Yuchi language served as a repository for the ceremonialism of the Great Medicine Society, and like Latin became institutionalized by that use.

The fact that the neighboring tribes did not speak any Yuclean was more than a little incentive for the Yuchi to become multilingual, and being frequently involved in trade they thus often served as interpreters from the earliest times. One can see this particularly in the word for “interpreter/ translator” (*yatik’e*), as it has been borrowed by many of the Southeastern tribes from the Yuclean. It is clear from the scattered Yuclean names around the Southeast that the Yuchi were far more influential than has been accorded to them in most written histories. From the Atlantic coast where they left names like Tybee Island (*dabi* - Salt) where they built saltpans and traded in salt, to Yazoo Mississippi where the name derives from “*yazu*“ (leaf), and northward into Tennessee where a number of names as well as recorded history documents their presence. As their oral history states the Yuchi were a major player in the Moundbuilding Culture before the culture collapsed from exposure to European diseases. They left a clear imprint of their central involvement in this first or pre-Columbian “United States of America.”

Well into the Twentieth Century most Yuchi remained bilingual, and many were trilingual. The real threat to the language was a one-two punch of oppressive boarding school policy, and community dissolution in the War effort of the 1940s. The first created a generation forced to use English as their primary language, and the second dispersed the community so widely that many could not regularly converse in Yuclean. It is the dedicated work of a few dozen fluent speakers that has kept the language alive, even though at the brink of extinction.

In language resides the very heart of a people -- if you would know the people, you must learn the language. The persistence of the Yuchi language is a testament to the tenaciousness of the Yuchi people and their culture. They have survived despite all forces directed to extinguish them. While most other Indigenous peoples have accommodated and acculturated or given up, The Yuchi have endured far more than most other peoples, and still managed to hold on to most of what makes them a distinct and unique people. The Yuclean Language is certainly very unique, as are the people who have used and continue to use it for communication.

Yuclean Lesson 1; A Beginning Vocabulary

Vocabulary is of little use without an understanding of the whole fabric of the language -- but it is the usual place to start. Pronunciations, here, are approximations only. Let us first start with a greeting: *Sahn Gah Ley* with the literal meaning of good morning, but used as a general greeting/hello.

Sa la k’adita again with the broad meaning of both “Thank you/You are welcome.”

<i>go we te ne</i>	instruction	<i>ya zu</i>	leaf	<i>s’a</i>	earth/land
<i>k’aso ta ne</i>	school	<i>yu da</i>	pipe (smoking)	<i>tso</i>	sun
<i>k’aso ta</i>	teach	<i>ya tik’e</i>	interpreter	<i>sha fa</i>	moon
<i>k’a so so</i>	book	<i>go ga sha</i>	trickster/jokester	<i>hob’o</i>	sky
<i>tsho le</i>	home	<i>tei di</i>	hatchet	<i>ge wan o</i>	spirit
<i>k’a la hi ti</i>	name	<i>ta le</i>	story	<i>ho da</i>	wind
<i>tso bi la</i>	promise/just	<i>sa ta</i>	lizard	<i>go da fa</i>	North
<i>k’ati</i>	friend	<i>we ta</i>	hawk	<i>aga fa</i>	East
<i>ta ne</i>	brother	<i>da ke ga le</i>	disrespectful	<i>wa fa</i>	South
<i>wa ne/wat ne</i>	sister	<i>dae</i>	cedar	<i>fa’fa</i>	West
<i>da bi</i>	salt	<i>fa dae</i>	snakebutton root	<i>wi ch ta</i>	Winter
<i>tse</i>	water	<i>we hi</i>	feather	<i>hi na wa de le</i>	Spring
<i>ii</i>	tobacco	<i>k’ago’a ne</i>	number/count	<i>wa de</i>	Summer
<i>ya ti</i>	fire	<i>k’ago ta ne</i>	food	<i>ya ch ti le</i>	Fall

pah doh night/dark
ah gah day
goct tee neh dance

Yuchi Colors:

Red — *tcala* or *tza-la*

White — *yash-kah*

Black — *ish-pi* or *ees-pee* (also dirty)

Gray — *ee' sh'ee*

Blue — *hi-tzo* or *hee-tzo* (also green and purple)

Yellow — *ti* or *ttee* (also brown & orange)

Silver — *s'a fifi yaxka* (literally: earth-shiney-white)

Gold — *s'a fifi ttee* (earth-shiney-yellow)

Yuchi Numbers 0-13 & 20:

<i>nagōtehn</i> (nah got neh)	none/zero
<i>hit'é</i> (heet'e)	one (or only)
<i>nōwe</i> (no wen)	two
<i>nōKá</i> (no kah)	three
<i>Tała</i> (tae lae)	four
<i>tc'wahé</i> (tch wa he)	five
<i>icdú</i> (ish tu)	six
<i>laxdjú</i> (lahsh ju)	seven
<i>bifá</i> (bee fah)	eight
<i>t'eKa</i> (t'aekae)	nine
<i>łaxPé</i> (thlahsh peh)	ten
<i>łaxPé hit'é tah weh</i>	eleven
<i>łaxPé nōwe tah weh</i>	twelve
<i>łaxPé nōKá tah weh</i>	thirteen ...
<i>k'hoshtahnonweh</i>	twenty

The pronunciations here are approximate, as one must really hear the sounds, tso, tci, etc. and learn where the various portions of your vocal track need to be in order to make the proper sounds. Many people require assistance to hear them, and guidance to adjust their vocal track to make the proper sounds. Glottal stops are represented by an apostrophe ('). A glottal stop is used in English to say "Oh'Oh" when we make an error. The vowel sounds include both oral and nasal vowels, but that distinction has not been delineated here.

In Yuchean there is little distinction between verbs and nouns, so the same word for "number" or "count" might be used as either a verb or a noun. The stress is on the context of who is doing the speaking and when. While the stories can be told in English, and have the same characters interacting and doing the same actions, something is lost in the translation which is somehow enriched with this contextualized telling in Yuchi.

The writer here is not a linguist, but has relied heavily on the unpublished work of Lewis Ballard, James Crawford, and Addie George to write this little primer on the Yuchi language. The unpublished thesis (*A Euchee Grammar*) by Mary Linn (2000) is also an excellent source, as will her forthcoming dictionary of the Yuchi language when it is completed.



shagokwono Tie-Snake Gorget Engraving