The Coushatta Tribe of Louisiana is a federally recognized Indian Tribe located in Elton, Louisiana. The tribe has a current enrolled population of 880 members, approximately 520 of who live in the immediate area of the tribal community near Elton (see Figure 1 below).

The Coushattas speak a Muskogean language called Koasati (CKU). The tribe has been located in or near Southwest Louisiana for the past two hundred years; prior to that time they were loosely affiliated with the Creek Confederacy in areas of Georgia and Alabama. Historical documents record the Coushattas westward movement into Louisiana in the late 1790’s to avoid conflicts with encroaching European settlers, thereby escaping forced removal and other hardships faced by many other southeastern tribes. Although there are three federally recognized tribes with Coushatta members, research has shown that most Koasati speakers are in Louisiana (Halmani, 2000, p. 81); Koasati has been the first language spoken in most tribal households until the present generation.

Prior to the inception of the Koasati Language Project, many tribal members did not realize that their language was or even could be in decline; the rapid speed of decline was not noticed by older, more fluent speakers. Although earlier published accounts estimated from 300-400 fluent Koasati speakers in the Coushatta community (Kimball, 1994), tribal surveys done at the start of the project found that only 43% of the tribal community is fluent in Koasati, and less than five percent (5%) of Coushattas under age 18 speak fluently. An additional major concern is the small number of tribal elders who possess traditional linguistic knowledge, such as the names of plants and trees used by the Coushattas in everyday life. All of the fluent speakers identified in the tribal survey were either first language speakers or bi-lingual; there were no second language speakers identified in the survey. Although Koasati was previously used throughout the tribal system, e.g., in the tribal court system, community church, and daily governance activities, Koasati is now mainly used in homes and in some of the tribal departments, such as the tribal health department.

The Coushatta Tribe of Louisiana had never previously implemented a tribal language program for two main reasons: The tribe did not previously recognize a need for such a program, since the majority of members spoke Koasati fluently, and the Tribe had never previously adopted a formal system for reading and writing.
Koasati. Faced with the indisputable evidence of language loss described above, we began to explore ways to disseminate information about the declining status of Koasati and gain consensus that it should be documented.

In Spring 2006, the American Indian Language Development Institute (AILDI) put out a call for teams of two to enroll in Grant Writing & Language Documentation courses pending funding from the NSF Documenting Endangered Languages (DEL) program. We applied and were selected as NSF Fellows, enrolling at AILDI in June 2006. The AILDI classes helped us realize the importance of developing and implementing a Koasati language program while the Coushatta Tribe still had many speakers. The training and technical assistance also gave us the skills needed to submit a DEL grant application. We were able to get support and participation from Council and tribal community members while still at AILDI; the Council asked us to make a presentation to the community as soon as we returned from Arizona.

In partnership with McNeese State University, The Coushatta Tribe of Louisiana applied for and received NSF Documenting Endangered Languages funding in May 2007 (NSF award #0804096) to support a comprehensive language documentation project. The authors serve as Co-Principal Investigators on the DEL project.

Kowasa:ton na:thi:hilkas – Let us speak Koasati
Koasati Language Documentation and Revitalization Project

I. Introduction

- Koasati (CKU) is a branch of the Muskogean language family.
- Although there are several hundred Koasati speakers between Louisiana and Texas, inter-generational transmission of the language is rare and very few Koasati children speak the language.
- The Koasati language is considered “Severely Endangered” by UNESCO (United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organization) guidelines.
- Accordingly, the Coushatta Tribe of Louisiana has established language documentation and revitalization as one of its highest priorities.

II. Project Goals

1. Conduct fieldwork to document naturally-occurring Koasati conversation.
2. Train tribal members in language documentation techniques.
3. Develop an archives for Koasati language materials, including audio tapes, video tapes, transcriptions, and an audio file corresponding to the written dictionary (Kimball, 1994).
4. Develop a searchable electronic database of Koasati texts, discourse, and accompanying audio files (i.e., oral lexical items);
5. Investigate language loss patterns;
6. Design a format for Koasati language lessons;
7. Begin a comprehensive Koasati language revitalization program.

III. Methods

1. Conduct training workshops to teach tribal members linguistic field methods and internationally-approved “best practices” (see http://emeld.org/school/classroom/).
2. Schedule meetings to film speech events (conversations, interviews, etc.).
3. Create audio recordings of dictionary, narratives, and existing word lists.
4. Digitization and transfer of DVD tapes into MPEG2 & MPEG4 formatted files.
5. Transcription of speech segments utilizing tribally-approved orthography.
6. Translate Koasati transcriptions into English.
7. Complete uninitiated morphological and syntactic annotation.
8. Include field notes, recordings, and translations into electronic and tribal archives.
9. Conduct training workshops to teach tribal members how to use archives.

IV. Outcomes

This project is significant because it will:
1) Substantially increase the body of linguistic data available for the highly endangered Koasati language.
2) Provide digital audio and video recordings of naturally occurring Koasati conversation.
3) Increase the materials available to Koasati language teaching, particularly specialized knowledge words that are passing or have already passed out of contemporary usage.
4) Create materials for teaching tribal members in linguistic “best practices” techniques of audio and video documentation.
6) Make linguistic data available for linguists and efforts to build a linguistic ontology, at the discretion of the tribal community.

V. Language Revitalization Activities

1) Develop language teaching materials (phrase books, tapes, computer games, cartoons, etc.).
2) Summer immersion camps where only Koasati is spoken.
3) Games & contests for young people (presentations, exhibits, Koasati word games, etc.).
4) Language classes in community and schools.
5) Interactive dictionary (with audio files) on web site.
6) Stories & narrative in IMAG format (downloadable) on web site.
7) Local access TV or radio programs in Koasati (news, sporting events, community events, etc.).
8) Develop community library & archives, where tribal members can check out tapes, books, etc. in Koasati.
9) Youth participating in documentation (as listeners and documenters).
10) Language fairs.
11) Koasati language section in newsletter.
12) E-mail discussion forum in Koasati.

Acknowledgements. Funding for this poster was partially provided by an NSF-NEH Fellowship. Special thanks to the Coushatta Tribe of Louisiana and the American Indian Language Development Institute for supporting this project. References. http://emeld.org/school/classroom/index.html

Prior to receiving funding, we visited with tribal elders to find out if they wanted to be included in the documentation project. We were surprised to learn that some of the eldest tribal members had already recognized the need for a language program, because their grandchildren did not understand them when they spoke in Koasati. They expressed concerns about the lack of opportunities for tribal children to hear Koasati, as the tribe does not have its own school, television or radio station, or tribal newspaper. In response to these concerns, the Tribal Council held a series of community meetings about the planned language project; as word
spread, more than thirty individuals volunteered to serve on the Koasati Language Committee. After hearing the
information gathered at AILDI training, the Language Committee became instrumental in planning and
implementing the DEL project. We have continued to receive valuable support from AILDI, through site visits
and consultations that have spanned the life of the project.

Although a Koasati reference grammar and dictionary had been published (Kimball, 1991; 1994), tribal
members had great difficulty in reading those works and expressed interest in having an alphabet that was easy
to read, in having practical teaching materials for children, and in having control over any materials produced.
Accordingly, the DEL project began with a community workshop on the Koasati alphabet held in June 2007
where the Language Committee made every decision about spelling. We also included writing exercises and
games that tribal members could use as practice in writing their language. Our second workshop, held in January
2008 focused on creating a topical dictionary using the new spelling system. During spring 2008, the committee
met weekly to conduct language documentation and transcription sessions. In June 2008, daily meetings
included training in documentation methodology, as well as elicitation and recording sessions. With the
assistance of Dr. Jack Martin and linguistics students from The College of William & Mary, the Koasati
Language Committee completed a 1200-word topical Koasati dictionary and recorded the correct pronunciation
of each word in corresponding audio files. A print version of this dictionary, with audio CD, was made and
given to each tribal family by the Tribal Council in August 2008. The “talking dictionary” incorporating this
data is currently located within the Coushatta Tribal Archives and the Creek Language Archives, with web
access provided by the College of William and Mary, at http://web.wm.edu/linguistics/coushatta/?svr=www.

In addition to developing and approving a tribal orthography and developing the 1200-word “talking”
dictionary, the Koasati Language Committee has been involved in learning “best practices” of language
documentation (Bird & Simons, 2003). They have been instrumental in conducting digital video interviews in
Koasati on various prioritized topics. A fluent speaker transcribes, translates, and types the interviews using a
simple three-line format (Koasati in the top line, word-for-word translation in the second line, and a free
translation in the third line). All transcribed texts are reviewed by the Co-PI’s, the Language Committee, and the
linguistic consultant, Dr. Jack Martin. The committee’s next goals include compiling and editing texts by topic
(basket making, life histories, traditional stories, etc. - see below).

Ongoing projects & new project goals: (from transcription workshop 1/08/09)

1. Language Documentation
   A. Record interviews and life stories w/tribal elders
   B. Transcription and translation of all stories collected to date
   C. Finish plant and animal word lists
   D. Develop text-book and video “lessons” for tribal students
   E. Develop a “talking” grammar
   F. Develop collections of texts (conversations, interviews, stories, etc):
      i. Stories of elders’ life experiences, as well as childhood memories, including:
         a. Everyday activities
         b. Games (wahoo, stickball)
         c. Discipline
         d. Ai-ba-chilka (sayings; rules for daily life)
         e. Cooking, food
         f. Getting water
         g. Farming – What crops? How rows laid out (east to west)? How to start a field? How
            were tools used (maybe demonstrate, bring old tools)?
         h. Transportation – walk, car, etc.
         i. Schooling – Where? Stories? How long?
         k. Hunting – What types of animals, camping, fire making, etc.?
         l. Dance traditions
         m. What people did when they got sick, remedies, etc.?
         n. Stories – legends, etc.
         o. Holiday traditions (olanwii)
p. Naming traditions
ii. Constructed conversations – phrase book
   a. Dinner time (phrases while eating)
   b. How to spend money (buying, selling)?
   c. Directions to do things
   d. Morning routine (getting ready)
   e. Phone conversation (anok onkali; Jeanette-kak onkal)
   f. When you run into people (at the store, etc.) – oiyon chosbanna (don’t buy)
   g. Everything up, leave something for me
iii. Collect materials and put out via newsletter and in book form

II. Language Revitalization Goals:
   A. Develop language learning materials for all age groups
   B. Begin Koasati classes for people in the community
   C. Begin distance-education Koasati classes
   D. Get Koasati onto LA list of “approved languages”
   E. Koasati signs throughout community (e.g., roads & buildings)
   F. Develop Talking Books in Koasati
   G. Develop an at-home kit for teaching Koasati to young children
   H. Establish regular Koasati story-time
   I. Establish Koasati language immersion camps and language clubs
   J. Establish “Take an elder to lunch” and other language mentoring programs

In 2008, the Coushatta Tribe began construction on a new state-of-the-art Heritage Center, which will feature over 30,000 square feet of interactive exhibits. The exhibits will incorporate information on the history, artistry and people of the Coushatta nation, as told by tribal members in Koasati. All displays will be bilingual; the Language Committee has also been instrumental in developing the content for these exhibits.

In June 2009 tribal Language Committee members began work on the first Koasati textbook, entitled “Sobaihilas! - Let’s Learn!” The textbook currently has 35 lessons, as well as brief culture and history lessons, and sections on crafts, field trips, and hopanka (games) to keep the learning process fun. Committee members began teaching the first Koasati class to tribal youth enrolled at the local junior high school in September 2009.

Figure 3. Coushatta Heritage Center: Opening planned for Fall 2010
The Koasati Language Project has come a long way since the early planning stages, with continuing help from AILDI and linguistic consultants. We have learned about, applied for, and received funding from the DEL program, and then taught tribal members the “best practices” of language documentation, developed a tribally-approved orthography, a 1200-word talking dictionary, and a 36-chapter Koasati textbook. To date, the project has produced approximately three terabytes of data in digital audio, video, and textual format, including targeted video interviews, life histories, topical books and videos, and 11,624 items of early Koasati linguistic materials digitized from the collections of the Smithsonian Institution’s National Anthropological Archives.

We have encountered many challenges over the last three years, including technological challenges such as equipment compatibility, finding user-friendly software, organizing assets, and meeting data storage needs. Transcribing is a difficult and time-consuming process; we were greatly relieved when a fluent speaker who joined the project in Year 3 proved to be an excellent transcriber. Maintaining enthusiasm for such an ambitious project is always difficult; we have learned to provide quick turn-around for all language materials produced, so that tribal members could correct mistakes and see continual progress. We also decided to respond to requests for language revitalization materials while still working on the texts; this has proven to be essential to
maintaining community support.

There is still a great deal of work to be done both in documenting and revitalizing Koasati; in many ways we feel that we have just begun this journey. However, the Koasati Language project has succeeded beyond even our expectations, because the community has had clear ownership of and been fully involved in every step of the process.

In addition to emphasizing community involvement and ownership of the project, we have implemented active collaboration between the Tribe, scholar-consultants and the broader academic community. With strong support of the Tribal Council, inter-generational participation, and a clear willingness on the part of participants “to agree to disagree,” language meetings are fun events marked by lots of laughter, shared memories, and generation of new ideas. The Koasati Language project is successful because everyone involved is strongly committed to the overall project goal:

“Ihoochatik, kom atlawistik Kowassaati nathihihka hohalaahiis: So that our children may continue to hear Koasati in the future.”
The Koasati Alphabet

a  aha, sweet potato
aa aati, person
b  bakba, woodpecker
ch chokfi, rabbit
f  fiito, turkey
h  hasi, sun
i  ifa, dog
ii iisa, house
k  kati, cat
l  lambi, caterpillar
m  mobiila, car
n  nokko, beaver
o  oki, water
oo oola, town
p  pakaali, flower
s  satta, turtle
t  tali, rock
th thato, fish
w  waaka, cow
y  yanasa, buffalo

When a vowel is nasal (said through the nose), it’s underlined: a, i, o
Diphthongs are written as ai or oi, as in the words taibi and oiba
Members of the Coushatta Tribe of Louisiana developed this alphabet June 22-23, 2007.

Notes
1 The Coushatta Tribe of Louisiana, the Alabama-Coushatta Tribe of Texas, and the Alabama-Quassarte Tribe of Oklahoma.
2 This article is based upon work supported by the National Science Foundation under grant No. 0804096. Any opinions, findings and conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation

References