Kowassaaton Ilhaalos: Let Us Hear Koasati
Developing and Implementing the Koasati Language Project

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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).

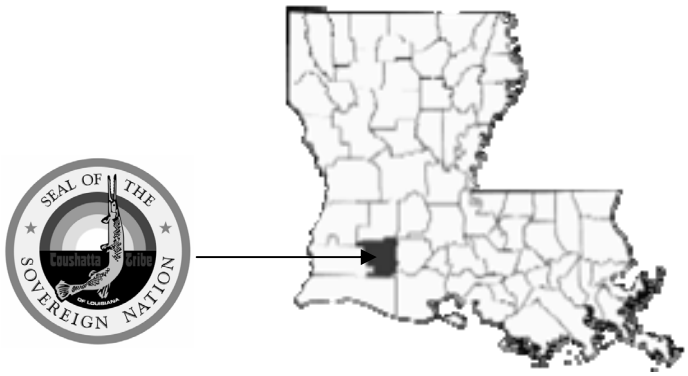

Figure 1. Coushatta Tribal Community, Elton Louisiana

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 Historical documents record the Coushattas westward movement into Louisiana in the late 1790's to avoid conflicts with encroaching European settlers, thereby escaping forced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[1], research has shown that most Koasati speakers are in Louisiana (Halmari, 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[2]. The authors serve as Co-Principal Investigators on the DEL project.

Figure 2. Koasati Language Program plan presented during AILDI poster session, June 2006

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)

I. 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?
         j. Trading – What? For what? How much?, etc.
         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.) – oiyan 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

Sobaihilas! - Let's Learn! Table of Contents

Chapter 1: The Alphabet
Chapter 2: Reading Practice
Chapter 3: Animals
Chapter 4: People
Chapter 5: My Kitchen
Chapter 6: In the Classroom
Chapter 7: Review
Chapter 8: Counting to Ten
Chapter 9: Colors
Chapter 10: Your Body
Chapter 11: Simple commands
Chapter 12: Ifak wowoohka? Is the dog barking?
Chapter 13: Inchaalil. I'm writing.
Chapter 14: Chahiicha? Does he/she see me?
Chapter 15: Naanosik pokko lataafka? Is the little boy kicking the ball?
Chapter 16: Overview of the sentence
Chapter 17: Chibanna? Do you want it?
Chapter 18: New forms of CHA prefixes
Chapter 19: More numbers
Chapter 20: Chokkool. He/she has sat down.
Chapter 21: Aatosik toklot ballaask. Two babies are lying down.
Chapter 22: Itachokkool. It's sitting on the ground.
Chapter 23: Location words
Chapter 24: Lokbáahoos. It's very hot.
Chapter 25: LI verbs
Chapter 26: Hidden LI verbs
Chapter 27: KA verbs
Chapter 28: SING verbs
Chapter 29: SEE verbs
Chapter 30: Summary of LI, KA, SING, and SEE verbs
Chapter 31: "Don't" commands
Chapter 32: Chihichallaho. I'll see you.
Chapter 33: Tali sbataapl. He's hitting it with the rock.
Chapter 34: Bit-akko. I'm not dancing.
Chapter 35: Nihtakon amaahilkat. We went yesterday.
Chapter 36: Naason sanchiisa? What were you doing?
Culture and History, Crafts and Field Trips, Games/Hopanka

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, learned 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 atlawistak Kowassaati nathihilka hohalaahiis: So that our children may continue to hear Koasati in the future."

Figure 4. Koasati Language Committee, with Tribal Council and students from William & Mary (June, 2009)

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	*thatho*, fish
w	*waaka*, cow
y	*yanasa*, buffalo

When a vowel is nasal (said through the nose), it's underlined: a, i, o
Dipthongs 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

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