CREEK

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Language name: Creek, Muskogee.

Location: Central Oklahoma and central Florida, formerly in Alabama and Georgia.

Family: Muskogean.

Related Languages: Hitchiti (no longer spoken), Mikasuki (spoken within the Seminole Tribe and the Miccosukee Tribe of Florida), Alabama (spoken in eastern Texas), Koasati (spoken in Louisiana and eastern Texas), Choctaw (spoken in Mississippi and southeastern Oklahoma), and Chickasaw (spoken in south central Oklahoma).

Dialects: The three main dialects of Creek are Muskogee (spoken in the Muscogee (Creek) Nation of Oklahoma), Oklahoma Seminole (spoken in the Seminole Nation of Oklahoma) and Florida Seminole Creek (spoken within the Seminole Tribe of Florida). There is close contact between the Oklahoma groups with only minor differences in vocabulary. Florida Seminole Creek is slightly more divergent, owing in part to its location, to differences in flora and fauna, and to different neighboring languages.

Numbers of speakers: 3,000-5,000

Origin and History:

Creek (or Muskogee) is a member of the Muskogean family of languages. The Muskogean family is indigenous to the southeastern United States, and includes Choctaw, Chickasaw, Alabama, Koasati, Apalachee, Hitchiti, and Mikasuki as well as Creek. The name 'Creek' is thought to have been applied by English settlers (referring to the Creek habit of residing near water). 'Muskogee' (*Maskoke* /ma:skó:ki/ or *Mvskoke* /maskó:ki/ in Creek) is of uncertain origin.

Early records show the Creeks living along the Coosa, Tallapoosa, Flint, and Chattahoochee rivers in what are today the states of Alabama and Georgia. Those living along the Coosa and Tallapoosa are referred to as Upper Creeks; those along the Flint and Chattahoochee are Lower Creeks. These two groups (in all, including some fifty to eighty towns and 11-24,000 people) were united in a loose confederation known as the Creek Confederacy. Smaller groups were incorporated or annexed, and the Creek Confederacy eventually came to include speakers of Alabama, Koasati, Hitchiti, Natchez, Shawnee, Yuchi, and Chickasaw in addition to Creek.

Creeks have had contact with Europeans or European-Americans since 1540, when DeSoto's expedition passed through their lands. Between 1740 and 1750, some Hitchiti-speaking Lower Creeks began moving into Florida. Some Creek-speaking refugees joined them following the disastrous Creek War of 1813-15, in which some Alabama Creeks (inspired in part by the Shawnee-Creek leader Tecumseh) fought against Anglo-American settlers. This new group of Hitchiti and Creek-speaking runaways was referred to in Creek as *semvnole* /simanó:l-i/'wild', from Spanish *cimarrón* 'wild'. These

Seminoles kept in contact for a while with the Lower Creeks, but were gradually excluded from treaties made with Creeks in Georgia and Alabama. In 1819, the state of Alabama was created, and tribal governments were outlawed (in violation of earlier treaties). In 1830, Andrew Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act. Although the U. S. Supreme Court found it unconstitutional, Creeks, Seminoles, Cherokees, Choctaws, and Chickasaws were removed to Indian Territory from 1834-1842. These "Five Civilized Tribes" formed independent nations with laws, courts, and schools, but their land was later allotted and in 1907 the state of Oklahoma was created. The Creek language was dominant numerically and politically within the Creek and Seminole Nations, but speakers of Yuchi, Hitchiti, Alabama, Koasati, and Natchez were also present.

Missionary work among the Creeks began as early as 1735, when the Moravian Brethren briefly operated a school on an island in the Savannah River. Intensive missionary work began after removal, and readers, hymnbooks, and translations of books of the New Testament were published in a spelling system devised by missionaries and native speakers. The first book published in Indian Territory was in Creek. In 1860, H. F. Buckner published a grammar of the language, and a dictionary written by R. M. Loughridge and David M. Hodge appeared in 1890. Literacy in the traditional spelling was low following the Civil War, but in 1906 it was estimated that 90 per cent of full bloods could read their language. Versions of the traditional spelling system were used in correspondence, legal briefs, laws, newspaper articles, and advertisements. Literacy declined following Oklahoma statehood, and is now low. Use of the language has also declined. Toward the close of the 19th century, some leaders argued that students would be more successful if they were educated in English. It was common for children in boarding schools to be punished for using even a casual word in Creek. When these children grew up, they spoke to their own children in English to save them punishment.

At the close of the 20th century Creek is spoken in central Oklahoma and on the Brighton Reservation within the Seminole Tribe of Florida. Creek speakers in Oklahoma and Florida have little difficulty understanding each other, though words for modern items and for local flora and fauna naturally differ. Creek is no longer spoken in Alabama or Georgia. In Oklahoma, the language is still used at churches, at ceremonial grounds, and at one radio station, but there are few individuals under the age of 50 who are able to use the language fluently. While there are some thirty to forty thousand individuals of Creek or Seminole descent, only 6,213 reported on the 1990 census that they speak Creek or Seminole at home, and the number of fluent speakers is decreasing at an alarming rate. There is, however, growing interest in maintaining the language and in producing new language materials.

The terms 'Creek' and 'Muskogee' (sometimes spelled 'Muscogee') are both in use currently, and have different meanings for different people. 'Creek' is felt by some to be broader in meaning: one might be Yuchi, Alabama, or Hitchiti and still call oneself 'Creek'. 'Muskogee' is thought to be more specific. Creek speakers within the Seminole Tribe of Florida, for example, are comfortable calling their language 'Creek', but associate 'Muskogee' with Oklahoma. Oklahoma Seminoles, however, refer to their language as 'Seminole', reserving 'Creek' or 'Muskogee' for members of the Creek Nation. Some younger people seem to favor 'Muskogee', while most older people continue to use 'Creek'.

Basic phonology:

The traditional Creek alphabet is based in part on English spelling.

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a father /a:/
c such /c/
e fit /i/
ē feed /i:/
f fish /f/
h hotel /h/
i hey (formerly as in pine) /ey, ay/
k skill /k/
l love /l/
m man /m/
n no /n/
o boat (short) /o/, bode (long) /o:/
p spot /p/
r athlete /ɬ/
s sew /s/
t step /t/
u put /o/
v sofa /a/
w will /w/
y yes /y/

Table. 1 Consonants

	Labial	Dental	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Plosives	p	t	c	k	
Fricatives	f	s; r /ɬ/			h
Approximants	w	l	y		
Nasals	m	n			

Table 2. Vowels

	Front	Central	Back
High	e /i/; ē /i:/		
Mid			u /o/; o /o:/
Low		v /a/; a /a:/	

For English speakers, the surprising letters are *c, i, r,* and *v*. *C* is generally pronounced like English *such*. *V* is pronounced like the final vowel in *sofa*. In the 19th century, the diphthong spelled *i* was pronounced like English *pine*. Because of a sound change, it is now generally pronounced like English *hey*. *R* is used for a voiceless lateral fricative, a sound not found in English. English *athlete* gives a rough approximation of the sound, but the sound is properly made by placing the tongue in the position for *l*, and then raising the sides of the tongue slightly so that friction results.

Creek has a rule of voicing that makes *p, t, k,* and *c* sound like the first consonants in English *bill, dill, gill,* and *Jill*. Voicing applies only when *p, t, k,* and *c* are: 1) at the beginning of a syllable; and, 2) between voiced sounds (vowels, diphthongs, *m, l, n, w, y*). Examples: *opv* /opá/ ‘owl’ (sounds like English *b*), *eto* /itó/ ‘tree’ (sounds like English *d*), *hvmken* /hámk-in/ (sounds like English *g*), *vce* /ací/ ‘corn’ (sounds like English *j*).

Most consonants can be doubled. Doubled consonants are held slightly longer than single consonants, and are not voiced. Vowels are divided into short vowels *v* /a/, *e* /i/, *u* /o/ and long vowels *a* /a:/, *ē* /i:/, *o* /o:/.

Creek words have stress, but stress is realized in terms of pitch rather than loudness or emphasis. Creek also has tone. Falling tone, high tone, rising tone, and level tone are found primarily on verbs, and indicate whether an activity is on-going, completed, etc. Tone is not marked in the traditional spelling. Thus *a-hueris* /á:-hoył-éy-s/ [‾ — —] means ‘I am in the process of standing up’, while *a-hueris* /a:-hôył-ey-s/ [‾ ˗ - ‗] means ‘I have stood up’. Vowels are sometimes nasalized, usually to indicate intensity or a prolonged event.

Basic morphology:

A few nouns form plurals with *-vke* /-aki/ or *-take* /-ta:ki/: *mēkko* /mí:kko/ ‘chief’, *mēkkvke* /mi:kk-akí/ ‘chiefs’; *honvnwv* /honánwa/ ‘man’, *honvntake* /honan-tá:ki/ ‘men’. Diminutives are formed by adding *-uce* /-oci/: *efv* /ifá/ ‘dog’, *efuce* /if-óci/ ‘puppy’. Nouns are possessed with inalienable or alienable prefixes:

cvpuse /ca-pósi/ ‘my grandmother’	*vm efv* /am-ífa/ ‘my dog’
cepuse /ci-pósi/ ‘your grandmother’	*cem efv* /cim-ífa/ ‘your dog’
epuse /i-pósi/ ‘his/her grandmother’	*em efv* /im-ífa/ ‘his/her dog’
pupuse /po-pósi/ ‘our grandmother’	*pum efv* /pom-ífa/ ‘our dog’

Inalienable prefixes are generally used for kin terms, body parts, and positional nouns.

Verbs may take a large number of affixes. Verbs expressing deliberate actions agree with the subject using suffixes:

hompis /homp-éy-s/ ‘I am eating’
hompetskes /homp-íck-is/ ‘you (singular) are eating’
hompes /homp-ís/ ‘he/she is eating’
hompēs /homp-í:-s/ ‘we are eating’
hompatskes /homp-á:ck-is/ ‘you (plural) are eating’

Verbs expressing nondeliberate actions or states agree with the subject using prefixes:

cvhaktēsikes /ca-hakti:sêyk-is/ ‘I sneezed’
cehaktēsikes /ci-hakti:sêyk-is/ ‘you sneezed’
haktēsikes /hakti:sêyk-is/ ‘he/she sneezed’
puhaktēsikes /po-hakti:sêyk-is/ ‘we sneezed’

These prefixes are similar in shape to the inalienable prefixes, except that there is no third person marker on verbs. The same markers are used for objects:

cvnafkes /ca-na:fk-ís/ ‘he/she is hitting me’
cenafkes /ci-na:fk-ís/ ‘he/she is hitting you’
nafkes /na:fk-ís/ ‘he/she is hitting it/him/her’
punafkes /po-na:fk-ís/ ‘he/she is hitting us’

Verbs may also be marked for number, tense, aspect, commands, and questions, giving what Mary R. Haas has described as a “luxuriance of grammatical processes”:

nesetv /nis-íta/ ‘to buy’
nesvketv /nis-ak-itá/ ‘to buy (plural)’
nesvrēs /nis-áł-i:-s/ ‘he/she will buy it’
nēses /ni:s-ís/ ‘he/she is buying it’
nehses /níhs-is/ ‘he/she bought it (today)’
nēsvnks /nî:s-ánk-s/ ‘he/she bought it (recently, but not today)’
nēsemvts /nî:s-imát-s/ ‘he/she bought it (about a year ago)’
nēsvntvs /nî:s-ánta-s/ ‘he/she bought it (long ago)’
nesvs /nis-ás/ ‘buy it!’
nēsv? /ni:s-a´/ ‘is he/she buying it?’

As these forms show, modifications in the shape of a stem are common, and are referred to as GRADES. Thus from *nes-* /nis-/ 'buy', Creek forms a lengthening grade (*nēs-* /ni:s-/), an aspirating grade (*nehs-* /níhs-/), a nasalizing grade (*nēs-* /nĭ:^{n}s-/, and a falling tone grade (*nēs-* /nî:s-/).

Some notions corresponding to English prepositions are also expressed on the verb:

hoccicetv /ho:cceyc-itá/ ‘to write’
enhoccicetv /in-ho:cceyc-itá/ ‘to write to (someone)’
eshoccicetv /is-ho:cceyc-itá/ ‘to write with (something)’
ohhoccicetv /oh-ho:cceyc-itá/ ‘to write on top of (something)’

Creek has no true passive voice, but it has a middle voice (*tvcetv* /tac-íta/ ‘to cut’, *tvckē* /tác-k-i:/ ‘be cut’), an impersonal (*kicetv* /keyc-itá/ ‘to say’, *kihoces* /kéyho:c-ís/

‘they say, someone says’), and a causative (*hompetv* /homp-itá/ ‘to eat’, *hompicetv* /hompeyc-itá/ ‘to feed’).

Distinctions in number are important in Creek. Verbs describing motion or position frequently have different forms depending on whether one, two, or three or more individuals are involved:

vretv /ał-íta/ ‘to go about (of one)’
welvketv /wilak-itá/ ‘to go about (of two)’
fulletv /foll-itá/ ‘to go about (of three or more)’

liketv /leyk-itá/ ‘to sit (of one)’
kaketv /ka:k-itá/ ‘to sit (of two)’
vpoketv /apo:k-itá/ ‘to sit (of three or more)’

Basic syntax:

The two main parts of speech in Creek are noun and verb. A verb marked for person, tense, and mood forms a complete sentence in Creek. When noun phrases are present, they generally occur in the order subject, object, verb. An auxiliary verb always follows the main verb. Numbers and descriptive words translating as adjectives follow the noun modified:

Hoktvke	*hokkolet*	*vce*	*hocvkētt*	*welaken...*
/hoktakí	hokkô:lit	ací	hocakĭ:^{n}tt	wila:kín/
women	two	corn	pounding	were:going:about

‘There were two women pounding corn...’

Subjects may be marked with *-t* /-t/ and objects may be marked with *-n* /-n/: the presence or absence of these markers appears to relate to specificity. Possessors and demonstratives precede the nouns they modify: *Cane em efv* /cá:ni im-ífa/ ‘John’s dog’, *mv efv* /ma ifá/ ‘that dog’.

Clauses are linked with the switch-reference markers *-et* /-it/ (generally used for sequential events sharing the same subject) or *-en* /-in/ (for clauses that are less closely linked).

Negation is expressed with a suffix: *hecetv* /hic-íta/ ‘to see’, *hec<u>eko</u>* /hic-íko-:/ ‘doesn’t see, blind’.

Borrowed words and loanwords:

English has borrowed a few plant names from Creek:

catalpa	winged head (Creek *’kv-tvrpv* /ka-tálpa/)
tupelo	swamp tree (Creek *’to-pelwv* /to-pílwa/)
coontie	(Florida Seminole Creek *kuntē* /kontí:/)

A number of place names in Alabama, Georgia, Oklahoma, and Florida are Creek in origin:

Tallahassee	old tribal town (Creek *Tvlvhasse* /tal-ahá:ssi/)
Talladega	border of the tribal town (Creek *Tvlvtēkv* /tal-atí:k-a/)
Chatahoochee	decorated rock (Creek *Cvto Hoↄce* /cato-hó:cc-i/)
Wewoka	barking water (Creek *Ue-wohkv* /oy-wó:hk-a/)

Common words:

big:	*rakkē* /łákk-i:/
bird:	*fuswv* /fóswa/
dog:	*efv* /ifá/
fish:	*rvro* /łałó/
good:	*herē* /hił-í:/
long:	*cvpkē* /cápk-i:/
man:	*honvnwv* /honánwa/
no:	*monks* /monks/
small:	*cutkē* /cótk-i:/
sun:	*hvse* /hasí/
three:	*tuccēnen* /toccî:n-in/
tree:	*eto* /itó/
water:	*uewv* /óywa/
woman:	*hoktē* /hoktí:/
yes:	*ehe* /ihí/

Example sentences:

(1) *Cvpose efuce vnnēsvnks.*
/ca-pósi ifóci an-nî:sanks/
my-mother puppy for:me-bought
‘My mother bought me a puppy.’

(2) *Hompetv rakko ohocat vpeyetv ceyacvkv?*
/hompita-łákko ohô:ca:t apiy-itá ci-yâ:c-ak-a´/
food-big that:they're:having to:go do:you:want
‘Do you want to go to the big meal they're having?’

Contact with other languages:

Creek has engaged in borrowing with neighboring languages. The Creek word *kolvpaken* /kolapâ:k-in/ ‘seven’ was borrowed into Cherokee, for example, and Creek *toknawv* /tokná:wa/ ‘money, dollar’ (earlier form *cvto konawv* /cato-koná:wa/ ‘stone/iron bead’)

was borrowed into Alabama and Koasati. The Creek word *penwv* /pínwa/ ‘turkey’ may be Fox in origin, while *pvkanv* /paká:na/ ‘peach’ is thought to come from Shawnee.

Creek borrowed a number of Spanish words from Spanish colonies in Florida. Creek *halo* /há:lo/ ‘tin can’ is from Spanish *jarro*, *wakv* /wá:ka/ ‘cow, bovine’ is from Spanish *vaca*, *cowatv* /cowá:ta/ ‘goat’ is from Spanish *chivato*, Creek *fvlasko* /falá:sko/ ‘bottle’ is from Spanish *frasco*, Creek *kapv* /ká:pa/ ‘coat’ is from Spanish *capa*, Creek *tosēnv* /tosí:na/ ‘bacon’ is from Spanish *tocino*, and *soletawv* /solitá:wa/ ‘soldier’ is from Spanish *soldado*.

Efforts to preserve, protect, or promote the language:

Few people younger than 40 grow up speaking Creek at home, and every month gifted monolingual and bilingual speakers pass away. As a result, Creek falls into the category of endangered languages. Courses in the Creek language are currently being offered at the University of Oklahoma and by a few individuals in the Creek Nation. Head Start programs in Oklahoma and Florida introduce Creek to preschool children. Several public school districts in Oklahoma have recently begun teaching their students Creek as a way to broaden the learning experience. A number of public school teachers have attended the Oklahoma Native American Language Development Institute to develop curricula for this purpose. Unless drastic measures are taken (for example, by establishing separate schools where Creek is the medium of instruction), it seems likely that Creek will continue to lose ground to English.

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