



The Whole World Speaks Choctaw

The Americanism “okay” originated with the Choctaw Indians and was used by them long before it became a loanword into English. According to a Choctaw grammar begun in 1819, with the first draft completed in 1834, “okeh” was literally a textbook example of a very important Choctaw grammatical structure, the affirmative contradistinctive. It meant almost exactly what “okay” means today, “it is so and not otherwise.” It was also used as an interjection to catch the listeners attention. Another early Choctaw grammar offered a variety of spellings and translated them as an emphatic “it is.”

Muskogean languages such as Choctaw were widely used as a *lingua franca* throughout the frontier at a time when it figured very prominently in shaping the culture and the identity of the young nation. Colloquial American English was enthusiastically embracing the colorful Americanisms originating between the Allegheny and Rocky Mountains.

“O.K.” found its way into the papers about 1839, and over the next few years an OK craze – its popularity was often characterized as “cabalistic” – swept the country. For over a year the expression was not used in newspapers as an abbreviation but merely to express something approximating “all correct.”

It was a fad in those days to use cute spellings and then coin acronyms based on those spellings. “O.K.” became part of this fad and an abbreviation for an endless array of cute phrases, one of which, “Oll Korrekt,” was widely associated with Andrew Jackson and the frontier.

In 1840, members of one of the many grassroots Tammany Societies of the day named for the Delaware Chief Tammany and devoted to using Indian

terms and practices began using the interjection “OK” as their war cry and calling themselves the “OK Boys.” A notice about a rally in support of Martin Van Buren by these “OK Boys” appeared in a newspaper, and some weeks later the expression “old Kinderhook” was used to refer to Van Buren’s birthplace and to exploit the popularity of “OK.”

President Woodrow Wilson spelled the expression “okeh” in a conscious effort to emphasize its Native origins. Other languages such as German and Russian still often use this spelling. The Okeh record label, which originally included an Indian head logo, released many “firsts” of jazz and blues. The Arrow Shirt Company marketed an “Okeh” line for a while.

The expression survives in some geographical names such as Okay, OK, which was formerly named North Muskogee, and on Choctaw web pages, where it usually retains the spellings of “oke,” “hoke,” or “hoka.” The Choctaw etymology and the “okeh” spelling remained widely accepted and were cited by dictionaries into the middle of the twentieth century.

Then, as the country became more urban and middle class, the Choctaw etymology, although never actually refuted, was widely ignored and ridiculed by those promoting rival etymologies. However, no other theory has been able to explain the enormous, enduring popularity of this unique Americanism.

Today it has been said that “okay” or “OK” is the most widely recognized expression (other than trade names) on the planet.

Indeed, in a very real sense, the whole world speaks Choctaw.

For further reading see the http document at < www.prairienet.org/prairienations/ok.htm > .