
Word avoidances in Muskogean languages

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Muskogean is the largest family of Native languages in the Southeastern United States. Reconstruction of Proto-Muskogean forms goes back to Haas (1941, 1947, inter alia). However, a large collection of Muskogean cognate sets (Munro et al. 1992) shows that for many seemingly ‘basic’ words of vocabulary, one or more Muskogean languages lack a clear cognate. Consider the cognate set for EYE shown in (1), where the Choctaw and Chickasaw forms are quite different.

- (1) EYE
Creek *-tolwa* | Mikasuki *it-i* | Alabama, Koasati *ittili* | Choctaw *nishkin*,
Chickasaw *ishkin*

Haas (1958: 245) notes that the Choctaw and Chickasaw forms are borrowed from an Algonquian language. But why is a basic vocabulary item borrowed? I argue that the most likely motivation is word avoidance. This paper examines the Muskogean cognate sets in detail and identifies about a dozen word avoidances. Two main avoidance mechanisms (borrowing and euphemism) are evident. *Borrowing* is seen in a set like EYE (1). We also see *euphemism*. Consider the cognate set for BLOOD (2):

- (2) BLOOD
Creek *ca:ta* | Mikasuki *picikci* | Alabama, Koasati *lakhani* | Choctaw,
Chickasaw *issish*

The Creek word *ca:ta* is a euphemism meaning ‘the thing that is red’. Similarly, the Alabama and Koasati *lakhani* derives from a verb ‘flow, ooze’.

Some Muskogean word avoidances (EYE, FIRE, THUNDER, OWL) point to religious practices of earlier Muskogeans who were part of the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex archaeological culture (Waring & Holder 1945, inter alia). Symbolism associated with this complex includes thunder and bird gods, sacred fire, as well as the ‘forked eye’ motif. The words which are avoided often coincide with sacred objects in this culture. This study thus connects Muskogean word avoidances to Muskogean prehistory.

References: • Haas, M. (1941). Noun incorporation in the Muskogean languages. *Language* 17(4), 311–315. • Haas, M. (1947). Development of Proto-Muskogean *k^w. *International Journal of American Linguistics* 13(3), 135–137. • Haas, M. (1958). A New Linguistic Relationship in North America: Algonkian and the Gulf Languages. *Southwest Journal of Anthropology* 14(3), 321–264. • Munro, P. et al. (1992). Muskogean cognate sets. UCLA. • Waring, A. & P. Holder (1945). A Prehistoric Ceremonial Complex in the Southeastern United States. *American Anthropologist* 47(1), 1–34.