

## Planning a Modern Houma Language

### Abstract

While a fair amount of information exists on the Western Muskogean languages Chickasaw and Choctaw (Munro, 1994; Byington, 1915; Broadwell, 2006), little is known about Houma, a Western Muskogean language historically spoken in parts of Mississippi and Southeastern Louisiana. All that remains of this language, which has been extinct for approximately a century, is a small collection of words and phrases collected by anthropologist John Swanton in 1911, and two undeciphered recordings of songs recorded in 1977. The songs were rediscovered by two Houma women in 2013, and inspired the women to found the Houma Language Project, whose current goals are cultural and linguistic reclamation. Previous comparative work using Swanton's list suggests Houma is a distinct branch of the Western Muskogean language family, and not a dialect of Choctaw or the trade language Mobilian Jargon (Drechsel, 1997; Brown and Hardy, 2000). Because not enough information is available to reconstruct Houma with conventional comparative methods, the Houma Language Project has shifted to planning a modern language using the existing documentation and the closely-related Choctaw and Chickasaw.

This presentation outlines the comparative process used for planning the modern Houma language, using analyses of Swanton's Houma vocabulary and assistance from Chickasaw and Mississippi Choctaw community members. In the vocabulary analyses, there are several phonological trends we can see in Choctaw-Houma correspondences, such as [ʃ] > [s], and [i] > [e], which are starting points to investigate the influences affecting Houma speakers before the language's extinction and extrapolate possible variations used at that time. This study also highlights the sociolinguistic dynamics of language planning within the Houma community: how the community views the Houma language as a core aspect of their identity, the social process of learning Western Muskogean grammar with Choctaw speakers, and the process of language planning and standardization.

## Bibliography

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