

“Omaha-Ponca”

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abstract: Omaha-Ponca is a Siouan language spoken in Nebraska and Oklahoma. It is severely endangered, with under 100 fluent speakers. Notable phonetic features of the language include four series of stops, an unusual dental approximant, and pitch accent. Grammatically, the language is characterized by complex verbal morphology, a rich system of definite articles, head-final word order, active-stative argument structure, and internal-headed relative clauses. There are some lexical and grammatical differences between male and female speech, and minor lexical differences between Omaha and Ponca dialects.

1. Speakers, Resources

Omaha-Ponca is the name linguists use for the language of the Omaha and Ponca peoples. Umoⁿhoⁿ (Omaha) and Paⁿka (Ponca, sometimes spelled Ponka) dialects differ only minimally, but are considered distinct languages by their speakers. See below for discussion of differences between the two varieties. Both tribes formerly inhabited areas near the Missouri river in northeastern Nebraska. The Omahas are still located in this area, with the tribal headquarters at Macy, Nebraska, but most of the Poncas were removed in the 1870's to Oklahoma, ultimately settling near modern Ponca City, and came to be known as the Southern Poncas. A smaller group, the Northern Poncas, still reside in Nebraska.

Omaha-Ponca is a member of the Dhegiha branch of Mississippi Valley Siouan, closely related to Osage, Kansa, and Quapaw. For more detail on the genetic relationships of the Siouan languages, see the article on Siouan in this encyclopedia.

Both Omaha and Ponca dialects are severely endangered, with only a few dozen elderly fluent speakers of Omaha in Nebraska and of Ponca in Oklahoma. However, many younger people have some ability to speak or understand, and language classes at several schools and colleges in Nebraska and Oklahoma have had some success in promoting fluency among passive and semi-speakers, as well as teaching the language to children and college students.

Major linguistic resources on Omaha-Ponca include the monumental text collections of James Owen Dorsey (1890, 1891), Dorsey's draft grammar and slip file, ethnographic studies by Fletcher and LaFlesche (1911) and Howard (1965), Swetland's recent dictionary (1977/1991), and an unpublished grammar by Koontz (1984). Several dissertations are currently in progress.

2. Sounds and Spelling

Traditionally, like other Native American languages, Omaha-Ponca was not written. Recently, both tribes have independently adopted nearly identical spelling systems, similar to the orthography used by Fletcher and LaFlesche, but reading and writing Omaha-Ponca is still complicated by the existence of several other orthographies. In particular, the Dorsey materials, the largest source of texts in the language, are written in an idiosyncratic orthography which uses upside-down letters for unaspirated stops, ϕ for the dental approximant, q for the voiceless velar fricative, and c for the voiceless alveopalatal fricative, among other unusual symbols. Most modern linguistic writings on the language use a transcription which represents tense unaspirated stops with a double letter, nasal vowels with a hook under the letter, and alveopalatal consonants with a hachek (\check{c} , \check{s} , \check{j} , \check{z}); a slightly modified transcription known as "NetSiouan" is used for electronic communication. This has the effect that even those who are literate in Omaha or Ponca do not have easy access to most works on the language.

In this article we use the orthography adopted by current school programs. The phonemic inventory of Omaha-Ponca, using this system, is shown in table 1.

Table 1. Phonemic Inventory of Omaha-Ponca

		labial	dental	alveopalatal	velar	laryngeal
stops & affricates						
voiced voiceless	plain	b	d	j	g	'
	aspirated	p	t	ch	k	
	glottalized	p ^h	t ^h	ch ^h	k ^h	
		p'	t'			
nasals		m	n			
fricatives	voiced		z	zh	gh	
	voiceless		s	sh	x	
	glottalized		s'	sh'	x'	
approximants		w	th			h
vowels	oral	i	e	a	(o)	u
	nasal	i ⁿ	a ⁿ /o ⁿ			
	long	(doubled letter, e.g. aa)				

Several sounds require explanation. The plain voiceless stops are lax in obstruent clusters (e.g. following a fricative), tense elsewhere. Glottalized consonants, which are ejective or coarticulated with a glottal stop, are rare. The back nasal vowel is spelled *o*"

in Omaha and a^n in Ponca. Throughout this article we use the Omaha spelling for convenience. It is not entirely clear whether there is more than one phonemic back nasal vowel. Phonetic vowels varying in quality from $[a^n]$ to $[o^n]$ to $[u^n]$ occur, but are probably allophonically conditioned. A vowel o is written in a few words of men's speech.

The most unusual sound in Omaha-Ponca is the consonant spelled *th*. This phoneme ranges apparently freely from $[l]$ to a lightly articulated voiced dental fricative $[\delta]$. Historically derived from $*r$, it behaves more like a liquid than a fricative, frequently occurring in syllable-initial clusters following a voiced stop (bth, gth), for instance. Because of its similarity to the sound in English “this,” it is spelled *th* in the Fletcher-LaFlesche and current educational orthographies. Other systems represent it variously as č (Dorsey), δ (Siouanist/linguistic) or *dh* (NetSiouan).

Vowel length is distinctive in accented syllables (*náⁿaⁿde* ‘heart’ vs. *náⁿde* ‘inside wall’), but this contrast was not recognized by linguists until the 1990s and is still marked only sporadically in written materials. Nasality is also distinctive, but sometimes difficult to hear; especially for $[i]$ vs. $[i^n]$ adjacent to a nasal consonant or in final position. For instance, ‘water’ can be found written as either *ni* or *niⁿ*. A downstep pitch accent occurs on the first or second syllable of the word, and is distinctive: *wathát^he* ‘food’ *wáthat^he* ‘table’, though this may turn out to correlate with vowel length.

Instrumental phonetic studies of O-P are lacking. It would be useful to have studies of the exact quality of the various stop series, *th*, and the suprasegmental features.

3. Morphology

Like other Siouan languages, Omaha-Ponca has complex verbal morphology but very little elaboration of other categories. There is no grammatical class of adjectives; concepts like “tall” are expressed by stative verbs. Adverbs, pronouns, and demonstratives are minor, uninflected categories. Nouns, other than those derived from verbs, generally contain no inflectional morphology. The exception is vocative and inalienable possessive marking of relationship terms:

wi-ko ⁿ ‘my grandmother’	ko ⁿ -ho ‘grandmother!’ (male vocative)
thi-ko ⁿ ‘your grandmother’	ko ⁿ -ha ‘grandmother!’ (female vocative,
i-ko ⁿ ‘his/her/their grandmother’	sometimes also used by men)

Definiteness is marked by a series of articles which also code animacy, proximateness, position, movement, and/or plurality of the nominal they follow. This complex definite article system is an innovation shared with other Dhegiha languages.

nu ak^ha ‘the man (proximate)’

nu thiⁿk^he ‘the man (obviative animate sitting)’
 zhoⁿ k^he ‘the stick (long, horizontal)’
 zhoⁿ t^he ‘the wood (stacked vertically)’

The verb is the locus of most of the grammatical information in the sentence. Besides pronominal prefixes identifying subject and object of the clause, the verb may contain prefixal instrumental, locative, dative, possessive, reflexive, suus, and vertitive markers, some of which can be obscured by phonological processes. Postverbal enclitics code plurality, negation, habitual or potential aspect, evidentiality, imperative and interrogative mode, proximateness, and other categories, some marked for person. There is no category of tense.

a-kig-thize-ta-miⁿk^he
1s.agent-reflexive-get-potential-1s.aux
 I’ll get (it) for myself

Omaha-Ponca is an active-stative language, meaning that verbs take one or the other or both of two sets of pronominal prefixes, an agent set and a patient set. The regular prefixes are given below (there are also several irregular conjugations):

	1st person sg.	2nd person	3rd person	1st person pl.
agent	a-	tha-	Ø-	o ⁿ -
patient	o ⁿ -	thi-	Ø-	wa-

Intransitive verbs take one set or the other depending roughly on their semantics, “active” verbs taking the agent set as their sole argument; “stative” verbs the patient set:

active verb: gthiⁿ ‘sit’
 agthiⁿ ‘I sit’ thagthiⁿ ‘you sit’ gthiⁿ ‘he/she/it/they sit’ oⁿgthiⁿ ‘we sit’
 stative verb: sni ‘be cold’
 oⁿsni ‘I’m cold’ thisni ‘you’re cold’ sni ‘it’s cold’ wasni ‘we’re cold’

Transitive verbs take both an agent prefix for the subject and a patient prefix for the object, e.g. oⁿ-thi-doⁿbai ‘we see you’. There is a portmanteau form wi- for 1st person subject with 2nd person object, and an additional patient prefix wa- for 3rd person plural or indefinite object.

4. Syntax

Syntactically, Omaha-Ponca is a head-marking, head-final language. Postpositions follow their nominal arguments: tiútanoⁿ k^he di ‘in the yard,’ literally ‘yard the in’. Modal and evidential auxiliaries are at the end of the clause, after the verb, as are

imperative and question particles. Determiners are the rightmost element in the nominal phrase (DP) and other noun modifiers also follow the head noun.

wat^hé tu wiwíta thoⁿ
dress blue my the
 ‘my blue dress’ (N + clause + poss + art)

Basic sentence word order is SOV, as in the following example:

[wahóⁿthishige ak^ha] [shóⁿge wiⁿ] [góⁿtha-i-t^he].
Orphan.Boy the horse one want-proximate-evid
 ‘Orphan Boy wanted a horse.’

Full SOV sentences are actually rather uncommon, however. All constituents except the verb are optional, so subject and/or object are often missing; a verb alone constitutes a full grammatical sentence. In addition, SOV order is far from rigid; it is not uncommon for a major constituent, such as the underlined phrase in the following example, to occur after the verb. Such postverbal phrases generally seem to be topics, but may sometimes be simply an afterthought.

M. S. izházhe athíⁿ nú ak^há.
name had man the
 ‘The man was named M. S.’

Since all participants are marked on the verb and all nominals are optional, it is possible to analyze Omaha-Ponca as a pronominal argument language in the sense that the pronominal affixes on the verb are the true syntactic arguments of the clause, nominal phrases (when they occur) being adjuncts. As in other languages, this analysis is controversial.

Relative clauses in Omaha-Ponca are internal-headed, with the head noun contained within the clause. The head noun is indefinite (not marked with a definite article), while the clause is followed by an article appropriate to the head noun’s role in the matrix clause.

[[shiⁿnuda noⁿba uxpátheawathe] ama]
dog two I.lose.them the
 ‘the two dogs that I lost’

Various types of nominal and adverbial subordinate clauses also exist, sometimes also marked with an article:

[[that^hi] t^he] údoⁿ
you.arrive.here the good
 ‘It’s good that you’re here’

5. Usage: Gendered Speech and Dialects

Some aspects of Omaha-Ponca language differ by speaker's gender. Male/female speech forms play only a minor role in the grammar and lexicon of the language; however, they are of great cultural salience and high frequency, including as they do forms of address, greetings, terms for certain relatives, speech act markers (command, exclamation, and question particles), and interjections. See examples below. Gendered speech sometimes hampers language teaching and revival efforts; males in particular are wary of learning inappropriate speech patterns from a female teacher.

- aho! 'greeting or interjection showing approval', used only by males
- imperative enclitics: -ga (male) vs. -a (female), sometimes with stress shift:
oⁿí-ga/oⁿí-á 'give it to me (m/f)'
- relationship terms and vocative enclitics:
zhiⁿthé-ho 'older brother!' male (i.e. addressed by brother)
tinu-há 'older brother!' female (i.e. addressed by sister)

Differences between Omaha and Ponca varieties of the language are slight, and mostly involve recently innovated vocabulary, such as 'telephone' (Ponca *máⁿdⁿze ut^híⁿ* ('tapping iron'; originally telegraph) vs. Omaha *móⁿoⁿze íutha* ('talking iron'), or 'cup' (Ponca *uxpé zhiⁿga* 'little dish' vs. Omaha *niúthatoⁿ* 'drink water in it'). Some words differ in meaning. For instance, *shóⁿzhiⁿga* (literally 'small horse') means 'colt' in Omaha but 'puppy' in Ponca. *Shóⁿge*, originally 'dog,' has shifted its meaning to 'horse' in both Omaha and Ponca, but the young animal term derived from it retains its older meaning in Ponca. Such lexical differences are not necessarily absolute. Given the close contact between Omahas and Poncas, in many cases both forms may be known in both communities.

Phonological and grammatical differences between Ponca and Omaha have not been well researched. There is some indication that Ponca speakers retain the final -i of the proximate/plural, which present-day Omaha speakers drop in most environments, though ablaut shows that it is underlyingly present: Ponca *athái*, Omaha *athá* 'she/he/they go', from *athé+i*. However, given the small number of speakers recorded, this may be more an idiolectal than a dialectal difference. In general, speakers from the two communities have no trouble understanding each other.

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 postpositions
 SOV
 pronominal arguments
 internal-headed relative clause
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