



The Whole World Speaks Choctaw

The Americanism “okay” originated with the Choctaw Indians of Louisiana 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.” Another nineteenth century grammar offered a variety of spellings and translated them as “it is.”

The expression was so useful it saw wide use throughout the frontier at a time when the frontier figured very prominently in shaping the culture and the identity of the young nation. Colloquial American English was enthusiastically embracing these colorful Americanisms.

Andrew Jackson and John Jacob Astor, the Indian trader who became the nation’s first millionaire, were early users of the expression.

“O.K.” found its way into the papers about 1839, and over the next few years an OK craze swept the country. For over a year the expression was not used in newspapers as an abbreviation but merely to express something like “it is so.” 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, the most common being “Oll Korrekt.”

In 1840, members of one of the many grassroots Tammany Societies of the day named for the Delaware Chief Tammany began calling themselves the “OK Boys” and using “OK” as their war cry. A classified ad 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 and to exploit the popularity of the clever acronym fad and the expression “O.K.”

President Woodrow Wilson used the expression widely, and always wrote it “okeh” in a conscious effort to emphasize its Native origins. And the Okeh record label, which originally included an Indian head logo, released many “firsts” of American music such as jazz and blues. The Arrow shirt company used “Okeh” as a trade name for a while. “Okehsauce” labels included a brief Choctaw etymology.

The expression survives in several geographical names such as Okay, OK, and on Choctaw web pages, where it usually retains the older spellings of “Hoka” or “Hoke.” The Choctaw etymology for “OK” remained the most widely accepted one and was favored by dictionaries and a host of highly prominent scholars until well into the twentieth century.

Then, as the country became more middle class, the Choctaw etymology, although never actually refuted, was widely denounced as a vestige of “ignorance and immorality” and the product of “lovers of the Indian.” Scholars who supported that etymology were mercilessly maligned. 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.illinoisprairie.info/ok.htm>.