

Secrets of the Original Code Talkers

By Alex Bellos

Choctaw is a Native American language spoken by about 7,000 people in Mississippi and Oklahoma. One characteristic of the language is that it is polysynthetic, meaning that words are often long and made up of affixes that provide meaning and syntax. For example, the pronoun “I” is not a separate word in Choctaw, but an affix included within a verb.

Here are some sentences in Choctaw and their English translations:

CHOCTAW

Baliililitok.

Baliilitok.

Baliililih.

Johnat niyah.

Pamat kayyah.

Baliilih.

Chikayyah.

Saniyah.

Hattakat chaahah.

Hattakat taloowatok.

Hattak chaahah piisalitok.

Hattak chaahah ishpiisatok.

ENGLISH

I ran.

He / she ran.

I've run / I am running.

John is fat.

Pam is pregnant.

He / she has run or He / she is running.

You're pregnant.

I'm fat.

The man is tall.

The man sang.

I saw the tall man.

You saw the tall man.

Your Challenge:

Write the Choctaw for:

1. He / she saw John.

2. I sang.

3. You're singing.

4. I'm pregnant.

5. He / she saw the fat man.