Umóⁿhoⁿ Ié tʰe – Umóⁿhoⁿ Úshkoⁿ tʰe
The Omaha Language – The Omaha Way:
Omaha Language and Culture Textbook Progress Report

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Omaha language and the Omaha in time and space

Omaha is in the Dhegiha branch of the Mississippi Valley Siouan language family which includes Ponca, Kaw, Osage, and Quapaw. The condition of the Omaha language is critical. Community members of all ages regularly voice their interest in reinvigorating and maintaining the Omaha language. In 1994, an Omaha Language Preservation Project grant proposal prepared by the Omaha Tribe stated that about 2,000 of the 5,227 Tribal members were living on the reservation with less than one percent of the total enrollment, mostly elders, identified as fluent speakers. The report did not speculate on the number of passive speakers. Since that report was written many of those active elder speakers have been laid to rest.

For all intents and purposes the transmission of Omaha language and culture has been delegated to Omaha Nation Public School at Macy, Nebraska. In the mid-1990s, the Umóⁿhoⁿ Language and Culture Center (ULCC) was created to systematically and rigorously strengthen native language and culture revitalization efforts. In 2000, the first Omaha language class of a two year series was launched at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) and immediately developed collaborative ties with the ULCC. Like the ULCC, the UNL classes are team taught with elder speakers. Class room-ready Omaha tteaching materials, textbooks, readers, audio recordings, and other supporting language resources were nearly non-existent.

Students in the first UNL class were told they were going to embark on a boat ride, but first they had to build the boat by assisting in the creation of teaching materials. Daily lessons were constructed on the fly. The choice of linguistic domains, vocabulary, activities, and cultural content were created and guided by the interests of the students, elder speakers, and instructor. Initial quizzes and tests were crafted while continual feedback from all parties usually pointed us towards the next language and culture goal. Lessons were delivered primarily in English. Post-class documentation of the lesson and outcome was sporadic in the rush to prepare for the next day's lesson. The second year classes utilized Dorsey's 19th century Omaha texts for activities and projects. This pattern of teaching continued through 2006 with simultaneous work on creating useful immersion activities.

After teaching Omaha for 6 years without a standard text Awakuni-Swetland secured a small UNL grant to support development of an entry level Omaha language and culture text-book. He extended an invitation to the ULCC Director, Vida Woodhull Stabler, and her team of elder speakers to collaborate on the project. There were multiple rationales for this shared approach. Like UNL, the ULCC teaching program would benefit from having a systematic set of lessons. Both programs had compiled a considerable number of lessons over a wide range of cultural and linguistic domains in various stages of completion. The ULCC speakers would bring more language resources to bear on the project. Their participation would help keep the textbook culturally appropriate, relevant, and properly gauged to the needs of their mid-

dle school and high school students.

The invitation to partner with UNL was immediately and enthusiastically embraced by Stabler. She facilitated access to the ULCC elder speakers and the computer files of language materials developed by her program. We mutually agreed to assign the copyright and all royalties to the ULCC. Local elders and other community leaders encouraged us to proceed with the textbook work. The student council at Omaha Nation passed a resolution supporting the textbook project. Three of the ULCC active fluent elder speakers joined with the UNL team of speakers on the textbook project. Everyone became contributing authors during a year-long series of meetings and elicitation sessions. All of the elder speakers said they wanted their grandchildren to see their names on the work as evidence of it being something important.

Awakuni-Swetland and Larson serve as the senior writers. Larson is creating the grammar lessons and illustrations. Awakuni-Swetland is crafting the cultural/historical lessons and is in charge of editing the final manuscript. He is also accepting responsibility for any errors, real or perceived, that may appear in spite of our team's best efforts.

Larson's plan for the Omaha grammar component

The grammatical part of our textbook was originally planned for a one year college course, with 12 chapters, six for each semester. Each chapter would cover two weeks, with nine lessons and one test day. The immediate project was later shrunk to half of that, for a one-semester text, when it was decided at the beginning of summer 2007 that Larson should go back and rewrite it all in a more iconic and less verbose manner. By late October of 2007 the first semester text is three-quarters completed, having been written once for linguistic philosophers, and half way again for students who prefer just the answers.

The revised version follows a standardized format for each lesson, including grammatical examples in tabular boxes, bullets to summarize the grammatical points, a lesson vocabulary, and a specific set of suggested exercises. We affectionately know the rewrite as the BOX version, i.e., the Boiled Out version with eXamples and eXercises.

Our use of the two versions in teaching has worked out so that the students have access to the original verbose version on Blackboard (UNL's on-line program), where they can get a taste of what we are going to cover ahead of class. In class, Larson works from the BOX version, and fills in the linguistic philosophy extemporaneously. This strategy has the advantage of letting the teacher rely on the exercises contained in the BOX version, and is forced, for this semester at least, by the 'just-in-time' production schedule of the BOX lessons themselves, to which the march of time has inexorably led.

The structure of the first semester volume exposes students to many of the fundamentals of Omaha grammar. Omaha is generally still considered an oral language by the few remaining elder speakers. Overwhelmed by the presence of mainstream English, Omaha children must be armed with every learning tool possible to aquire their heritage language. A small number of late 19th- and early 20th century texts document the Omaha language in various orthography systems. As the number of speakers dwindle in the community it becomes critical to teach students how to access these treasure troves of written Omaha (SEE Dorsey n.d., 1890; Fletcher and La Flesche 1911).

Our working table of contents starts the student with lessons on phonology and spelling in Chapter 1. Chapter 2 covers basic word order, nouns, verbs, adjectives, exclamations, and

common expressions. Chapter 3 introduces basic sentence patterns, command, statement, question, negation, potential, and hearsay. Chapter 4 focuses on affixed pronouns. Chapter 5 describes positionals which are often analyzed like the articles in English. The semester would conclude with Chapter 6 verbs of motion.

Pedagogical philosophy

We will try to build up the language from simple to complex. Exercises and examples should emphasize what we are currently learning and what we already know. A few teasers illustrating future lessons should be sown along the way, however, so that when new material is encountered it explains old mysteries, rather than being purely unfamiliar.

Students and teachers should use the language in practical applications from the beginning. Frequent instructions should be given in the target language. Exercises and games should be 'real', and the participants should be prepared to get physical in their interactions. Good humor is preferred over dignity. This binds the language to the real world in the participants' heads, and helps to build classroom rapport as well.

We spend the first chapter on phonology, with a discussion of the comparative phonotactics of English and Omaha, and attention to the correct pronunciation of Omaha phonemes. We feel that establishing this from the beginning is critical. A phonological discussion can be sugar-coated by teaching the students fun, lexical words like animal names, body parts, colors and numbers, to illustrate the phonology.

To aid in teaching phonology and spelling, we have developed an Omaha *phonemic* alphabet shown in Table 1. The theory is that there should be one letter for every distinctive Omaha sound. Unlike the English alphabet which sees a letter as a pictorial symbol, our Omaha alphabet views a letter as representing an Omaha phoneme. Thus, regardless of what pictorial symbol one may use to write the phoneme, the phoneme itself can be discussed with its own name. For this alphabet, vowels are always named as they are pronounced, and are thus open-ended in the event that we discover additional vowels. Consonants are generally pronounced in the continental fashion. Letter names end in a vowel, in respect to the syllabic nature of Omaha.

Omaha Alphabet	How the letter is pronounced using Omaha sounds
a	pronounced *ah*, as in "father"
aⁿ	pronounced like the vowel in "nun"; may be an unround variant of **oⁿ**
b	pronounced *bay*
č̈	pronounced *chay*
č	pronounced *chay-ha*
č̈č	pronounced *chay-diⁿdiⁿ*
d	pronounced *day*
e	pronounced *ay*, as in "bay"
εⁿ	pronounced like ε, like the sound in "pet", but nasalized
g	pronounced *gay*
h	pronounced *ha*
i	pronounced *ee*, as in "machine"
iⁿ	pronounced like i, but nasalized
ǰ	pronounced *jútta*

k	pronounced *ka*
kʰ	pronounced *ka-ha*
ḳḳ	pronounced *ka-diⁿdiⁿ*
m	pronounced *mi*
n	pronounced *ni*
o	pronounced *oh*, rarely used in Omaha
oⁿ	pronounced variously between a, o, and u, but nasalized
p	pronounced *pay*
pʰ	pronounced *pay-ha*
ṗṗ	pronounced *pay-diⁿdiⁿ*
pʼ	pronounced *pay-ʼúh-ʼuh*
x̌	pronounced *qu*
th	ledh, pronounced *tha*
s	pronounced *sa*
ṣ	pronounced *sa-shtóⁿga*
sʼ	pronounced *sa-ʼúh-ʼuh*
sh	pronounced *shay*
ṣh	pronounced *shay-shtóⁿga*
shʼ	pronounced *shay-ʼúh-ʼuh*
t	pronounced *tay*
tʰ	pronounced *tay-ha*
ṭṭ	pronounced *tay-diⁿdiⁿ*
tʼ	pronounced *tay-ʼúh-ʼuh*
u	pronounced *oo*, as in "boot"
w	pronounced *waw*, like *wow!*
x̣	pronounced *x̣a*
z	pronounced *zay*
zh	pronounced *zhu*
ʔ	glottal stop, pronounced *ʼuh-ʼuh*

Table 1: Phonemic alphabet with Omaha oral pronunciation by Larson

We intentionally postpone the use of subject nouns until chapter 5, when we introduce positionals. In English, subject nouns together with finite or head verbs are integral to the mechanism for expressing what Larson calls *demand*; that is, telling the listener whether the sentence is a statement, a question or a command. In Omaha, as in other Siouan languages, the demand is generally made explicit by a special particle at the end. The subject therefore, unlike in English, is optional. Next to the phonology, perhaps the most difficult protocol shift for the student learning Omaha is getting over the English pattern of signaling demand and accepting the Omaha pattern in its place. To help them over this hump, we prefer to take subjects away from them altogether for the first few chapters.

Given the scarcity of spoken Omaha today, we have developed the idea of **ṭṭígax̣e** as a special type of exercise. The word is recorded by Dorsey in the 19th century, but does not seem to be recognized by our speakers today. It means, literally, "make house", and it meant "play" in the sense that children play games of imagination such as making toy houses out of mud down by the river. For our use, it means that we design a classroom game that provides some interest

and challenge in itself, and for which our students are equipped to play using only Omaha. We require complete immersion for the duration: no English is to be spoken. Our students are locked in a world in which they are trying to accomplish something in cooperation and competition with other students, and Omaha is their only tool. This is the closest thing we can practically offer them to immersion in the language. We begin to introduce **ttígaxe** exercises in our textbook starting in about chapter 4.

Awakuni-Swetland's plan for the culture and history component

Pointing at each side of his upraised hand, Omaha elder Howard Wolf told an early UNL Omaha language class that one side represented Omaha language, the other Omaha culture. He said that learning about one would coincide with learning about the other. The UNL and ULCC programs have routinely recognized the need for cultural understanding to support language acquisition.

The strategies about how to present key historical and cultural lessons have gone through several modifications. Awakuni-Swetland initially began writing lengthy descriptive lessons on foundational aspects of Omaha history using the usual list of anthropological domains: origins, subsistence strategies, dwellings, political organizations, and so on. Writing for a reservation high school reader, he included key terms and suggested in-class activities. Outside reading and essay writing exercises were included for college students.

It quickly became apparent that Awakuni-Swetland was re-inventing the wheel since most of the historic information was already captured in available books. Awakuni-Swetland began to rewrite the lessons in a scaled down version similar to the BOX approach that emerged for the grammar lessons. Feedback from the project team about the description of historical topics was generally positive. After consultation with the University of Nebraska Press, it was recommended that all of the historical material be moved in front of the grammar lessons as a way to highlight the Omaha people.

The ethno historical narrative planned for the beginning of the volume reflects some of the most common topics that arise in public discussions on the Omaha Reservation, and in the UNL class room. Each topic will be constructed as a lesson plan, with suggested exercises, readings, essay opportunities, and discussion. They include the origins and migrations from the Ohio River Valley, and the Omaha seasonal subsistence round of corn and buffalo. Earth lodge and tipi dwellings are described. Tribal organization at the clan and society levels are presented. Traditional leadership systems are introduced. The Omaha community has a strong feeling against talking to non-Indians about their spirituality and religious practices. This reticence is the result of generations of religious persecution by the non-Indian, especially the Christian denominations supported by the federal government. For that reason, the role of the sacred tents, sacred objects, and sacred beings in Omaha society will only be lightly examined. It will be up to the Omaha instructor to decide about how deeply a spirituality discussion will go in the class room. The influences of the fur trade rounds out the historical materials for the volume.

In the summer of 2007 the ULCC team requested lessons relating to current cultural beliefs and practices be created since their program routinely taught contemporary culture. Awakuni-Swetland circulated a list of possible topics and concepts drawn from his experiences in the Omaha community. A selection was made and initially divided among the chapters in a manner that reflected seasonal progression and the non-Omaha student's growing understanding of the Omaha community. Key terms are defined.

Culture lessons cover a range of practical topics such as how to ask someone for help in a culturally appropriate manner, the role of gift giving, and how to play hand games. The lessons are contextualized with real-life scenarios. Other topics include the importance of oral history and story telling, protocols concerning food, what to do when visited by deceased relatives, and how to act during a thunderstorm. Some of the descriptions are brief, but all have an exercise or discussion opportunity built into the lesson. The placement of individual cultural lessons will be decided after the historical and grammatical materials are finished.

Pedagogical philosophy

We want to provide general descriptions of selected areas of Omaha history as behaviors and experiences of past generations. Key Omaha and English terms are highlighted and defined. Many of the history lessons can be assigned as primarily out-of-class readings at the college level. Additional reading resources will be included for students wanting to do further study. In-class discussion opportunities at the high school and college level are encouraged as an assessment tool. There will be in-class and out-of-class research activities. For advanced classes we encourage critical essay writing as an assessment tool.

The cultural lessons are offered as general descriptions of selected Omaha values/beliefs as behaviors and experiences of the contemporary community. Real-life examples of the value in practice are provided. In-class discussion is strongly recommended. Students are encouraged to describe and analyze their own values and practices. The historical and cultural content is cumulative. Class activities and social interactions with the local Omaha community at hand games, dances, and feasts will illustrate many of the themes addressed in the lessons.

Textbook Considerations

There are several considerations that impact the writing of this textbook. The first is the diversity of the intended audience. The ULCC will use this text in conjunction with their teaching of middle and high school students at Omaha Nation. Concerns about grade level academic preparedness exist. There is a problematic track record of assigning and completing outside reading and writing activities in the reservation community. Adult learners in the community are anticipated as a second group of textbook users and may display a wide range of reading and comprehension skills. Although uncommitted as of this writing, the tribal community college at Macy may find this work useful in their language and culture classes. UNL undergraduate students will use this as their standard introductory text.

Grammar lessons are being written in an effort to address the range of academic preparedness of all readers. We are operating with the expectation of little or no prior knowledge of the language. History and cultural lessons presume little or no prior knowledge of Omaha history, or practice in Omaha culture.

The sounds and symbols of the language are introduced in a step-by-step fashion so that all users can access existing Omaha texts and capture their own thoughts for future consideration. The text is not written from a solely linguistic perspective, replete with the technical jargon of that discipline. Key terms are introduced and unpacked into vernacular English with the expectation that students and instructors will use them as tools on their learning journey. An Omaha phonemic oral alphabet and other metalinguistic terms allow students and instructors to talk about the language while remaining in the language during immersion activities.

Feedback from the ULCC and UNL elder speakers has been critical in keeping the lessons and their presentation culturally appropriate. Negotiating these sometimes conflicting opinions about how the lessons should be presented is challenging. However, it indicates the emotional importance that community members continue to place on proper Omaha language use and representation.

Working on the textbook has provided an opportunity to bring together a core group of active and passive elder speakers and language instructors for a common cause. This work, like any other documentation project, will not be the reason that Omaha language revives and thrives. For that to happen requires the personal commitment of each individual to want to learn and use the language, in spite of the possible embarrassment of making mistakes along the way. It is hoped that this textbook and its proposed companion volumes will provide another tool in the language learner's toolkit to draw upon as they travel this road of knowledge. Time is growing short. In the past two years the ULCC and UNL teams have experienced the loss of valued elder relative speakers as they made their final step into the next world. We hope that they left behind the spirit of the Omaha language that it may continue to shape our thoughts and prayers in this world.

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DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF
ALBERT GRANT CANBY
Uzhóⁿge agthiⁿ – Tesíⁿde Waʔú
(1930-2007)

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Afterword, January 2008
The first semester of Omaha I finished in early December 2007. A few new developments have occurred that relate to the Omaha language and culture textbook. Students and instructors finished Chapters 1-5. It became evident by early November that the pace of introducing new lessons on a near-daily basis was too rigorous. The students did display an amazing level of language competence and written performance. However, there w not enough class periods that could be dedicated to oral production and immersion language use. Overall, the spontaneous oral production performance trailed behind written performance. We were also prevented from having very many Omaha culture or history discussions due to the competition for time with the grammar lessons. With that in mind, the first volume has been scaled back to include Chapters 1-5 with the supporting history and culture lessons. Chapter 6 will be rolled into the second volume already under development.

Larson unveiled a font set specifically created for the Omaha diacritical markings. Previously all of the Omaha language was typed into an MSWORD document using the available ASCII symbols. We used the drop down "insert symbol" menu to locate symbols for marking stress and related needs. This was time er-consuming and not always satisfying. UNL marks the difference between the forced and muted velo-palatal fricative /x/. Historically written by Dorsey as /q/ and /x/ respectively, it was collapsed by Fletcher and La Flesche into /x/. Because our students do not know the language already, we have taken our cue from Dorsey and marked the two distinct sounds as /x̌/ and /x̱/ respectively. Following the Siouanist example, we have adopted the double letters in the tense stop series /ᵽᵽ/, /ŧŧ/, /ꝁꝁ/. The entire alphabet is displayed in the table above. These changes are meant to enhance learning by providing visual cues for proper pronunciation by students with no prior knowledge of the language. The UNL elder speakers have been exposed to these symbols regularly and have found them useful for the students. The students have voiced appreciation for having the visual clues in the instances when they are using

materials from Fletcher and La Flesche with their ambiguous symbols. The modifications will be presented to the ULCC team in early 2008. We will discuss what is best to use in our respective class rooms and textbook.

We remain on target for a manuscript delivery to the University of Nebraska Press in March 2008. The press has calculated a fall 2009 release. That would coincide with the beginning of the next scheduled offering of Omaha I at UNL.

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