



Bridging the Language Divide



Exposing the Treacherous Language Barrier Between Trader and Cherokee

Have you ever tried to talk with someone who doesn't understand you? Maybe the challenge stems from different languages, customs, or even a hearing or speech impairment. If so, you probably had to find another way to communicate. You might try to talk louder or use gestures, text, or a translator.

The English occupants in the Carolina region had trouble communicating with their Native American neighbors. The barrier was not solely derived from language but also from a difference in customs. However, Native Americans and settlers adapted to these difficulties.

Failure to Communicate

When Native Americans and settlers interacted, communication was often an obstacle. Initially, Indians did not know the settlers' language nor the settlers know native languages. How, then, did these people communicate? Gestures and body language were used as an early form of communication. With an increase in contact, some traders, trappers, and Native Americans evolved into translators as they learned the language of one another. Another obstacle in communication was the manner in which the two groups respected others as they spoke. The Cherokee did not speak over one another, rather they waited on whomever was speaking to finish before commenting. Cherokee leader Skiagunsta had this to say at a conference with South Carolina Governor James Glen: "...I have something to say, for it is not our custom like the white people to talk altogether, but when one is done another begins. When they are all quiet, I shall begin to speak."

Lost in Translation

During the mid to late 1700's in the Carolina region, one of the dominant Native American tribes was the Cherokee. However, the region was also home to several other tribes: Creek, Congaree, Catawba, and Wateree. Each tribe had their own language which derived from broader native language families. The European settlers who traded and trapped in Cherokee country faced a problem with understanding the native language of the area. The Cherokee language was not consistent within the tribe, as it varied from region to region. Even today people experience problems much similar to the one that the settlers faced. Take the United States for instance. The dominant language is English, but a variation from the English dialect one would hear in England. However, even within the various regions of the United States, people say words differently and also use different phrases for certain situations. Even on an international level, in some countries, a "thumbs up" is a negative gesture, while in the United States, it is a sign of a job well done.

Can You Hear Me Now?

Crossing the language divide was likely a frustrating and difficult task for all people involved. This task, however, was especially important in the colonization of the United States. Interaction and relationships between Natives and colonists was absolutely necessary, as the groups came together and learned to cooperate. Until a language was shared, it was necessary for someone to translate – someone to bridge the language divide.