

A Cherokee Language Lesson
Jimmie Durham

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Ka Tsi wonia. Tsi yunh wiya
Hey I am speaking. I am Cherokee.

Wahya u we tlu gunh
A wolf howled.

Wahya u we tlu gunh, an dia
Someone called for help, they say.

Aliah lige, ka
Rejoice, hey.

Hi yunh wiya
You are Cherokee.

Tsu tla niga we s'gunh gatunh gi
I hear a fox speaking.

Yo nunh uhnalunh a
An angry bear is speaking.

Ani ko ga nani we a
Crows are calling.
Dunha i
They are coming this way.

Wohali dagano hi hi
The eagle flies this way.

Tlunhdatsi ani suli dega hye a
A panther is eating the buzzards.

Tlunhdatsi ani suli dega hye a
A panther is eating the jury.

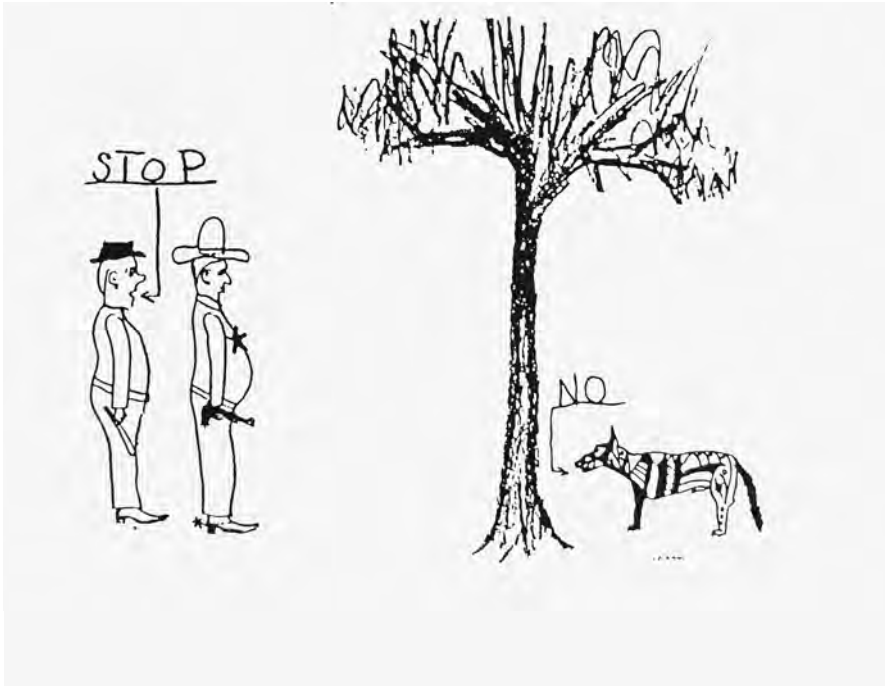
Hnaquu!
Right now!

Ka, wiga i!
Hey, I am already in motion!

Please try to pronounce the Cherokee sentences to yourself. It is not easy, but it is not impossible. It would be impossible in Cherokee as it is usually written in the European alphabet. I have taken the liberty to write it phonetically, more or less. It was first transcribed into the European alphabet by anthropologists, who did not care whether or not an ordinary person might be interested in reading it. That has served to keep it and other Indian languages isolated and unreal-seeming. In this anthropological Cherokee, if I wanted to write the Cherokee word for "yes" I would write "v-;v." Can you read that and get an idea of the sound of the language? There are sounds in Cherokee which cannot be easily written in English, but that is also true for French, Portuguese, and other languages. The sound signified by the anthropologist's "v" is like a French sound that one says when the word is "un" or ends in "un." It is a nasal unpronounced "n." Instead

of writing “v” I write “unh,” which is like in the comic books when some guy gets hit in the stomach. It is like the sound of “huh?” in English, without the “h” in front. Why should it be mystified by that “v” or “v;v”? They even put question marks in the middle of words, as part of their own private Cherokee.

In our language there are many words and phrases which have a double meaning, as in these poems. The double meaning always echo each other. You can imagine the reasons why a jury, always white, is called “ani sulì”—a bunch of vultures.



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