

A Siouan Language

Kanza (also known as Kaw, Kansa, Konze, or Kansas), along with Quapaw, Omaha, Ponca, and Osage, is a **Dhegiha Siouan** (pronounced *they-GEE-hah SOO-un*) language. This branch of five is a member of a larger group called **Mississippi Valley Siouan**, which also includes Dakotan (Lakota, Dakota, and Nakoda), Winnebago (Ho Chunk), and Chiwere (Ioway, Otoe, and Missouri). In turn, the Mississippi Valley languages are part of a much larger family simply called **The Siouan Language Family**. This is a big family known today to consist of more than 20 related languages, all of which presumably came from a prehistoric language that scientists call Proto-Siouan. At right is a chart of the Siouan family based on one designed by the distinguished linguist and Kanza Language Project affiliate Dr. Robert L. Rankin.

A Dhegiha Language

The Dhegiha languages are very similar in terms of their vocabularies and their grammars. In fact, some have said that they are merely dialects of the same language. Nevertheless, there are degrees of relatedness within this small branch. Kanza is most similar to Osage. It's a little less similar to Omaha and Ponca (which are very close indeed), and fairly removed from Quapaw. You can witness some of the similarities and differences for yourself by comparing a few words in the chart at right. Some say that a speaker of Omaha can freely understand someone speaking Ponca, and vice versa. The same was once said of Kanza and Osage, too.

Dhegiha cultures are clearly related to one another, as well. In the traditional period, the Dhegiha tribes shared many of the same kinship patterns, mourning and war customs, and dances.

A Fascinating Language

Kanza has several features that make it very exciting to learn. For instance, the action part of the sentence (the verb) usually comes at the end, rather than the middle like we as English speakers are used to. Apart from simply stating the action, the Kanza verb also happens to contain a great deal of information about who or what is performing the action, and who or what is receiving the action. So a sentence like **ni kó"bla** (*NEE COMB-blah*) literally means "WATER I-WANT-IT." Perhaps you can see why some have said that Kanza sounds "just backward" of English. But we don't think of Kanza as backward at all!

Plus, there aren't "tenses" (Past, Present, Future, etc.) like what we're used to seeing. Instead, Kanza makes use of position and orientation in space to show that the action is ongoing as opposed to not ongoing. Thus speakers must often reassert the fact that they are sitting down, standing up, moving around, or lying down. Consider, for example, **omá"zheyá mi"khé** (*oh-MON-shay-yah mink-HAY*), meaning "I AM TIRED (AND I AM SITTING DOWN)."

Also, there are no plural nouns like in English. So the word **sí"ga** (*SING-gah*) can just as easily mean "SQUIRREL" or "SQUIRRELS." These are just a few of Kanza's many, many intriguing features.

A Very Endangered Language

Although there were once thousands of people who spoke Kanza as a first language, unfortunately today it is no longer spoken fluently. There are plenty of tribal members, however, who know words and phrases, and even a few who can speak some sentences in certain contexts. The last truly fluent

speakers of Kanza were all gone by the early 1980s. Unless more people - especially children and young people - become interested in learning Kanza soon, it may pass out of existence entirely.



English	Quapaw	Omaha	Ponca	Osage	Kanza
"house"	ti	ti	ti	htsi	ci
"man"	nika	niashi ⁿ ga	niáshiga	nihka	nika
"woman"	wax'ó	wa'ú	wa'ú	wak'ó	wak'ó
"eagle"	xidá	xiǒá	xiǒá	xuǒá	xuyá
"three"	dábni ⁿ	ǒábǒi ⁿ	ǒábǒi ⁿ	ǒábri ⁿ	yábli ⁿ

Based on information from
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Spellings have been altered to suit Web browsers and to reflect the pronunciations from a Kanza point of view.