

# IS SYLLABICS AN ABUGIDA?

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I have seen, with increasing frequency online, statements proclaiming that Canadian Syllabics (often under the name "Cree Script") is an Abugida. I would like list some reasons for why this may not be an accurate description of the writing system.

## WHAT IS AN ABUGIDA?

Some definitions from other sources:

1. ... abugida (for scripts like Devanagari in which signs denote consonants followed by a particular vowel; diacritics are added if no vowel or a different vowel follows)...  
[Bryn Mawr Classical Review 96.5.3](#)
2. Abugida is a term coined by Peter T. Daniels for a script whose basic signs denote consonants with an inherent vowel and where consistent modifications of the basic sign indicate other following vowels than the inherent one.
  - Thus, in an abugida there is no sign for ⟨k⟩, but instead one for ⟨ka⟩ (if ⟨a⟩ is the inherent vowel), and ⟨ke⟩ is written by modifying the ⟨ka⟩ sign in a way that is consistent with how one would modify ⟨la⟩ to get ⟨le⟩. In many abugidas the modification is the addition of a vowel sign, but other possibilities are imaginable (and used), such as rotation of the basic sign, addition of diacritical marks, and so on.
  - The obvious contrast is with syllabaries, which have one distinct symbol per possible syllable, and the signs for each syllable have no systematic graphic similarity.
  - The name is derived from the first four characters of an order of the Ethiopic script used in some religious contexts (this order seems to correspond to the ancestral Semitic character order (aleph, beth, gimel, dalet / ABCD / ...). The Ethiopic script is an abugida, although the vowel modifications in Ethiopic are not entirely systematic. Many North American Indian scripts, such as Cree syllabary, are abugidas as well. [Gujara.com](#)

## ONE DESCRIPTION OF CANADIAN SYLLABICS AS AN ABUGIDA

from Encyclopedia: [Canadian Aboriginal Syllabics](#)

"Canadian syllabic writing schemes are for the most part abugidas, where consonants are always marked in a manner which implies a specific vowel. Each consonant has a basic shape which is rotated or flipped over to indicate which vowel follows it.

In Cree, for example, the unvoiced labial plosive consonant /p/ is indicated by an chevron shape:  $\wedge$ . By itself,  $\wedge$  indicates the syllable /pi/ (pronounced approximately like *pea*). Turned to point downwards -  $\vee$  - it indicates /pe/ (*pay*). Pointing to the left  $\lessdot$ , it is /pa/ (*pa*), and to the right  $\gtrdot$  - /po/ (*poe*). This general pattern is largely common to all Canadian syllabics schemes. With symmetric characters, pointing upward indicates /i/, downward /e/, left /a/ and right /o/. The actual vowels represented may vary considerably between languages, but they have generally been made to approximate this Cree-based usage."

## ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

FROM SUZANNE MCCARTHY

- Peter T. Daniels, who invented abugida, calls Cree a 'grammatogeny', certainly not an abugida.
- W. Bright and Robert Brin, labeled syllabics an 'alphasyllabary'.
- John Nichols has called it both 'a mixed alphabet and syllabary'.
- James Fevrier and Marcel Cohe French, developed the idea 'neosyllabary', or 'secondary syllabary' also use the term 'alphabet-syllabary'.
- H. Rogers, in a new book on writing systems, is calling syllabics an 'alphasyllabary'.
- I have personally tried out 'compositional syllabic notation' picked up from an Indic writing group.

## COMMENTS ON THE ABOVE DESCRIPTION

- Each consonant does indeed have a basic shape which a direction is applied (not so much a rotation or flip) indicating in a consistent way what the vowel sound is.
- I disagree with the statement that the sound /p/ is indicated by  $\wedge$ , to which rotations are applied. (see below)

## WHY CANADIAN SYLLABICS IS NOT AN ABUGIDA

One of the primary conditions of an abugida is that there is a base character consisting of a consonant plus vowel, for example Devanagari क /ka/. In Devanagari, to write a different vowel after the /k/, an additional mark is added: के /ke/ or कि /ki/. For many languages writing with an abugida, if there is no vowel after the consonant sound, another mark (sometimes called *virama*) is added: क् /k/. It can be clearly seen that in the Devanagari example above, क /ka/ is the base character. Some scripts are more complex than others as to how to add these additional marks.

Syllabics differs from this description in a number of ways:

1. There is no base consonant+vowel symbol to which to add the additional marks. The p-series of syllabic characters:  $\vee \wedge > <$  could indeed be described as a single base consonant+vowel character followed by an abstract “rotate x°” additional mark., but what is that base character?
  - Sort order doesn’t help here. Cree uses the order  $\nabla \Delta \triangleright \triangleleft$  (south/north-west north/north-east east/south-west west/south-east), while Dene sorts differently:  $\triangleleft \nabla \Delta \triangleright$  (west/south-east south/north-west north/north-east east/south-west).
  - The eastern-Algonquian finals are raised versions of a regular syllabic character. Cree uses a raised east/south-east pointing final  $\text{ }^{\text{c}}\text{ }^{\text{b}}\text{ }^{\text{L}} (p\ t\ k\ m)$ , but many dialects of Ojibway use a raised north/north-east pointing final  $\wedge \cap \rho \Gamma (p\ t\ k\ m)$ . Western finals have no relation to the syllabic shape  $\text{ }^{\text{I}}\text{ }^{\text{I}}\text{ }^{\text{c}} (p\ t\ k\ m)$ . Blackfoot finals are stemless versions of the south/north-west final  $\circ \text{ }^{\text{v}}\text{ }^{\text{v}} (p\ t\ k\ m)$ . The direction of the final does not help with determining the base character.
  - There is nothing in the orthography itself which determines a base character to which rotations are made.
2. Syllabics writing systems contain a significant number of symbols which have no inherent vowel. Most of these symbols fall under the category *finals*. Essentially, a final is a consonant. The western Algonquian characters  $\text{ }^{\text{I}}\text{ }^{\text{I}}\text{ }^{\text{c}} (p\ t\ k\ m)$  are consonant sounds, not a consonant-vowel character plus some sort of *virama*. In most cases, each syllabic series has a corresponding final: the full Cree p-series is  $\vee \wedge > < \text{ }^{\text{I}} (pe\ pi\ po\ pa\ p)$ . There are often a few consonant characters which do not belong to a series of syllabics: in Western Cree, these include:  $\text{ }^{\text{h}} (h)$ ,  $\text{ }^{\text{r}} (r)$ ,  $\text{ }^{\text{l}} (l)$ , and the ligature  $\times (hk)$ .
  - As an example, a transliteration of my given name ‘Chris’ into Cree syllabics is  $\text{ }^{\text{v}}\text{ }^{\text{z}}\text{ }^{\text{d}}\text{ }^{\text{h}} (kris)$ . Here, each syllabics character represents a single phoneme (meaningful sound), looking far more like an alphabetic script than an abugida.

*Finals are characters which have no inherent vowel sound: they only have a consonant value*

Because the relationship between the characters in a single series is so clear ( $\text{ }^{\text{q}}\text{ }^{\text{p}}\text{ }^{\text{d}}\text{ }^{\text{b}}$ ), the desire to classify the writing system as an abugida is strong. However, when applied to syllabics, the criteria of an abugida are simply not met:

... abugida (for scripts like Devanagari in which signs denote consonants followed by a particular vowel; diacritics are added if no vowel or a different vowel follows)

There are no diacritics added if no vowel or a different vowel follows, as there is no base glyph to add these to.

If one is determined to label syllabics as an abugida, one must accept many abstractions:

1. There is some abstract basic character to which directionality (not rotations or flips) is applied. Thus for the Cree p-series,  $\vee \wedge > <$ , there would have to be an abstract “pointy, cardinal direction” designation. The Cree k-series,  $\text{ }^{\text{q}}\text{ }^{\text{p}}\text{ }^{\text{d}}\text{ }^{\text{b}}$ , would also require an obscuration: “circle plus vertical stem, diagonal direction”.
2. Directionality would need to inherent in the abstract base character, as some

syllabics point to the cardinal directions (north, south, east, west), some point diagonally (north-east, north-west, south-east, south-west), and some have irregular directionality.

3. An extremely abstract virama (no vowel) concept would have to be introduced. In eastern languages, this virama would be described as “superscript and direction”. In western languages, the virama would produce completely different looking glyphs. In Blackfoot, the virama would have to include the concepts superscript, direction, and stem-deletion!
4. There are a number of consonant only signs.

## WHAT IS SYLLABICS THEN?

Like virtually all scripts, syllabics has features from a number of different script-types. The Latin script is classified as an alphabet, but it does contain many logographic characters: \$ ¢ & @. The Cherokee syllabary has an alphabetic letter ᎠᎵ /s/.

- Canadian Syllabics is a syllabary with alphabetic elements. I do not see any reason why the characters of a syllabary cannot have visual patterns.
- Canadian Syllabics is an alphabetic system with syllabic elements. Support for this claim is fairly weak as the syllabic characters make up the majority of symbols in the orthography and glyphs in a text.
- Canadian Syllabics is a very abstracted abugida.
- Canadian Syllabics is a unique writing system, and should not be grouped as an alphabet, syllabary, or abugida.

*The ampersand & is actually a ligature (joining graphically of two characters) for Latin et 'and'. It would be interesting to know the number of people who were aware of this.*

From a strictly classificatory standpoint, the latter option is probably the best. The directionality aspect of the script is unique among the world's orthographies and is its major defining property. Very different scripts (Blackfoot, Algonquian, Dakelh) are grouped together as a single writing system, “Canadian Syllabics”, even though they share very few characters and are certainly less similar than Latin, Greek, and Cyrillic. They are grouped together as syllabics purely for their use of directionality. Instead of placing a monolithic Canadian Syllabics script into the category abugida to which it does not really belong, it seems more reasonable to propose a new category focusing on the most important aspect of this system of writing: “Rotational Syllabary”, to which the quite separate Dakelh, Blackfoot, and General Syllabics scripts belong.

I am sure that many linguists are hesitant to create a new category of script, and would like to find a home for syllabics in one of the established types. Yet under the current guidelines, I do not believe that syllabics fits anywhere; it certainly breaks (or stretches to breaking point) most of the abugida rules, and syllabics is not alphabetic. If no new “Rotational Syllabary” category is acceptable, then I would suggest the orthography is a syllabary, with alphabetic additions.

I would appreciate comments from others interested in this subject. I will place all reasonable comments, suggestions, and ideas on this page as they come in, with the writer's permission. This page has not been checked thoroughly for errors as yet. I will do so when time permits.

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