

SOME GENERAL ASPECTS OF THE SYLLABICS ORTHOGRAPHY

©CHRIS HARVEY 2003

THE NATURE OF SYLLABICS

Syllabics is not an orthography per se, but it is an idea, a way to represent spoken language. In the same way an alphabet is an idea: very generally, a symbol represents a phoneme which can be either a vowel, consonant, or combination of these. The English orthography takes the sounds of English and maps them onto an alphabetic template. Cree or Inuktitut orthography, similarly, maps the sounds of these languages onto the Syllabics model.

Phoneme: the smallest meaningful element of sound for a specific language.

Syllabics is a mixture of a syllabary (like Japanese or Cherokee)—one character is a full syllable, and an abjad (like Hebrew or Arabic)—one character is a consonant. This alone would not be so remarkable. What is unique about Syllabics is the relationship between vowel and character rotation. This really puts Syllabics in a classification of its own. Some linguists claim Syllabics is an abugida. While [Syllabics could be an abugida](#) in the broadest of terms, I suggest that it is an orthographic system in its own right.

Abugida: A system where each independent symbol is a consonant to which marks are added to indicate different vowels.

Within the Syllabics model, there are in fact three distinct scripts: 1) General (Cree, Ojibway, Oji-Cree, Naskapi, Inuktitut, Slavey, Beaver, Chipewyan); 2) Blackfoot; 3) Dakelh (Dene-Carrier). Each writing tradition is as distinct from each other as English, Greek, and Russian are. Yet all of the syllabics languages are similar in that each character represents a syllable (consonant + vowel), a final (consonant), or a diacritic (a modifier of a syllable or consonant).

FULL SYLLABIC CHARACTERS

When a syllable symbol is rotated or flipped, the vowel changes. For example, in Cree, U is pronounced /tē/, ᐃ is /ti/, ᐅ is /to/, and ᐇ is /ta/. Syllabics use smaller characters (called 'finals') to show a consonant sound without a vowel, e.g. Cree-Ojibway

Full Syllabic characters are letters which represent a consonant or consonants plus a vowel sound.

- ᐃ, or ᐅ is /p/
- ᐃ, or ᐅ is /sh/.

The essential idea of syllabics is directional. In the case of Eastern Syllabics:

- /p/, /t/, /v/, /th/, and no-consonant are cardinal:
 - When the character is pointing south, the vowel is /ē/ ᐅ ᐇ ᐃ ᐅ
 - When the character is pointing north, the vowel is /i/ ᐃ ᐅ ᐇ ᐃ
 - When the character is pointing east, the vowel is /o/ or /u/ ᐅ ᐇ ᐃ ᐅ
 - When the character is pointing west, the vowel is /a/ ᐃ ᐅ ᐇ ᐃ
- /k/, /c/, /m/, /n/, /s/, and /y/ are diagonal:
 - When the character is pointing northwest, the vowel is /ē/ ᐅ ᐇ ᐃ ᐅ
 - When the character is pointing northeast, the vowel is /i/ ᐃ ᐅ ᐇ ᐃ

- When the character is pointing southwest, the vowel is /o/ or /u/ ᑭ ᑭ ᑭ ᑭ ᑭ ᑭ
- When the character is pointing southeast, the vowel is /a/ ᑭ ᑭ ᑭ ᑭ ᑭ ᑭ
- /sh/ and /r/ are somewhat irregular:
 - ᑭ /shē/, ᑭ /shi/, ᑭ /sho/, ᑭ /sha/
 - ᑭ /rē/, ᑭ /ri/, ᑭ /ro/, ᑭ /ra/

Blackfoot uses diagonal directionality only, and Dakelh employs only cardinal. The relationship between vowel and direction is not necessarily consistent between scripts. In Blackfoot, the southeast direction indicates the vowel /o/, while in General Syllabics it is /a/.

FINALS

Finals can either be:

- a small-raised version of the a-syllabic: ᑭ ᑭ ᑭ ᑭ ᑭ ᑭ
 - East Cree, Naskapi, Moose Cree, Inuktitut, some Ojibway
- a small-raised version of the i-syllabic: ᑭ ᑭ ᑭ ᑭ ᑭ ᑭ
 - some Ojibway
- unrelated to the normal syllabic shape: ᑭ ᑭ ᑭ ᑭ ᑭ ᑭ
 - Swampy Cree, Plains Cree, Woods Cree, some Ojibway, all Dene languages, Blackfoot, Dakelh

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

SYLLABICS LANGUAGES

These days, Inuktitut, Cree, Naskapi, Oji-Cree, and Manitoba (Sayisi) Chipewyan are the languages most often written in Syllabics (although Roman orthographies for these languages are also available). The others have generally switched to Roman writing systems, although some dialects, communities, or individual speakers still prefer syllabics. The usefulness of Syllabics has been much debated within linguistics, government, as well as within the Native community. Questions such as: accuracy, ease of learning, standardisation, appropriateness, and computer literacy have been raised. It is hoped that this document helps dispel any view that Syllabics cannot be used on computers or that it hinders learning.

Language	Speakers	
Cree	97,230	
Inuktitut	32,775	* Do not commonly use syllabics today.
(*)Ojibway	30,505	(*) Some dialects or communities use syllabics, while others do not.
(*)Dene	17,040‡	
Oji-Cree	10,475	Population figures from Statistics Canada 2001 except † from the 2000 Ethnologue.
*Blackfoot	4,495	
*Carrier	2,055	
Naskapi	1,177†	‡ Includes Chipewyan, Slavey, and "Dene".
*Beaver	300†	

Syllabics Language Populations

Next: [Accuracy](#)

