

SOME GENERAL ASPECTS OF THE SYLLABICS ORTHOGRAPHY

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EASE OF LEARNING

This is a very important issue, especially as most of the languages which have used Syllabics in the past are currently in decline. Some of the people learning the orthography are learning the language at the same time. Most of the universities in Canada (to my knowledge) are teaching the languages and producing materials in Roman orthography. Occasionally publications (especially from the University of Manitoba) have included texts in Syllabics as well as Roman orthography, but almost all dictionaries I have seen are Roman only. The dictionary for Naskapi shows that Syllabic dictionaries are possible. University language classes generally teach syllabics in intermediate or high level courses, after the students have already learned Roman orthography.

Almost two decades later, at Norway House, Evans learned the Cree language but again faced difficulties in reducing it to writing in the Roman alphabet. Here he re-examined his syllabic system, modifying it somewhat to suit the peculiarities of the Cree language. He taught the simple system to the Indians at Norway House and produced religious material for them to read. The results were amazing. The system was so simple that it could be mastered and literacy acquired within a few hours. Moreover, every Indian who mastered the system became a teacher of it, and use of the system spread rapidly as far as the Rocky Mountains. Even on the trail, Indians were able to communicate by leaving messages drawn with charred sticks in birchbark sheets.

One writer at the time noted: “All accounts represent the diffusion of the syllabic characters among the Indian camps of the vast interior occupied by the Cree tribes as extraordinary. Parties descending rivers would exchange messages by inscriptions on banks or bars of the stream and its acquisition was only the labour of a few hours.”

The Wesleyans ... have, very unfortunately ... adopted a new character ... A few of the Indians can read by means of these syllabic characters; but if they had only been taught to read their own language in our letters, it would have been one step towards the acquisition of the English tongue. The bishop thus saw [Roman orthography] literacy as a means to speed assimilation. Kenn Harper: 1983.

ᐃᓕᑦ ᑲᓱᑲᓴᑦ^a (the Cree School Board) of Northern Québec has produced educational

materials for teaching children literacy Syllabics from kindergarten without falling back on Roman orthography as a guide. The James Bay Cree have been so successful with their syllabics retention, that one rarely sees this dialect/language written in Roman orthography. APTN (the Aboriginal People's Television Network) runs children's shows in Inuktitut that teach Syllabics in much the same way English North Americans learned to read from Sesame Street.

Historically, Syllabics were taught to children from within the family; this was extremely successful. There is no reason to suggest that the system is too complicated or difficult to learn. If the Roman orthography is easier, it is because one becomes a fully fluent reader through practice. As there are far more English or French materials to read, people consequently develop more advanced reading skills in these languages than their own Native language.

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