

SOME GENERAL ASPECTS OF THE SYLLABICS ORTHOGRAPHY

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STANDARDISATION

Here is a political and linguistic question which all languages must face eventually. The problem lies in the definitions of a language, a dialect, and a language community. Where does a dialect end and a language begin? Is Cree one language or two languages or five? Is Oji-Cree a separate language, or is it a dialect of Ojibway? Would a standard orthography reduce the distinctiveness and independence of communities? These are complex issues, and I will not discuss them in detail here. Suffice to say, a *language community* is a group of people who see themselves as sharing a common language (perhaps with many dialects). A standardised orthography is one which is used and understood by all speakers of a language community.

These same questions could be asked of European languages. Are Scottish and English dialects of the same language (sharing a same standardised orthography), or are they separate? Are Danish, Swedish, and Norwegian the same language (with different standardisations) because many speakers of one language can understand the others? Politics and history define a language community more than linguistics does. People with different ideologies would answer the above questions differently.

Traditionally, writing in Syllabics has not followed any standardised rules, each speaker would write as they spoke, or as they were taught. This may not cause any serious misunderstandings between different speakers, but it would certainly make reading other people's work uncomfortable. Furthermore, computer/internet searches and spell checkers are useless without some degree of standardisation.

Standardising the writing system of the Mohawk language would be of great benefit to the retention, survival, and revitalization of the Mohawk language within the six territories. Solidifying a standard literary form that is and has been used by Native speakers will assist in the preservation of the older forms of speech, especially the speech of Elders. If all Mohawk speakers were to utilise one standard written form, it would be easier to teach literacy in the native language. Mohawk curriculum materials could be developed which would be available to schools in communities speaking the same language." *Kanien'kehá:ka Ohiatonhkwa'shón:'a Katokénhston Tekawennatáhkwen.*

A discussion in favour of standardisation is also given in *Naasaab Izhi-anishinaabebii'igeng: E-gii-maawaji'idiwaad anishinaabeg e-gii-*

A language can be standardised either by decree or more organically by common accepted use. At this point in time, Native languages are most likely to be standardised through official means, such as the Kanien'kéha (Mohawk) effort, sponsored by the government of Ontario, which gathered input from people in each of the communities. The Mohawk example shows that Native standardisation need not be “One identical system for everyone” as the committee decided that each community could keep its idiosyncratic orthography, but in a consistent way so that readers from other communities would have no problem adapting—much as American English spells ‘favour’ as *favor* or ‘travelling’ as *traveling*.

There is no practical reason why Syllabics orthographies cannot be standardised, as Cree, Oji-Cree, Naskapi, and Inuktitut are beginning to show. It is up to the speakers of these languages to implement the standard. Cree and Inuktitut have some important dialect differences, and the traditions of each dialect have been respected. The Cree word for *me* shows nicely one of the dialect differences in the language. It can be: niya~ᑎᓴ, nītha~ᑎᓴ, nīna~ᑎᓴ, or nīla~ᑎᓴ. Cree speakers could choose to write the syllabic character specific to their community, or choose one form, for example: ᑎᓴ, where ᓴ (following Moose Cree) is either ya, tha, na, or la depending on dialect. ᑎᓴ could also be used, but ᑎᓴ and ᑎᓴ would be poor choices as [n] and [y] can be found as distinct sounds (phonemes) in all dialects.

Syllabics do have an alphabetical order, dependent on the basic system: General, Blackfoot, or Dakelh. Unlike alphabets, the ordering is two dimensional, vowels along the x-axis, consonants down the y-axis. Syllabaries are almost always shown in chart form. In the General Syllabics style (using Plains Cree as an example), the vowel order is: ∇Δ▷◁ (e i o a), and the consonant order is: ∇∨Uᑭᑲᓄᐅᔪ (plain-vowel p t k c m n s y). At first the reasoning behind the order may seem unclear. This is because originally, the Roman Orthography was based on English pronunciation rules, not linguistic phonetic principles. The vowels e i o a using English spelling conventions would be written ā ī ō ū—this should be starting to look familiar. Similarly the consonants would be b d g j m n s y. Syllabics alphabetical order is in fact the same as English and is based on English orthographical rules. Consistent ordering of " h and long vowels is more problematic probably because they are so often left unwritten, but this can easily be standardised. Additional consonant series are typically added after a similar shaped or sounding series. Blackfoot follows General syllabics ordering. The ordering of Dakelh is reminiscent of the scripts of India, where characters are grouped according to similarity of sound. Dene ordering depends on whether it is from the English or French traditions, but it is basically the same as Cree.

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