

SOME GENERAL ASPECTS OF THE SYLLABICS ORTHOGRAPHY

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APPROPRIATENESS

Probably the most divisive question is that of appropriateness, or “Which system do I think is best”. The answer combines many feelings and beliefs of an individual, which may be based on scientific, historical, nostalgic, emotional, political, religious, or artistic reasons. Each one of the above is important and ought never to be dismissed in the orthography debate. In some language communities, this discussion can become very heated and argumentative, blaming illiteracy, poor scholastic results, or political failings on one writing system or another.

As shown earlier, the supposed scientific superiority of Roman orthography over Syllabics is completely unfounded. With some modifications, virtually any writing system can be used for any language. Claims of inaccuracy and pedagogical difficulties against Syllabics as a system are simply untrue.

Historically, Native languages north of Mexico were not written (i.e. where the marking matched the sound of the language); all knowledge was transmitted orally or with mnemonic symbols. Writing began with some vocabulary lists jotted down by European explorer-tourists in a fashion (based on their own European language’s rules and conventions) that were not intended to become a practical orthography. Later, traders, missionaries, and eventually linguists and anthropologists each created their own orthography of varying quality. As a consequence, most Native languages historically have dozens of writing systems. In most cases, a language is written differently in various communities because of the denomination of the missionary who worked in that area. To add to the list, Native speakers have invented their own systems—based on Roman orthography or their own creation—which may or may not extend beyond their immediate community, classroom, or family.



Title of a Newsletter from Caribou News in Inuktitut (ᑕᑦᑕᑦᑕᑦ ᑕᑦᑕᑦᑕᑦ – *Tuktunik tusarutiŋ*), English, and Dene: (ᑕᑦᑕᑦᑕᑦ ᑕᑦᑕᑦᑕᑦ – *ᑕᑦᑕᑦᑕᑦ ᑕᑦᑕᑦᑕᑦ*)

North American Native languages are not alone in the *Multitude of Orthographies* problem. In Europe, Breton has at least two competing systems, and Cornish at least three. Occasionally, a single “language” is divided into separate “languages” primarily on a

different orthography: Serbo-Croatian—Serbian uses Cyrillic (like Russian) and Croatian uses Roman. Hindi and Urdu are essentially a single language except that the former uses the Devanagari writing system while the latter uses the Arabic. Politically, however, it is prudent to separate Serbian from Croatian, and Hindi from Urdu, so strong is the symbolic power of writing. Even Mandarin Chinese, with its tens of thousands of characters, is divided into traditional (Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the Chinese communities abroad) and reformed (the People's Republic and Singapore) orthographies.

To choose one orthography out of this multitude has proven a difficult task. Around the world, people—especially Elders who are the most influential people in Native communities—are very attached to the way they write their language. When personal letters, diaries, religious texts, are all written in one manner, people are resistant to change. Change is difficult and often unwanted, which is why English is today written as it was spoken hundreds of years ago. A further problem is that if a standard orthography is selected from one of the existent systems, that community of speakers may be seen as preferred over all the others.

Many Native languages have taken a unique route to standardisation compared to their European counterparts. In the spirit of independence and consensus, several different orthographies have been labelled as jointly official. Inuktitut is written in three different Syllabics standards:

- With the ᑭᑭᑭ series (Nunavut)
- Without the ᑭᑭᑭ series (Nunavut)
- Where the ᐅᐅᐅ... vowel series has been recently re-introduced (Nunavik)

The language also uses several Roman orthographies, one each for Nunavut, Labrador, Greenland, North West Territories, and Alaska. Though there is always talk of a single standard, it seems that the multiple standards policy will continue. Mohawk has several standards, as does Ojibway and Cree. One could say that English has a British standard, and an American standard, and each of the other English speaking nations combines the two in their own way.

To choose a writing system is also to show allegiance to one philosophical, religious, or political camp. Native communities are religiously very diverse, with Traditional, Roman Catholic, and different Protestant denominations sharing the same community. If the orthography used in one religion is picked as the standard, does this also mean that religion has also been made official? If a linguist devises a new orthography, does this mean that the community should support the current theoretical model, which could go out of date within the decade? Political affiliation is an unfortunate result of orthography choice. "However, even people who cannot read syllabics [today] often regard syllabics as a better, more traditional way to write Carrier than the English-based Carrier Linguistic Committee writing system." (Poser 2000:2)

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, language is the most obvious symbol of national identity, and writing is the most visual aspect of language. How a language looks is a statement of the culture. To some, Syllabics gives an impression of "Nativeness", so distinctive from the European- colonial English/French alphabet. So much so that many speakers refer to their language as "Syllabics"; one may see notices such as

“Documentation is available in English or Syllabics”. You cannot help but feel that you are in a different place when the public signs are in Syllabics. To others, Syllabics is a symbol of missionaries and oldfashioned times. The modern, secular, international world is a world of English and its alphabet, so to use Syllabics is to be outdated or technologically behind the times. This thinking is so pervasive that most new “practical orthographies” in Canada and around the world have no special letters or diacritics (accents above/below letters like in French: é, â, etc.). Most people have English computers with English Keyboards, making diacritics unwieldy, so an unaccented orthography is promoted as more technologically astute. I hope that this website shows that any writing system is functional in the modern world, and that technology should not be a primary concern in choosing a writing system. If language is music, than writing is art, and such beauty should not be sacrificed in the name of apparent progress.

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