

SOME GENERAL ASPECTS OF THE SYLLABICS ORTHOGRAPHY

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ACCURACY

A very important question is whether the writing system (orthography) should reflect pronunciation (phonological), reflect grammar (morphological), or follow a potentially inaccurate historical model. One can assume that many irregular historical spellings are not desirable, and these can be easily fixed. The phonological/morphological issue ought best be discussed within the language community. The writing systems described here do not presuppose a phonological or morphological spelling—either could be used.

An example from English phonological spelling is: *keep* vs *kept*. Here the past tense *-ed* becomes *-t*, and the vowel change is noted. A demonstration morphological spelling would be *nature* [netʃə] vs *natural* [nætʃəɹəl] where the vowel changes are not shown in the spelling—native speakers of English can correctly pronounce the words being familiar with them. The morphological spelling choice spells grammatical roots the same in all circumstances, whatever the pronunciation, whereas phonological spelling always follows the sound. Historical spellings such as *though*, *sign*, or *does* do not represent the sounds of the English words, but present little problem to speakers who simply memorise the irregular spellings.

One of the arguments against using Syllabics is that it does not precisely represent the sounds or grammar of the Native languages. This is certainly the case in the Dene languages which could be a reflection of early missionaries not understanding fully the languages. Modern Inuktitut written in Syllabics, on the other hand, is entirely phonologically accurate. However, not all languages need to represent every sound in their orthography—most of those that do are recent writing systems developed by linguists. Usually, languages leave out of their spelling sounds that every native speaker would automatically know, either by phonological rule or by context.

UNDERSPECIFICATION IN SYLLABICS

A criticism levelled against Dene Syllabics in particular is this lack of phonetic precision. A typical remark is that the Dene languages are too phonologically complex to be well represented by Syllabics and consequently require an alphabetic orthography. Upon examination, Dene languages have a simpler syllable format (C₀VC₀) than Cree (C₀w₀VC₀C₀).

When a writing system does not mark all of the phonological contrasts in a language, it is said to underspecify.

Many native Cree and Ojibway speakers do not write long vowels or the /h/ sound. It is not that these sounds are unimportant to the languages, e.g.: unpointed Cree VC^o could be pētāw “s/he brings it”, or pēhtāw “s/he waits for it”. The fluent reader can decide which word is appropriate from context, and supply in their mind the unwritten sound. Almost all languages with a written tradition which predates linguistics underspecify to some degree. This is not a failure of the orthography, it instead demands less effort on the part of the writer to make distinct each and every sound.

Underspecification is also present in Dene syllabics, where tone, nasal vowels, and

ejective consonants could be left underspecified without too much confusion as to the meaning of the text. The French tradition which did mark nasal vowels. In many early Inuktitut writings, vowel length and even syllable final consonants were not written. This made it easier for writers of different dialects to understand each other, as the most striking dialect differences are when two consonants are side by side (a consonant cluster). The final consonants are regarded as diacritics (like French accents), and just as continental French does not need to write diacritics for capital letters (e.g. DEJA for déjà), Syllabics can be read without diacritics. In learner's textbooks or dictionaries (just as in English), special marks can be employed to indicate what the spelling ignores.



[ye ε da wə dɪh ku dɪ di gha]

Ye edawondih kudindi gha? *"What would you like to know"*

This example is given by Johnny Providence in Dene Wodih Society (1990:100) as an example of the inaccuracies of Syllabics in South Slavey Dene, where ʼ represents /wə/, /ku/, and /gha/ *"...because the syllabic system does not represent all the contrastive sounds in the language"* (100). However, the traditional Dene Syllabic system does indeed distinguish these sounds, and writes them: ʼ, ʼ, and ʼ respectively. The example here must be seen either as some sort of spelling shorthand or simply a spelling mistake.

UNDERSPECIFICATION IN OTHER LANGUAGES

In most of the long-term literary languages of the world, the writing system does not completely reflect the sounds in the language. English spelling, for example, does not differentiate between the two *th* sounds [θ] and [ð] (as in *thigh* and *thy*), nor does it consistently indicate long, short, or reduced vowels. Many speakers of tonal languages (especially in Africa) find that writing the tone all of the time is cumbersome and unnecessary, and have chosen to abandon the tone marks given them by linguists. In the African language Dinka, some speakers wholeheartedly reject the inclusion of tone in their writing, and have also stopped using the breathy voice diacritics.

An extreme case of underspecification occurs in Hebrew and Arabic, where all short vowels and some long vowels are not written. Modern Korean—often described as having a very "scientific" orthography—neglects vowel length altogether, and fails to indicate consonant tensing in compound words. Speakers of all these languages have no great difficulty reading.

Phonological accuracy is—in the minds of most linguists and educators trained in linguistics—the benchmark of whether an orthography is worth keeping or discarding. This serves the needs of the linguist but not the community of native speakers. Accuracy is cited as a major cause for the abandonment of Syllabics, yet there is no reason why Syllabics cannot be phonologically precise, nor is there any reason why following a precise phonological model is necessarily wise.

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