CAPITALISATION IN NATIVE ORTHOGRAPHIES

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CAPITALISATION IN NATIVE LANGUAGES

Generally speaking, the Native languages of North America employ the same rules for capitalisation as English, French, or Spanish, depending on which is the most influential global language in that region.

In Innuaiamûn (Montagnais), like French, days of the week and languages *are not* capitalised: neutshîhakâu and akanehâu–aiamun. Whereas in Eastern-Ojibwa, these *are* capitalised as in English: Aabtawewang and Zhaagnaashiimod. Both languages capitalise place and personal names. In the Innuaiamûn and Ojibwa examples above, the English glosses are 'Thursday' and '(speak) English' respectively.

NO CAPITALS

Some orthographies have rules which overtly state that there is to be no capitalisation whatsoever. Most of the writing systems I have seen which are all lowercase can be found in the Pacific North West, such as Nuu-chah-nulth or Nłeʔkepmxcín. Because most of these languages use phonetic characters in their alphabet which have not, in the past, had capital forms, a decision was made to jettison capitals altogether.

Choices of design can sometimes attempt to overrule the ban on capitalisation, as when a heading or title is to be set in ALL-CAPS or when the Native language is mixed with English within a text. Often, the non-English letters such as ‹ƛ› are simply left in the lower case in the middle of all caps. In the example below, lowercase letters are marked in red:

Qʷ́Qʷƛ̓’Qʷəƛ̓’T: A TRADITIONAL NɬEʔKÉPMX LEGEND
from Swan, Brian ed., 1994. *Coming to Light.*

Mixing cases in such a way is not an acceptable typographical solution. Within an English

text, Native words should adhere to English capitalisation rules – unless the Native orthography is expressly discussed at some point earlier in the document. As is evident in the example below, employing Nłeʔkepmxcín capitalisation within an English title is also unattractive:

qʷíqʷƛ̓qʷəƛ̓t: A TRADITIONAL nłeʔképmx LEGEND

The best solution here is either all-caps throughout, or title case where capital versions of some characters (such as ‹ƛ›) are unavailable in the font.

Qʷíqʷƛ̓qʷəƛ̓t: A Traditional Nłeʔképmx Legend

Even with the no-caps case rule in effect, many writers still prefer to write personal or place names with initial capitals, either through habit or to place respectful emphasis on important people or places. For this reason, Ktunaxa writers have recently started to use initial capital letters as in English. More and more, capital forms of phonetic characters are becoming available in the Unicode standard: the capital schwa exists in two forms: ‹Ə› and ‹Ǝ›, and the slash-l ‹ɬ› also has an accompanying ‹Ɬ›. If communities wish to have capital forms of their special characters, proposals can be made to Unicode for their inclusion. Technology should be no barrier to writing a Native language exactly how the speakers desire.

ALL CAPITALS

There is at least one example of a language which uses capital letters in almost all situations: SENĆOŦEN, a variety of Northern Straits Salish spoken on Vancouver Island. The only occurance of a lower-case letter in the official orthography is ‹s› for a possessive suffix.

MIXED-CASE ORTHOGRAPHIES

Many orthographies of Native languages were developed during the age of the typewriters; English typewriter keyboards have very little to offer in the way of diacritics or other accent marks. As most languages have more sounds than can be written with the standard Latin A–Z, linguists and native speakers had to find other methods to fully represent their languages on paper.

The simplest way to extend the alphabet, from a keyboarding point of view, is to use the shift key. Capital letters have been used to indicate:

- A relationship between two sounds. A language like Arikara with both voiced and voiceless vowels indicates the difference with capital letters: ‹a› is voiced, and ‹A› is voiceless.
- Vowel quality. One writing system for Potawatomi writes the tense-i [i] with a lowercase ‹i›, and the lax-i [ɪ] with a capital ‹I›.
- A different place of articulation. Abenaki ‹C› for [tʃ].

This system seems to pose no serious issues when the written text is stored on paper: the eye can easily distinguish a capital from a lowercase letter. Some problems do crop up when the first word of a sentence begins with one of these letters or when it is the first

letter in a proper name. In the orthography of Abenaki: ‹c› is pronounced [ts] and ‹C› is pronounced 'ch' [tʃ]. The reader is unable to differentiate the two sounds in the names:

Cimak [tsimɑk] "Mark", Caliz [tʃɑliz] "Charles".

It is with computers that these mixed-case orthographies can encounter major problems. Case is not stable; that is to say, software can change one case to another either automatically or at a user's request. A word processor can change a Nuxalk word like xtX^{w} to XtX^{w} at the beginning of a sentence if "Autocorrect" is turned on. Then, if the user selects "Sentence Case", the word would change to Xtx^{w}. Our example word has now mutated from [xtχ^{w}] to [χtx^{w}] purely through format choices. Similarly, for a single-case language (with lowercase- or uppercase-only rules), software may decide to change case irrespective of the writer's wants.

The second problem with mixed-case orthographies is that they likely will not sort correctly. Software treats capital and lowercase letters as the same thing for sorting purposes, while Native language writing systems often sort these separately.

WHAT TO DO?

In the case of single-case orthographies, capital forms of phonetic characters might already exist, and these can be used if the typist wishes. If these do not exist, the language community can apply to have them included in Unicode. But there is no pressing need for a language to be written with two cases: people just need to be careful that their computer programs don't automatically change case on them.

For mixed-case orthographies, the issue is a bit more serious, as there is potential for a database or word-processor to mess up the case of letters; people have to be very careful when working in these languages. One solution is to use a different character in the database (like ‹à› instead of ‹A›) which is then converted to its capital form on output. This will also help in sorting. A more radical choice is to use a diacritic instead as the usual orthographic form. Computer fonts are much more flexible than the old typewriters, and many accent characters are available, and keyboard layouts can be developed to give easy access to these accents. It is not my position that orthographies using a mixed-case system need to switch to diacritics. Instead, I offer it as a possible solution to the casing issues discussed above.

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