Want more information?

Although the syllabary is currently in only limited use, it remains a topic of much interest for scholars and Cherokee alike. It is considered one of the true litmus tests for citizenship in the Cherokee nation. You can see it in use at http://www.cherokee.org, the website for the Cherokee nation, which is a great place to find out more about the language and the syllabary.

Scholars continue to do work on the history of Cherokee and its influence, including the surprising new connections with the Vai syllabary. Konrad Tuchscherer and PEH Hairs article in History in Africa has good information on the Vai connections, and Marianne Mithun writes highly technical descriptions of Cherokee grammar and constructions.

Why a syllabary, anyway?

The Cherokee language is particularly well-suited for a syllabic writing system, or a syllabary. Cherokee syllabaries only come in a few different “shapes”. They all have exactly one vowel and sometimes that’s all—those are called “V” syllables, things like “i” or “u”. They can have, at most, one consonant at the beginning of each syllable, and those are called “CV” syllables, like “gi” or “taa”. Those are the only two possibilities for Cherokee syllables, V and CV. As mentioned above, there are only about 20 truly distinctive sounds in Cherokee. Because of this, there’s a small number of possible syllables in Cherokee—only the 85 syllables represented in the syllabary are possible.

Compare this to English, which allows very complicated syllables, like in the words “string” (CCCCV) and “sixth” (CVCCCC), and it becomes clear that, compared to English, at least, Cherokee is very easily represented by a syllabary with only a small number of symbols for different syllables.

Trying to write English in the Cherokee syllabary

Now that you know how to use it, it can be fun to try to write English using the Cherokee syllabary. Keep in mind that it’s going to be hard. English has 26 consonant sounds and at least 12 vowel sounds, whereas Cherokee only has 12 consonant sounds and 6 vowel sounds, so there are sounds that occur in English that don’t occur in Cherokee at all. It’s also hard because every language has its own rules about how sounds go together to make syllables, and the rules for English and Cherokee are pretty different.

However, this obviously became an issue for the Cherokee, who were pretty quickly surrounded by English speakers and often had to adapt and record English words in their own writing system. This was most common with English names. So, the name “Carrie”, a popular 19th century girl’s name which contains the “-r” sound (which does not exist in Cherokee) was transcribed as “ge-wi” and written in the syllabary as Ḭʷ.

Can you imagine how your own name might be transcribed?

The Cherokee Syllabary

An original indigenous North American writing system

History of the Cherokee writing system

Prior to the arrival of westerners, writing was not a very common linguistic practice among the peoples of North America. In the early part of the 19th century, Chief Sequoyah of the Cherokee (also known as George Gist) introduced a writing system that he had specifically developed for the purpose of recording the Cherokee language. By 1830, literacy rates shot up dramatically and 90% of Cherokee were well-versed and fluent in the writing system, and the system was used to record life within the Cherokee nation. It went on to inform syllabary formation for several other languages and language groups, including the Canadian Aboriginal Syllabic system and the Vai syllabary of west Africa.

Due to forced migrations imposed by the United States Government, the Cherokee language is not as robust and healthy as it once was, but it is still considered an important part of Cherokee identity and life, and the still syllabary is still considered a remarkable achievement.

Kinds of writing systems

Linguists divide writing systems into three major types: alphabetic, logographic, and syllabic. They differ based on the size of the “chunk” of language they try to represent in each character or symbol.

Alphabetic systems, like the Latin alphabet we use to write English, more or less have a different symbol for each sound. That can get complicated (think about the complications of the letters “c”, “s” and “k” in English, where sometimes “c” can sound like “k”, as in the word “call” and sometimes “c” can sound like “s”, as in the word “cell”), but the driving force behind an alphabet is that each symbol should stand for one bit of sound.

Logographic systems like the Chinese writing system or Egyptian hieroglyphics have a different symbol for every word or chunk of meaning. These systems can have thousands of different symbols to learn! Historically, logographic systems originated first and alphabets are most recent, while syllabaries are an intermediate step between them.

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Syllabaries and how to use them

Syllabaries are an important building block of language, the smallest segment into which individual sounds organize themselves into sections and rhythms and a necessary component of every language. A syllabary is a writing system where each symbol represents a syllable in the language.

There are 85 characters in the Cherokee syllabary. The syllabary is reproduced below, and its structure tells us a little something about the language itself. There are six columns, because there are six vowel sounds in Cherokee. (That sixth vowel that looks like a “a” stands for the sound that the letter “a” makes in the word “amuck”). Each row represents a consonant that can combine with a vowel to build a syllable.

If you were tasked to write something in the Cherokee syllabary, then, you would listen to the words that were being said and figure out what the syllables are, then look in the syllabary for the corresponding symbol.

EXAMPLE: The word for “Cherokee” is tsalagi. That word has three syllables and is broken up tsa-la-gi. Using the syllabary below, see if you can write that word using these symbols. You will find the correct Cherokee spelling of their own language somewhere on the front page of this handout.

The Syllabary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>a</th>
<th>e</th>
<th>i</th>
<th>o</th>
<th>u</th>
<th>v [طائر]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>a</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>e</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S</td>
<td>ga</td>
<td>ə</td>
<td>ka</td>
<td>ə</td>
<td>ge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o</td>
<td>ha</td>
<td>ə</td>
<td>he</td>
<td>ə</td>
<td>hi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W</td>
<td>la</td>
<td>ə</td>
<td>le</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>li</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ə</td>
<td>ma</td>
<td>ə</td>
<td>me</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>mi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Θ</td>
<td>na</td>
<td>ə</td>
<td>ne</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>ni</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ɬ</td>
<td>qua</td>
<td>ɬ</td>
<td>que</td>
<td>ɬ</td>
<td>qui</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ə</td>
<td>s</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>sa</td>
<td>ə</td>
<td>se</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ɬ</td>
<td>da</td>
<td>ɬ</td>
<td>ta</td>
<td>ɬ</td>
<td>de</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ə</td>
<td>dla</td>
<td>ɬ</td>
<td>tla</td>
<td>ɬ</td>
<td>tie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>tsa</td>
<td>ɬ</td>
<td>tse</td>
<td>ɬ</td>
<td>tsi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>wa</td>
<td>ə</td>
<td>we</td>
<td>Ω</td>
<td>wi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ə</td>
<td>ya</td>
<td>ə</td>
<td>ye</td>
<td>ə</td>
<td>yi</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Cherokee to English

In addition to the Cherokee script, Cherokee words are often written in the Latin alphabet that English uses in what is called a transliteration. Here is a snippet of text in all three formats.

Cherokee

hst Dhbo hľ-jło Dd' O-wa ə-qst Sgľm h'T. Mrlw ə-čųm Dd' ə-zčľm Dd' Uće hĎ khám Dęcų-p Dlőv Ėl

Transliteration

Nigada anywyi nigegeyale'vna ale unihloyi unadehnuyuku'd gesv'ı. Gejinala unadanvtehdi ale unohlisi ale sguw gesv tsuniyviwsiadene anahclidinvdlv adanvo glyhdi.

Translation

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood. (Article I of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights)

Matching exercise

See if you can match up the Cherokee words on the left with their transliterations and English translations on the right.

Rlr
IrMY
DrW
Δhfi
fGjΛE
TZp

tsi-lragi “welcome”
o-wiye “hello”
yo-wanec-gv “Arkansas”
i-no-li “badger”
a'isi-la “fire”
e'isi “Mother”

Like breaking a code!

World War II saw a shift in the way wars were conducted, as the technical progression of radio meant that information could be passed over larger distances. This also meant, though, that those messages could be intercepted by the enemy, and so code-breaking and code-establishing became major wartime efforts.

Because North America has such a rich indigenous linguistic heritage, the US military began using Native American soldiers as code transmitters. Although the most common and well-known of these today are the Navajo code talkers, the US Army also used enlisted Comanche, Choctaw, and Cherokee as code talkers and breakers, as well.