Syllabic Glyph Variation

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Like all writing systems, syllabics is a *work in progress*. Styles have changed through time, as has spelling, accentuation and other conventions. As the languages have changed, so have their written representations.

The individual glyphs in any orthography are essentially ideals or concepts, not definite shapes or forms. Any literate English speaker would recognise that A A A are all the same letter. Which letter is the "base" from which all of the others are derived? There is no base character, instead a concept of A-ness exists in the mind, a fluid and malleable set of parameters which constitute the letter. A separate matter is the question of which printed form of the letter is the most beautiful, or which form of the letter best suits which situation. The former belongs to the realm of art, typography, and, in the end, personal æsthetic preference. Some may believe that the ANCIENT ROMAN CAPITALS have never been improved upon, others may find the work of Claude Garamond the pinical of typography, and some may prefer the blackletter calligraphy of the middle ages.

The same holds true for syllabics. Though the history of syllabics does not go back nearly as far as other orthographies, there are still a number of distinctive styles. For the purposes of this discussion, "style" does not refer to dialect differences. Instead, style is used in its artistic sense.

Broadly speaking, there are two major styles of syllabics—each with various sub-styles. I will label these two styles by the Cree words: $k\bar{a}$ - $w\bar{a}wiy\bar{e}yaki$ (those which are round) and $k\bar{a}$ - $ayisaw\bar{e}yaki$ (those which are square). $K\bar{a}$ - $w\bar{a}wiy\bar{e}yaki$ fonts tend to have half-height n-, l-, and sh-series syllabics, variation in syllabic widths (the c-series tends to be very thin, while the l-series is quite wide), and finals at the top-line. $K\bar{a}$ - $ayisaw\bar{e}yaki$ fonts typically have a look where each syllabic fits inside a square box—giving it a monospaced look, and finals are usually mid-line. In the nine-teenth century, it could be said that English Protestant missionaries tended to print in $k\bar{a}$ - $w\bar{a}wiy\bar{e}yaki$, whereas French Catholic missionaries published materials in $k\bar{a}$ - $ayisaw\bar{e}yaki$. Over time, this denominational distinction disappeared. Today, $k\bar{a}$ - $w\bar{a}wiy\bar{e}yaki$ has become the more popular style in secular printed materials.



Fig. I. Kā-wāwiyēyaki style. /nistam īyiyumasinihikan/ Northern East-Cree.

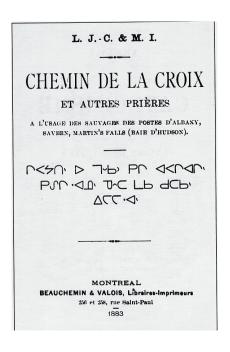


Fig. 2. *Kā-ayisawēyaki* style. /cīpayātik omēškan kici apacihācik kī[ē]šiciwanohk nēsta māka kotakak ililiwak/ Moose Cree

These two styles are—like the glyphs themselves—nothing more than abstract concepts, and there are many cases where elements from either have been mixed together.

Variation of Symbols Ċσィワカンイムb・P

In different fonts or hand writing styles, some syllabics characters can appear different. On the whole, this sort of variation does not impair legibility, any more than the Latin writing system's a~a g~g. At this time, I cannot comment much on variation in hand-written forms of these orthographies.

Below is a list of common variations of syllabics shapes comparing the $k\bar{a}$ - $w\bar{a}wiy\bar{e}yaki$ form (on the left) with its corresponding $k\bar{a}$ - $ayisaw\bar{e}yaki$ syllabic.

$K\bar{a}$ - $W\bar{a}WIY\bar{e}YAKI$	Kā-ayisawēyaki
O, C (thinner)	\supset , \subset (wider)
9, P, d, b (circular bowl)	9, P, d, b (semi-circular bowl)
1, 1, J, L (symmetrical curve)	\cap , \cap , \cup , \cup (non-symmetrical)
σ, σ, o (half height)	T, T, D, D (full height)
\neg , \neg , \neg , \subset (half height)	\neg , \neg , \triangle , \triangle (full height)
← ← ← ← (vertical stem)	\leq , \geq , \leq , (slanted stem)

 \upalpha , \upalpha ,

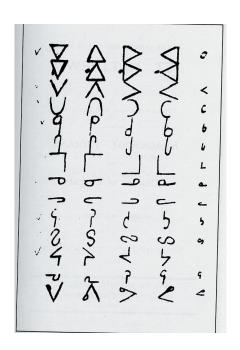


Fig. 3. from [Cree Primer], Church Missionary Society 1908

Variation through time し"アレベンロ"ムタム・3 b アトラロム・x

Syllabics has been changing over time. Certain syllabics characters which looked one way one hundred years ago, may look different today, irrespective of the font style. Some syllabics characters have disappeared altogether.

James Evans' syllabarium of 1841 contains two items which no longer exist in the languages employing syllabics. First—perhaps for consistancy's sake, or an imperfect understanding of Ojibway and Cree grammar—he differentiated a long and short /e/. Only the long /ē/ exists in both of these languages. Thus the first row of his chart is ∇ $\dot{\nabla}$ Δ $\dot{\Delta}$ $\dot{\nabla}$ $\dot{\nabla}$ $\dot{\Delta}$ $\dot{\nabla}$ $\dot{\nabla}$ $\dot{\nabla}$ $\dot{\Delta}$ $\dot{\nabla}$ $\dot{\nabla}$

is b, instead of $\dot{\Delta}$ and \dot{b} . Otherwise, little has changed for the Algonquian languages Cree and Ojibway.



Fig. 4. Evans' 1841 Syllabics Font for Cree (Nichols 1984)

As syllabics were being gradually fit to write the northern Dene languages, several modifications occured. The northern Dene orthographies can be split into two traditions based on the missionaries that developed the printed material: Catholic-French (CF) and Anglican-English (AE).

The early CF texts are noteworthy in the way they distinguish aspirate from plain stops. The plain stops /d/ and /g/ are written C b. Their aspirate counterparts are the same except that they use the diacritic c , so /t/ and /k/ are cC c b. This was the situation in the 1800's. By the turn of the century, a glyphic contraction had taken place, so that the aspirate diacritic began to be written inside the /t/ syllabics: cU became cU , cC became cC , etc. Another minor change took place in the 1890's. Previously, a nasal vowel could be written with a grave accent *above* the vowel-syllabic: /a/ was cC . Then, the grave accent over the vowel-syllabic moved to the right: cC 0, as was already the case for the other syllabics—/ka/6.

The 1870's version of the AE orthography used raised a-syllabics for finals. So where b is /ka/, /k/ would be b. This strategy resulted in a few finals which only existed during that decade: $\frac{1}{2} \sqrt{\frac{1}{2}}$ AE orthography had switched to a system of western finals

which may have some degree of similarity to the consonant marks of the Duployé shorthand.

Superficial Changes <"ハンノくマム・a b タハらノ"P

There are a few syllabic characters which can appear in slightly different ways which have nothing to do with font style or time-frame. It is simply a matter of personal habits, although one version of the syllabic might be more standard than the other.

When the syllabic character has a small loop at one end, like the thand v-series: $\mathbb{C} <$, this loop can appear at the other extreme: $\mathbb{C} <$. This is especially common for $\mathbb{U} \sim \mathbb{U}$ and $\mathbb{C} \sim \mathbb{C}$.

Something similar occurs in Dakelh Dene (Carrier) for its 1-group of syllabics—1-group refers to the 1-, d1-, t1-, and t1'-series. For all but the 1h-series, mirror-image variants occur. So /t1e/ $\mathfrak D$ can also be seen as $\mathfrak D$, and /dloo/ $\mathfrak U$ as $\mathfrak U$. The j- and ch'-series behave in the same way, where /jo/ $\mathfrak Q$ can appear as $\mathfrak Q$.

Finals L"PV"∆ba

Finals are smaller than other syllabic characters, and fall into two major categories: eastern and western. Eastern finals are reduced versions of a syllabic character. In the Inuktitut example above, the m-final is a raised version of the ma-syllabic. Inuktitut and Eastern dialects of Cree and Ojibway use the raised a-final; some Ojibway dialects prefer a raised i-final. Western finals are abstract, and do not have any graphical similarities with their respective consonant series. The Blackfoot s-final has nothing visually in common with the s-series syllabics: \\ \textsq \t

Printed eastern finals are top-line, although in handwritten documents, the exact positioning of the final can vary. If relative position does not change, the direction of the final can. As mentioned above, a-finals are the most common, with some dialects using i-finals. There are also cases of o-finals, as in Naskapi $<\Delta d^{-}$ /paikosapw/ or East Cree d^{-} /kuyiskw/, but these have different sounds, and are not variant glyphs of the same character.

Dialects using western finals have much more leeway with regards to final placement. Very generally speaking, $k\bar{a}$ -wāwiyēyaki fonts have top-

line finals, and $k\bar{a}$ -ayisawēyaki finals are usually mid-line: $b \cdot \not \succ \cap vs b \cdot \not \sim h$ /kwayask/. Some, such as the c-final and w-final have a stronger tendency than others to be mid-line in $k\bar{a}$ -wāwiyēyaki fonts as well: $\Delta \cdot < -h$ wīpac/, $\Delta \cdot \subset h$ of h with h

Blackfoot finals are all top-line, except for the t-final, which is midline. Dakelh finals are generally mid-line in old printed texts, although there are some fonts which place the finals top-line. Occasionally in some Dakelh texts (such as gravestones), a few finals are the same size as the rest of the syllabics, for example: LCOS instead of LCOs /payas/. This may be due to the craftsman's poor knowledge of the language.

Althought there are tendencies for final placement in the languages discussed above, there is are no definitive rules. It is in the northern Dene languages where the location of finals is very important to proper pronunciation. CF Dene orthography differentiates top-line and mid-line finals. Such distinctions can be seen in the table below—each final is preceded by the syllabic /da/.

TOP-LINE	PRONUNCIATION	Mid-line	Pronunciation
C,	dą (nasal)	C,	dak
C ₁	t'a (ejective)	C'	dap
Cc	dax	Cc	dam

The top-line ' is also used to indicate the following sound is an "aspirate": ' $\frac{1}{4}$, ' $\frac{1}{4}$,

AE Dene also has a consistant pattern of final placement. When a final is baseline, it represents a consonant sound only—no vowel. If the final is topline, it is a diacritic modifying the following syllabic.

TOP-LINE	PRONUNCIATION	Base-line	PRONUNCIATION
-ح	dla (d + la)	C-	dad
ہط	tla (t + la)	$\subset_{\mathfrak{t}}$	dat
٦٢	$\theta + \theta$	Cı	$da\theta$

While final placement in most syllabics languages may be stylistically conventional, it would in no circumstances impede legibility. In northern Dene languages on the other hand, the location of the final indicates pronunciation.

Conclusion 9/1/94.3

Currently, only a few syllabics styles have remained somewhat popular. The $k\bar{a}$ - $w\bar{a}wiy\bar{e}yaki$ style is the most common in use today. There have been a few experimental typefaces, most notably Robert Hunt's Cree *Portions of the Book of Common Prayer*. The font used is very flowing and caligraphic, with what look to be ligatures. Ron Ogawa's Ballymun is also a script-like font.

Writing is one of those things that people tend to get very passionate about; everyone has their own opinion on how their language ought to be written. In the end, there cannot be a "right way" to draw a character, there is no perfect form. Syllabic characters, like the letters in any orthography, are platonic ideals, whose identity escapes ink and paper. Although the immediate future of the look of syllabics lies in the hands of the artists, graphic designers, and typographers, inevitably, the people will decide which forms they like best. It is my hope that people will not be the prisoner of one or two syllabics fonts—imagine a world of nothing but Times Roman and Helvetica—instead, an inventory of fonts used for different purposes is necessary, to ensure that syllabics publications are the works of art they deserve to be.

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