

Some General Aspects of the Syllabics Orthography

©Chris Harvey 2003

## Origins ▷"rΔ·o

Depending on whose story you choose to believe, the Syllabaries used by several Aboriginal languages in Canada were invented by either the missionary James Evans (originally for Ojibway), or by the Native Peoples themselves who upon meeting Evans explained the orthography to him. I have not seen any examples of Syllabics before Evans' time in southern Ontario, so I cannot personally vouch for the Native origin of the orthography. In all likelihood, Syllabics arose from the collaboration of Cree and Ojibway speakers with Evans. The phonological match between even the earliest Syllabics texts with the language is too precise to be the work of Evans alone, and would have required detailed knowledge of the language that only the most sophisticated of the Elders understood fully.

Many sources cite Pitman's shorthand as the system upon which Evans based the Syllabic orthography. There are a number of strong reasons to doubt this assertion. In the first place, Pitman presented his shorthand in 1837, six years *after* Evans started working on a syllabic orthography for Ojibway. Secondly, Pitman's shorthand system writes vowels by placing dots and other markings around a base consonant—much like the writing systems in India and south east Asia. Syllabics does not follow this strategy at all. Finally, there are no graphical similarities between shorthand and syllabics. Thus Syllabics was not developed or inspired by this shorthand.

Yet there is some evidence that later Syllabics systems may have borrowed from European shorthands. The Duployé shorthand employed in France, like Pitman, is not a syllabic system, but there are some interesting visual equivalences between Duployé consonants and Dene Syllabics finals: / - c > n o represent the sounds **l d/t m n s/sh w/u** in both systems. However, the *sténographie Duployé* was first introduced in 1867, a date far to late to have had any impact on the original Ojibway syllabics. An attempt was made to introduce this French shorthand into the Hudson's Bay region to write Cree in 1889, but was not adopted by the speakers.



Figure 1. Evans' 1841 Syllabics Font for Cree (Nichols 1984)

# The Nature Of Syllabics ḷσሩ ሌሎች ሰብቅሱ

Syllabics is not an orthography *per se*, but it is an idea, a way to represent spoken language. In the same vein, an alphabet is an idea—very generally: a symbol represents a phoneme (the smallest meaningful element of sound for a specific language) which can be either a vowel, consonant, or combination of these. The *English Alphabet* is an orthography grafting the sounds of that language onto the alphabetic template. Basically, Syllabics is a mixture of a syllabary (like Japanese or Cherokee)—one character is a full syllable, and an abjad (like Hebrew or Arabic)—one character is a consonant. This alone would not be so remarkable. What is unique about Syllabics is the relationship between vowel and character rotation. This puts Syllabics in a classification of its own.

When looking at how each language uses the Syllabics model, there are several distinct styles: 1) Eastern (Cree, Ojibway, Oji-Cree, Naskapi, Inuktitut); 2) Blackfoot; 3) Dakelh (Dene-Carrier); 4) Dene (Slavey, Beaver, Chipewyan). Each writing tradition is as distinct from each other as English, Greek, and Russian are. Yet all of the syllabics languages are similar in that each character represents a syllable (consonant + vowel), a final (consonant), or a diacritic (a modifier of a syllable or consonant).

# ᓇᐤᓂጀጀ ሥጀጀ የጀጀ ሥጀጀ ሥጀጀ የጀጀ ሥጀጀ ሥጀጀ

Cree	97,230
Inuktitut	32,775
(*)Ojibway	30,505
(*)Dene	17,040‡
Oji-Cree	10,475
*Blackfoot	4,495
*Carrier	2,055
Naskapi	1,177†
*Beaver	300†

\* Do not commonly use syllabics today. (\*) Some dialects or communities use syllabics, while others do not. Population figures from Statistics Canada 2001 except † from the 2000 Ethnologue. ‡ Includes Chipwyan, Slavey, and “Dene”.

Figure 1. *Syllabics Language Populations*

When a syllable symbol is rotated or flipped, the vowel changes. For example, in Cree, **U** is pronounced **te**, **U** is **ti**, **D** is **to**, and **C** is **ta**. Syllabics use smaller characters to show a consonant sound without a vowel (e.g. Cree-Ojibway **'**, **^** or **<** is **p**, **υ**, **ʃ** or **ω** is **sh**).

The basic idea of syllabics is directional. In the case of Eastern Syllabics: **p**, **t**, **v**, **th**, and **vowel only** are cardinal: the south pointing vowel is **e**, the north **i**, the east **o/u**, and the west **a**. All the other consonants (except **sh** and **r** which are irregular) are diagonal: northwest is **e**, northeast is **i**, southwest is **o**, and south east is **a**. Blackfoot uses diagonal directionality only, and Dakelh employs only cardinal. Dene Syllabics, like Eastern, combine the two. The relationship between vowel and direction is not necessarily consistent between languages. Finals can either be a smaller—sometimes raised—version of the **a**-syllabic (rarely the **i** version), or be completely unrelated to the normal syllabic shape.

These days, Inuktitut, Cree, Naskapi, Oji-Cree, and Manitoba Chipewyan are the languages most often written in Syllabics (although Roman orthographies for these languages are also available). The others have generally switched to Roman writing systems, although some dialects, communities, or individual speakers still prefer syllabics. The usefulness of Syllabics has been much debated within linguistics, government, as well as within the Native community. Questions such as: accuracy, ease of learning, standardisation, appropriateness, and computer literacy have been

raised. It is hoped that this document helps dispel any view that Syllabics cannot be used on computers or that it hinders learning.

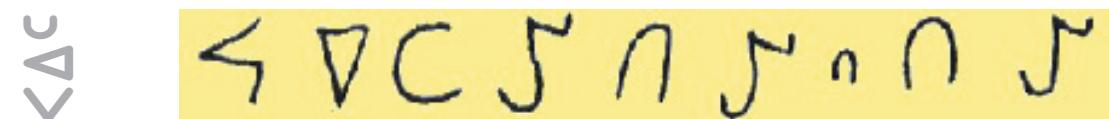
## Accuracy 7Dσ b·ɬiŋpʌɻq·

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 would be *keep* vs *kept*, where the past tense -ed becomes -t, and the vowel change is noted. A demonstration morphological spelling would be Canada [kænədə] vs Canadian [kənéid-iən] 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, 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 were there either by phonological rule or by context.

A criticism levelled against the Dene Syllabics languages in particular is this lack of precision. A typical remark is that the Dene languages are too phonologically complex to be well represented by Syllabics, and therefore require an Alphabetic orthography. Yet upon examination, Dene languages have a simpler syllable format ( $C_oVC_o$ ) than Cree ( $C_oW_oVC_oC_o$ ). Many native Cree and Ojibway speakers do not write long vowels or the /h/ sound. The reason behind these omissions is *not* that these sounds are



[ye ε da wq díh ku dí di gha]  
Ye edawondíh 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 Dene Tha, where **J** represents /wq/, /ku/, and /gha/ "...because the syllabic system does not represent all the contrastive sounds in the language" (100). However, the traditional Dene Tha Syllabic system does distinguish these sounds as: **▷**, **d̪**, and **N** respectively.

Figure 2. Example of handwritten Dene Thah

unimportant to the languages, e.g.: unpointed Cree VC° 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 the unwritten sound. This strategy is also applied to Dene languages, where tone and nasal vowels could be left out without too much confusion as in all of the original syllabic texts, except those from 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 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.

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 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*

C I C I B E H U P Q " A q A " A q A > J b S > J b < A C

*voice* diacritic ä. A further example of leaving out sounds comes from Hebrew and Arabic, where they do not typically write short vowels. Modern Korean—often described as having a very “scientific” orthography—neglects vowel length altogether. Speakers of all these languages have no great problems 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 the phonological model is necessarily wise.

### **Ease of learning Δ·"Lrɔ" R Pnρɔ"Δl drΔ·"**

This is a very important issue, especially as most of the languages which have used Syllabics in the past are currently in decline. Some of the people learning the orthography are learning the language at the same time. All of the universities in Canada (to my knowledge) are teaching the languages and producing materials in Roman orthography. Occasionally publications (especially from the University of Manitoba) have included texts in Syllabics as well as Roman orthography, but almost all dictionaries I have seen are Roman only. The dictionary for Naskapi shows that Syllabic dictionaries are possible. University language classes generally teach syllabics in intermediate or high level courses, after the students have already learned Roman orthography.

Almost two decades later, at Norway House, Evans learned the Cree language but again faced difficulties in reducing it to writing in the Roman alphabet. Here he re-examined his syllabic system, modifying it somewhat to suit the peculiarities of the Cree language. He taught the simple system to the Indians at Norway House and produced religious material for them to read. The results were amazing. The system was so simple that it could be mastered and literacy acquired within a few hours. Moreover, every Indian who mastered the system became a teacher of it, and use of the system spread rapidly as far as the Rocky Mountains. Even on the trail, Indians were able to communicate by leaving messages drawn with charred sticks in

# ᐋᒋᔨ ሥᑎᔨ ሥᑎᔨ ሥᑎᔨ ሥᑎᔨ ሥᑎᔨ ሥᑎᔨ

birchbark sheets. One writer at the time noted: "All accounts represent the diffusion of the syllabic characters among the Indian camps of the vast interior occupied by the Cree tribes as extraordinary. Parties descending rivers would exchange messages by inscriptions on banks or bars of the stream and its acquisition was only the labour of a few hours."

The Wesleyans ... have, very unfortunately ... adopted a new character ... A few of the Indians can read by means of these syllabic characters; but if they had only been taught to read their own language in our letters, it would have been one step towards the acquisition of the English tongue. The bishop thus saw literacy as a means to speed assimilation. Kenn Harper: 1983.

Δප᳚ ሪ᳚ ሪ᳚ (the Cree School Board) of Northern Québec has produced educational materials for teaching children literacy Syllabics from kindergarten without falling back on Roman orthography as a guide. The James Bay Cree have been so successful with their syllabics retention, that one rarely sees this dialect/language written in Roman orthography. Also, APTN (the Aboriginal People's Television Network) runs children's shows in Inuktitut that teach Syllabics in much the same way English North Americans learned to read from Sesame Street.

Historically, Syllabics were taught to children from within the family, and this was extremely successful, so there is no reason to suggest that the system is too complicated or difficult to learn. This all is contrary to the hundreds of myths out there. One becomes a fully fluent reader through practice, and as there are far more English or French materials to read, people consequently develop more advanced reading skills in these languages than their own Native language, this has nothing to do with the writing system itself.

## Standardisation ዶ᳚ ሪ᳚ ሪ᳚

This is a political and linguistic question which all languages must face. The problem lies in the definitions of a language, a dialect, and a language community. Where does a dialect end and a language begin? Is Cree one language or two languages or five? Is Oji-Cree a separate language, or is it a dialect of Ojibway or Cree? These are complex issues, and I will not discuss them in detail here. Suffice to say, a language community is a group of people who see themselves as sharing a common language (perhaps with many dialects). A standardised orthography is one which is used and understood by all speakers of a language community.

These same questions could be asked of European languages. Are Scottish and English dialects of the same language (sharing a same standardised orthography), or are they separate? Are Danish, Swedish, and Norwegian the same language (with different standardisations) because many speakers of one language can understand the others? Politics and history define a language community more than linguistics does. People with different ideologies would answer the above questions differently.

Traditionally, writing in Syllabics has not followed any standardised rules, each speaker would write as they spoke, or as they were taught. This may not cause any serious misunderstandings between different speakers, but it would certainly make reading other people's work uncomfortable. Furthermore, computer/internet searches and spell checkers are useless without some degree of standardisation.

Standardising the writing system of the Mohawk language would be of great benefit to the retention, survival, and revitalization of the Mohawk language within the six territories. Solidifying a standard literary form that is and has been used by Native speakers will assist in the preservation of the older forms of speech, especially the speech of Elders. If all Mohawk speakers were to utilise one standard written form, it would be easier to teach literacy in the native language. Mohawk curriculum materials could be developed which would be available to schools in communities speaking the same language." *Kanien'kehá:ka Ohiatonhkwa'shón:a Katokénhston Tekawennatáhkwen*. A discussion in favour of standardisation is also given in *Naasaab Izhi-anishinaabebii'igeng: E-gii-maawaji'idiwaad anishinaabeg e-gii-gagwemikamowaad bezhig naasaab anishinaabebii'igewin/ A Conference to Find a Common Anishinaabemowin Writing System* (pp. 7-9)

A language can be standardised either by official committee, or more organically by common accepted use. At this point in time, Native languages are most likely to be standardised through official means, such as the Kanien'kéha (Mohawk) effort, sponsored by the government of Ontario, which gathered input from people in each of the communities. The Mohawk example shows that Native standardisation need not be "One system for everyone" as the committee decided that each community could keep its idiosyncratic orthography, but in a consistent way so that readers from other communities would have no problem adapting—much as American English spells *favour* as *(favor)* or *travelling* as *(traveling)*.

There is no reason why Syllabics orthographies cannot be standardised, as Cree, Oji-Cree, Naskapi, and Inuktitut are beginning to show.

# “ΔqΔnΔyΔpΔrΔbΔc”

It is up to the speakers of these languages to implement the standard. Cree and Inuktitut have some important dialect differences, and the traditions of each dialect have been respected.

The Cree word for *me* shows nicely one of the dialect differences in the language. It can be: **niya~σ᷑**, **nitha~σ᷒**, **nīna~ᷓ᷑**, or **nīla~ᷓ᷒**. Cree speakers could choose to write the syllabic character specific to their community, or choose one form, for example: ḥ᷒, where ᷒ (following Moose Cree) is either **ya**, **tha**, **na**, or **la** depending on dialect. ḥ᷒ could also be used, but ḥ᷑ and σ᷑ would be poor choices as [n] and [y] can be found as distinct sounds (phonemes) in all dialects.

## Appropriateness ᐅ “Δ<᷑Δ·”

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, 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 or poor scholastic results 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 not true. If this were the case, then English would have to abandon Roman orthography because English spelling does not represent pronunciation and is famously hard to learn.

Syllabics do have an alphabetical order, dependent on the basic system: Eastern, Blackfoot, Dakelh, or Dene. Unlike alphabets, the ordering is two dimensional, vowels along the x-axis, consonants down the y-axis. Syllabaries are almost always shown in chart form. In the Eastern style (using Plains Cree as an example), the vowel order is: ΔΔ>Δ (e i o a), and the consonant order is: ΔVUQQLσYK (plain-vowel p t k c m n s y). At first the reasoning behind the order may seem unclear. This is because originally, the Roman Orthography was based on English pronunciation rules, not linguistic phonetic principles. The vowels e i o a using English spelling conventions would be written ā i ū ū—this should be starting to look familiar. Similarly the consonants would be b d g j m n s y. Syllabics alphabetical order is in fact the same as Roman, but it is based on English orthographi-

cal rules. Consistant of "h" and long vowels is more problematic probably because they are so often left unwritten, but this can easily be standardised. Additional consonant series are typically added after a similar shaped or sounding series. Blackfoot follows Eastern ordering. The ordering of Dakelh is reminiscent of the scripts of India, where characters are grouped according to similarity of sound. Dene ordering depends on whether it is from the English or French traditions, but it is basically Eastern.

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 single language is also written differently in various communities because of the denomination of the missionary who worked in that area. To add to the list, Native speakers occasionally invent their own system—based on Roman orthography, or their own creation—which may or may not extend beyond their immediate community, classroom, or family.

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 for all purposes a single language, except that the former uses the Devanagari writing system, and 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 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 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, two in Nunavut: one with the  $\check{C}\check{Q}\check{S}$  series, one without, and one in Nunavik: where the  $\nabla\text{VU}\dots$  vowel series has been recently re-introduced. 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 dialectics (accents above/below letters like in French: é, â, etc.). Most people

Caribou News  
Vol. 15, No. 2  
Tuktunik tusarutit  
October, 1995



Figure 3. Title of a Newsletter from Caribou News in Inuktitut, English, and Dene: ᐃᖅσᑲ ᐃᕈᓂጀ—Tuktunik tusarutit, ች-ገና ሙዕስፏ—?ëtthen ghuniye(?)

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.

## Sources $L_{\text{RQ}} \Delta b_{\text{RQ}} d_{\text{Y}} C^x$

Asociación de Taquígraphos del Uruguay. *Historia de la Taquigraphía: Émile Duployé*. <http://www.geocities.com/taquigra/duploye.htm>

Asociación de Taquígraphos del Uruguay. *Historia de la Taquigraphía: Isaac Pitman*. <http://www.geocities.com/taquigra/pitman.htm>

*Caribou News / କରିବୁ ନ୍ୟୁସନ୍ / ଦ୍ୱାରା ମୂଲ୍ୟାଙ୍କଣ କରାଯାଇଥାଏଇଛି।* October, 1995.

Census of Canada. 2001 *Various Languages Spoken (126), Sex (3) and Age Groups (15) for Population, for Canada, Provinces, Territories, Census Metropolitan Areas and Census Agglomerations, 2001 Census - 20% Sample Data*.

Dene Wodih Society. 1990. *Wolverine Myths and Visions: Dene Traditions from Northern Alberta*. Patrick Moore and Angela Wheelock eds. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press. E99 .S65 W65 1990

Grimes, Barbara (ed.). 2000. *Ethnologue: Languages of the World* (14th ed.). Dallas: International Academic Bookstore. ISBN: 1-55671-105-0

Harper, Kenn. 1983. *Writing in Inuktitut: An Historical Perspective*. Ottawa: Indian and Northern Affairs. <http://www.nlc-bnc.ca/2/16/h16-7301-e.html>

Lazore, Dorothy Karihwénhawé. 1993. *Kanien'kehá:ka Ohiatonhkwa'shón:'a Katokénhston Tekawennatáhkwen / The Mohawk Language Standardisation Project*. Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario. (Mohawk and English) ISBN: 0-7778-6105-4. <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/training/literacy/mohawk/mohawk1.html> (Mohawk version)

Nichols, John D. 1984. *The composition sequence of the first Cree hymnal*. in “Essays in Algonquian Bibliography” H.C. Wolfart ed. Winnipeg: Algonquian and Iroquoian Linguistics PM936.E88.1984

Poser, William J. 2000. *The Carrier Syllabics*. Vanderhoof: Yinka Déné Language Institute. (Roman) <http://www.ydli.org/biblio/lingbib.htm#carsyl>