The Carrier Syllabics

William J. Poser
Yinka Dene Language Institute and the
University of British Columbia

Yinka Dene Language Institute
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Yinka Dene Language Institute
RR#1, Site 12, Comp. 41
Vanderhoof, BC V0J 3A0
Canada

CLC Version

The first writing system used for Carrier was the *Déné Syllabics*, designed and introduced in 1885 by Father Adrien-Gabriel Morice, O.M.I., at the Stuart's Lake mission at Fort Saint James. This writing system is known in Carrier as *dulkw'ahke* ᑐᑊᐡᗕᑋᗸ "toad feet".[1] It is an adaptation of a writing system used for other Athabaskan languages in the Northwest territories (Petitot 1876), which in turn was derived from the Cree syllabics created in 1840 by the Reverand James Evans (Harper 1985). The syllabics used to write Inuktitut by most Inuit people in Canada outside of Labrador are also derived from the Cree syllabics. Although the Carrier syllabics are related to the Cree, Inuktitut, and Slave/Dogrib syllabics, they are quite different in detail, and knowledge of one system does not enable one to read any of the others. English and Latin were also sometimes written in syllabics.

At one time Sekani people also wrote in syllabics, but they apparently always wrote in the Carrier language, not in Sekani. According to Harry Chingee of McLeod Lake (personal communication, August 1993), his father could read and write Carrier in syllabics. The one gravestone at McLeod Lake in syllabics is in Carrier. There is also a photograph, showing a sleigh drawn by a team of horses, once in the possession of the late Alexi Jack of Cheslatta, with the inscription *ditnab doch'ak* in syllabics on the back. The language of this inscription is unknown.

Father Morice taught the syllabics only a few times, but they spread rapidly from one person to another and soon came to be widely used. Within a few months of the introduction of the syllabics, a lengthy message was written on the wall of the Richfield jail (near Barkerville). This is the first known document in the Carrier language.[2] Considerable material was published in syllabics, including two editions of the Roman Catholic Prayerbook, a reading primer, and 24 issues of a bimonthly newspaper, the *Dustl'us Nawhulnuk* (ᑐˢᗿˢᓚᕗᑊᒉ′), published from 1891 to 1894.[3] Headstones were inscribed in syllabics. Carrier people corresponded with each other in syllabics and wrote messages on blazes on trees. Some kept diaries and business accounts in syllabics. For several decades there appears to have been mass literacy in syllabics.

Beginning in the 1920s the use of syllabics began to decline. This was probably due to the establishment of Lejac Residential School, where the use of Carrier was forbidden (except for prayer and singing hymns). At first, prayers and hymns were read from the syllabic Prayerbook, but in 1938 a

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1 Father Morice always referred to syllabics in Carrier as *duchunk'ut* ᑐᗿ'ᗸᐪ "on trees", but this term is unknown to Carrier people today, and may never have gained currency among Carrier people.

2 A photograph of the Barkerville Jail text may be found on p. 176 of Walker (1996).

3 In the second issue of the newspaper, dated November 1891, Father Morice reported that 84 people in 16 communities had subscribed.

third edition of the Prayerbook was published, in roman letters, and syllabics were no longer taught and used in the school. Furthermore, most people had learned to read and write from older relatives in the winter, on the trapline. Once children began to spend most or all of the year at school and did not go out on the trapline, they no longer had much opportunity to learn to read and write in their own language.

These changes greatly reduced the use of syllabics. Today, only a few people read and write syllabics. However, even people who cannot read syllabics often regard syllabics as a better, more traditional way to write Carrier than the English-based Carrier Linguistic Committee writing system.

The following chart shows the symbols of the "official" version of the syllabics, as found in the first two editions of the Roman Catholic Prayerbook.[4] The majority of the symbols represent a consonant followed by a vowel. Each row in the chart contains a different initial consonant. Each of the first six columns contains a different vowel. Thus, the symbol ∈ in the G row and the A column represents *ga*, while the symbol ᗰ in the M row and the O column represents *mo*. It is because most of the symbols represent entire syllables such as *ga* and *mo* that the system is referred to as "syllabics". However, it is not really a syllabary since more complex syllables are written with more than one symbol, and since even simple syllables such as these, consisting of only a consonant and a vowel, are actually decomposed into their component consonant and vowel.

Notice that all of the syllables beginning with the same consonant are written with symbols that have the same shape; they differ only in their orientation and in whether they contain a dot or a vertical bar. If the symbol points to the left, the vowel is *a* (e.g. ∈ *ga*). If it points upward, the vowel is *o* (e.g. ᗰ *go*). If it points downward, the vowel is *oo* (e.g. ᗯ *goo*). If it points to the right and has no diacritic, the vowel is *u* (e.g. ∋ *gu*). If it points to the right and has a dot in it, the vowel is *i* (e.g. ∋̇ *gi*). Finally, if it points to the right and has a vertical bar in it, the vowel is *e* (e.g. ∋̈ *ge*). The syllabics are therefore really a kind of alphabet, with symbols for consonants and symbols for vowels. The difference between the syllabics and the roman alphabet is that in the roman alphabet the vowels are separate symbols written after the consonants, whereas in the syllabics the vowels are orientations or diacritics (the dot and the vertical bar) superimposed on the consonant symbols.[5]

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[4] The font used here is a Metafont font created by Richmond Thomason (University of Michigan) and myself. There is also a Windows Truetype font, available from Tl'azt'en Nation Research and Development.

[5] Although we do not go into this here, the syllabics also have a degree of distinctive feature level organization. For example, the ejectives all have a characteristic indentation.

C	a	u	e	i	o	oo	isolated
b							
t							
d							
t’							
k							
g							
k’							
ch							
j							
ch’							
ts							
dz							
ts’							
n							
m							
ng							
l							
lh							
tl							
dl							
tl’							
s							s
s̲							s̲
z							z
z̲							z̲
sh							s̲
kh							
gh							
h							h
w							
wh							
y							
none							
’							

The first row contains the symbols used to write vowels with no preceding consonant. These are also used to write syllables beginning with glottal stop. There is no series of symbols for the combination of glottal stop plus vowel.

The closest relative of the syllabics is, therefore, from a structural-typological point of view, Korean *hangul*.

Instead, there is a separate symbol for glottal stop, a raised dot, which may precede an isolated vowel symbol. Thus, we have *'a* ·ᐊ, *'u* ·ᐅ, *'e* ·ᐁ, *'i* ·ᐃ, *'o* ·ᐄ and *'oo* ·ᐆ.

The symbols that we have discussed thus far do not provide any way of writing consonants at the end of a syllable. For this purpose, there is a separate set of isolated consonant symbols. These are the symbols in the seventh column. For example, ᐧ is the symbol for isolated *n*. The word *shun* "song" is therefore written ᔅᐧ . Note the symbol ᕽ for the very rare *ng*, which occurs only syllable-finally, as in *'utsung* "meat" ·ᐅᓴᕽ . Glottal stop at the end of a syllable is written with the same symbol used at the beginning. For example, *hodiz'e'* "I learned" is written ᐱᑐᶻ·ᐁ·.

Notice that on Father Morice's analysis the coda consonants written <t> and <k> in the Carrier Linguistic Committee writing system are treated as the counterparts of the unaspirated onset consonants and so are written with the isolated symbols in the unaspirated rows. That is why there is no symbol in the isolated row for *t*. There are isolated symbols in both the *k* and *g* rows because both occur before *w*. (This is explained below.) The appropriate symbol for syllable-final position is the one in the *g* row, not the one in the *k* row.

When an onset consonant precedes another consonant, it is written with one of the isolated consonant symbols. For example, *sba* is written: ˢᑕ . Here, *s* is separated from the vowel by *b*, so it cannot be written using a CV symbol and must be written with the symbol for isolated *s* just as it is when it occurs at the end of a syllable. Another example is ᐧᐁᐧ. *njan* "here", where the initial syllabic *n* and the syllable-final *n* are both written with the isolated *n* symbol.

The labiovelars *kw*, *gw* and *kw'* are not treated as single consonants in syllabics. Instead, they are written with *w*-series symbols preceded by the symbols for isolated *k*, *g*, and *k'* respectively. For example, we write *kwa* ᑊᐸ , *gwa* ᕀᐸ and *kw'a* ᕽᐸ. (As the glottalized stops do not occur syllable-finally, this is the only use for ᕽ *k'*.)

Although the syllabics provides a distinction between *s* and *ṣ* and between *z* and *ẓ*, this distinction is made only in isolation, not before a vowel. The corresponding distinctions between *ts* and *tṣ*, *dz* and *dẓ*, and *ts'* and *tṣ'*, are not made at all.

There is no symbol for isolated *w*. Syllable-final *w* is written as *oo* ᐆ. For example, *'aw* "not" is written ·ᐊᐆ.

There is no symbol for isolated *ts*. The very rare instances of syllable-final *ts* can be handled by writing isolated *t* ᵀ followed by isolated *s* ˢ, e.g. ᑕᑕᵀˢ *balhats* "potlatch"

When the syllabics were created in 1885, the Nak'ażdli dialect did not have *kw* at the end of a syllable. The syllables that now end in *ukw* (*kw*

never follows any other vowel) then ended in *ook*. Therefore, no device was provided for writing final *kw*. And since there is no device for writing final *w*, it is not possible to use the symbol for isolated *k* followed by the symbol for isolated *w*. One possibility is to write *ook* ∇ᑊ but read *ukw* in those dialects in which historical *ook* has become *ukw*.

The syllabics as promulgated by Father Morice were intended for a pure form of Carrier into which no European words had been borrowed. In fact, already in the 19th century European words were borrowed into Carrier, and the need arose to write sounds that did not occur in Carrier. The writing system was extended in a variety of ways to meet this need.

Two extensions were made by Father Morice himself in order to write the four Latin hymns he printed in the Prayerbook. In order to write *r*, which does not occur in native Carrier words, he used a roman *r*. He did not introduce a new series of symbols, but used the *r* as he did the raised dot he used for the glottal stop, that is, followed by one of the symbols for an isolated vowel. For example, *ra* is written r◁.

In order to write Latin /f/ and /v/, Father Morice used an *h* rotated 180 degrees, thus: ᖵ. Here again he did not introduce a new set of "syllabic" symbols but used the ᖵ together with the symbols for isolated vowels, e.g. ◁ᖵ▷*Ave*.[6]

Additional extensions are found in syllabic texts written by Carrier people, especially on tombstones. One such extension is a means of writing *r* at the end of a syllable. For this purpose, a symbol resembling a plus sign is used. For example, the name *waldur* "Walter" is written ᗅᑊᑐ+. This extension evidently came into use almost immediately, as it is found in the Barkerville Jail text of 1885, where it is used to write the /r/ of the English phrase "dumb bugger".

The sound *p* is not native to Carrier. It is sometimes written by writing the isolated *b* symbol ᐦ before the *b*-series symbol with the appropriate vowel. For example, the name *Pol* "Paul" is written *b-bo-l* ᐦᑏᑊ.

The sound *v* is not native to Carrier. It is sometimes written using a convention similar to that for writing *p*. The symbol for isolated *k'* ᕀ

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[6] It is unclear why Father Morice did not distinguish /f/ and /v/. The Latin of the hymns in the Prayerbook evidently reflects the pronounciation of a French speaker further adapted to the phonology of Carrier. For example, Latin /u/ is rendered /i/, presumably because Latin orthographic /u/ was prounced as a high front rounded vowel, following French orthographic conventions. As Carrier lacks front rounded vowels, this was then converted to /i/. It is possible that at the time at which Father Morice first transcribed these hymns Carrier speakers did not distinguish /f/ from /v/, but there is no evidence bearing on this point. Many elders can still sing the Latin hymns that they learned as children, including those in the Prayerbook. However, the pronounciation that they use is typical Church Latin, not the French/Carrier pronounciation rendered by Father Morice.

(which, presumably not coincidentally, looks like a roman *v*) is written before the *b*-series symbol with the appropriate vowel. For example, *novembur* "November" is written *no-k'-be-m-bu-r* ᑌᐡᗸᑊᗷ+.

Father Morice intended names to be preceded by an asterisk (*) and followed this practice in his own writing. For example, *mali* "Mary" is written *ᘻᘓ. However, Carrier people did not adopt this proposal; there are few if any examples of this usage in materials written by Carrier people.[7]

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[7] Father Morice also proposed the use of a small circle to indicate a lengthened vowel. To my knowledge this was never used.