The Meaning and Value of the Syllabic Script for Native People

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This paper looks at the demography of literacy in Northern Ontario and the values and attitudes surrounding the use of the Cree syllabic script in that area. We find that although knowledge of the syllabic script appears to be declining, particularly among the young, there is nearly universal support for the script among Native people of all ages and a strong desire to maintain its use.

The Cree syllabic script was devised in Norway House, Manitoba in the late 1830s and early 1840s by Rev. James Evans, a Methodist minister. (For an account of Evans's development of this syllabic script see Murdoch 1981:20–33, also Burwash 1911.) Rev. Evans had considerable experience with the Cree and Ojibwa languages. He had worked among the Ojibwa for 11 years prior to his assignment to Norway House, and he had long been intrigued with the idea of using a syllabic form of writing for the Cree language. In Cree the majority of syllables consist of a single consonant sound followed by a single vowel. Evans used this phonetic pattern to his advantage to work out a script which is extremely economical in the number of symbols it employs. Many Cree dialects can be transcribed in the script using only nine or ten symbols. This is extraordinarily few. Most alphabetic scripts, for example, contain 20 to 30 characters. Syllabic scripts usually count symbols in the dozens. The 19th-century Cherokee syllabic script devised by Chief Sequoia contained 85 characters. The Vai script in Liberia studied by Scribner and Cole had over 200 (Scribner and Cole 1981:32).

The Cree syllabic script relies on a minimal number of characters or symbols but it uses these characters in a unique way. In the Cree syllabary (Figure 1) the characters are associated with the sound of what can be
thought of as consonants in English: /t/, /p/, /n/, etc. Each character is presented in one of four orientations, corresponding, if you like, to our conventional representations of north, south, east and west. The orientation of the character gives the vowel quality of the syllable. The four main vowels are /e/, /i/, /o/ and /a/. Thus, for example, the character resembling our English “V” can be rotated to form the four sounds: /pe/, /pi/, /po/ and /pa/. In addition the last three vowels can be lengthened by the addition of a dot over the character to give a total of seven vowel sounds.

Besides the dot which lengthens the vowel, there are several additional symbols. A dot placed before a character denotes the insertion of a /w/ into the syllable. There are also specific signs to indicate the insertion of a final consonant at the end of a syllable. Such two-consonant syllables conveniently occur mainly at the ends of words.

Demography of Literacy

This paper is a part of a recently concluded three-year Cree-Ojibwa research project which looked at syllabic literacy in northern Ontario.1

Other aspects covered were the future of the syllabic script, the probable reasons behind the rapid spread of the script in the 19th century (Bennett and Berry 1989), and the relation between knowledge of the script and other aspects of cognitive performance (Berry and Bennett 1989). We worked in four communities: the Cree-speaking communities of Fort Albany and Attawapiskat on the James Bay Coast (called West Main Cree in Helm 1979), and the communities of Big Trout Lake and Kasabonika in inland northwestern Ontario which speak Northern Ojibwa but which usually refer to themselves as “Cree” (also called such by Rogers 1983:86).

Part of our research involved administering a community literacy survey to several hundred people in the four communities in which we worked. This survey provided basic, systematic information on the extent of English and syllabic literacy, the uses to which the two scripts were put, the frequency of use and, in a general way, the norms and attitudes which surrounded literacy. The survey also provided information on social and experiential factors related to literacy, such as age, sex, history of residence, schooling experience and knowledge of other languages.

Questions concerning values were posed at several points throughout

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1Research for this project was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. We worked with a total of 20 Native assistants in the four communities but special mention should be given here to Evelyn Nanokeesic of Big Trout Lake and to Elizabeth Gull of Attawapiskat. Thanks should also go to Karen Parsonson who undertook field work as well as computer analysis and to Pat Brown who scored, and coded and checked our data.
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Figure 1: Cree Syllabary
the survey. These questions were open ended, inviting people to give unstructured comments. Because of this, it has not been possible to computerize all replies. First of all, it is helpful to take a quick look at the demography of literacy in northern Ontario. As can be seen from Figures 2 and 3 ("Distribution of Literacy in Northern Ontario"), there is a sharp contrast between old and young with regard to literacy. Almost without exception older people are literate in the syllabic script. By contrast, younger people read and write English. Many Native people (42% of those we interviewed) can do both.

Even at a casual glance there is a noticeable break between the English and syllabic literacy. For men the break occurs around the age of 45. In other words, nearly every male under 45 is literate to some degree in English (96%). Conversely, nearly every male over 45 is literate in syllables (92%), again to some degree. For females the cutoff is even more dramatic and occurs at the age of 30. Every woman 30 years or younger was able to read English. With one exception all women over 30 were able to read syllables.

The pattern of literacy distribution is directly related to the history of education in northern Ontario. Fulltime, on-reserve, government schooling became available to most communities in the 1950s. Before that there were summer mission schools in the inland communities of Big Trout Lake and Kasabonika and year-round mission schools in the coastal communities. Attawapiskat and Fort Albany have a longer history of schooling within the community but early schools were not government regulated and their effects upon literacy were sporadic until after the Second World War. Not all children from the coastal communities attended school and those who did attend often stayed for only two or three years. Fort Albany is unique among the four communities in having had a boarding school, St. Anne’s, to which children from other communities were sent to receive religious and academic instruction.

In the years immediately following World War II many children were sent outside of their home communities to be educated. Boys were much more likely to be sent to boarding schools than were girls. Most people over 40 who know English well have a history of education at residential schools in the south or at live-in schools such as St. Anne’s in Ft. Albany.

As noted, there is a sizeable proportion of dual literates among Native people in northern Ontario (42% of our sample). Most dual literates have an obvious superiority in one script over the other, that is, they are basically English literates who also know syllables or they are basically syllabic literates who can also read English.

Dual literates who favour the syllabic script tend to be in their 40s, and to have learned syllables from a close relative. Most of them managed to pick up their knowledge of English at the summer mission schools, at
work in mines or in forest projects or during extended hospital stays in the south. Conversely, dual literates who favour English tend to be under the age of 30, and to have picked up a knowledge of syllabics either in school or at home from a close relative (or both). Syllabics instruction in school would have been available for those under the age of 25. Generally speaking, knowledge of syllabics among younger people is poor and a large proportion of young people exposed to syllabics instruction in the schools claimed to be unable to read the script. This was true, for example, of 73% of young people (under 20 years of age) in Big Trout Lake.

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O = literate only in English (Roman orthography)
• = literate only in Cree Syllabic script.
X = literate in both of the above.

Figure 2: Distribution of Literacy – Big Trout, Ontario
Figure 3a: Distribution of Literacy in Northern Ontario — Males
Figure 3b: Distribution of Literacy in Northern Ontario — Females
A much higher percentage of women are bi-literate than men. The difference is most pronounced among women in their 30s. It appears that girls attending school were more likely than boys to maintain a parallel interest in their own script outside of school. At the time people in this age group were being educated no syllabics instruction was allowed in the schools, nor was the use of Native language permitted. Men who are now in their 30s are far more likely to have been sent out of the community to be educated at boarding schools where they would have had little access to syllabics instruction. This was true even after the introduction of year-round schooling within their home communities. A total of 59% of males in their 30s have attended school in the south as opposed to 31% percent of females.

Values and Attitudes Surrounding the Script

The vast majority of Native people interviewed thought syllabics were better known in the old days than today. This community assessment agrees with our research results which show that age is the single best predictor of a person’s expertise in syllabics and that the older half of the population knows syllabics far better than the younger half. Since syllabic literacy looks as if it is in decline we asked people whether or not they wanted their children to learn to read and write in syllabics. Knowledge of the script may be in decline but support for it is definitely not. Over 95% said they wanted their children to learn the script.

We asked why people thought knowing the syllabic script would be important for their children. Most gave as their reply the simple declaration that it is important to be able to read and write syllabics. A typical series of responses is:

"It is important to read syllabics."
"So they can read syllabics books and letters."
"I want all my kids to read syllabics."
"Just to read."

The second most popular response was to stress the importance of Native language, with which the syllabic script is intimately bound up (one could almost say confused) in the minds of most Native speakers. People said:

"They (children) should able to read and write their own Native language."
"They are born with it."
"It’s our language. We were given it to use it."

Another popular reason given for wanting children to know syllabics was to stress Native culture and identity. It was said children should learn syllabics:
"Because they are Native people."
"Because it is part of their culture and heritage."
"Because in traditional life they would (learn)."

A few parents stressed the usefulness of syllabic literacy in getting jobs, in translating for relatives, in reading letters for aged relatives. One thoughtful person said that knowing syllabics would help his children "use a Native turn of thought."

It was obvious from our early work in the area that people tended to confuse the issues of script and spoken language. When questioning people about the future of their script it was almost impossible to prevent a simultaneous discussion of the future of the Cree/Northern-Ojibwa language. People typically stated that they thought it would be a bad thing if they lost the ability to write the syllabic script because then they would lose their language, forget their culture and lose their Indian heritage. Despite our persistent efforts to disentangle the two strands of script and speech, people would still forget and tell us, that it was important to learn to read the syllabic script, "Because it's the language for the Indian people, the same as whites have to learn their language." And, making the link with culture explicit, "It [syllabics] is part of the culture and it is part of a person's responsibility to keep his culture alive."

For this reason we instructed our field assistants thoroughly in the importance of keeping the two items (script vs. spoken language) separate. Although analysis of interview responses reveals that they were not always completely successful in doing so there were some differences in the way people responded to questions concerning the future fates of script and language.

Overall, 60% of Native people questioned thought that knowledge of the syllabic script might be forgotten in the future. Older people were generally more pessimistic than younger. Opinion concerning the future of the spoken language differed sharply between old and young. A total of 65% of those over 40 foresaw a time when Native people would no longer be able to speak their Native language while only 36% of young people were similarly pessimistic. It is difficult to say whether the pessimism of older people is part of a general human pattern of the old decrying the ways of the young or whether it represents an accurate observation that knowledge of Native language is indeed dropping off in succeeding generations.

On both issues (future of the script and of the language) there was marked variation among the communities. Residents of Fort Albany were the most optimistic while those in Big Trout Lake foresaw the gloomiest future for their language and script. We asked people to elaborate on their replies. The following paragraphs paraphrase hundreds of comments:
Concerning language: It was asserted that Native people would not lose their language because they wanted so much to keep it. They would insist on maintaining it. They are Indians. They received their language from the Great spirit. On the other hand, people explicitly stated fears for loss of their culture, or loss of their identity due to loss of their language. It was said repeatedly that “it’s already happening in the south.”

Concerning script: People said they would keep their syllabic script, but only if efforts are made to ensure that it continues to be taught. Some people explicitly mentioned the schools in this regard. People said it was important to keep the script because they are Indians. Many individuals explicitly linked the survival of the syllabic script to Native control of education.

On the other hand, it was noted that many Native people today cannot read and write syllabics. People observed that the loss of syllabic literacy had already begun and that even the use of Native language was in decline. People said many teenagers already speak more English than Cree. Small children are using English. There were too many Apple Indians, too much education, too much exposure to white society, white teachers, and white distractions.

Actual comments, from old (76 years) to young (16 years) were as follows:

“The Indian people have to be able to write in their own language which they got from the Great Spirit.”

“The way I see it, in the future they won’t be able to read Syllabics. They will lose their parents’ heritage.”

“Because of exposure to white society [the young people] are copying a different culture.”

“As for me, I won’t lose my language. I just wanted to say I love speaking my language!”

“The younger generation today can hardly speak their language.”

“The dominant society has control of the education system. Whites exert control over us.”

“I have seen people in the south who can’t even speak one Indian word.”

“We get too educated by white society.”

“People want to maintain their language. It doesn’t look good not to write it [syllabic script].”

“With local control of education we can put more emphasis on syllabic writing.”

“Too much exposure to white society.”

“Many people don’t know how to write in their own language and it will only get worse. We can’t live as white people because the Great Spirit made us Indians.”

Overview

Several recurring themes run through the above material. There is the notion that the Syllabic script equals the Native language as well as a parallel notion that Native language equals the Native culture. In addition there is a tendency to assert that both language and script were given to-
Native people in primordial times by the Great Spirit and have been handed on from generation to generation ever since.

It is a fact that many Native speakers and writers are not aware of the historical origins of the syllabic script. They feel it is something that Indian people have always had, an integral part of their culture. Others, who have heard rumours concerning the script’s missionary origins, occasionally ask if it is true that a white man first made up the syllabary. People want the script to be an Indian thing. One of my field assistants told the following story about the origins of the syllabic script:

An old woman I know, she’s dead now, told me there were two men who were lost and they [the people from the community] went for a search party. They didn’t find them. They just found the campsite and presumed they were dead. And about five years later they came back and people asked them what happened and they said there was a light that struck them and they flew up and they landed somewhere — another village I guess, I don’t know — and these people [in the other village] taught them the Hey Hee Ho Ha [syllabary] and religion.

This version of the origins of syllabics (and Christianity) removes the initiative from whites and returns it to Native people or at least to a spiritual dimension that is obviously Native in character. Other statements have been made to us concerning the origins of the syllabic script. Several Native people have said that Evans did not make up the characters on his own but adapted them from existing Indian symbols. John Murdoch (1985:9-10) has made out a case for the symbols being used prior to 1840 in Indian beadwork patterns. Certainly, if you examine old artifacts, pre-contact decorative designs, and even paintings of Indians by early artists it is easy to discern many of the syllabics characters in the geometric quill and beadwork patterns that were in vogue before the European-influenced floral designs took over. In light of Evans’s long association with both the Ojibwa and the Cree it seems likely that he worked on the script together with Native assistants or had, at the very least, a significant amount of feedback from them concerning both the language and the script he devised to represent it.

The various assertions that the syllabic script is a purely Native phenomenon must be viewed as a statement of the importance that the script has had and continues to have in the lives of Native people. For hunting people, living in a difficult environment, material culture was necessarily limited. The indigenous ritual/ceremonial system was necessarily unelaborated at least in the sense of being associated with numerous material artifacts or institutional, hierarchical institutions. The most important things, the most easily transportable, were those that could be carried around in people’s heads. Thus the main embodiments of culture would have been
language and knowledge of survival skills. The second of these has lessened in importance as a result of the increasing urbanization of Native people and their exposure to Euro-Canadian goods, services and technologies. Language therefore remains the preeminent symbol of Native identity. To the extent that cultural identity is perceived to be closely tied to language, it will also be bound up with the syllabic script because of the strong linkage between the two.

Native people are proud of their syllabic script and they are concerned about its future. They tend to regard the script as synonymous with their language. Thus, the syllabic script has considerable value as a symbol of Native culture. This helps to explain the persistence of the script in the face of official indifference or persecution. It also helps to explain the continuing efforts of the Native people to maintain and expand educational programs for teaching the script to their children. Literacy in the syllabic script is an element of tradition that most Native people want to preserve.

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