

Gwich'in Technical Report

Introduction

The recommendations for standardizing Gwich'in orthography which are included in this report have been ratified by the Gwich'in speakers of Fort McPherson, NWT. The important and fundamental decision that the new orthography (developed in Alaska and the Yukon) should be promoted in preference to the older McDonald orthography has been taken.

Gwich'in is spoken across more political boundaries than the other northern Athapaskan languages. For this reason, and since the dialects are mutually intelligible, decisions concerning orthography standardization should ideally be made by speakers from all dialect areas. Furthermore, decisions need to be taken primarily by those familiar with the issues and by elders. This demands the active involvement of language teachers, and all those who are literate in both orthographies.

Some of the questions which have been addressed in standardizing the Gwich'in writing system include:

- Should Gwich'in speakers in Alaska, the Yukon and the NWT use the same symbols and conventions when writing their language?

- Should variation between speakers within a community and between communities be encoded in the writing system, or should standard, nonvariable spellings be used?

- Should redundant information (such as word initial glottal stop) be included in the writing system, and if so, to what degree should the writing system be redundant?

- Should phonetic alternants of a given lexical item be represented in the same way at all times? For example, in Gwich'in, should the different pronunciations of the prefix meaning "my" be written, or should this prefix be written in one consistent way, and language learners be taught that there are different pronunciations possible?

The recommendations given in this report have been guided by several premises:

- That Gwich'in orthography conform as much as is reasonably possible with that of other Athapaskan languages.

- That general linguistic principles influence what might otherwise be arbitrary decisions.

- That any decisions taken be practically feasible, that is that such changes as may be required be implemented with a minimum amount of effort on the part of already literate Gwich'in speakers.

- That already existing writing symbols and conventions be taken into account when making decisions.

1.0 On defining the Gwich'in alphabet symbols

1.1 Replace the symbol < ? > with the symbol < ' >.

The symbol <?> stands for a sound which is called a glottal stop. It sounds like a popping noise. In Alaska, this sound is written using a single quote mark <'>. Consonants which are pronounced with a popping noise, also known as glottalized consonants, are to be written with a single quote mark following the consonant symbol. These consonants are: <t' tɬ' tth' ts' ch' tsh' ts' k' n'>.

Standard:	at'an'	leaf
	nin'	moss
	ts'ee nakal'	raspberries
	echi'	corpse, carcass

1.2 Continue to use < kh > instead of < x >.

The sound which has been written using <kh> in Gwich'in is written using <x> in other Dene languages in the NWT. Since the symbol <kh> is also used in Alaska, it is retained for Gwich'in in the NWT.

Standard:	khah	packsack
	kheh	goose
	khòo'	raft

1.3 Continue to write long vowels as double vowels.

Long vowels have traditionally been written as double vowels in all the Dene languages, and so will continue to be written this way.

Standard:	naagaii	beads
	neekaii	two
	aat'oo	birch
	gwiitshìi	front
	aghòo	eggs
	guuk'ih	their tracks

1.4 Write nasal vowels with a subscript hook wherever they are pronounced.

In the dialects spoken in the NWT, nasal vowels are only pronounced in prefixes (i.e. a part that is added onto the beginning of a word). Compare the following examples from Fort Yukon and Fort McPherson:

<u>Fort Yukon</u>	<u>Fort McPherson</u>	
ɬaɬɬ	ɬaii	dog
daazraɬɬ	daraii	swan
naagaɬɬ	naagaii	beads

Nasal vowels do not show up in the Fort McPherson dialect except in prefixes, as shown below in these words from this dialect:

aɬtsih	I'm making it
naɬtsih	You're making it
ahtsih	He's making it

For dialects of the NWT, nasal vowels should be marked with a subscript hook wherever they are pronounced.

Standard:	naɬtsih	You're making it
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1.5 Use the symbols < zɾ > and < sɾ > rather than the symbols < zhr > and < shr >.

Use the symbols < zɾ > and < sɾ > instead of the symbols < zhr > and < shr > at all times. This simplifies the writing system.

Standard:	zraii	black
	sriijaa	grayling

1.6 Use the symbols < tɬ > and < tɬ' > rather than the symbols < tl > and < tl' >.

In the other NWT Dene writing systems, these sounds have always been written < dl tɬ tɬ' >. All Dene writing systems, including Gwich'in, also use the symbols < l ɬ >.

Standard:	daatɬih	soap
	tɬ'oo	grass

1.7 Any sequences of glottalized consonant followed by [y] should be written < C'y > rather than < Cy' >.

The single quote mark which follows a glottalized consonant should be written right after the consonant. Since a [y] cannot be glottalized, the quote mark should not follow the [y]. Although Alaskan writers follow this convention, it is inaccurate, and should not be used by Gwich'in writers in the NWT.

Standard:	dinjii zhuh k'yuu	native language
	gwich'yàa'	clothing

1.8 Retain the symbols < u > and < uu >.

While it is possible to write these sounds in different ways, for example as <io> and <ioo>, these changes would be too great for already literate Gwich'in speakers. Therefore the traditional symbols <u> and <uu> have been retained.

Standard:	ɬuk	fish
	dɬuh	cold
	tryuh	otter
	ch'yuh	coals
	gyuu	worm

1.9 Remove the symbols < rʔ >, and < nj > from the alphabet.

The symbols <rʔ> and <nj> should not be included in the alphabet because these are just two consonants in a row which already have alphabet symbols. They can be written using the symbols <r>, <'>, <n>, and <j>.

2.0 On the use of symbols

2.1 Do not write glottal stop at the beginning of a word when the word begins with a vowel.

A glottal stop is always pronounced if a word begins with a vowel. Because we know that a glottal stop will be pronounced if the word starts with a vowel, we do not need to write glottal stop at the beginning of the word. While glottal stop may be difficult to hear at the beginning of words, it shows up clearly when a prefix is added:

'aɬtài'	bow
sha'aɬtài'	my bow

We would always write glottal stop when it is no longer at the beginning of a word, for example:

shi'ik	my jacket
taa'aai	paddle

Standard:	aih	snowshoe
	sha'àii'	my snowshoe

2.2 Write low tone wherever it occurs.

Until recently, low tone was not written by Gwich'in speakers, since fluent speakers could determine which word was meant given two identically spelled words, from the context. However, there are advantages to writing low tone, especially for language learners. It is not possible to predict which vowel will have low tone, and if low tone is marked, the language learner will correctly pronounce a word. An incorrect pronunciation (with high tone rather than low tone, for example) would lead to misunderstanding among his listeners. Additionally, if low tone is not marked, a large number of words which are spelled the same but pronounced differently will result. For example, shih would be the spelling for both "bear" and "meat", and without any context, it would not be possible to differentiate the meanings. Even with a context, ambiguity could result.

It is not necessary to mark high tone on vowels since any vowel which is not marked with low tone will have high tone. Low tone is marked above a vowel using a grave accent.

Standard:	zhòh	wolf
	zhoh	snow
	shìh	meat
	shih	bear

2.3 When a word ends in a short vowel followed by a glottal stop, always write low tone.

It is difficult to hear whether tone is high or low on a short vowel before a glottal stop. We have agreed to write low tone on short vowels before a glottal stop, based on what we know about the history of the language.

Standard:	aghò'	someone's tooth
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2.4 Write glottal stop at the end of a word when it follows a short vowel.

Glottal stop should always be written at the end of a word when it follows a short vowel. There are several reasons for this. First, short vowels cannot occur at the end of a word all by themselves. Second, the standard practice in Alaska is to write glottal stop at the end of the word after short vowels, and to mark the vowel as low tone. When glottal stop occurs at the end of the word after long vowels with low tone, it is not written.

Standard: k'i' arrow

2.5 Mark low tone on the first symbol in long vowels, vowel sequences and diphthongs.

In Alaska, we need to mark tone on both symbols in long vowels, vowel sequences and diphthongs because we have rising or falling tones. In the NWT, we do not have falling or rising tones, and so we just mark low tone on the first symbol, for example

<ìi òa àii >. (In Alaska, a hachek would be used to mark rising tone, and a caret to mark falling tone.)

Standard: ginìidìk hìh we are speaking

2.6 Do not write glottal stop at the end of a word when it follows a long low tone vowel.

A glottal stop always is pronounced when there is a long low tone vowel at the end of a word. Because we can predict that there will be a glottal stop after a long low tone vowel, we do not need to write the glottal stop.

We always write a glottal stop at the end of a word when it follows a consonant, for example:

shikwàan' my fire
ezhir' bull moose

A glottal stop is never pronounced at the end of a word when it follows a long high tone vowel, for example:

chúu water

Standard: dàii fly

2.7 Whenever there are two possible pronunciations of a word, spell the word with the [kh] pronunciation.

Older and more conservative speakers often pronounce a word with a [kh] sound, while younger and more innovative speakers use an [h] sound for the same word. For example:

<u>Conservative</u>	<u>Innovative</u>	
khài'	hài'	Thank you
deetokh	deetoh	across

Since the pronunciations in Gwich'in reflect a difference between conservative or older forms, and innovative or newer forms, and since it is generally advisable to retain information about conservative forms, it is recommended that the spellings which reflect the [kh] pronunciation be used.

Standard: deetokh across

3.0 Word divisions

3.1 Write nat/kat, kwah, lee, gwat, ts'at and hah, separate from the word.

The words **nat** and **kat** are plural markers. The word **kwah** is a negative marker meaning "not". It is pronounced kwaa when it is not at the end of the sentence. The word **lee** is a question marker. The word **gwat** means "but". The word **ts'at** means "and". The word **hah** is a topic conjoining marker which is used in certain sentence types in the place of ts'at.

We recommend that all of these "little words" or particles be written separately in Gwich'in.

Standard:	dinjii nat	people
	Ni'in kwah.	I don't see him.
	Dinjik lee t'iinch'uh?	Is it a moose?
	Ahà' nuh, gwat	He said yes, but
	gat'iniidhan kwah.	he didn't like it.
	Mary, John hah chuuzhih.	Mary went with John.
	Mary, John ts'at	Mary, John and
	Adam uu'an chuuzhii.	Adam went off.

3.2 Write choo and tsal as part of the word when the word has a different meaning than a phrase would have.

The word **choo** means "big", and the word **tsal** means "small" when used in a phrase. The words **choo** and **tsal** can also be used to build new words, in which case they no longer strictly mean "big" or "small". Compare the following examples, the first two of which are phrases, and the second two of which are new words built using either **choo** or **tsal**:

ʔuk choo	big fish
tr'iinin tsal	small child
ʔukchoo	king salmon

Whenever **choo** or **tsal** is added to a word to build a new word, it should be written as part of the word. When **choo** or **tsal** simply describes a word in a sentence, it should be written separately.

Standard:	ʔaiichoo	horse
	chuuchoo	ocean
	tʔ'oochoo	rope
	gwitsal	it is small

3.3 Always write a postposition separate unless it takes a prefix or it cannot be separated from a verb (i.e. it is part of the verb itself).

A postposition is a word which follows a noun, such as **chii**, **kwantat**, or **tr'ih**. Some postpositions include **kak**, **ts'at**, **hah**, and **eenjit**. A postposition is always written on its own, unless it occurs with a prefix, such as **gwi-** in the word **gwits'at**. The only other time a postposition is not written separately is when it is part of a verb, for example the postposition **-na-** in the verb **nah'in'**. The following examples show a postposition written on its own, a postposition written together with a prefix, and a postposition written together with a verb:

John, srii hah ʔuk t'ih. John cut the fish with a knife.

Gwit'eh tr'ahch'uh gwizhit
ʔuhch'uh dha'aih. The bread is in the oven.

Mary John nah'in'. Mary watched John.

Standard:	Mary, chii <u>kak</u> dhidih.	Mary sat on a rock.
	K'eedàì' John, Mary <u>ts'at</u> giinkhii.	Yesterday John spoke to Mary.
	John kwantat <u>gwits'at</u> ahaa. John tr'ih ts'at gwin <u>ah'in</u> .	John walked to town. John looks at the boat.

3.4 Always write the formal, slow speech forms of words.

In Gwich'in, as in any language, there is a difference between formal, careful, slow speech and informal, fast speech. Most, if not all, written texts in any language encode the slow speech forms. Compare the examples of slow speech and fast speech given below:

Slow speech

I want to go

Did you eat?

Do you know what
I am going to do?

Fast speech

I wanna go

Djeet?

Y'know what'm gonna do?

While it should be emphasized that fast speech forms are normal, and that in fact, everyone does use informal and formal speech depending on the situation in which he/she is speaking (e.g. a religious speech vs. a chat on the street with a friend), the slow speech forms are preferable to use in writing. The major reason for this is that it aids the language learner in identifying grammatically important parts of words, and in seeing the relationship between words and parts of words.

3.5 Always choose the conservative forms as the standard forms when writing.

In some cases, contracted or shortened forms have become normal for younger speakers of Gwich'in. In these cases, contracted forms should be checked against the speech of elders in a community, in order to determine what the formal speech form would be. Conservative forms are to be chosen in preference to the innovative forms when writing Gwich'in words. The reasons for choosing conservative forms are:

- conservative speech preserves important grammatical information
- conservative forms reflect the speech of elders who are culturally important.

Innovative

t'agwa'ah

tr'it

vichì'

Conservative

t'agwaha'ah he will work

gwitr'it he works

vitshì' his head

3.6 When two parts of a compound word cannot stand alone, they are to be written as one word.

A compound word is a word which is built up of two (or more) words. Nouns, verbs or postpositions can be added together to build a new, compound word in Gwich'in. Examples of compound words are given below:

Nesrihach'uu k'anahtih
they are poor-he takes care of them

social worker

tr'igiikhii zheh
they are speaking-house

church

gwi'teh tr'ahch'uh
it-under-they cook

oven

dzih daat'ih
gum-soap

lye

We always write a compound word as two separate words, unless one part of the compound word cannot be written as a word on its own. For example, look at the following compound word:

ʔukvir

boiled fish

ʔuk

fish

yahvir

he cooks

In this case, one part of the compound, **-vir**, cannot be written as a word on its own. Both parts of the compound word, **ʔuk** and **-vir**, must be written together as one word.

Standard:

dzih daat'ih

lye

ʔukvir

boiled fish

ninji'ihthat

I think

3.7 When compounds contain three or more parts, each part is to be written separately.

Whenever a compound word is built up of three or more words, each word must be written separately. In this case, it does not matter whether each part can be written as a word on its own or not.

Standard:

vanch'òh nak'òh zhàk dhitin

nine

tthah tsal dhoh

sewing bag

3.8 Write the possessive prefix as part of the noun.

A possessive prefix is a part added to the beginning of a noun, and carries the meaning "my" or "your" or "his/her", etc. It is always written together with the noun.

Standard:

shiti'

my father

niti'

your father

4.0 Punctuation

4.1 Use quotation marks. Use English punctuation and capitalization practices.

The standard practice in writing Gwich'in has been to follow English capitalization and punctuation practices. The rules of capitalization are given below:

1. Capitalize the first letter only in a digraph such as:
ch, ch', dh, dl, dr, dz, gw, kw, kh, ng, sh, sr, th, tɬ, tl', tr, ts',
ts, ts', zh
2. Capitalize the first letter only in a trigraph such as:
ddh, dzh, ghw, khw, tth, tth', tsh, tsh'
3. Capitalize both parts of a compound word if the word is a proper noun (such as a person's name or place name):

Chuuvee Gwich'in	Aklavik people
Ddhah Zhit Han	Rat River
Teetɬ'it Zheh	Fort McPherson
Drit	man's name

While a question mark <?> is not actually required in Gwich'in because the particle lee is used in all questions, it is suggested that writing a question mark may assist language learners. It is recommended that a double space be left between a glottal stop, written <'> and quote marks <"> to eliminate any possible confusion.

Standard: "John, aanaih, jii gwinyah'in," juunuh.
"John, come and see this," he said.

4.2 Gwich'in alphabet symbols and alphabetic order

The alphabetic order and standard symbols of the Gwich'in alphabet are given below. This order should be used in all dictionaries.

'	daa'aai	axe
a	at'an'	leaf
ai	taih	hill
ao	gaonahtan	teacher
b	bèebii	baby
ch	chii	rock
ch'	ch'ik	plate
d	dinjii	man
ddh	ddhah	mountain
dh	dhik'ii	arctic char

dl	dlak	squirrel
dr	drah	cache
dz	dzan	muskrat
dzh	dzhii	bird
e	eltin	jackfish
eii	gwiinleii	many
g	geh	rabbit
gh	aghòo	egg
ghw	ghwàn	lumpy
gw	gwitsàk	nails
h	han	river
i	ineedzit	bumblebee
j	jak	berries
k	kaiitrih	mukluks
k'	k'àii	willow
kh	khyàh	trap
khw	nakhwanh	us
kw	kwàn'	fire, matches
l	lìdii	tea
ł	łaii	dog
m	mahsì'	thank you
n	niinjii	lynx
n'	nìn'	moss
nd	ndèe	eyes
ng	dàang	four
nh	vahanh	her mother
o	òk	eddy
r	chìiruk	comb
s	san'	star
sh	shih	grizzly bear
sr	srii	knife
t	tah	socks
t'	t'eh	feather
th	thoh	belt
tth	tthah	awl
tth'	tth'an	bone
tł	jak tłoo	berry pudding
tł'	tł'oo	grass
tr	troo	firewood
tr'	tr'ih	boat

ts	tsèe	beaver
ts'	ts'it	porcupine
tsh	teetshik	creek
tsh'	tsh'yùh	charcoal
u	ʔuk	fish
v	van	lake
y	yakaih	northern lights
z	sriizaii	blunt knife
zh	zhòh	wolf
zr	daazraii	swan