

The Cherokee language and syllabary

a	e	i	o	u	v [ə]
D a	R e	T i	Ꭰ o	Ꭱ u	Ꭲ v
Ꭳ ga Ꭴ ka	Ꭶ ge	Ꭷ gi	Ꭸ go	Ꭹ gu	Ꭺ gv
Ꭼ ha	Ꭽ he	Ꭾ hi	Ꭿ ho	Ꮀ hu	Ꮁ hv
Ꮂ la	Ꮃ le	Ꮄ li	Ꮅ lo	Ꮆ lu	Ꮇ lv
Ꮉ ma	Ꮊ me	Ꮋ mi	Ꮌ mo	Ꮍ mu	
Ꮎ na Ꮏ hna Ꮐ nah	Ꮑ ne	Ꮒ ni	Ꮓ no	Ꮔ nu	Ꮕ nv
Ꮖ qua	Ꮗ que	Ꮘ qui	Ꮙ quo	Ꮚ quu	Ꮛ quv
Ꮝ s Ꮞ sa	Ꮟ se	Ꮠ si	Ꮡ so	Ꮢ su	Ꮣ sv
Ꮤ da Ꮥ ta	Ꮦ de Ꮧ te	Ꮨ di Ꮩ ti	Ꮪ do	Ꮫ du	Ꮬ dv
Ꮮ dla Ꮯ tla	Ꮰ tle	Ꮱ tli	Ꮲ tlo	Ꮳ tlu	Ꮴ tlv
Ꮷ tsa	Ꮸ tse	Ꮹ tsi	Ꮺ tso	Ꮻ tsu	Ꮼ tsv
Ꮾ wa	Ꮿ we	Ᏸ wi	Ᏹ wo	Ᏺ wu	Ᏻ ww
Ᏼ ya	Ᏽ ye	᏶ yi	᏷ yo	ᏸ yu	ᏹ yv

Figure 1. The Cherokee language is written in a *syllabary*, a system in which each character represents a complete syllable.



Figure 2. The Cherokee syllabary was invented by Sequoyah, a Cherokee silversmith.

The Cherokee language is written in a *syllabary*, a kind of alphabet in which each character represents a complete syllable. In English, each character (or letter) usually represents a single *phoneme*, or sound. The English language has far too many syllables (tens of thousands!) for an English syllabary to be useful, but the Cherokee syllabary is a practical way of writing down the spoken Cherokee language.

The syllabary was developed by a Cherokee silversmith named Sequoyah, also known as George Guess, between 1809 and 1821. Sequoyah originally wanted simply to be able to write his own name, so that like other silversmiths he could sign his work. He first tried *pictographs*, characters that visually represent entire words (as Chinese characters do), but found that this would have required thousands of symbols. Instead, he designed a symbol for each syllable in the spoken Cherokee language.

Some Cherokee leaders opposed his work, believing that written language was at best worthless and at worst evil. They said that white man's words dried up and blew away like leaves when the words no longer suited them. Sequoyah, perhaps making fun of this idea, called his syllabary "talking leaves."

But the syllabary quickly caught on. Schools began teaching it almost immediately, and the Cherokee Nation officially adopted it in 1825. According to some accounts, by 1830, as many as 90 percent of the Cherokee were literate in their own language. Books, religious texts, almanacs, and newspapers were published using the syllabary, including

the *Cherokee Phoenix*, the newspaper of the Cherokee Nation published between 1828 and 1834, and the Bible, one of the first books to be translated into Cherokee.

Today, some Cherokee are working to revive both the language and the syllabary, and a number of schools and colleges offer courses in Cherokee.

Listen

You can hear what the Cherokee language sounds like — and learn a few words for colors and foods — in these recordings.

CHEROKEE COLORS

This media is available in the web edition only.

CHEROKEE FOODS

This media is available in the web edition only.

On the web

A Cherokee dictionary

<http://public.csusm.edu/guests/raven/cherokee.dir/cherlexi.html>

This dictionary uses transliteration to spell the Cherokee words -- that is, it uses the English alphabet to approximate the sound of the Cherokee words, so that English speakers can pronounce them. It includes nouns, verbs, adjectives, a pronunciation guide, and a special section on animal names.

Free Cherokee font

<http://www.atypical.net/Cherokee.html>

To try writing (or reading) Cherokee, install this font on your Mac or PC. (Check your computer first, though -- many computers, especially Macs, already have a font called Plantagenet Cherokee installed, and it is a little nicer than the free version.)

Learning Cherokee online

<http://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Cherokee>

A WikiBook currently in development will provide language instruction using the Cherokee syllabary.

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Figure 1 (page 1)

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Figure 2 (page 1)

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