

Introduction to the Tanacross Writing System

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The Tanacross writing system has undergone several changes over the past two decades. The current system follows that developed at the Yukon Native Language Centre in the early 1990's and represented in the YNLC Listening Exercises and Language Lessons.

Special characters

The Tanacross alphabet uses many of the same letters which are found in the English alphabet. Only two special characters are used: 1) the 'barred L' symbol ǀ or ǁ as in the word *ǀii*, meaning dog; and 2) the nasal hook (ǁ) written under certain vowels to indicate that the vowel is pronounced with air directed through the nose.

The apostrophe

The apostrophe has a special meaning in the Tanacross alphabet. By itself it indicates a glottal stop

Using the hyphen

Sometimes it is necessary to indicate that a glottal stop (') is not part of the previous letter. In this case, a hyphen (-) is used to separate the previous letter and the glottal stop. An example is nek-'eh 'I see'. It would be wrong to write this as nek'eh because this word does not contain a glottal k (k').

The underscore

The underscore (_) is used in combination with certain letters and letter combinations to indicate that a sound begins voiceless and becomes voiced as it is pronounced. Thus, the sound sh sounds very much like *shy* and the sound sh sounds very much like *sh*.

Tone

In Tanacross the pitch of the voice can affect the meaning of a word. This pitch is called tone. For example, *tétth* 'cane' has a higher pitch than *teddh* 'night'. The higher pitch is called high tone and is marked with an accent on the vowel. The lower pitch has no marking. There are also rising and falling tones. For example, *ǀii* 'dog' has low tone, but *shǀiig* 'my dog' has a rising tone. And some words have falling tone, such as *dendǀiig* 'moose'.

Pronunciation guide

Consonants

Consonants that are pronounced almost the same as in English

Consonant	Example	Meaning	Similar English sound
ch	chox	big	choke
t	tuu	water	too
s	saa	sun	son
h	hên	creek	hen
m	menh	lake	men
n	nah'óg	outside	now
sh	sheen	summer	she
th	thiit	embers	thin
dh	dhet	liver	this
y	yaadiimeey	northern lights	yell
k	kón'	fire	cool
l	laalêel	butterfly	look
j	jeyh	mittens	jay
w	wudzih	caribou	woo

Consonants that occur in English, but not at the beginning of a word

Consonant	Example	Meaning	Similar English sound
ts	tsá'	beaver	cats
dz	dzeen	day	adze
dl	dleg	squirrel	padlock
nd	ndiig	creek	bandage

Consonants which differ from English sounds

Consonant	Example	Meaning
tl	tlee	friend
tth	tthee	rock
ddh	ddhel	mountain
x	xos	thorns
gh	ghah	for

Glottalized consonants

The glottal stop (') is pronounced by closing the vocal chords. It is the same sound found in the middle of the English word as *uh-ob*. When it follows certain consonants, the apostrophe indicates a glottalization, a catch-in-the-breath sound formed by using the closed vocal chords to compress the air in the vocal tract.

Consonant	Example	Meaning
tl'	tl'uul	rope
tth'	tth'éex	sinew
t'	t'aath	cottonwood
k'	k'a'	gun
ts'	ts'eyh	canoe
ch'	ch'ox	quills

Consonants

		labial	dental	alveolar	lateral	palatal-alveolar	palatal	velar	glottal
Stops/ Affricates	voiceless	(b)	ddh	d	dl	dz	j	g	'
	aspirated		tth	t	tl	ts	ch	k	
	ejective		tth'	t'	tl'	ts'	ch'	k'	
Fricatives	fortis		th		ɬ	s	sh	x	h
	lenis		<u>th</u>		ɮ	<u>s</u>	<u>sh</u>	<u>x</u>	
	voiced		dh		l	z		gh	
Nasals	voiced	m		n					
	voiceless stopped	(mb)		nh nd					
Approx	voiced	w					y		
	voiceless						yh		

Vowels

long ii
ee
aa
oo
uu

short i
e

Tone

v low tone (unmarked)
 v̇ high tone
 v̂ falling tone
 v̆ rising tone
 v̇̇ extra-high tone