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The Cherokee syllabary: Writing the people's perseverance by Ellen Cushman (review)

Brad Montgomery-Anderson

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The Cherokee syllabary: Writing the people's perseverance. By ELLEN CUSHMAN. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2011. Pp. 256. ISBN 9780806142203. \$34.95 (Hb).

Reviewed by BRAD MONTGOMERY-ANDERSON, *Northeastern State University*

In the 1820s Sequoyah devised a syllabic writing system for his native Cherokee language. The creation of this script, commonly referred to as the Cherokee syllabary, is one of the most famous episodes in Native American history. The syllabary has become iconic of the Cherokee people, the largest Native American community in the United States. In recent years this writing system has undergone both a popular and scholarly revival. Language revitalization initiatives among the three federally recognized Cherokee tribes have promoted syllabary usage in immersion and college classrooms, and they have increased its presence in the linguistic landscape of northeastern Oklahoma and western North Carolina. New scholarly interest has also heightened awareness of this two-hundred-year-old writing system. Bender (2002a,b, 2007) has written extensively on its use among the Eastern Cherokees in North Carolina, while Peter and Hirata-Edds (2009) have studied its use in the Cherokee Nation immersion school in Tahlequah, Oklahoma. Ellen Cushman has previously explored issues related to the origin and use of the syllabary (2011a,b, 2012), and I discuss and use it throughout my own grammar of the language (Montgomery-Anderson 2014). Unlike Bender, C focuses in this work on Oklahoma Cherokee. C is a professor of writing, rhetoric, and American cultures at Michigan State University, and she is a citizen of the Cherokee Nation, a federally recognized tribe that is headquartered in Tahlequah.

In the first chapter ('Sequoyah and the politics of language'), C provides the historical context of the creation of the syllabary. She opens with a claim that is at odds with the traditional portrait of Sequoyah, who has historically been described as illiterate in English. C presents an English letter signed by Sequoyah that she found at the Gilcrease Museum in Tulsa. C's assertion that Sequoyah was already fluent and literate in English is an important part of her claim that Sequoyah's design of the syllabary—or Sequoyan, as she terms it—was part of a conscious and deliberate effort to maintain a distinctive Cherokee identity in the face of an encroaching white society that threatened to overwhelm and assimilate it. The term 'perseverance' in the subtitle of this work is an important theme throughout. With the adoption of Sequoyan, the Cherokee acquired a powerful technology for recording traditional knowledge and communicating among themselves; at the same time, this unique writing system helped them to resist the assimilative pressures of which alphabetic literacy was a part. The story of Sequoyah's process of invention is absorbing reading, and C makes good use of contemporary sources in her narrative. She underlines that this period was characterized by 'self-imposed isolation from the influence of the Roman alphabet' (38).

In Ch. 2 C discusses the syllabary as a writing system, focusing specifically on the organization of the complete set of characters. She contrasts the initial arrangement with the second, print-oriented arrangement; this latter set, as C points out, is organized to make sense to those already literate in English. For example, the vowel characters on the horizontal axis of the chart are ordered as /a/, /e/, /i/, /o/, /u/, and /v/ (this last character represents a nasalized mid-central vowel), while the consonants on the vertical axis also follow the same sequence as that of the English alphabet. C comments that this arrangement has often been seen as an added obstacle to learning the syllabary as it 'inserts alphabetic sound systems and orthographies as intermediary steps that learners must go through to locate the correct character' (45). This observation is part of another important theme in the book: that is, that the syllabary has been misunderstood and underappreciated by those who insist on seeing it through an alphabetic bias rather than on its own terms. In this chapter C claims that Sequoyan not only matches characters to sounds but also 'at times can also match meaningful units (morphemes) to glyphs' (49). This is a novel claim that I pursue in more detail after this summary.

In Ch. 3 C examines in depth Sequoyah's original arrangement of the characters to determine if there is an underlying motivation for the order. She describes how the use of image-editing software allowed her to overlay the characters and discover an internal organization. According

to this analysis, the first seven forms provide visual ‘roots’ for the subsequent characters in the row; that is, seven characters provide a basis for quickly learning the forms of the subsequent seventy-nine characters. The discussion in this chapter is truly groundbreaking, as C asks a thought-provoking question and provides a fascinating explanation in response.

Ch. 4, ‘The syllabary from script to print’, is an intriguing rebuttal of the idea that the current form of the syllabary was largely the work of the white missionary Samuel Worcester and that, moreover, this form of the syllabary has a strong influence from the Roman alphabet. C first addresses the notion that the current set of characters—characters especially adapted for the printing press—are completely different from those in the original manuscript system. She argues against these claims by comparing high-resolution images of the original glyphs with the later print versions; she then categorizes these pairs into four groups, depending on the degree of correspondence between the two versions. C reports that nearly four-fifths of the characters correspond to visual elements in the original set and that only seven characters appear to be direct borrowings. She further supports this claim with citations from Worcester’s own writings, which downplay his role in the transition of Sequoyan from manuscript to print form. An especially interesting piece of supporting evidence she provides is a collection of nineteenth-century manuscripts from the Eastern Cherokees; these documents use a form of the syllabary that appears to have more in common with the longhand script than the later print-oriented version. C points out that these texts prove that the influence of the later version was not as great as originally thought in the diffusion of the Cherokee literacy; apparently many Cherokees had already learned a shorthand manuscript form directly from Sequoyah’s original longhand form.

The remaining four chapters are a stimulating history of Sequoyan literacy, both in print and manuscript form. The author convincingly demonstrates how this writing system has played a vital role in maintaining Cherokee identity despite traumatic social and political upheavals. In these chapters C masterfully explains the interplay of cultural and political factors in public and private uses of the syllabary. In Ch. 5 she examines the history of the first Native American newspaper, the *Cherokee Phoenix*, and Elias Boudinot’s role in its publication. A key point in her discussion is describing how the *Phoenix* helped construct an external political identity for the tribe that was distinct from its internal cultural life. She argues against the view of some scholars that the paper is not a reliable ethnohistorical source and instead emphasizes its role in nation-building and creating a public face for outsiders. In Ch. 6 (‘The breadth of the Cherokee writing system, 1840–1920’), C outlines the histories of several shorter-lived papers and discusses the decline of Cherokee-sponsored printing that accompanied the dissolution of tribal government at the time of Oklahoma statehood. After these traumatic events, the syllabary survived in handwritten manuscripts, and C describes its role in the recording and dissemination of Cherokee spirituality and cultural traditions. In the last two chapters she explores the expansion of Sequoyan into new media and technologies. Cherokee literacy had become relatively uncommon in the period between statehood and the mid-1960s, but it received renewed attention in the 1960s through the Carnegie Cross-Cultural Education project. It was further bolstered by the revival of tribal government in the 1970s. In that decade the Cherokee Bilingual Education Program produced new materials, including a dictionary (Feeling 1975), which is still the most used and useful resource on the Cherokee language. Ch. 7 (‘Perseverance and calculated inconspicuousness, 1920–1980’) also describes the use of Sequoyan in comic books and revived Cherokee newspapers. In the final chapter (‘Peoplehood and perseverance: The Cherokee language, 1980–2010’), C discusses the efforts of the Cherokee Nation Education Services team and its immersion school to pass the language on to a new generation.

C’s work is captivating and informative, and she makes several bold claims. Her central assertion—that Sequoyan played a role in maintaining a distinctive Cherokee identity—is well supported. Her analysis of the motivation for the original arrangement of the characters is novel and deserving of serious consideration. C also advances the idea that Cherokee writing might be morphographic—that the characters represent not just sounds, but morphemes as well. I do not find sufficient evidence to support this idea. In Ch. 2 she reviews all eighty-five syllabary characters and briefly describes for each a possible corresponding morpheme. Many of these characteriza-

tions appear unmotivated. For example, the syllabary character /tli/ is described as the root of the common noun *gitli* ‘dog’ (53). This word, however, appears unanalyzable, and I know of no reason to separate the two syllables or to favor one syllable over the other as the root. It is not surprising that there would be some instances of a syllabary character accidentally corresponding to a morpheme, especially function morphemes that, in general, tend to be monosyllabic. In my work with Cherokee, however, I know of no lexical morpheme that is underlyingly only one syllable. Even the pronominal prefixes—the most high-frequency morphemes in the language—are not all monosyllabic; moreover, all of these undergo changes when attaching to different kinds of stems. C does recognize that these prefixes are different when attaching to stems starting with various vowels. For example, she lists /ho/ as the second-person prefix of the /o/-initial verb *-ohweli’a* ‘write’ and /ha/ as the second-person prefix of the /a/-initial verb *-anigi’a* ‘leave’. It seems that these syllabary characters represent a second-person morpheme /h/ plus the initial vowel of the stem to which they attach; that is, they correspond to sounds but do not have a one-to-one correspondence with a morpheme. A few of her characterizations are simply confusing. For example, she states that /ha/ ‘functions as a reflexive pronoun for the future tense: “you are tying it up” ’ (58); this example is not reflexive at all in the normal usage of that term.

Overall, the book is well researched and brings to light little-known facts about the writing system in a readable narrative format. Interspersed throughout are wonderful images of texts, syllabary charts, and literacy materials. I found only a few omissions: C makes no mention of literacy initiatives among the other federally recognized Cherokee tribe in Oklahoma, the United Keetoowah Band. This oversight stands out, as this tribe is headquartered in the same town as the much larger Cherokee Nation, of which the author is a citizen. Her otherwise thorough list of references makes no mention of an important and recent article on literacy revitalization at the immersion school (Peter & Hirata-Edds 2009). She also overlooks the Cherokee Language Program at Northeastern State University (also located in Tahlequah). The program—in existence since 2005—receives \$100,000 per year from the Cherokee Nation and is one of only three institutions in the United States that offers a B.A. in an American Indian language (full disclosure: I am a professor at NSU and teach for the Cherokee department). This program not only uses the syllabary but is also creating new domains and possibly genres for it.

C’s work is an important addition to the literature on Cherokee in particular and writing systems in general. In my own work on Cherokee I use both the syllabary and a Romanized system. I do believe it would be useful to explore ways of teaching that use only the syllabary rather than filtering it through an alphabet. C’s book helps to open this dialogue and explore ways in which such a pedagogy could be created.

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Bringing our languages home: Language revitalization for families. Ed. by LEANNE HINTON. Berkeley, CA: Heyday Books, 2013. Pp. xx, 264. ISBN 9781597142007. \$20.

Reviewed by NANCY H. HORNBERGER, *University of Pennsylvania*

How does one concretely go about reclaiming a heritage language with no living speakers? or with only a few members of an elder generation of native speakers? How does one do this within a family? an extended family? a school? a community? The authors in this book have tackled these questions in their own lives and share with us their wisdom, strategies, achievements, challenges, and hopes from the vantage point of twenty and more years of experience in these endeavors.

The book, beautifully edited by Leanne Hinton, takes us through language reclamation projects that range from individual families working from scratch to recreate a sleeping language within their own home—the Baldwin family reclaiming Myaamia and Jessie Little Doe Baird and her family reclaiming Wampanoag—to families working with the last generation of native-speaker elders—the Albers family remembering Karuk elder Auntie Violet, and Richard Grounds and his daughter Renée recounting purposeful strategies their family adopted to learn Yuchi. Other families benefited from a context of community support in reclaiming Mohawk (the Peters), Māori (O’Regan), Hawaiian (Wilson and Kamanā), Anishinaabe (Noori), and Irish (Mac Póilin). Or they found support in structured family language-learning programs—the Hernandez family learning Kawaiisu (as told by Grant and Turner) and the Taic/CNSA organization reviving Scottish-Gaelic (Macleoid). There are also two cases of efforts by parents to teach their child a language far from the speech community—the Bielenberg Pittaka family attempting to raise their son as a fluent speaker of a fading Greek dialect, Kypriaka, and Ken Hale teaching his twin sons Ezra and Caleb to speak Warlpiri, a central Australian aboriginal language.

It is now more than twenty years since that same Ken Hale and colleagues (1992) drew linguists’ attention in the pages of this journal to the ‘worldwide erosion of the languages spoken by indigenous and minority populations’, as Hinton puts it in her introduction (xiii). This book is about ‘another pattern emerging ... of individuals and communities striving to strengthen or regain aspects of their heritage cultures ... a movement away from ... cultural annihilation’ (xiii). Most of the languages included here are Native North American languages, complemented by cases from Māori and Hawaiian, Irish and Scottish Gaelic, Kypriaka and Warlpiri.

Among the memorable lessons in the BALDWIN family’s account of their multidecade experience recreating Myaamia in their home are teaching/learning how the language thinks, staying in the language, and moving ‘away from language being the target to language just being part of life in the home’ (13); and among the favorite practices remembered are the penny jar from which one earned a penny for using the language and had a penny taken away for forgetting to. In the second chapter of Part I (‘Starting from zero’), JESSIE LITTLE DOE BAIRD speaks of accepting responsibility for making a place for her language to be welcomed back into her community, giving it to her children, and patiently communicating with nonspeakers. She began learning her language by teaching herself, studying Algonquian linguistics to access documentation from the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries, and she went on to teach others, continue her research, and write a layperson’s grammar. Today the Wampanoag Language Reclamation Project has embarked on a master-apprentice fluency program with future plans for children’s television programming, an after-school theatre program, and an immersion school.