

The Witsuwit'en alphabet

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Each distinctive sound in the Witsuwit'en alphabet is spelled with its own symbol or combination of symbols. The symbols used in the Witsuwit'en writing system are the same as those used to write English, because of widespread literacy in English and familiarity with English language computers.

This summary of the writing system is based on Hargus 2000, a set of materials developed for FNST 131 and 132, Witsuwit'en language courses offered in Moricetown through UNBC in 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000. These courses were co-taught by George Holland, Lillian Morris, and Sharon Hargus, who developed the materials together. In 2000, a set of audio recordings was made and hyperlinked to these materials, and distributed by Kyah Wiget Education Society as a CD (Hargus 2000), viewable with an internet browser such as Microsoft Internet Explorer. This report also includes some of the information provided in Hargus 2007 (Appendix 2).

Consonants

Witsuwit'en has more distinctive consonants than English does, so to spell all of the Witsuwit'en consonants, some consonant sounds are spelled with a group of two or three symbols. These are the consonant symbols of the Witsuwit'en alphabet:

' b c c' d dz dl g gg gh gw h k k' kh kw kw' l lh m n p s t t' ts ts' tl tl' w wh y yh z

<i>consonant</i>	<i>example</i>	
b	bin	lake
m	min	roof
d	diz	driftwood
t	tiz	cane
t'	t'alh	food
n	nu	island
dz	dzut	coat
ts	tsa	beaver
ts'	ts'ac	bowl, plate
s	sis	black bear
z	zi	belt
dl	dildlit	he/she is talking in a loud, angry voice
tl	itliwh	he/she is laughing
tl'	tl'olh	rope
lh	lhës	bread, bannock
l	l'iggoc	chicken
	wizil	heat
g	gis	hook
c	cas	grizzly

c'	īlc'iw h	he's going along mad
y	yin	land
yh	'ayh	snowshoe
gg	ggīs	spring salmon
k	kē	foot
k'	k'a	ammunition, shells
kh	khikh	goose
gh	c'ighīh	roots
gw	gwe'ilh	bag
kw	kwin	fire
kw'	kw'isil	bead
wh	'awh	around (there)
w	niwis	soapberries
h	halho'	cloth
'	tse'alh	pillow
	mī'	berry

Vowels

English has only five symbols to represent vowels, and since there are more than five vowel sounds in Witsuwit'en,¹ it is also necessary to combine symbols to represent each vowel sound in a unique way. Two of the vowel symbols used to write these sounds consist of a primary vowel symbol, **i** or **e**, marked with " (called 'umlaut' or 'dieresis') over the vowel.

ï e ë u o a i

A quick way to type **ï** and **ë** in Microsoft Word documents is: ctrl-:, i or ctrl-:, e. (Hold down Ctrl, then Shift-:, release and quickly type i or e.) For capital versions, **Ë** **İ**, keep holding down Shift key while typing **i** or **e**.

There are also long versions of six of the Witsuwit'en vowels:

ïï ee ëë uu oo aa

Here are some examples of the vowel symbols used to spell Witsuwit'en words:

¹Witsuwit'en actually has fewer distinctive vowels than the English spoken in North America, but the English writing system does a particularly poor job of representing the vowel sounds in English. Many of the spellings of English words represent the way those words were pronounced roughly 600 years ago. Spellings like *ea*, *ie* represent original diphthongs; *ee* and *e* represented an original vowel length contrast. The pronunciation of English has changed in 600 years but the spelling has not kept up with all the changes.

	<i>Witsuwit'en example</i>	<i>Closest sound in English</i>
ĩ	dzĩn 'day', bĩt 'inside', mbĩ 'who', khĩt (or khiyt) 'winter', Kw'is (chief name), Sizi 'Jesus' (or Sezi)	ski, bleed, breathe, piece, receive, she, amoeba, highly
e	dzen 'muddy water', tsen to 'sweat', ndet 'it's narrow', dik'alt'et '7 times', sitl'et 'he farted', sidlet 'it's licking me'	weigh, they, way, ache, detain, gauge, great
ë	bitsën 'his/her shadow', t'ët 'teenage girl', tl'ët 'night'	led, tread, says, said, guest, Thames
u	dzut 'coat', unis 'way ahead', 'anu 'we', sunye 'money', lhk'u 'different', ku 'puppy'	Lucy, true, to, too, two, uncouth, stew, pseudo

The vowel is commonly found either at the beginning of a word or after the following consonants:

b	d	dz	dl	g	gw	gg
m	n	z	l	y	w	gh

The vowel **ĩ** is rare after the following consonants:

p	t	ts	tl	c	kw	k	
	t'	ts'	tl'	c'	kw'	k'	'
		s	lh	yh	wh	kh	h

The Witsuwit'en vowels are difficult to spell because some of the vowels, particularly **o**, **a**, and **ĩ**, have fairly different pronunciations depending on what the preceding consonant is. It should be kept in mind that this is a fact about the oral language. The writing system simply tries to reflect or represent as accurately and clearly how the language is pronounced.

The vowel **o** has a pronunciation similar to the underlined vowel in the following English words:

no, road, doughnut, zone, toe, slow, faux

when **o** follows any of these consonant sounds:

b	d	dz	dl	g	gw	gg
m	n	z	l	y	w	gh

doso
nido
no'ilh

'gunny sack'
'white person'
'glass'

(o is rare after the sounds listed in the table. The three examples above are all loan words.) However, the vowel **o** has a pronunciation more like the underlined vowel in:

normal or coffee (as pronounced by someone from New York City)

when **o** follows any of these consonant sounds:

p	t	ts	tl	c	kw	k	
	t'	ts'	tl'	c'	kw'	k'	'
		s	lh	yh	wh	kh	h

lhok	'fish'
to	'water'
ts' <u>o</u>	'spruce'
so' <u>o</u>	'well, fine'
c'it' <u>o</u> ts	'its bark'
k' <u>o</u> n	'fish eggs, roe'
lhot	'scab'
tlon <u>o</u> inzin	'he's smiling'

The vowel **a** is generally pronounced like the underlined vowel in:

hat, laugh

after the following consonants:

b	d	dz	dl	g	gg
				c	
				c'	
		z	l	y	gh
m	n				

day <u>i</u>	'chief'
gabun	'credit, mortgage'
Mali	'Marlene, Marion'
liz <u>a</u> s	'angel'
Ndo Mali	'Holy Mary'

or when the preceding or following consonant is **c** or **c'**:

cas	'grizzly'
'et wic' <u>a</u>	'because of that'
ts' <u>a</u> c	'bowl, plate'

The vowel **a** is generally pronounced like the underlined vowel in:

father, soft, caulk (but for some speakers, more like hat, laugh)

after the following consonants:

p	t	ts	tl	gw	k	
	t'	ts'	tl'	kw	k'	'
		s	lh	kw'	kh	h
				wh		
				w		

t'alh	'food'
tat	'3 times'
kwa	'again'
nduwa	'why'
tsa	'beaver'
tsan	'excrement'
bitl'a	'her butt'
diltlat	'jump in'
halho'	'cloth'

The vowel **i** is pronounced like the underlined vowel in:

medicine, about, thene, bottom, to suspect

when this vowel follows any of the following consonants:

b	d	dz	dl	gg
m	n	z	l	gh

b <u>i</u> bit	'his abdomen'
b <u>i</u> n	'lake'
m <u>i</u> n	'roof'
dz <u>i</u> lh	'mountain'
bil <u>i</u> t	'its smoke'
c'iz <u>i</u> z	'hide'

When the vowel **i** follows **g**, **y** (and **c'** in unstressed syllables) the vowel **i** sounds more like 'i' in English 'it':

nig <u>i</u> t	'fear'
y <u>i</u> s	'snow'
c' <u>i</u> dī	'horn'

The vowel **i** is generally pronounced like the underlined vowel in:

other, under, tough, flood

when it follows these consonants (for **c'**, only in stressed syllables):

p	t	ts	tl	c	gw	k	
	t'	ts'	tl'	c'	kw	k'	'
		s	lh		kw'	kh	h
					wh		
					w		

h <u>i</u> ne	'it is alive'
lh <u>i</u> m	'chunk of ice'
di <u>t</u> sin	'it's dirty'
si <u>s</u>	'black bear'
lh <u>i</u> t	'smoke'
ni <u>l</u> wit	'it's fresh'

The pronunciation of **i** is also influenced by the consonant which follows this vowel. *Before y* which begins the next syllable, the vowel **i** sounds more like 'i' in English 'ski':

bi <u>y</u> ez	'her son or daughter'
ts'i <u>y</u> etsic	'everything'

Before k kh gh the vowel **i** sounds more like English 'u' in 'cut':

ni <u>k</u>	'uphill'
si <u>k</u> h	'gaff hook'
nit' <u>i</u> gh (nit'agh, nit'a) ²	'it's flying around'

Before wh w, the vowel **i** sounds more like the vowel 'o' in English 'know what?' but it is not as long as Witsuwit'en **o**. Examples:

ni <u>w</u> is	'soapberries'
lh <u>d</u> iw	'it cramped up'

Before kw at the end of a word, the vowel **i** also has this o-like sound:

nizdi <u>k</u> w	'it's spherical, three-dimensional'
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²For some speakers, the sound sequence *igh* is not different from *agh* or *a*. For those speakers, the spelling *nit'agh* or *nit'a* would be more appropriate than *nit'igh* for 'it's flying around'.

The long vowels are pronounced according to the principles of the short vowels (their sound is affected by the neighbouring consonants) but they take more time to say. Some people describe them as “dragged” vowels. The long vowels mostly occur in forms with ‘they’ or ‘them’ in the translation:

	<i>short</i>	<i>long</i>
a	netl’ <u>a</u> dīde ‘she sat down’	netl’ <u>aa</u> dīlts’iy ‘they sat down’
e	silh <u>y</u> elhdic ‘he’s talking to me’	silh <u>ye</u> elhdic ‘they’re talking to me’
ī	nīnīnye ‘he went and stayed’	nīnīndīl ‘they went and stayed’
ē	kēdīzilh ‘she’s travelling’	kēēdīdikh ‘they’re travelling’
o	yikh <u>h</u> ot’iy’ ‘he had a house’	yikh <u>hoo</u> t’iy’ ‘they had a house’
u	nibī <u>u</u> dil’ēkh ‘she’s learning how to swim’	naabī <u>uu</u> dil’ēkh ‘they’re learning how to swim’

History of the Witsuwit’en writing system

The ‘distinctly Witsuwit’en’ writing system was developed in 1991 by Sharon Hargus, and it is based on the writing system for the Nadot’en/Nedut’en/U’in Wit’en (also known as Babine) dialect of the language, which was developed by Hank Hildebrandt in consultation with Dick Walker and Gillian Story. The Witsuwit’en writing system was presented at a March 1993 meeting of the hereditary chiefs, and after much discussion, summarized in Jim 1999, the chiefs voted to adopt the revised system as the official Witsuwit’en writing system. A series of literacy workshops to provide training in the Witsuwit’en writing system were held in Moricetown between 1993-2000. There are now various written works in the Witsuwit’en writing system, including Gottesfeld 1991, Hagwilget Band 1995, Gunlogson 1995, Hargus 1999, Gunlogson 2001 and various unpublished materials developed for Kyah Wiget Education Society, Moricetown, such as Morris and Rosso 1999.

The main differences between the Nadot’en and Witsuwit’en systems involve the following points:

	<i>Hildebrandt system</i>	<i>revised Hildebrandt</i>	
(1)	negizjee	neggizgī	‘fox’
(2)	whenicljit	wenigilgit	‘I’m scared’
(3)	yeilhdic	yeelhdic	‘they’re talking’
(4)	seezee	sīzī, sezī	‘Jesus’
	weusdleet	weusdlīt, weuslīt	‘it’s not melting’
	sitl’ <u>e</u> et	sitl’ <u>e</u> t	‘he farted’
	sidlet	sidlet	‘it’s licking me’
	tl’ <u>e</u> t	tl’ <u>ē</u> t	‘night’
(5)	dijuwh	diguwh	‘mosquito’
	widzeeyh	widzih	‘caribou’
(6)	bi’n	bin’	‘morning’

- (1) j is used in Nadot'en but not Witsuwit'en; g represents a different sound in Nadot'en than it does in Witsuwit'en
- (2) -icl- is used in Nadot'en but -igil- in Witsuwit'en in certain verb forms
- (3) the long vowels are represented as vowel+i in Nadot'en
- (4) the Witsuwit'en vowels i e ë are represented differently in Nadot'en
- (5) the symbols wh and yh are used more in Nadot'en than in Witsuwit'en
- (6) Witsuwit'en n' and m' are spelled 'n and 'm in Nadot'en

Point (1) involves an actual phonetic difference in the oral language between the two dialects, but the other points simply reflect differences in decisions about the design of the writing systems.

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