

THE NAVAHO ALPHABET

The following information with regard to the Navaho alphabet and its use should prove helpful to one familiar with the English language.

VOWELS

The vowels have continental values. They are as follows, the first example being a Navaho word, the second the closest approximation to the sound in an English word:

a	gad	(juniper)	father
e	ké	(shoe)	met
i	sis	(belt) or as in	sit or as in
	dishááh	(I'm starting)	pique
o	doo	(not)	note

Vowels may be either long or short in duration, the long vowels being indicated by a doubling of the letter. This never affects the quality of the vowel, except that long i is always pronounced as in pique.

sis (belt) is short siziiz (my belt) is long

Vowels with a hook beneath the letter are nasalized. That is, some of the breath passes through the nose in their production. After n, all vowels are nasalized and are not marked.

tsinaabqqs	(wagon)
jí	(day)
kóó	(here)

DIPHTHONGS

The diphthongs are as follows:

ai	hai	(winter)	aisle
ei	séi	(sand)	weigh
oi	'ayóí	(very)	Joey

The diphthong oi (as in Joey) will frequently be heard as ui (as in dewy) in certain sections of the reservation. However, since the related word ayóó

is always of one value, this spelling has been standardized.

In a similar way, the diphthongs ei and ai are not universally distinguished. For example, the word for sand, séi will be pronounced sái by some Navaho.

CONSONANTS

The consonants are as follows:

b	bá	(for him)	like p in spot
d	díí	(this)	like t in stop
g	gah	(rabbit)	like k in sky

These sounds are not truly voiced as are the sounds represented by these letters in English, but are like the wholly unaspirated p, t, and k in the English words given as examples.

t	tó	(water)	tea
k	ké	(shoe)	kit

The t and k in Navaho are much more heavily aspirated than in the English words given in the ex-

amples, so that the aspiration has a harsh fricative quality.

' glottal stop yá'át'ééh (it is good) unh unh, oh oh

In the American colloquial negative unh unh, or in the exclamatory expression oh oh, the glottal stop precedes the u and the o respectively. Or, in actual speech, the difference between Johnny earns and Johnny yearns, is that the former has a glottal closure between the two words.

t' yá'át'ééh (it is good)

This letter represents the sound produced by the almost simultaneous release of the breath from the closure formed by the tip of the tongue and the teeth and the glottal closure described previously.

k' k'ad (now)

This sound is produced in the same way as the t', except that the k closure is formed by the back of the tongue and the soft palate.

m	mósí	(cat)	man
n	naadqá'	(corn)	no
s	sis	(belt)	so
sh	shash	(bear)	she
z	zas	(snow)	zebra
zh	'ázhi'	(name)	azure
l	laanaa	(would that)	let
ł	łid	(smoke)	

This sound is made with the tongue in exactly the same position as in the ordinary l, but the voice box or larynx does not function. The difference between these two l's is the same as the difference between b and p, d and t, or s and z in English. If one attempts to pronounce th as in thin followed by l without an intervening vowel a ł is produced. Thus athłete.

h	háadi	(where)	hot
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In Navaho there are two sounds represented by the letter h. The difference is in the intensity or fricativeness. Where h is the first letter in a syllable it

is by some pronounced like the ch of German. This harsh pronunciation is the older, but the younger generation of Navaho tends to pronounce the sound much as in English.

gh	hooghan	(hogan)
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This is the voiced equivalent of the harshly pronounced variety of h, the functioning of the voice being the only difference between the two sounds.

j	jádí	(antelope)	jug
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This sound is an unaspirated ch, just as d and g represent unaspirated t and k.

ch	chizh	(wood)	church
ch'	ch'il	(plant)	

This sound is produced in a fashion similar to the t' and k', but with the release of the breath from the ch position and from the glottal closure.

dz	dził	(mountain)	adze
ts	tsa	(awl)	hats

ts occurs in the beginning and middle of Navaho words, but only in final position in English.

ts' ts'in (bone)

This sound is similar to ch', except for the tongue position, and involves the release of the breath from the glottal closure in the same way as the other glottalized sounds.

dl beeldléí (blanket)

The dl is pronounced as one sound as the gl is in the word glow.

tł tła (grease)

This sound is pronounced as unvoiced dl.

tł' tł'ízi (goat)

This sound involves the release of the breath from the t position of the tongue tip and teeth, from the contact of the sides of the tongue inside the back teeth (normal l position), and the glottal closure. It

has a marked explosive quality. The sound is produced as a unit, as in the gl of glow, cited above.

y	yá	(sky)	you
w	'awéé'	(baby)	work

PALATALIZATION AND LABIALIZATION

It is to be noted that the sounds represented by g, t, k, h, gh, ch, and ts (when heavily aspirated) are palatalized before e, i, and labialized before o. By this is meant that such a word as ké (shoe) is pronounced as though it were written kyé, and tó (water) as though written twó.

Due to the nature of the gh sound, it practically resolves itself into a w when followed by o. Thus tálághosh (soap) could be written táláwosh, yishghoł (I'm running) as yishwoł etc.

k and h can also be pronounced as kw and hw before e, i, in which case the combination is a distinct phoneme. In such cases the w must be written. Thus kwe'é (here), kwii (here), hwii (satisfaction) etc.

tone

The present system of writing Navaho employs only one diacritical to express four tonal variations. This is the acute accent mark (´). If a short vowel or n, both elements of a long vowel, or a diphthong are marked thus the tone indicated is high. If only the first element of a long vowel or diphthong is marked the tone is falling from high, and if only the last element is marked the tone is rising from low. When a vowel, diphthong or n is unmarked the tone is low. The difference between low and high tone in Navaho is similar to the difference in tone of "are you" and "going" in the English question "are you going?"

'azee'	(medicine)	low tone
'azéé'	(mouth)	high tone
háadish?	(where)	falling tone
shínaaí	(my elder brother)	rising tone

WORD AND SENTENCE STRUCTURE

Teachers will note that the possessive pronouns of Navaho are always prefixed to the noun. Thus, we have shimá (my mother), nimá (your mother), bimá

(his mother), but never má. The stem -má has no independent form and never occurs without a prefix.

The structure of the Navaho verb has similar characteristics, but is more complex. The subject of the sentence is always incorporated in the verb with a pronominal form, and other verbal elements. Ideas of time and mode are likewise incorporated in the verb, and auxiliary verbs such as will, did, have, might, etc. do not occur in Navaho. The ideas conveyed by these independent words in English are expressed by different forms of the verb itself in Navaho.

Another point in which Navaho sentence structure differs from English is the English prepositions are postpositions in Navaho.

with my elder sister	shádí bił (my elder sister, with her)
for my mother	shimá bá (my mother for her)

Whereas normal word order in English is subject, verb, and object, Navaho has subject, object, and verb.