

## REVIEW

### *THE ALUTIIQ ORTHOGRAPHY: KODIAK DIALECT*

*April G. L. Counciller and Jeff Leer, 2012. Anchorage, AK: Alutiiq Heritage Foundation.*

*Paper and ebook, 98 pages, photos, maps, tables, appendices, index. ISBN 978-1-929650-09-5. Available for free download at <http://www.alutiiqmuseum.org>.*

#### Reviewed by Anna Berge

Alaska Native Language Center, P.O. Box 757680, University of Alaska Fairbanks, Fairbanks, AK 99775; [amberge@alaska.edu](mailto:amberge@alaska.edu)

The *Alutiiq Orthography* provides a detailed explanation of the orthographic conventions and rules for the representation of the Alutiiq language, a Yupik language spoken in the central gulf coast of Alaska. The creation of the orthography has taken a number of decades and undergone several incarnations. Rapid language shift to English during this time has resulted in a steady decline in the knowledge of language features that might otherwise be taken for granted when teaching literacy. The need for a definitive orthography together with an accompanying explanation of the orthography is therefore critical. This book clearly fulfills this need.

To understand the importance of this book, as well as decisions made in the development of the orthography, it is necessary to understand the history of literacy development and language endangerment in Alaska. Orthographies for a number of Alaska languages, including Alutiiq, were variously developed by missionaries, ethnographers, linguists, and explorers, although few of these had widespread and lasting effects. From the 1960s, collaborative work between the Alaska Native Language Center and speaker communities resulted in the development of orthographies for most of the Alaska Native languages, including the Yupik languages. Several considerations played an important role in these orthographies. The avoidance of special characters was driven by the relative ease with which characters could be typed. Orthographies were created to reflect morphophonological rules, resulting in a level of detail not always consistently found in writing systems; thus, the use of the

apostrophe to reflect syllable structure or gemination, or the representation of morphophonologically dependent changes in vowel length (cf. the underspecification of the pronunciation of the English plural morpheme *-s*, sometimes written *-s* and sometimes *-es* but never written *-z*). In addition, Yupik languages have particularly complex prosodic systems. Of these, Alutiiq prosody is the most complex. In much the same way that the representation of tone has been problematic in certain tonal languages, prosody has represented a challenge for Yupik writing systems. Alutiiq orthography encodes prosodic information that affects pronunciation through conventions such as the apostrophe (cf. Russian orthography, with encoding such as accent marks used for beginning language learners only).

The development of the Alutiiq orthography has taken place within this context. From the early 1970s, there have been several versions of the orthography, reflecting pronunciation changes resulting from rapid language change, a growing understanding of the intricacies of the phonological and prosodic systems, and a shift in technology from the typewriter to the computer. The current orthography represents years of work involving the active participation of elders, language teachers, language learners, and linguists. It has involved consensus on difficult issues. For example, orthographic conventions are often based on one particular dialect of a language; the attempt here is to create an orthography that is adaptable yet consistent—hence references to, for example, similarities or differences of Kodiak Alutiiq with the Chugach dialect.

The consensus on the orthography and the acceptance thereof is vital since the Alutiiq language is currently severely endangered, with fewer than fifty first language speakers of the Kodiak dialect, many of whom are elderly. Lack of speakers, teacher training, and language learning materials are all challenges to language revitalization efforts; the latter two are greatly improved by an established literacy program. This book, therefore, is prepared primarily for the combination of audiences most directly engaged in language revitalization, namely language teachers in training and language learners, and secondarily for non-community members such as linguists or other interested readers. Previous experience in teaching the language has highlighted areas of difficulty, and this has guided the development and presentation of the material in the *Alutiiq Orthography*, particularly in the explanation of syllable structure and prosody.

After a brief introduction explaining some of the principles guiding the development of the Alutiiq orthography, the participants, the intended users and uses, and some notes on dialect variation, the book is organized in somewhat self-contained chapters with copious references to other chapters as needed; these in turn are grouped in three parts, each of which builds on the previous part. Part I focuses on the alphabet and the sound system. Part II focuses on the complexities of syllabification in Alutiiq, including complications resulting from morphophonological processes such as the gemination or the dropping of sounds, and the orthographic choices made for representing these processes. Part III guides the learner through the processes needed to determine the proper prosodic reading of a word and explains the use of the nonalphabetic symbols, the apostrophe and hyphen. Part III also contains discussions of decisions made regarding the representation of Russian and English loanwords, a summary of the changes between this and previous recent orthographies of Alutiiq,

and a summary of the rules discussed in the book. There are several helpful appendices, a glossary, and an index.

The book is well organized, with copious examples, excellent references to other sections, helpful chapter summaries, and useful charts of older orthographies, and it is for the most part very readable. It could be improved by more clearly identifying the readership for which it is prepared. The authors state that it is primarily for people with linguistic training or with exposure to the language; however, these are often two very different groups of people with very different needs. Linguistic terminology is unevenly defined and less precise than needed for a linguist, while often unnecessarily technical for non-linguists. Likewise, expanding the discussion of dialectal differences within Alutiiq and Kodiak Alutiiq that are specifically relevant to the orthographical conventions would be helpful.

The purpose of the book is to introduce a standard Alutiiq orthography to encourage literacy and language learning; the book should prove invaluable in these efforts. Adhering to standard orthography is good for learners and teachers and helps in creating a common base of understanding of materials. The authors worry about unintentional or undesirable spelling changes, but such changes are bound to happen, as they also point out. Languages change naturally, eventually leading to opacity within the orthographic system (e.g., English). But no orthographic system is without its complications (e.g., the representation of Russian loans in Alutiiq) and difficult orthographies can be learned (e.g., Japanese). Eventually, orthographies can be successfully changed to reflect more modern language use when necessary, as happened in Inuktitut and Greenlandic. For now, the Alutiiq orthography seems ready for use, and *The Alutiiq Orthography* provides the necessary tools to use it. Kudos to all those involved.