

# The Tanacross Alphabet

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The Tanacross language is written with the same basic alphabet used to write English, though with a few additions, and some English letters are not used. Tanacross words and text in these stories use the same alphabet and writing conventions developed by the Yukon Native Language Centre in Whitehorse, Yukon Territory, Canada, and used in language learning publications by the Yukon Native Language Centre and the Alaska Native Language Center since 1994. A slightly different alphabet was used for educational material and stories published between 1973 and 1983.

The following presents a brief overview of the spelling system used for writing the Tanacross language. For more details, the interested reader should consult the *Tanacross Learners' Dictionary* (Arnold et al. 2009), in which much of the following material appeared in a similar form, or *Tanacross Phrases and Conversation* (Arnold et al. 2003).

## The Tanacross Alphabet

The alphabet uses 50 different letters or letter groups to write Tanacross language. Putting these into an alphabetical order along the lines of the English alphabet, we get: ', a, ạ, ch, ch', d, ddh, dh, dl, dz, e, ẹ, ee, ẹẹ, g, gh, h, i, ị, j, k, l, ḷ, ḷ̣, m, n, nh, o, s, s, sh, sḥ, t, t', th, th, tl, tl', tth, tth', ts, ts', u, ụ, w, x, x, y, yh, z.

Sounds that are different from the English values are discussed below. The apostrophe, ', is not a punctuation mark in Tanacross; rather, it is a letter and also can

appear as part of a group of letters used to represent one sound.

The letter **w** is used in writing Tanacross, but it is not pronounced. It is used when a word “really” begins with a **u**. Usually, words written with **u** (or any vowel) as the first letter really start with an apostrophe, ’, but to make reading easier the apostrophe is not written at the start of a word.

## **Punctuation**

Most punctuation is used as in English writing. However, in Tanacross the apostrophe is not a punctuation mark, but rather is a letter or part of letter group.

The hyphen, a short dash, -, is used to clarify just which sounds are represented. Most often it is used to separate the apostrophe from the letters **k** or **t** where there could be confusion as to which sound is meant. So in *nek-’eh* ‘I see it’ there is no confusion as to whether it is **k** or **k’**. The hyphen is also used to make clear the intended sounds, even if, technically, it could not be confused with anything else. So, in *dat-sey* ‘it is black’, the hyphen is used to make clear that the sound is **t** followed by **s** and not the sound **ts**. In *xanet-tseth* ‘liquid comes out’ the hyphen is used to make reading the two **t**’s clear. In these texts, when Ellen drew out the pronunciation of a word for emphasis, this is indicated with ... an ellipsis.

## **Pronouncing Tanacross**

The following section gives a short description of the sounds of Tanacross. However, it is far better to hear the

sounds and if possible see speakers making the sounds. Audio recordings of many Tanacross words and sentences can be found on the World Wide Web at <http://www.uaf.edu/anlc/tanacross>.

Video recordings of all the sounds of Tanacross and audio recordings contrasting similar sounds are found on the “Tanacross Sounds System” (Arnold et al., forthcoming), a multimedia CD published by the Alaska Native Language Center.

## **Consonants**

Tanacross has a large number of consonant sounds, many of which are not used in English.

### ***Sounds that are pronounced much as in English:***

**ch** as in choke (never as in chute)

**d** as in den

**h** as in hen

**j** as in jay

**l** as in look

**n** as in now

**m** as in men

**s** as in son

**sh** as in shot

**t** as in too

**th** as in thin but not as in this or that

**y** as in yell

**z** as in zoo

***Sounds that occur in English but not at the beginning of English words:***

**dl** as in padlock when pronounced as pa-dlock

**dz** as in adze or or the ds in lads

**mb** as in ambush

**nd** as in bandage

**ts** as in cats

***Sounds that occur in English but that are spelled differently in Tanacross:***

**dh** as the first sound in ‘this’

***Sounds that do not occur in English:***

**tth** and **ddh** — The sound written **tth** is found in a few words in English: it is the last sounds in careful pronunciation of “eighth”, as if it were spelled eight-th. The sound **ddh** has slightly different pronunciations depending on whether it is at the start or end of a syllable. At the start of a syllable, **ddh** is similar to **tth** except that **ddh** lacks the puff of air that follows **tth**. At the end of a syllable, **ddh** is pronounced with the vocal cords vibrating.

**ɭ** and **tl** — The sound spelled **ɭ** is called “barred l” or “Indian l”. This sound is made with the tongue in the same place as **l**. Unlike **l**, however, this sound is made without the vocal cords vibrating and is made with friction, so it sounds a bit rough. The sound written **tl** is actually pronounced as **tɭ** but for easier writing the **l** is substituted for the **ɭ**.

**nh** and **yh** — The sounds spelled **nh** and **yh** are pronounced **n** and **y** but without the vocal cords vibrating.

**k** and **g** — The sounds spelled **k** and **g** are pro-

nounced differently depending on whether the sound is at the beginning or end of a syllable. At the beginning of a syllable, these sounds are pronounced with considerable friction, so that they sound rough or raspy. At the end of syllables, **k** and **g** do not have a raspy quality and sound much as they do in English, like the **k** in Luke and **g** in rug. Note that in Tanacross **g** is never pronounced as in the English name George. That sound is written in Tanacross letter **j**.

**x** and **gh** — The sounds spelled **x** and **gh** are made with the tongue in almost the same place as for the **k** and **g** sounds but just a little below the roof of the mouth. Without the vocal cords vibrating at the same time, this sound is Tanacross **x**. With the vocal cords vibrating, this sound is Tanacross **gh**. In these stories, we also write a particular **x** sound as **xʷ**. This was historically a sound separate from **x**; Ellen Demit was one of the last speakers of Tanacross to have this pronunciation, which is quite distinctive. It is produced as **x** but with the lips rounded.

**' (apostrophe)** — The apostrophe **'** is a “catch in the breath”. Although it is not spelled in English as a separate letter, it is common in the spoken language, for example in uh-oh and co-ed, where the dash shows the “catch”. This is an important sound in Tanacross and is needed for proper pronunciation. However, the spelling can be confusing at first because the apostrophe is also used in conjunction with other letters to indicate the glottalized sounds described below.

## Glottalized sounds

Tanacross, and all Athabascan languages, have a number of sounds that are made in a slightly different way than any English sounds. These sounds are called glottalized because these sounds are made while holding the vocal cords tightly together, and are often accompanied by a “popping noise”. In Tanacross, these sounds are spelled **t’**, **tl’**, **ts’**, **tth’**, **ch’**, and **k’**. Each of these stands for one sound and is not a letter followed by a catch in the breath. These sounds are separate from the related sounds that are written without the apostrophe. Consider these two Tanacross words: *chox* ‘big’ and *ch’ox* ‘quills’. The only difference in the sound of these words is that one starts with **ch** and the other starts with **ch’**.

## Underscored Letters

A group of sounds distinct to eastern Interior Alaskan Athabascan languages is the set spelled with an underline: **th**, **ɬ**, **s**, **sh**, and **x**. For all these sounds, the underline shows that the sound starts without the vocal cords vibrating and ends with the vocal cords vibrating. Most of these sounds are partway between two other sounds found in Tanacross language:

**th** starts as **th** and ends as **dh**

**s** starts as **s** and ends as **z**

**x** starts as **x** and ends as **gh**

**ɬ** starts as **ɬ** and ends as **ɬ** except that the friction continues so the entire sound is rough.

**sh** is a little different, because no sound in Tanacross could be described as “**sh** except with your vocal cords

vibrating”. But the idea is the same: **sh** starts without the vocal cords vibrating and finishes with vibration. In older versions of the Tanacross writing system, this sound was spelled *shy*, and this is a good approximation of the pronunciation. The **sh** sound corresponds to a **y** sound in many other Athabascan languages, including the nearby languages Ahtna and Lower Tanana.

## mb and nd

The sounds spelled **mb** and **nd** can occur as single sounds in Tanacross. Most Tanacross speakers use just one sound made with the lips closed together, which is written with **m** and is very similar to the English sound, as in *mat*. At Healy Lake, speakers have **m** in some words and **b** in others; this can be seen in Ellen’s stories. Some Tanacross speakers also have two “closed lip” sounds, **m** and also a pronunciation that is an “in-between sound” that starts as **m** and ends as **b**. The **nd** sound may be pronounced as **nd**, **n**, or **d**. This sound corresponds with an **n-** sound in Ahtna and Lower Tanana.

## Vowels

The vowels of Tanacross are similar to those of English, except that Tanacross has nasalized vowels as well as oral vowels.

## Oral Vowels

English uses many combinations of letters to write the sound of vowels. Tanacross spelling is much simpler because the same letter is used for the same sound.

Letter **u** is pronounced as the **oo** in boo said with emphasis.

Letter **a** is pronounced as the **a** in father or the **o** in hot.

Letter **o** is pronounced as the **oa** in coat or the **o** in robe.

Letter **i** is usually pronounced as the **i** in police or the **ee** in heed but in some cases is pronounced as the **i** in hit.

Letter **ee** is pronounced a little differently from the similar English sound in hay or bait. Say the word *hay* slowly. Notice that as you pronounce the sound spelled **ay**, your tongue moves a bit and the sound changes. In order to make the correct Tanacross sound, hold your tongue in the same position as you say the **a** sound in hay. Although this seems like a small difference, it is quite noticeable to Tanacross speakers.

Letter **e** has the most variable pronunciation of any Tanacross vowel, with noticeable differences between the Mansfield and Healy Lake dialects. In Mansfield dialect this sound is most typically pronounced like the **e** in let; in Healy Lake, this sound may be as in Mansfield, but it is commonly heard as the same sound as the **a** in sofa.

Vowels can be also written double. Except for **e** and **ee**, which are used for different sounds, the double letters are pronounced the same as the single letter, just for a longer time. So **a** and **aa** sound the same, but **aa** is said for a longer time than **a**. This difference can slightly change the meaning of words.

### **Nasalized Vowels**

All of the vowels except **o** are sometimes written with a

little hook beneath the letter. This hook shows that the sound is pronounced with air coming out your nose as well as out your mouth, hence the term *nasalized*, meaning ‘through the nose’. These nasalized vowels are separate from the regular versions of these sounds. For example, *wukéy* ‘her husband’ and *wuké* ‘his or her foot’ are very similar except for the difference between **e** and **ɛ**.

### **Tone**

Another way in which Tanacross differs from English is that the pitch of the voice can vary syllable by syllable. English uses pitch changes too, but pitch changes are used for emphasis or spread over a word or more, depending on the meaning of the sentence. In short, English words do not have to be produced with a particular pitch. However, syllables of Tanacross words have a pitch that is used regardless of sentence meaning. This syllable-by-syllable variation of pitch that is part of the pronunciation of a word is called ‘tone’. When put together in words and sentences, this is sometimes referred as a “tune” or “melody” and is essential for fluent pronunciation.

In the text here we have decided not to write tone marks. This was done primarily because the editors were sometimes unable to determine the appropriate tone on each syllable. We could have marked the tones as would be appropriate in Mansfield dialect, but this may not have been true for Ellen Demit as she told these stories. However, there is no doubt that Ellen Demit used a tone system quite similar to that in the better-documented Mansfield dialect.