



Sounds & writing

1st annual Yokuts, Miwok, Mono Conference

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Why write our languages?

- Writing can help us preserve language and communicate across distance (e.g. texting)
- Helps learners to keep a record of what they learn (note-taking)

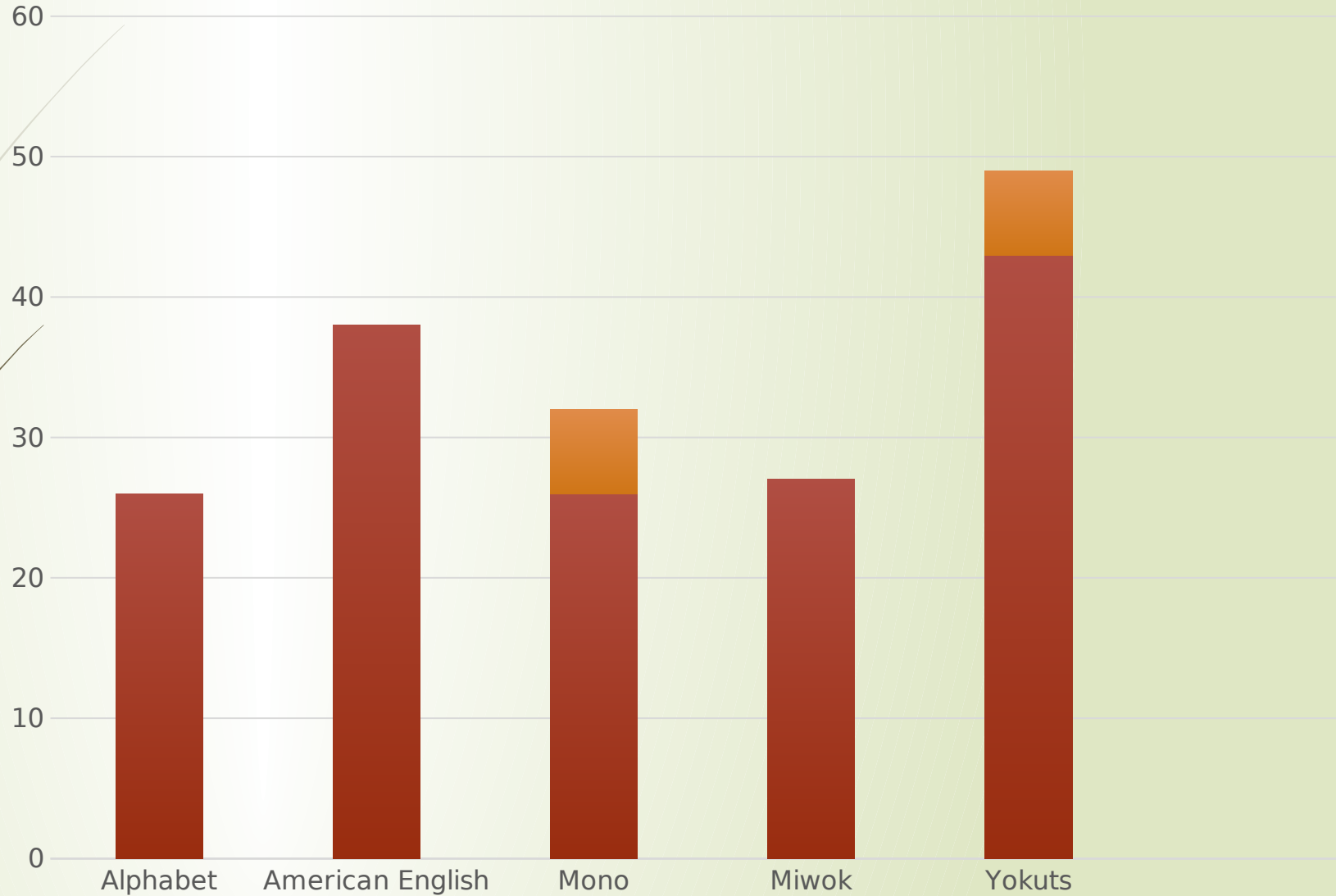


Why is writing these languages hard?

- Different languages have different sets of sounds – we can't just adapt one spelling to any language.
 - The English alphabet has 26 letters.
 - American English has about 38 sounds.
 - Miwok languages have about 27 sounds.
 - Mono languages have about 26-32 sounds.
 - Yokuts languages have about 43-49 sounds.

See handout for sources and more detailed information.

Why is writing these languages hard?



Two approaches to writing

- Using linguistic writing systems can be intimidating.
 - Seeing a lot of š, č, ł, λ, or weird accents floating around is scary.
 - It's hard to learn new letters and a new language at the same time.
 - It takes some work to type these on a phone or computer.
- Adapting English spelling to YMM languages is hard because English is very irregular.
 - E.g. We use two letters, "sh", to represent the "sh" sound.
 - But sometimes, "sh" is not pronounced that way: dishonor
 - Sometimes, that "sh" sound is written another way: sugar, chandelier, nation



Phonemic spelling

- In phonemic writing systems, one symbol always represents one sound.
- It's easy to pronounce new words, once you learn the system.
- This consistency is good for learners.
- It can be a crutch if learners rely on reading instead of memory.



English-derived spelling

- If you reference English spelling for a Native language, it can be misleading or inconsistent:
- For example, if I say “It’s pronounced like ‘s’ in English”:
 - Is it like the ‘s’ in ‘sit’? (typical ‘s’ sound)
 - Is it like the ‘s’ in ‘sugar’? (more like a ‘sh’ sound)
 - Is it like the ‘s’ in ‘vision’? (more like a ‘zh’ sound)
 - Is it like the ‘s’ in ‘because’? (more like a ‘z’ sound)
 - Is it like the ‘s’ in ‘island’? (silent)



English-derived spelling

- If I see an “**e**” at the end of a word, is it pronounced like **cafe** or like **chafe**?
- If I see an “**h**” at the end of a word, is it pronounced or silent?
- If I see “**ee**”, is it pronounced like **matinee** or **marquee**?
- If I see “**oo**”, is it pronounced like **food** or **good**?

- We can handle this variation in English spelling because we know the language – the spelling just reminds us of a word we already know. We aren’t usually sounding out the pronunciation when we read.



What to do?

- Don't worry too much about spelling!
 - Writing is just a **tool**. Speaking **is** the language.
- Having multiple spelling systems can be fine!
 - because - bcuz (standard / slang)
 - doughnut - donut (UK / US)
 - jewellery - jewelry
 - kerb - curb
- The key is not to get stuck on spelling.
- The better you know how to speak the language, the easier it is to write it.



Teaching pronunciation

- Have a good pronunciation guide
- Choose example words that are simple
- Teach contrasts
- Lots of practice!



Pronunciation guide

- ▮ Whatever kind of writing system you use, try to be consistent and thorough.
- ▮ If you have a pronunciation guide, go through a sample of words to check if you're missing something.
 - ▮ Be careful with “y”, “h”, “c” vs “k”
- ▮ Include double-letter sounds in your alphabet guide:
 - ▮ E.g. “sh”, “ch”, and any vowel combinations. (“eu”, “ay”)
- ▮ Include sounds that seem obvious, like “m”.
- ▮ If you find something isn't pronounced like the guide says, maybe it needs to be written differently.

Choose words that are simple

□ Choose a word that is short.

Mono: mook-shu-now-wee, “smile”

Mono: mee, “immediate, now”

Miwok: kénheṭija·ky-, “eleven”

Miwok: ṭís·y-, “hand”

Yokuts: p’axaanit’a, “scaring”

Yokuts: xot, “rain”



Mono words from Big Sandy Western Mono Language & Word List (2019)

Miwok words from Central Sierra Miwok Dictionary, Freeland & Broadbent (1960)

Yokuts words from Wukchumni, courtesy of Crystal Ruiz

Choose example words that are simple

- When you are teaching a new sound, choose a word where only that one sound is difficult – helps keep focus on it.

Mono: tzeu-kweu-dop, “fast”

Mono: tzow, “good”

Miwok: šá· čawi-, “screech owl”

Miwok: šawá·- “rock, stone”

Yokuts: xuyi, “return”

Yokuts: t'i, “rabbit”



Choose example words that are simple

- Choose a word that is easy to explain the meaning.

Mono: pu-dee-ee-theu, “coming out”
(like when snakes come out or water comes out of a bottle when it pours)

Mono: meu-ya, “gopher”

Miwok: hóŋ-ot-u-, “to kneel, preparatory to sitting on the floor”

Miwok: hóŋ-u-, “egg”

Yokuts: p'it' wihda'a, “weaver – the piece you move when making a coil basket”

Yokuts: dauwiht', “run”





Give a variety of examples

- When you teach a sound, give examples of it in different places in a word:

For example, Wukchumni “ih”:

- Starting a word: iht’edad, “hungry”
- In the middle: nihm, “my”
- At the end: trih, “house”



Teach contrasts

- If I say a word (“bat”) 10 times, each time might be a little different.
- But I know to avoid confusing it with similar sounds, so I won’t say “pat”, “bad”, “batch”, “at”, “bet”, “ban”, “mat”, etc.



Teach contrasts

- Instead of focusing on having learners repeat sounds perfectly, try to get them to make a distinction between similar sounds in your language.
- (examples) x vs. h, t' vs. t
- Wukchumni: na'at, "older sister"
no'ot, "younger sister"



Teach contrasts

- Humor helps! Everyone knows examples where a slight change in pronunciation gives you a very different meaning.
Use this!

Higher level pronunciation

- Break down long words into pieces.
- Try going forwards and backwards through them.
- Emphasize where the stress is.
- Wukchumni is using pronunciation blocks:

T'oiyono (night)	t'oi	yo	no
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Higher level pronunciation

- Try having students say a phrase with different emotions:
- “duishi na biholihsh.” (“I ate beans.”, Wukchumni)
- Sad
- Happy
- Angry



Practice a lot

- Games are a great way to get learners to practice saying words in the language.
- Games help keep learners engaged in the language.
- Competition encourages people to try their best.




Game: Find the first letter

- Get students to practice listening -- students hear a word in the language, and have to identify what letter it starts with.
- They can do this by running up to the board to point at where all the letters are written, or holding up a card with the letter on it, or moving to one side of the room (designated as a specific sound).
- The game can be made more challenging by making students write the letter themselves, or write the whole word they hear.
- (demo:)



Game: Telephone

- Get students to practice pronunciation by repeating a word to another student. They need to say it right for the other student to understand and pass it on correctly.
- (Demo:)



Game: Write English with your alphabet

- Have the students practice thinking about sounds by asking them to write English words in the language.
- (Demo:) e.g. “cow” becomes “kau” in Wukchumni



Game: Readers and writers

- Practice reading, speaking, listening, and writing all at once. Prepare a list of words or sentences and put them on a paper outside the classroom, or away from the students.
- Students work in pairs: one reader and one writer.
- The reader goes to the paper to read the words or sentences written there. They remember those and go back and tell them to the writer. The writer writes down what they hear. Whoever is first to have written down all the words or sentences correctly, is the winner. Switch roles.
- (demo:)



Thank you!

▣ Special thanks to:

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References

- ▮ Freeland, L.S. & Silvia Broadbent. 1960. *Central Sierra Miwok Dictionary with Texts*.
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