

## Native American Fonts and Tribal Sovereignty

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When I was contracted by the Tulalip Tribes of Washington state to design a font for the Lushootseed language, my brief was simple: design a proprietary font for the language teachers, especially those working with tribal youth. The contract came to me on the heels of the financial meltdown of 2008 and had been stripped down to one weight and style, so at first I questioned the need for a proprietary font which would increase the design fee.

As this project has made clear, I had a lot to learn. The explanation was that any communication set in the font might be understood to emanate from the Tulalip Tribes, and that they therefore needed to control who used it. Not a single glyph had been designed yet, but this opinion proved to be prescient because the font ultimately became a branding tool and remains closely identified with the Tulalip Tribes even after becoming available as a free download to other tribes.

Lushootseed had been spoken for thousands of years in the Puget Sound region before a linguist at the University of Washington, Thomas Hess, and a native speaker from the Upper Skagit tribe, Vi Hilbert, created a written script in the 1960s. Like other scripts devised in the last half-century for indigenous languages with solely an oral tradition, the Lushootseed alphabet consists of latin letters, diacritical marks, small raised letter-modifiers, and glyphs from the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). This stew of letters lacks the evenly interwoven texture that is the hallmark of beautiful latin typography. Of course in the formidable task of understanding the syntax and devising an alphabet for a language well on the path to extinction, aesthetics was not a priority.

The font I was to replace was a version of Times Roman with Lushootseed characters added, but without proper unicode encoding. It could not be used on websites as text, and documents created with it were unreadable in other fonts. Type-set in this font, Lushootseed resembled mathematical or chemical formulas—a rather intimidating script that accurately represented all the phonemes of the language but poorly represented the beauty of its spoken word [fig. 1].

ʔalʔal ʔə tsi kʷiçkʷiçlaʔadxʷ  
yəhʊtub ʔə tsi hayalçəʔ (Harriette Shelton Dover)  
ʔayʷwaʔstəb dxʷʔal dxʷləʔucid  
ʔə tsi taqʷʂəblu

ʔal tudiʔ tuhaʔkʷ tuʔabsʔalʔaltub ʔə ti ʂəq siʔab kʷi bəçkʷ ʔal tiʔəʔ swatixʷtəd.  
tuʂuʔ dxʷgʷəd gʷəl tuʂuucəxʷ -- ʔah tiʔiʔ çičkəd ʔəʂʔitut bəçkʷ çad. xʷiʔ həwə  
gʷəʔalʔals.

hay tuʔəçəxʷ tiʔəʔ ʂaʔʂaʔ. gʷəl ʔal tiʔəʔ sʔəççs, sʔibəçs, çičkʷ ʔuləç tiʔəʔ swatixʷtəd. xʷiʔ  
kʷi gʷat gʷəʔudxʷʂuʔusəd. hiqab ʔəsləç ʔal tiʔiʔ sʔuʔibəçs tulʔxʷulʔgʷədxʷ. lçil. huy gʷi  
hidəxʷ tiʔəʔ bəçkʷidup çičkəd, bəçkʷ tiʔəʔ çuʔsaqʷ.

"ʔəçəʔ ʔi! ʔəçə, qawqs, kaʔkaʔ, həbuʔ, sbəçʷaʔ, yəçʷəlaʔ, kaykay, buʔqʷ, xʷpəçəʔə, ç  
sçəçqiq, sxʷət, ʔəʔiʔad, kiyuuqs, sgʷəlub, təkʷtəkʷəlus, sçəçəçkʷ. ʔəçə ʔi!  
ʔuʂuʔtubutəd çəd ʔəççal kʷi ʔadshuyud t(i) adʔalʔalʔal."

hay, ʔəçəxʷ əlgʷəʔ, ʔəxʷshaydxʷəb. gʷədil gʷəl ləqəladiʔəb ʔə kʷi haʔt. bəçkʷ -- çʷulʔ  
tsiʔəʔ diiču. tsiʔəʔ diičuʔ gʷəl çʷulʔ ʔiʔgʷadadgʷaad. çuqəldub ʔə tiʔiʔ ʔiççəçs, gʷəl çʷulʔ  
çucut. "ʔu, ʔəççəçid əwə kʷi gʷəççəçləqəladiʔəb. ʔəshaydub ʔə kʷi diʔ gʷat  
ʔəççal kʷi gʷəçshuyuds kʷi ʔalʔals."

yayusəxʷ tiʔəʔ bəçkʷ, qʷibidəxʷ tiʔəʔ ʔudəxʷʔəççəççils.

Figure 1. Lushootseed text typeset in a version of Times Roman.

The mission of the Tulalip Lushootseed Department is to return the language to everyday use in order to preserve traditional teachings formerly passed on through story telling, and, as is the case with all languages, embedded in the lexicon. Instruction begins in preschool. At this writing, there is instruction available locally at all education levels except middle school. The survival of the language rests on the willingness of children to embrace it as a second language at an early age, and an unattractive font that impedes that desire is no small obstacle.

Lushootseed is full of sounds that mimic the natural whisperings and consonantal crackling of the cedar forests and gentle shorelines of Puget Sound. Anyone who has camped in this corner of the country will recognize the indigenous sound of Lushootseed. To honor the beauty of the language and create a font that would invite young learners to decode its mysteries, I determined to design letterforms that came from traditional shapes in Salish art. My goal was to make the script look indigenous—part of the aesthetic tradition of the original inhabitants, instead of a stepchild of the immigrant culture that overtook them.

My task was made easier by a contemporaneous exhibit of Salish arts at the Seattle Art Museum, curated by Barbara Brotherton. From studying the artifacts and works of art [fig. 2] in *S'abedeb/The Gifts: Pacific Coast Salish Art and Artists*, I de-

terminated to use a broad circle for my curved letters and slightly curved edges for my vertical strokes. Intersections on crossing strokes were rounded off. The digital glyphs were designed as if the medium was wood rather than metal. Special attention was given to the texture that the characters created in a longer text setting. The font was made into wood type after the fact by the Hamilton Wood Type & Printing Museum, in time for use in the 2010 Lushootseed Summer Language Camp for children [fig. 3, fig. 4].



Figure 2. Salish art objects exhibited at Seattle Art Museum in 2008. Clockwise from left: Housepost of Tsimalano (©University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology); Cowichan Spindle Whorl, (© Trustees of the British Museum); figure collected in 1792 from Puget Sound (© Trustees of the British Museum).



Figure 3. Broadsheet printed with Lushootseed wood type at Tulalip summer language camp. (Courtesy of Tulalip Lushootseed Department. Photo: Dave Sienko.)

ʔalʔal ʔə tsi kʷiçkʷiçlaʔadxʷ  
 yəhutub ʔə tsi hayalčə? (Harriette Shelton Dover)  
 ʔəywaʔstəb dxʷʔal dxʷləšucid  
 ʔə tsi taqʷšəblu

ʔal tudiʔ tuhaʔkʷ tuʔabsʔalʔaltub ʔə ti šəq siʔab kʷi bəkʷ ʔal  
 tiʔəʔ swatixʷtəd. tušut dxʷgʷəd gʷəl tušuučəxʷ—ʔah tiʔiʔ čičikəd  
 ʔəsʔitut bəkʷ čad. xʷiʔ həwə gʷwʔalʔals.

hay tuʔəʔəxʷ tiʔəʔ xəʔxəʔ. gʷəl ʔal tiʔəʔ sʔəʔs, sʔibəšs, ciclkʷ  
 ʔuləxʷ tiʔəʔ swatixʷtəd. xʷiʔ kʷi gʷat gʷəʔudxʷšulʔusəd. hiqab  
 ʔəsləxʷ ʔal tiʔiʔ sʔuʔibəšs tulʔqʷulʔgʷədxʷ. lčil. huy gʷi hidəxʷ  
 tiʔəʔ bəkʷidup čičikəd, bəkʷidup čičikəd, bəkʷ tiʔəʔ ʔuʔsaqʷ.

“ʔəʔəʔ lʔi! ʔəʔə, qawqs, kaʔkaʔ, həbuʔ, sbəqʷaʔ, yəʔəlaʔ,  
 kaʔkaʔ, buʔqʷ, xʷpəčəʔəʔ, skʷəqʷiq, sxʷət, ʔəʔiʔad, kiyuuqs,  
 sgʷəlub, təkʔəkəlus, sʔəʔəxʷ. ʔəʔə lʔi! ʔušutubutəd čəd ʔəsčal  
 kʷi ʔadshuyud t(i) adʔalʔalʔal.”

hay. ʔəʔəxʷ əlgʷəʔ, ʔəxʷshaydxʷəb. gʷədil gʷəl ləqəladiʔəb  
 ʔə kʷi haʔʔ. bəkʷ—xʷulʔ tsiʔəʔ diiču. tsiʔəʔ diičuʔ gʷəl xʷulʔ  
 ʔiʔgʷadagʷaad. ʔuqəldub ʔə tiʔiʔ ʔiışəds, gʷəl xʷulʔ ʔucut. “ʔu,  
 ʔəsʔəxid əwə kʷi gʷəxəxʷləqəladiʔəb. ʔəshaydub ʔə kʷi diʔ gʷat  
 ʔəsčal kʷi gʷəshuyuds kʷi gʷəshuyuds kʷi ʔalʔals.”

yayusəxʷ tiʔəʔ bəkʷ, qʷibidəxʷ tiʔəʔ ʔudəxʷʔəsʔəʔlils.

xʷulʔ tsiʔəʔ diičuʔ. ʔəsʔalabac. ʔəsbiʔicut. ʔəshuyalikʷ ʔə tiʔəʔ  
 šiqʷ ʔabsčičal. ʔəsʔadʔ ʔə tiʔəʔ haʔʔ gʷəl lədʔəlaʔadbid tiʔəʔəʔ,  
 lətətabəb.

yaʔʔ ʔuqəldub, “ʔub čəxʷ ʔuqʷibid t(i) adʔalʔalʔal.” xʷiʔ. xʷulʔ  
 ʔugʷagʷatxʷ tiʔiʔ ʔiışəds.

Figure 4. Identical text shown in figure 1, typeset in Lushootseed Sulad.

Lushootseed Sulad, as the font was named, was released in early 2009. Since then it has been used extensively on the tribal website, to produce educational aids for the language department, and in videos and brochures produced by the Tulalip Tribes. Its solid weight and simple shapes are designed to be easy for children to copy. (One complaint of the language teachers was that children laboriously copied the serifs in the Times-resembling font, too young to extrapolate the simple skeletons of the letters.) In 2011, Lushootseed Sulad was implemented in exhibition signage for the new Hibel Cultural Center at Tulalip. Currently there are plans to carve signs in wood identifying various facilities on the reservation, such as the salmon hatchery, in Lushootseed Sulad.

The earliest surprise in the implementation of the new font was its appearance on Tulalip Police vehicles [fig. 5]. This was its first use in branding, preceding even its widespread adoption by the language teachers. For a Native American tribe branding is a tool for reinforcing something far more vital than commercial property: tribal sovereignty. About 10 months prior to release of the font, a milestone agreement was reached between the Tulalip Police and outside law enforcement officials. Tulalip officers who met the training requirements were deputized by the Snohomish County sheriff, giving them the right to arrest non-Indians who commit crimes on the reservation. Previously suspects could only be detained for one hour while awaiting arrival of the county police to arrest them. In 2014, the Tulalip were one of three tribes in the nation granted the right by the Department of Justice in a federal pilot project to “exercise special criminal jurisdiction over certain crimes of domestic and dating violence, regardless of the defendant’s Indian or non-Indian status...”<sup>1</sup> Simply stated, tribal sovereignty is self-governance. It is a passionate issue among Native American tribes today and has profound implications for their quality of life.



Figure 5. Tulalip Police vehicle, photographed in 2009. (Courtesy of Dave Sienko.)

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.tulaliptribes-nsn.gov/Home/NewsArchive/SpecialCriminalJurisdictionFebruary62014.aspx>, sourced on February 1, 2018.

The federal government has a visual identity that symbolizes its legitimacy and reinforces recognition of its authority. So do states, counties, and many cities. To the extent that Lushootseed Sulad has helped the Tulalip Tribes to strengthen their visual identity, it has served the cause of expanding recognition of tribal sovereignty as well. This is less of an issue with tribes, such as the Cherokee, who employ a unique syllabary instead of the extended latin alphabet like Lushootseed. For other tribes like the Tulalip, pan-American typefaces such as those produced by Ross Mills ([tiro.com](http://tiro.com)), Christopher Harvey ([languagegeek.com](http://languagegeek.com)) and SIL ([sil.org](http://sil.org)), among others, offer a better tool for writing in blended English and Lushootseed since all the characters for both languages reside in the same font. As such, they support language revitalization, but they are not designed to support a culturally appropriate visual identity for the tribe. A bespoke font linked to the aesthetic heritage of the tribe can do that and, as such, become one paddle on the journey to tribal sovereignty.

Thank you to Dave Sienko, Tulalip Lushootseed Department, for his insightful updates.