

The Heiltsuk Alphabet, from **A Concise English – Heiltsuk Dictionary**, John Rath [1974]. Re-typed by Robyn Humchitt, HCEC 2019.

Note that transcriptions in the newer revised morpho-phonemic alphabet (on-line dictionary <https://.heiltsuk.arts.ubc.ca>) have been added next to the earlier transcriptions. For example, ananá becomes ḥnaná.

The Heiltsuk alphabet is much longer than the English alphabet, as can be seen from the survey to follow. Also, the Heiltsuk alphabet is based on the idea of always writing the same sound or sound complex in the same manner, whereas the pronunciation of English letters may vary from word to word.

Heiltsuk is a language with tones in the words. Therefore, when trying to pronounce a Heiltsuk word, always sing the melody of this word softly for yourself first. There is a high tone (indicated by a ´ over certain letters) and a low tone (indicated by the absence of any special mark over these letters). When you see a word such as wátásu (i.e. “you pull”) do ^{pom} ^{pom} _{pom} first. When you see wátasú (i.e. “somebody pulls”) do ^{pom} _{pom} ^{pom} first.

English Alphabet	Heiltsuk Alphabet (old spelling/new spelling)
a (sounds different in ‘m <u>a</u> n’, ‘f <u>a</u> ther’, and ‘M <u>a</u> dam’)	<p>á (with <u>high</u> tone, as in wá ‘river’ tá ‘to wadé’ pá ‘to split boards to lay a boardwalk’)</p> <p>a (with <u>low</u> tone, as in ananá/ ḥnaná ‘expression of pain or unpleasant surprise: Ouch! Hell!’ l<u>a</u>sá ‘to plant’)</p>

	<p>Keep in mind that the entire difference between the Heiltsuk word for ‘mussel’ (i.e. k^hvás) and the word for ‘to sit on the ground outside’ (i.e. k^hvas) is a matter of tone only.</p>
b	<p>b (as in bíka ‘to ignite, to light a fire (as with a match), to light a pipe’ buá ‘to flee, to fly from, to escape’)</p> <p>A Heiltsuk b is usually pronounced <u>without</u> a ‘buzz’ in the throat, and is in fact a soft p.</p>
c (sounds different in ‘c <u>e</u> n <u>t</u> re’, ‘c <u>e</u> ue’, ‘c <u>a</u> n’)	<p>c (as in cása ‘to pour or dump liquid out cúsa ‘dry, dried up, dried out, brittle’ ccxxstuá ‘to wipe the eyes’ cká ‘to rub clothes or cedar bark, to mix dough, to knead’</p> <p>A Heiltsuk c is not quite the same as an English t followed by an s. You can clearly hear this when you compare the beginning of the Heiltsuk word cása with the beginning of the Heiltsuk word tsá (i.e. to push)</p>
	<p>č (as in čála ‘tide, flow of the tide water, running of the tide water’ ččén/ččḥ ‘tidal rapids’)</p> <p>The mark ‘ ’ is called a ‘stop sign’ and indicates a ‘catch in the throat’ or stoppage of breath.</p>
d	<p>d (as in dása ‘to dive for something’ dála ‘money, dollar(s)’)</p>

	<p>A Heiltsuk d is usually pronounced without a ‘buzz’ in the throat and is actually a soft t.</p>
	<p>dh/λ (as in dhápa/lápa ‘to dig for cockles or clams’ dhá/lá ‘to wedge, to split with a wedge’</p> <p>The letter dh/λ stand for one sound that results from starting to say d but letting the breath escape between the <u>sides</u> of the tongue and the teeth</p>
<p>e (sounds different in ‘<u>bed</u>’ and ‘<u>father</u>’)</p>	<p>é (this letter is called ‘high tone carrier’ and occurs exclusively in the letter combinations él, ém, én)</p> <p>e (this letter is called ‘low tone carrier’ and occurs exclusively in the letter combinations el, em, en)</p> <p>The precise pronunciation of the letter combinations él, ém, én (that have high tone) and of the letter combinations el, em, en (that have low tone) <u>depends</u> on the sort of letter or letter combination that precedes. The details of this pronunciation can only be fully explained after the whole Heiltsuk alphabet has been presented. Here follow examples of how él, ém, én, el, em, en may vary.</p> <p>1) pélstu/pǐstu ‘thin and flat as e.g. a board’ tselsá/tsǐsá ‘to push with the hands over the ground outdoors’</p> <p>2) gélt/gǐt ‘long, tall’</p>

	<p>zígens/zígᅇs ‘chicken’</p> <p>3) xvélta/xvłta ‘to burn, be on fire; to burn something’</p> <p>kvels/kvłs ‘to lie on the ground outdoors said of animate beings’</p> <p>4) ǰvélzus/ǰvłzus ‘tomcod’</p> <p>ǰvel/ǰvł ‘seal fat, seal blubber’</p> <p>5) qélǰa/ qłǰa ‘to cut with scissors’</p> <p>ǰelstáut/qłstáut ‘to drop a hook in the water’</p>
f	
g (now pronounced as in ‘get’, now as in ‘George’)	<p>g (as in</p> <p>gála ‘to be first to do something, to be before or ahead of someone or something, in some respect; to do or be something first off (before anything else), for the first time, or as soon as something else happens’</p> <p>génca ‘how many?’</p> <p>glá ‘to go on all fours, to crawl (like a baby)’</p> <p>glútha/glúła ‘to rob, to steal’)</p> <p>A Heiltsuk g is always pronounced as the k in English ‘askew’, or the c in English ‘cue’. That is to say, a Heiltsuk g has a built-in y.</p>
	<p>gv (as in</p> <p>gvast ‘tear (from one’s eyes)’</p> <p>gvúgvı ‘leg, foot’)</p> <p>The two letters gv are used to write the <u>one</u> sound that results when you try to pronounce a Heiltsuk g while keeping the lips rounded as when whistling. You could</p>

	<p>also say that a Heiltsuk gv sounds as the underlined part of the English word ‘<u>quill</u>’</p> <p>ǵ (as in íǵás/ýíǵás ‘health resort, sanatorium’ ǵném/ǵnǵm ‘girl, woman, wife, daughter, to be female’ ǵánúth/ǵánúλ ‘night’ ǵátha/ǵáλa ‘to hook, gaff, crochet’)</p> <p>To pronounce ǵ do as follows when you are not a native speaker of Heiltsuk. Stick a pencil in your mouth and push the back of your tongue down, then try to pronounce a <u>Heiltsuk</u> g. This should produce a ǵ. Practice first with the pencil in the mouth, then without. Not that the mark ˇ is called ‘back sign’.</p>
	<p>ǵv (as in ǵválás ‘lizard’ ǵvísa ‘to cook smoked salmon without soaking first’)</p> <p>Try to say a Heiltsuk gv ‘with the pencil’. This should produce ǵv. Note that the letter v is called ‘rounding sign’ in Heiltsuk.</p> <p>The difference between gv and ǵv is not always easy to hear. Nevertheless, keep in mind the difference between dúǵváyú ‘trolling spoon’ (a word used in Bella Bella only, not in Klemtu) dúǵváyú ‘binoculars’</p>
h	h (pronounced softer than in English and <u>with</u> a buzz in the throat.)

<p>i (pronounced differently in ‘b<u>i</u>t’ and b<u>i</u>te’)</p>	<p>í (with high tone as in íta/ýíta ‘to row’ í/ýí ‘eeek, yecch!’ ímás/ýímás ‘cork of a net, buoy’)</p> <p>i (with low tone, as in iyúzua/ýúzua ‘flood, something flooded, when the plural form is used also: great flood, deluge’)</p> <p>Apart from the tones í and i always resemble the ee in the English word ‘deep’. If this seems unfamiliar, think of how you pronounce the English girl’s name ‘Mia’. Here the second letter is pronounced in the Heiltsuk manner indeed. In fact, when you pronounce the name ‘Mia’ with a Heiltsuk high tone at the end, you get the Heiltsuk word for ‘salmon’: ‘miá’.</p>
<p>j</p>	
<p>k</p>	<p>k (as in kabút ‘to roast something in the oven’)</p> <p>A Heiltsuk k resembles the first sound in the English word ‘keep’, but is pronounced with much emphasis. Remember: a Heiltsuk k (like a Heiltsuk g) has what you could call a ‘built-in’ y.</p>
	<p>ḳ (as in káta ‘to paint or write’)</p> <p>Like the č̣, the ḳ is a letter with a ‘catch in the throat’. It also has the ‘built-in’ y.</p>
	<p>kv (as in abúkv/ǰbúkv ‘mother’)</p>

	Try to pronounce a Heiltsuk k while rounding the lips when whistling. This will give a Heiltsuk kv.
	<p>ḱv (as in ḱvísa ‘to snow’ ḱvás ‘mussel’ ḱvas ‘to sit on the ground outside’)</p>
l	l can be pronounced with a ‘thick tongue’ or with a ‘thin tongue’, as one pleases.
	<p>ĺ (as in ĺǵém/ĺǵm ‘putty’ máwálas ‘Douglas fir’)</p> <p>The sound of ĺ is unknown in English. It is that of an l immediately preceded by a ‘catch in the throat’. If one wishes (but it does not make pleasant reading) the ĺ <u>can</u> be written as ’l. One <u>must</u> do this, however, when a capital letter is needed: ’L.</p>
	<p>lh/ł (as in álúlh/hálúł ‘new, fresh (as a supply of something)’ lhénta/łnta ‘to blow the nose’)</p> <p><u>Whisper</u> the English word ‘please’ hold the l for a while and press the tongue upward a bit, so that there is only a narrow opening at the sides of the tongue for the breath to escape through. This will produce the Heiltsuk lh/ł.</p>
m	m (as in mánás ‘prairie, flat country’)
	<p>m̄ (as in m̄énca/m̄nca ‘to measure’ m̄ánáka ‘to arrive simultaneously’)</p>

	Like ĭ, the ṁ begins with a ‘catch in the throat’. Can be written as ṁ if desired. Capital letter: Ṁ.
n	n (as in níka ‘to retaliate, to take revenge, to pay back for injustice done’)
o	
p	p (as in dápa ‘to tow’ pádhabu/pálabu ‘skiff’) A Heiltsuk p sounds as the English p in ‘pit’, ‘pack’, but is pronounced with still more emphasis. A Heiltsuk p has a built-in ‘h’, so to say.
	p̣ (as in pála ‘to work, to work on something, to do something, to fix (repair) something, workers, crew’) This letter again has the ‘catch in the throat’ as a built-in feature.
q (usually followed by the letter u. Notice well that an English qu as in ‘quick’ sounds exactly the same as a Heiltsuk gv!)	q (as in qqs ‘eyes’) The Heiltsuk q is an extremely harsh sound formed in the back of the mouth. Stick a pencil in your mouth, press the tongue down and try to say a Heiltsuk k. With the pencil deep enough in the mouth, a q should result.
	q̣ (as in q̣ápa ‘to hit a mark with a bullet, rock, spear, or arrow’)

	<p>The built in ‘catch in the throat’ is the only difference between a \acute{q} and \check{g}.</p>
	<p>qv (as in qvíqva ‘to work something (such as a post) back and forth in order to loosen it, to wriggle, wiggle, wrench something’ qvúná ‘thumb’)</p> <p>Try to say a Heiltsuk q while rounding the lips as when whistling. This should produce a qv.</p>
	<p>$\acute{q}v$ (as in $\acute{q}vása$ ‘to weep, to cry, to mourn’ $\acute{q}vas$ ‘to stand up right on the ground outside (said of a group of trees or people), grove of trees, group of timber, forest, jungle’)</p> <p>A $\acute{q}v$ is a $\check{g}v$ with a ‘catch in the throat’ as an extra feature. Example: In practice it is not easy to distinguish $\acute{q}v$ from $\acute{k}v$. It is therefore a good exercise to compare the pronunciation of $\acute{k}vas$ ‘to sit on the ground outside’ with that of $\acute{q}vas$ ‘forest, group of trees, group of persons’.</p>
r	
s	s (same as in English)
t	<p>t (as in tá ‘to wade’)</p> <p>The Heiltsuk t resembles the English t in ‘tack’, ‘tip’, but it is pronounced with still more emphasis. In other words, a Heiltsuk t has a built-in ‘h’.</p>
	<p>\acute{t} (as in $\acute{t}isem/\acute{t}is\text{m}$ ‘rock, stone, ore’)</p>

	<p>A \dot{t} is a Heiltsuk d with the ‘catch in the throat’ as a built-in feature.</p>
<p>th (as in ‘think’ or with a different pronunciation as in ‘father’)</p>	<p>th/λ (as in mátha/máλa ‘to shake hands’ thsá/λsá ‘slippery, smooth’)</p> <p>The letter th/λ stand for <u>one</u> sound that is formed in the same manner as dh/λ, except for the greater pressure, speed, and duration of the air stream between the sides of the tongue and the teeth. You could also say the a th/λ is a (<u>Heiltsuk</u>) t and a lh/t in one.</p>
	<p>\dot{t}h/$\dot{\lambda}$ (as in \dot{t}há/$\dot{\lambda}$á ‘black bear’ \dot{t}há\dot{t}há$\dot{\lambda}$a/$\dot{\lambda}$á$\dot{\lambda}$á$\dot{\lambda}$a ‘to hunt for black bear’)</p> <p>The \dot{t}h/$\dot{\lambda}$ is an extremely explosive sound. The tongue is in the same position as for the dh/λ or a th/λ, but this time you have to make a clicking sound at its sides.</p>
<p>u (pronounced differently in ‘but’, ‘fuel’, ‘full’)</p>	<p>ú (with <u>high</u> tone, as in ú\dot{t}á/\dot{w}ú\dot{t}a ‘to pierce’)</p>
	<p>u (with <u>low</u> tone, as in us/\dot{w}us ‘surface of the ground, soil’)</p> <p>Apart from the tone, ú and u resemble the oo in English ‘boot’, but are pronounced with stronger rounding of the lips.</p>
v	<p>v (used <u>exclusively</u> in the letter combinations gv, \dot{g}v, kv, \dot{k}v, qv, \dot{q}v, xv, and \dot{x}v).</p>

	<p>The letter v is called ‘rounding sign’. The rounding sign does not by itself stand for a sound; rather it is a warning-signal that the <u>preceding</u> letter must be pronounced with rounded lips.</p>
w	<p>w (as in wá ‘river’ wáta ‘to pull with the hands, to jig for fish with a line’)</p> <p>In rapid speech the Heiltsuk w is the same as the English w. However, in slow speech, particularly at the beginning of the word, you can hear that the Heiltsuk w actually starts with a very soft h.</p>
	<p>ẉ (as in ẉápa ‘to dilute, to water down, to mix with water’)</p> <p>The ẉ is an English w immediately preceded by a ‘catch in the throat’. It is worth remembering that <u>before</u> the (Heiltsuk) letters í and i this letter ẉ may easily sound as a ‘catch in the throat’ followed by the Heiltsuk letter u (with low tone). For instance, the word nómáskasẉi ‘those are old men’ can also be pronounced in a manner that would make you write nómáskas’ui.</p>
x	<p>x (as in xálá ‘come here!’)</p> <p>To pronounce the letter x, begin to pronounce the Heiltsuk letter k and hold it closed, then lower the back of the tongue a little bit so that the air can flow through. This will produce x. It is like ‘whistling with the back</p>

	<p>of the tongue.’ If you can imitate the way a cat spits at a dog, you can pronounce the letter x.</p>
	<p>xv (as in xvisá ‘to whip’ xvúsa ‘one’s lungs’)</p> <p>Try to say a Heiltsuk x while rounding the lips. This should produce a xv.</p>
	<p>ǰ (as in ǰáǰ ‘bone’ íǰsá/ýíǰsá ‘medicine’)</p> <p>The ǰ is pronounced farther back in the mouth than is the x. Try to say x while pressing the tongue down with a pencil. This should produce a ǰ. You could say that a ǰ is an extremely raw h.</p>
	<p>ǰv (as in ǰvtá ‘to cut with a knife’)</p> <p>Stick a pencil in your mouth, press the back of the tongue down and try to say a Heiltsuk xv. This will produce ǰv. You could also say that ǰv is a ǰ with a built-in rounding of the lips.</p>
y (used differently in ‘yes’ and ‘pay’)	<p>y (as in yápa ‘to send on an errand, to order to do something’ sgáyú ‘spear, harpoon’ yúyala ‘north wind’ nínúya ‘to sing’)</p> <p>The Heiltsuk y is usually no different from the English y. In slow speech, however, and particularly at the</p>

	<p>beginning of a word, you can hear that the Heiltsuk y actually starts with a very soft h.</p> <p>Never forget to write the letter y before a Heiltsuk ú or u when necessary. If you forget to write the first y in yúyala ‘north wind’ you get ‘úyala’ which is an existing Heiltsuk word meaning ‘seaward, in the direction of the sea’.</p>
	<p>ȳ (as in ȳiála ‘to signal, to wave with the hands’ háȳa ‘to hide oneself’)</p> <p>The ȳ is an English y immediately preceded by a ‘catch in the throat’ Can also be written ’y. Capital letter: ’Y.</p>
z	<p>z (as in zúsa ‘to dig’ zása ‘to have a dark skin’)</p> <p>A Heiltsuk z is pronounced very different from an English letter z. It is a <u>soft</u> version of the <u>Heiltsuk c</u>. Never confuse z with the two Heiltsuk letters ts or with the one Heiltsuk letter c. Always bear in mind the different beginnings of: zása ‘to have a dark skin’ cása ‘to pour or dump out liquid’ tsá ‘to push with the hand’ Do not confuse z and c either.</p>
’	<p>’ʔ (as in the letters c̣, ḳ, kṿ, ḷ, ṃ, ṇ, p̣ q̣, q̣v, ṭ, tḥ/ʔ, ẉ, ỵ, but also in the words: las’ít/ las’ʔit ‘to start to put in the ground, to start planting’</p>

ts'ít/ tsʔít 'to give a push, to start pushing with the hands'

númás'u/ númáʔu 'little old man'

tu'út/ túút 'to walk somebody home'

lá'á/ láhá 'yes'

The mark ' is called 'stop sign' and indicates a stoppage of air.

Never forget to write the stop sign where necessary. If you forget to write the stop sign in númáʔu 'little old man', you get númásu which means 'that is an old man!'