Cushman Unravels Syllabary’s Mystery

ELLEN CUSHMAN, Writing, Rhetoric, and American Cultures and CAITLAH, “The Cherokee Syllabary: Writing the People’s Perseverance,” University of Oklahoma Press, December 2011

THE CHEROKEE SYLLABARY

“I had a poster of the Cherokee Syllabary sitting over my desk at work for a long time,” says Ellen Cushman. “And I had questions about it because I research reading and writing.”

Cushman, who is a professor of Writing, Rhetoric, and American Cultures and co-director of the Center for Applied Inclusive Teaching and Learning in Arts and Humanities (CAITLAH), says she was interested in how the Cherokee Syllabary worked, how it was created, and what it all meant. The end result: her new book, “The Cherokee Syllabary: Writing the People’s Perseverance.”

“For a long time, I thought my dream study would be to delve deep into it,” Cushman says, “because there was this really interesting mystery around it. The Cherokee tribe learned to read and write within three to five years of its invention – without mass education, and without print, which is pretty astounding.”

Cushman adds, as somebody who is interested in writing, she had to wonder how it is that people learned to use something so quickly, especially when it looks really complex – and had 86 characters.

“In addition to that visual mnemonic and the way that it works linguistically, the longhand developed into a shorthand, and that shorthand became, in large part, the model for the print.”

HOW IT MAY HAVE BEEN DONE

“The first part of the book looks at how it works instrumentally to suggest ways in which it could have been easily and widely adopted,” Cushman says. “And what I found is that it matches the language really clearly; really well. Not just phonetically, but it also has a visual mnemonic to it. The original order was different than the one you see pictured on the front cover of my book. The Syllabary’s original order was developed by Sequoyah in a different arrangement and in longhand.”

Professor Cushman says that the longhand looks very different from the print. So, Cherokees might have been learning these seven forms and then the kind of variants upon them for the remaining characters.
“The University has always been supportive in my work. I’d been collecting data for more than four years, learning the language along the way, so when I wrote a grant proposal tied to a sabbatical and it was approved, I was ready to write this book and the articles that have come with it. MSU and the College of Arts and Letters made this work possible.”

HOW THE SYLLABARY CAME ABOUT
Part artist, part politician, a Cherokee man named Sequoyah (called George Guess or George Gist by his white friends) created the Cherokee Syllabary, and he was directly instrumental in the Syllabary’s progression from the longhand to the shorthand to the print system in just over a decade. Sequoyah was a man of great substance and intellect; some whites called him a philosopher. In fact, an Austrian botanist is thought to have named the Sequoia tree after him, although there is no conclusive proof this is so.

The writing system took over 10 years to develop, and is one of a very few writing systems developed by a single individual. Sequoyah and his daughter introduced the Cherokee Syllabary to the tribal council in 1821. But by 1827, the original arrangement, longhand, and shorthand of the writing system had been standardized into print. Moravian missionary Samuel Worcester—obviously not a Cherokee—reordered the original characters of the Cherokee Syllabary following orthographic rules of the Latin alphabet, believing it was much more an alphabet than it is. But this obscured the instrumental logics of the original script.

“The Cherokee Syllabary is not an alphabet, though Worcester calls it such,” says Cushman. “A typical phonetic alphabet just encodes individual sounds of a language with each letter. But more meaning potential is tied to the Cherokee characters. Of course, there is shift and drift in meaning over time, but the Syllabary always helps keep it intact. The writing system itself helped preserve the language.

“In the end, Sequoyah’s wish remains intact. The Cherokee Syllabary unlocks the heuristic potential of the writing system so we can see how it works; how to better put things together. This instrumentality contributes to its cultural and historical importance that I describe in the remaining chapters. The Cherokee writing system facilitates language preservation efforts and cultural perseverance for the tribe.”

MULTIPLE AUDIENCES
This book is written to Cherokee people as much as to literacy scholars, American Indian scholars, scholars interested in writing systems, and scholars interested in decolonial indigenous understandings of the world. Because it speaks to many audiences at once, Choice magazine honored it as an outstanding academic title for 2012.

“Maybe too that’s why it was recognized with an honorable mention for the Modern Language Association Mina P. Shaughnessy Prize,” Cushman says. “The Mina P. Shaughnessy Prize is typically given to books that are about rhetoric, writing and the teaching of English. The award committee recognized that the book has something to it that contributes to histories of literacy in America as well as the tribe’s cultural and linguistic perseverance.”

As to how the book came about, Cushman says, “The University has always been supportive in my work. I’d been collecting data for more than four years, learning the language along the way, so when I wrote a grant proposal tied to a sabbatical and it was approved, I was ready to write this book and the articles that have come with it. MSU and the College of Arts and Letters made this work possible.”

A lot of Cherokees helped her, too, Ellen says. “There’s Cherokee linguist Durban Feeling; Sue Thompson, Cherokee Nation language specialist; Ed Fields, an online Cherokee language instructor, and the list goes on. I’m very grateful to my Cherokee teachers and to everyone here at MSU who supported this work.”