

Webster's Way

On July 14, 1826, the missionaries established a 12-letter alphabet for the written Hawaiian language, using five vowels (a, e, i, o, and u) and seven consonants (h, k, l, m, n, p and w) in their "Report of the committee of health on the state of the Hawaiian language." The report was signed by Bingham and Chamberlain. The alphabet continues in use today (with the 'okina and kahakō added later).

"To one unacquainted with the language it would be impossible to distinguish the words in a spoken sentence, for in the mouth of a native, a sentence appeared like an ancient Hebrew or Greek manuscript—all one word."

"It was found that every word and every syllable in the language ends with a vowel; the final vowel of a word or syllable, however, is often made so nearly to coalesce or combine with the sound of the succeeding vowel, as to form a diphthongal sound, apparently uniting two distinct words."

"There are, on the other hand, abrupt separations or short and sudden breaks between two vowels in the same word. The language, moreover, is crowded with a class of particles unknown in the languages with which we had any acquaintance."

"There were also frequent reduplications of the same vowel sound, so rapid, that by most foreigners the two were taken for one. In the oft recurring names of the principal island, the largest village, and of the king of the leeward islands, "Owhyhee," "Hanaroorah," and "Tamoree," scarcely the sound of a single syllable was correctly expressed, either in writing or speaking, by voyagers or foreign residents."

"Had we, therefore, followed the orthography of voyagers, or in adopting an alphabet made a single vowel stand for as many sounds as in English, and several different vowels for the same sound, and given the consonants the ambiguity of our c, s, t, ch, gh, &c., ..."

"... it would have been extremely difficult, if not impracticable to induce the nation to become readers, in the course of a whole generation, even if we had been furnished with ample funds to sustain in boarding-schools, all who would devote their time and labor to study." (Bingham)

"The power of the vowels may be thus represented: - a, as a in the English words art, father; e, as a in pale, or ey in they; i, as ee or in machine; o, as o in no; u, as oo in too. They are called so as to express their power by their names - Ah, A, Ee, O, Oo."

"The consonants are in like manner called by such simple names as to suggest their power, thus, following the sound of the vowels as above - He, Ke, La, Mu, Xu, Pi, We." (Bingham)

"There were some difficulties to be encountered in distinguishing several consonant sounds, and to determine which of two characters in the Roman or English alphabet to adopt for certain sounds that appeared somewhat variable in the mouths of the natives."

"The following appeared sometimes to be interchangeable: b and p, k and t, l and r, v and w, and even the sound of d, it was thought by some, was used in some cases where others used k, l, r or t. For purely native words, however, k, l, p and w were preferred."

THE ALPHABET.

VOWELS.	SOUND.	
<i>Names.</i>	<i>Ex. in Eng.</i>	<i>Ex. in Hawai.</i>
A a --- â	as in <i>father</i> ,	la—sun.
E e --- a	— <i>tele</i> ,	hemo—cast off.
I i --- e	— <i>marinc</i> ,	marie—quiet.
O o --- o	— <i>over</i> ,	ono—sweet.
U u --- oo	— <u><i>rule</i></u> ,	nui—large.

“The opening to them of this source of light never known to their ancestors remote or near, occurred while many thousands of the friends of the heathen were on the monthly concert, unitedly praying that the Gospel might have free course and be glorified.”

“It was like laying a corner stone of an important edifice for the nation.”

“A considerable number was present, and among those particularly interested was Ke’eaumoku, who, after a little instruction from Mr.

Loomis, applied the strength of his athletic arm to the lever of a Ramage press, pleased thus to assist in working off a few impressions of the first lessons. These lessons were caught at with eagerness by those who had learned to read by manuscript.”

“Kamāmalu applied herself also with renewed vigor to learn, both in English and in her own language, and exerted an influence, on the whole, favorable to the cause of instruction, and soon had a school-house built for the benefit of her people.”

“Liholiho requested a hundred copies of the spelling-book in his language to be furnished for his friends and attendants who were unsupplied, while he would not have the instruction of the people, in general, come in the way of their cutting sandalwood to pay his debts.” (Bingham)

Learning the Language by Syllables

Noah Webster (1758-1843) was the man of words in early 19th-century America. He compiled a dictionary which became the standard for American English; he also compiled *The American Spelling Book*, which was the basic textbook for young readers in early 19th-century America.



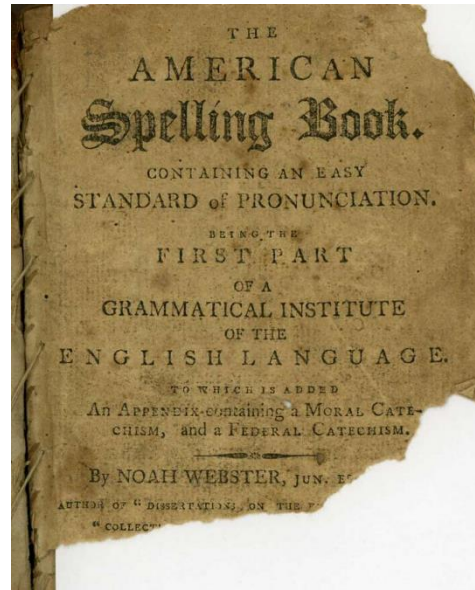
In the beginning part of his *American Spelling Book*, several signed a ‘Recommendation,’ stating, “Having examined the first part of the new *Grammatical Institute of the English Language*, published by Mr. Noah Webster we are of opinion, that it is far preferable, in the plan and execution, to Dilworth's or any other Spelling Book, which has been introduced into [o]ur schools.”

“In these the entire omission of the rules of pronunciation is a capital defect, which very few of the parents, schoolmasters or mistresses, employed in teaching children the first rudiments have sufficient knowledge to supply.”

“The usual method of throwing together, in the same tables, and without any mark of distinction, words in which the same letters are differently pronounced, and the received rules of dividing syllables, which are wholly arbitrary, and often unnatural, seem calculated to puzzle the learner, and mislead the instructor into a vicious pronounciations.”

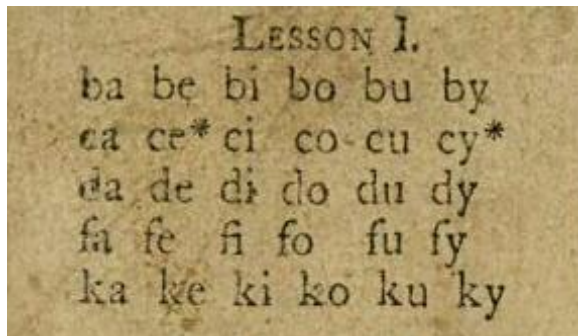
“These defects and mistakes are judiciously supplied in the present work, and the various additions are made with such propriety, that we judge this new Spelling Book will be extremely beneficial for the use of schools.”

The Speller’s Preface notes the priority in learning, “The syllables of words are divided as they are pronounced, and for this obvious reason, that children learn the language by the ear. Rules are of no consequence but to printers and adults. In Spelling Books they embarrass children, and double the labour of the teacher.”



“The whole design of dividing words into syllables at all, is to lead the pupil to the true pronounciation: and the easiest method to effect this purpose will forever be the best.” (Webster’s Speller)

"As far back as one can trace the history of reading methodology, children were taught to spell words out, in syllables, in order to pronounce them." Webster wrote. (Schütz 1994:163)



And so it was with the American Protestant Missionaries teaching the Hawaiians to read and write their own language.

Just as American schoolchildren spelled aloud by naming the letters that formed the first syllable, and then pronouncing the result: “b, a - ba,” so did Hawaiian learners. (However, back then, Webster used ‘y’ as a vowel; the missionaries did not.) (Schütz 2017a:12)

Pī ‘ā pā

In the initial instruction, the missionaries taught by first teaching syllables – adding consonants to vowels, just as Noah Webster noted in his speller.

The classroom exercise of spelling aloud also focused on syllables: Pupils first pronounced each letter of the syllable, and then put the sounds together and pronounced the syllable.

This practice of spelling aloud gave the Hawaiian alphabet its name. Just as American schoolchildren taught with Webster's speller began their recitation by naming the letters that formed the first syllable, and then pronouncing the result: "B, A - BA," so did Hawaiian learners.

The early missionary teacher said to his pupil, b, a - ba; the Hawaiian would repeat, pronouncing “b” like “p” and said “pī ‘ā pā; hence the word that is now known as the Hawaiian alphabet and the name of the book. (Schütz 1994:162-163)

Webster’s way of teaching was practiced in Hawai’i, as described by Andrews, “The teacher takes a Piapa (i.e., speller, primer,) sits down in front of a row or several rows of scholars, from ten to a hundred perhaps in number, all sitting on the ground, furnished perhaps with Piapas, perhaps not.”

“The teacher begins: says A. The scholars all repeat in concert after him, A. The teacher then says E. They repeat all together, as before E, and so on, repeating over and over, after the teacher, until all the alphabet is fixed in the memory, just in the order the letters stand in the book; and all this just as well without a book as with one. The abbs and spelling lesson are taught in the same way.” (Schütz 1994:163)

“The Hawaiian version also used the names of the letters and the resultant syllable: bē ā - bā; by 1824, this had become the Hawaiian word for ‘alphabet’.” However, after b had been eliminated from the alphabet, p took its place in this new name. (Schütz 2017a:12)

“One result of applying this methodology to Hawaiian is that it produced a new word: Pi a pa. ... From that time on, the word for ‘alphabet’ has been pī‘āpā, first appearing with this spelling (minus the kahakō and ‘okina) in a book title in 1828.” (Schütz 2017a:12)

The purpose of all these first exercises was to teach the mechanics of pronouncing words, one by one – syllable by syllable.

Missionary Period

Over the course of a little over 40-years (1820-1863 - the “Missionary Period”), about 184-men and women in twelve Companies served in Hawai’i to carry out the mission of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) in the Hawaiian Islands.

The missionaries established schools associated with their mission stations across the Islands. This marked the beginning of Hawai’i’s phenomenal rise to literacy. The chiefs became proponents for education and edicts were enacted by the King and the council of Chiefs to stimulate the people to reading and writing.

The instruction of students in schools (initially, most of whom were adults), in reading, writing and other skills initially fell to the missionaries. The schools generally served as both native churches and meeting houses, and were established in most populated ahupua‘a around the islands; native teachers and lay-ministers were appointed to oversee their daily activities.

References

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