

Handout 1. Eight useful rules to remember about Manchu orthography

1. EVERYTHING YOU WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT BACK and FRONT (or hard and soft) VOWELS
Vowels are divided into two main groups, back (or "hard") and front (or "soft").

The back vowels are

a, o, ū

while the front vowels are

e and u.

The vowel sound represented by

i

is considered neutral.

The back vowels occur only after aspirated (gutturalized) **k** [q], **g** [ɣ], and **h** [χ]
while front and neutral vowels occur only after unaspirated **k**, **g**, and **h**.

The same differentiation occurs after the "hard" and "soft" forms of **t** and **d**, *except* that **i** is governed by the same form of **t/d** as that governing the hard vowels.

Note that there is no difference in the pronunciation of either **t** or **d** before hard or soft vowels, and that there is no difference, either, in the way that they or the different forms of **k**, **g**, and **h** are transcribed.

2. WHY DID I WANT TO KNOW SO MUCH ABOUT BACK and FRONT VOWELS?

It is important to remember which group a particular vowel belongs to; or, alternatively, to remember which forms of **k**, **g**, **h**, **d**, and **t** are proper to back vowels and which to front and neutral vowels. This is because when written after **k**, **g**, **h**, **d**, and **t**, there are *no dots* to distinguish **a** from **e** or **o** from **u**. If there *are* dots, it is to distinguish **k** from **g** or **d** from **t**, *not* to distinguish vowel sounds, even if, as is often the case, the dot is written exactly alongside the vowel on the page (the placement varies according to individual habit). The value of the vowel is entirely determined by the preceding consonant. In turn, the vowel may affect the pronunciation of that consonant. A good example of this is seen in no. 3 below.

3. THE PALATALIZING I

All consonants are palatalized before the vowel **i**. This is most noticeable for the consonant sound **s**. Thus the pronunciation of the word *aisin* is "aishin" and *isimbi* ("to arrive") is read "ishimbi." For this reason, **š** does not appear before **i** except in loan words from Chinese, in which case the resulting sound is close to Chinese retroflex *shi*, written in Manchu *šī*.

In this connection, note also that when the consonant cluster -sh- occurs in Manchu words, it does not get pronounced as it would in English; rather, the s and h are pronounced separately. Thus *tasha* (tiger) gives "tas-ha," not "ta-sha." For the sound "ta-sha," you would need the word *taša* (which does not exist).

4. DIPHTHONGS

The possible diphthongs (or semivowel combinations) are most commonly

ai, ei, ii, oi, oo, ui, ūi.

Note that **ii** (transcribed as **i**) occurs only after vowels and that **ūi** occurs only at the end of a word.

Less common, but still possible are

eo, io.

The ending **-eo** is most frequently used to render Chinese sounds. For example, *changshou* ("long life") becomes in Manchu *cangšeo*.

Impossible combinations include

ae, ao, au, aū, ea, ee, eu, eū, ia, ie, iu, iū, oa, oe, ou, oū, ua, ue, uo, uu, uū.

However, the semivowel combinations

iya, iye, iyo, uwe, and ūwa are often seen.

5. IS IT F or W?

The written form of the sound **f** is the same as that for **w** when the following vowel is **i**, **o**, or **u**. This does not produce confusion, however, because the sounds

wi, wo, wu, wū

do not exist in Manchu.

However, because all of the following are possible sounds

fa, fe, wa, we

it is necessary to distinguish **f** from **w** in those situations. Thus before the vowels **a** and **e**, **f** is written in "long-stroke form," where it begins high to the right of the centering line and cuts through the line as it slopes down to the left.

6. ENDINGS

Words usually end in vowels

a, e, i, o, u, ū

or in

n or **ng**

but can sometimes end in

b, r, s

Such words (e.g., *gib*, *kunggur*, *kes*) are usually onomatopoeic. As such they are usually followed by the word *seme* (lit., "saying"), very much like Japanese という.

As a rule, words ending in other letters, such as

k, t

are loan words. However, there are exceptions (e.g., *fik seme* ["in profusion"], *fak seme* ["sturdily"], *tak tik* ["the sound made when chopping wood"]), and these again are usually onomatopoeic.

7. DOTS AND CIRCLES

Dots (*tongki*) and circles (*fuka*) greatly facilitate the reading of Manchu texts, as they allow to distinguish unambiguously between the following sets of letters, which, were the dots and/or circles not there, would be indistinguishable:

a and **e**

o and **u**

k, g, and **h** (both front and back sets)

t and **d** (both front and back sets)

a or **e** and **n** (in sequence, under some conditions)

For **e**, **u**, **g**, and **d**, a dot is placed to the right and slightly below the letter to indicate its value; in the case of **h**, a circle is used.

For **n**, a dot is placed to the left of the letter.

A double dot **:** on the left is used to mark a **k** before another consonant when its absence would permit an alternate (hence incorrect) reading, e.g., "t-e-n-e-s-i-n" (no double dot) instead of "t-e-k-s-i-n."

A double dot is also used to mark a final **k**. Such words are uncommon.

8. WHEN DO I USE A DOT FOR N?

A dot is put to the left of **n** if the next letter is a vowel. Which is another way of saying that if there is a dot to the left of a tooth, that letter is an **n** and the letter following is a vowel. By the same token, since initial **n** can only be followed by a vowel, if you see a word with a dot before the first tooth, you know that the word begins with **n** (and not **e**).