

# THE SOUNDS OF ENGLISH AND TLINGIT

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*Language has a profound influence on culture and world view, and it is a tragedy of our age that Native American languages are in peril. Tlingit is no exception. Like other Native languages, Tlingit was traditionally an oral language, but it is one that will not survive unless it becomes a written language which is read. The popular writing system used today for Tlingit was developed fairly recently, beginning in the 1960s with the work of Constance Naish and Gillian Story and continuing with the work of Nora and Richard Dauenhauer and Jeff Leer in the 1970s through the present. Thanks to their efforts, we now have a rich Tlingit literature in the written word to supplement the oral traditions. But in order for people to access this wonderful literature they must come to terms with the standard Tlingit orthography that is being employed. Like popular systems of writing used for other Native American languages, the Tlingit orthography takes advantage of the English alphabet to represent Tlingit sounds, thus facilitating their mastery among learners for whom English is their dominant language. But as Richard Dauenhauer points out in this essay, popular orthographies can be deceptively simple. As the Tlingit sound chart shows, there are many sounds and combinations of sounds in Tlingit that we don't find in English. Mastery of these sounds requires more than just a knowledge of linguistics and orthography: it takes oral practice and a conscious effort to distinguish Tlingit sounds from those of English.*

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In hearing and learning a new language, it is normal to replace the unfamiliar sounds of the new language with the familiar sounds of the language we already use. Therefore, it helps to know where the two languages are the same, and where they are different. As the accompanying charts show, the sounds of Tlingit are much more difficult than English, and Tlingit has many sounds that are not found in English. This makes it hard for speakers of English to hear and pronounce Tlingit. This also makes it very hard to figure out spellings of Tlingit names from old sources, such as the Russian records and early writers such as Emmons and others. The sound charts show where the points of difficulty lie. These are the places we need to be careful in learning Tlingit names and words from the elders.

Example 1. Gunalchéesh. The “Indian L” in the middle of this word is found in all Native languages of Alaska, but is not found in English. This sound is often dropped out, or changed to a similar sound in English or Tlingit, so that you may hear:

Guna\_\_chéesh  
 Gunash-chéesh  
 Gunas-chéesh  
 Gunax-chéesh  
 Gunax<sub>x</sub>-chéesh

Example 2. Tláa. The TL sound never begins a word in English, but is very common in this position in Tlingit. It becomes KL

klaa                    (tláa)  
 klane                  (tlein)  
 Klinkit (Lingít; Tlingit)

Example 3. Dleit. The DL sound never begins a word in English, but is very common in this position in Tlingit. It becomes GL

glate                    (dleit)  
 glaa                    (dlaa; tlaa)

As the charts show, the most difficult problem area is the many K and X sounds in Tlingit. Most of these merge with English K, sometimes H. Tlingit Xutsnoowú becomes English “Kootsnoowu” or “Hootsnoowu.”

There are 16 “K” and “X” sounds in Tlingit, but only 1 in English. So, 15 of the Tlingit sounds are usually lost, and become “K” or “H” in English.

Example 4. Yátx’i. This word means “children,” and is the plural of yádi, which means child. It is very common in songs. The X’ usually becomes K.

yátki                      (yátx’i)

Example 5. All the K and X sounds are difficult for learners to distinguish. Thus, in learning songs or names, it is easy to confuse:

yax     like  
yax’    at the face of.

Both may become “yuck.”

Many combinations of sounds are difficult to hear in Tlingit. For example, T and CH may come together, and BOTH be pronounced, unlike English. Combinations of unfamiliar sounds occur, such as words ending in -KKW.

Tlingit is not an easy language to learn. The sounds are very difficult, and often take years to hear and pronounce. There are about 30 sounds in Tlingit not found in English. But these charts may help by showing where the difficulties lie. Like nautical charts for boating, sound charts can show you where the dangers lie.

## Four K and X Sounds

The basic four k and x sounds can also be rounded as well. Tlingit has one of the most complicated sound systems of any language in the world. The chart below shows why. Of the three features—**backing**, **rounding**, and **pinching**—a k or x sound may have one, two, or three in any combination.

		Front (velar)			Back (uvular)
		Round (labialized)			
		<b>g</b>	<b>gw</b>		<b>ɠ</b>
		<b>k</b>	<b>kw</b>		<b><u>k</u></b>
<b>Pinched</b>	<b>k'</b>	<b>k'w</b>	<b><u>k'w</u></b>		<b><u>k'</u></b>
	<b>x'</b>	<b>x'w</b>	<b><u>x'w</u></b>		<b><u>x'</u></b>
		⊙ <b>x</b> ⊙	<b>xw</b>		⊙ <b><u>x</u></b> ⊙
		<b>Glottalized</b>			

Of the twenty k and x sounds, eighteen are not shared with English. Shaded sounds are not shared with English; circled sounds are found in German. The bold lined box encloses the two Tlingit sounds (**k'w** and **x'w**) in which all three features—backing, pinching, rounding—are heard.

## Technical Sound Chart

Unlike English

Like English in some places, but not in others. Still a problem.

Found in German ich and ach, but not in English

		Dental	Aspirated	Glottalized ("pinched")	Aspirated	Glottalized	Nasal	Semivowels
Front of Mouth	Dental	d	t	t'			n	
	Lateral	dl	tl	tl'	l	l'		
	Alveolar	dz	ts	ts'	s	s'		
	Alveo Palatal	j	ch	ch'	sh			
Back of Mouth	Velar	g	k	k'	⊗	x'		y
	Velar Rounded	gw	kw	k'w	xw	x'w		w
	Uvular	g	k	k'	⊗	x'		
	Uvular Rounded	gw	kw	k'w	xw	x'w		
	Glottal	•			h			

### Vowels

Short:    a        i        e        u  
 Long:    aa       ee       ei       oo

### Tones

High:    ´  
 Low: unmarked; formerly `