Proposed ALA-LC Romanization Table for the Deseret Alphabet
October 27, 2015

Background

The Deseret alphabet is a phonetic alphabet developed in Utah Territory in the 19th century, under the direction of Brigham Young. Only four books were published in the Deseret alphabet in Brigham Young's lifetime. After his death, the alphabet fell into obscurity.

In the last few years, there has been a renewed interest in the alphabet as a historical curiosity, following the alphabet's 2001 addition to the Unicode standard, filling blocks 10400 through 1044F.

Due to advances in self-publishing, it has become possible for hobbyists to publish new works in the Deseret alphabet. To date we are aware of 34 recently published volumes, as well as some ephemera such as newsletters.

Because the Deseret alphabet has ties to the Mormon movement and to Utah history, it is of interest to the special collections department at Brigham Young University's Harold B. Lee Library, which collects extensively in areas related to Mormonism and Western history.

Methodology

After creating and then refining several versions of the romanization standard on my own, I reached out to Dirk Elzinga, a linguistics professor at Brigham Young University who recently co-authored a book on the history of the Deseret alphabet. Dr. Elzinga offered helpful feedback in approaching the romanization project, particularly in the case of how to best romanize the Deseret alphabet vowels.

In creating the romanization standard, we have tried to follow the *Procedural Guidelines for Proposed New or Revised Romanization Tables* as closely as possible, although it has sometimes been challenging to apply them to an alphabet of this type. The following is a list of our interpretations or judgment calls when applying the guidelines to this situation:

II.1. Any future ALA/LC Romanization Tables should be transliteration schemes rather than schemes to replicate pronunciation or guides to pronunciation. Pronunciation is variable around the world.

As this is a phonetic alphabet, we have necessarily had to take pronunciation into account, to a certain extent.

II.3. Any future ALA/LC Romanization Tables should be in line with internationally accepted standards and/or standards officially sanctioned by the home country when possible.

III.1. Examine national and international standards before beginning the process of creating a new or revising an existing Romanization table.

III.2.a. Take the equivalent characters used from the MARC Basic Latin script repertoire as much as possible.

The Deseret alphabet is a phonetic alphabet developed for the English language, so we have chosen to treat standard American English orthography as the "national standard" to which our Romanization table should aspire to conform. Consequently, our primary methodology has been

to take a sample of Deseret alphabet text and to record the frequency with which a given Deseret alphabet letter corresponds to a Roman alphabet letter. If there was a consistent correlation between a Deseret alphabet letter and the Roman alphabet letter used to write the same word in English, we chose that letter as the Romanized equivalent. This methodology worked fairly well for Deseret alphabet consonants, most of which had consistent Roman alphabet equivalents.

This methodology did not work as well for Deseret alphabet vowels, many of which had multiple Roman alphabet equivalents. (Indeed, this type of inconsistency in English pronunciation and orthography is the very problem that phonetic alphabets such as the Deseret alphabet were intended to solve!) To address this problem, we consulted other English-language phonetic transcription standards, such as those used by the *American Heritage Dictionary and Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*. (Although the International Phonetic Alphabet is one of the most widely used systems of phonetic transcription, we did not consult it in developing our romanization standard because many of its characters are not part of the Basic Latin character set.)

III.3.a. Prefer single letter equivalents (e.g., š) to blends (e.g., sh), that is, multiple letter equivalents, unless there is no ambiguity in the use of the blend.

III.3.a. Use modifier characters (diacritical marks) in conjunction with the basic Latin script characters, but take care to avoid modifier characters that are not widely supported (e.g., ligature marks), or whose positioning over or under a Latin script base letter may interfere with the printing and/or display of that letter

In choosing between conforming to standard American English orthography and preferring single letter equivalents, we have weighed the former more heavily. Consequently, our chart includes a number of Deseret alphabet letters which have multiple letter equivalent romanizations. Note also that, for clarity, we have not yet added any ligatures.

If we were to prioritize having single letter Roman alphabet equivalents for each Deseret alphabet letter, we would probably be able to do away with most of the blends that are currently in the chart. However, this decision would take the resulting transcription farther away from standard American English orthography.

Hopefully this provides a good overview of the general principles and methodologies we used when creating the table. I would be happy to provide a more detailed explanation for our Romanization decisions for any individual letters.

Kjerste Christensen
Cataloger of 21st Century Mormonism and Western Americana
6739 Harold B. Lee Library
Brigham Young University
Provo, Utah 84602
801-422-4185
kjerste_christensen@byu.edu