



**From the *Art of Silabar* to the modern syllabaries of the Portuguese language:  
the persistence of the language taught**

Da *Arte de Silabar* aos modernos silabários da Língua Portuguesa:  
a persistência da língua ensinada

Del *Arte del Silabar* a los silabarios modernos de la lengua portuguesa:  
la persistencia de la lengua enseñada

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**Abstract**

Language progresses and becomes more complex in accordance with the development of individuals, societies, and humanity. From the end of the Middle Ages, vernacular languages formalized grammars to standardize and teach spoken and written language. Syllabaries became a fundamental means of teaching languages to children, but also to adults. In this text, a comparative and long-term look at the teaching of the Portuguese language is outlined, whose first syllabary, *The Art of Silabar*, was created by João de Barros, in the middle of the 16th century, and that of the French, English, Castilian. An attempt will be made to understand and justify, on a pedagogical and psycholinguistic level, the long-term and persistence of syllabaries in the languages taught. A type of small textbook that has lasted either as an autonomous entry, or integrated into composite reading and writing compendia, more recently, the syllabary is also a language game provided through digital media.

**Keywords:** Syllabaries; Vernacular languages; Language teaching; Reading methods.

## Resumo

A linguagem progride e torna-se mais complexa em conformidade com o desenvolvimento dos indivíduos, das sociedades, da humanidade. A partir de final da Idade Média, as línguas vernáculas formalizaram gramáticas para uniformização, normalização e ensino da linguagem falada e escrita. Os silabários passaram a constituir um meio fundamental para o ensino das línguas às crianças, mas também a adultos. Neste texto, esboça-se um olhar comparativo e de longa duração sobre o ensino da Língua Portuguesa, cujo primeiro silabário, *A Arte de Silabar*, foi criado por João de Barros, em meados do século XVI, e o das línguas francesa, inglesa, castelhana. Procurar-se-á compreender e justificar, nos planos pedagógico e psicolinguístico, a longa-duração e a persistência dos silabários nas línguas ensinadas. Modalidade de pequeno livro didático que tem perdurado ora como verbete autónomo, ora integrado em compêndios compósitos de leitura e escrita, mais recentemente, o silabário constitui também jogo de linguagem facultado através de suportes digitais.

**Palavras-chave:** Silabários; Línguas vernáculas; Ensino das línguas; Métodos de leitura.

## Resumen

El lenguaje progresa y se vuelve más complejo de acuerdo con el desarrollo de los individuos, las sociedades y la humanidad. Desde finales de la Edad Media, las lenguas vernáculas formalizaron gramáticas para estandarizar, normalizar y enseñar la lengua hablada y escrita. Los silabarios se convirtieron en un medio fundamental para la enseñanza de lenguas a los niños, pero también a los adultos. En este texto se esboza una mirada comparada y de largo plazo sobre la enseñanza de la lengua portuguesa, cuyo primer silabario, *El Arte del Silabar*, fue creado por João de Barros, a mediados del siglo XVI, y el de los franceses, inglés, castellano. Se intentará comprender y justificar, a nivel pedagógico y psicolingüístico, la longevidad y persistencia de los silabarios en las lenguas enseñadas. Un tipo de pequeño libro de texto que ha perdurado como entrada autónoma o integrado en compendios compuestos de lectura y escritura, más recientemente, el silabario es también un juego de lenguaje proporcionado a través de medios digitales.

**Palabras clave:** Silabarios; Lenguas vernáculas; Enseñanza de idiomas; Métodos de lectura.

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## From syllabaries – elementary, uniform, universal

The most widespread notion of syllabary is that a small book, which one learns to read writing systems, both current and ancient. The notion of syllabary as an elementary book, where words are broken down into syllables to facilitate learning by children, is included in the Larousse Dictionary: «*Livre élémentaire où les mots sont décomposés en syllabes et dans lequel on apprend à lire aux enfants*»<sup>1</sup>. A second meaning included in this Dictionary is that syllabary corresponds to the set of signs used in certain writing systems, in which each symbol represents not a phoneme, but a syllable. As a rule, syllabaries are ordered by the alphabet and take the syllable as a reference and significant element.

For the International Reading Association (1985), the first notion of syllabary is that of a «*lista de sílabas sin sentido, dispuestas por orden alfabético, que siguen, al alfabeto en cartillas y catones de lectura de primero grado*» (p. 367); only secondly does it include the generic meaning of any printed material whose text is broken down into syllables, used as a method of introductory reading.

A syllable corresponds to a single vowel or one joined to other phonemes, vowels or consonants, pronounced with a single voice. It also refers to the sound formed by a single voice emission (Faria and Pericão, 2008, p. 1133). Spelling is the most common way of reading syllabaries. In some languages, particularly English, there is no complete correspondence between spoken and written syllables, which is why spelling and typographic printing follow a different division from spoken syllables. This is the case of words with doubled letters.

The syllabary meets the criteria of elementary and universality. It is elementary, since it takes as legible the syllable that constitutes the smallest unit whose set forms words. Moving on from the syllable, the word appears as a meaningful unit. The universality of the syllabary is evident from the fact that it is used in a variety of languages, not only in those that correspond to syllabic systems. Associated with alphabets or integrated into primers, syllabaries are, as a rule, intended for children and for learning to read and write, by young learners, since they progress from the part to the whole, progressing through increasingly complex steps and allowing for an infinite number of exercises that are conducive to memorization and language training, at the auditory, oral, logographic and orthographic levels. Although not exclusive to children, syllabaries are, however, less suitable for adults to learn to read and write.

The existence of syllabaries for teaching children to read and write is documented in many modern and contemporary language systems, as William Gray concluded in the comparative report *The Teaching of Reading and Writing an International Survey*, published by UNESCO in 1969. There are syllabaries that attempt to provide an exercise, covering all syllables, real and imagined, that combine the phonemes that form a grapheme, composing a phonic unit and a logographic unit. Such syllabaries correspond to an autonomous editorial unit, namely a leaflet or a pamphlet. But there are also syllabaries integrated into general compendia, in which the syllabification exercise is only exemplified, so that the learner can replicate it whenever appropriate.

In linguistic systems that are markedly syllabic, such as Portuguese and Spanish, in which the same syllable is maintained in different circumstances in terms of spelling and phonetics, syllabaries soon ceased to be integral and became auxiliary to methods centered on the syllable and the word. In fact, in the aforementioned report, William Gray points out, based on studies on reading movements and learning in French, German, English, Chinese, Japanese and Spanish, that “the investigators concluded that ‘the natural form of reading is not by spelling or syllabizing, but on the basis of whole groups of words’. This fact, they pointed out, provides ‘the physiological basis of the modern methodology of reading’” (Gray, 1969, p. 52).

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. <https://www.larousse.fr/dictionnaires/francais/syllabaire/76022>

Syllabification became associated with alphabetic and phonic methods. Originating in Classical Greece and Rome, alphabetic methods were the most widespread until the end of the Middle Ages, but in the 19th century they were still common in schools in several countries.

Ensuring elementary and formal education, syllabaries were useful in standardizing oral and written communication, resulting from the universalization of vernacular languages. They were based on the principle that familiarity with the shapes and names of letters helped students recognize and pronounce words. When learning a word, students would repeat the letters that were familiar to them until they felt the pronunciation of the word, or until someone revealed it to them. The alphabetic method was also called spelling. In the 19th century, syllabic methods were common, integrated into analytical-synthetic methods and synthetic-analytical methods, which became common in schooling, particularly in French.

### **Syllabaries and the standardization of vernacular languages**

For the English language, *The American Spelling Book*, written by Noah Webster and published in 1783, presented a structure that favored logical and progressive learning. For more than a century, it was common in America. Having sold more than 80 million copies and having been remade many times, this syllabary taught how to read, spell and pronounce words. Years later, in 1828, Noah Webster published an *American Dictionary of the English Language* in which he presented words with syllabic division adjusted to their writing and sound; for each word, the correct pronunciation was indicated. In the preface to this 1828 work, Noah Webster wrote: “in the year 1783, just at the close of the Revolution, I published an elementary book for facilitating the acquisition of our vernacular tongue, and for correcting a vicious pronunciation.” This elementary book was intended to facilitate the acquisition of the American vernacular language and to correct pronunciation errors made by ordinary people.

After the publication of *The American Spelling Book*, the Reverend Chauncey Goodrich (of Durham), at the time a respected scholar and one of the trustees of Yale College, had suggested that Noah Webster compile a Dictionary that would complete the system of English language instruction for the citizens of the country. Noah Webster joined forces with other philologists to publish *An American Dictionary of the English Language*. In this new work of 1828, Webster once again paid particular attention to correct pronunciation, adopting the definition that language or speech consists of human voices or articulate sounds intended to communicate thoughts or ideas from one person to another.

As the Editor of the revised and expanded 1852 edition of that Dictionary explains in the preface, the pressure to reissue this volume was growing and the main improvements consisted of «the addition of several thousand words to the vocabulary, the division of words into syllables, and the correction of definitions in several of the sciences, which are made conformable to recent discoveries and classifications» (in Webster, 1852). The aim was, fundamentally, to expand the vocabulary and update the classifications, but maintain the division by syllables. Among many other aspects, the Americanization of the English language was underway during the preparation of this Dictionary.

In the Preface to the new edition of *The American Spelling Book*: containing an easy Standard of Pronunciation, being the First Part of a Grammatical Institute of the English Language, of 1790, Noah Webster insisted on the advantages of orderly learning according to the abilities of children and learning the language by ear, based on correct pronunciation. In this sense, he reiterated that «the syllables of words are divided as they are pronounced, and for this obvious reason, that children learn the language by the ear» (Webster, 1790). He argued that, except for editors and adults, rules are of minor importance and that, in Spelling Books, they embarrassed children and doubled the teacher’s work. Consequently, «the whole design of dividing words into syllables at all, is to lead the pupil to the true pronunciation; and the easiest

method to effect this purpose will forever be the best» (Webster, 1790). He concluded that reason justified that choice and that the experience of teachers who used previous editions revealed that students learned more easily and with less effort, compared to using Dilworth's New Guide or other spelling books in the same context.

Since the 17th century, syllabaries in the French language had been associated with the teaching of Christian doctrine and the schooling of Catholic and non-Catholic populations. Syllabaries in the vernacular became common as a counterpoint to the teaching of the Latin language. In this regard, Anne-Marie Chartier reports: «*En 1698, Jean-Baptiste de la Salle fait ainsi publier [...] un Syllabaire Français, le premier du genre (hormis les ABC calvinistes), malgré l'hostilité du chantage de Notre-Dame, Claude Joly*» (Chartier, 2007, p. 59). The Lasallian method established a curricular standard that included the alphabet chart, the syllable chart, the syllabary, and the first reading book. As a support for learning to read through memorization, spelling methods and syllabic methods were maintained throughout the 19th century, when the first applications of global methods appeared and synthetic methods gave way to mixed synthetic-analytical and analytical-synthetic methods. Until the mid-20th century, syllabaries for teaching French based on syllabic methods, mixed methods, global methods.

For the Castilian language, there were syllabaries from the beginning of the modern period. The syllable was taken as a representative unit with meaning. This was pointed out by D. Francisco Xavier de Santiago Palomares, in *El Maestro de Leer*, which he composed by order of the Royal Basque Society: «*Sylaba es la voz, ò sonido que resulta del golpe, ò pronunciación breve ò larga de dos ò tres, ò mas letras, en que haya precisamente una vocal, porque si na hubiese faltaría el espíritu, y entonces no sería sylaba*» (Palomares, 1786, p. 88).

Santiago Palomares' work is composed of two parts. In the First Part, in addition to a *Dedicação à Real Sociedad Bascongada*, in which the subject of the work is explained, a letter to the reader is included, containing a critical inventory of previous Primers. This part is composed of eleven Conversations between teacher and student, constituting a sort of elementary grammar that includes general Orthology, the alphabet, vocabulary, sentence, period and, finally, Orthography and a treatise about syllabification. In the last Conversation of this Part (Conversation no. XI), the author summarized what he called the “natural and true way of teaching reading with perfection through [his] new Primer”. The method he proposes (Santiago Palomares, 1786) includes seven levels:

El primer grado de la facultad orthologica es el conocimiento material de las letras, distinguiéndolas por sus talles, ò figuras, diciendo sus nombres distintivos con verdadera pronunciación; digo verdadera, porque si à la c, llama se, y seda à la zeda no será, ni habrá quien diga que es buena. El segundo, deletrear que es decir los nombres de las letras, y juntarlas, componiendo, ò haciendo syllabas, y leerlas con perfección. El tercero, pronunciar syllabas sin deletrear, ni nombrar las letras. El quarto, decir palabras enteras sin deletrear, ni distinguir las syllabas. El quinto, pronunciar con buen tono dos, tres, ò mas palabras, formando comas. El sexto, pronunciar, ò leer con buen tono, una, dos, ò mas comas, formando colones perfectos, ò imperfectos. El séptimo, leer, ò pronunciar con buen tono uno, dos, tres, cuatro, ò mas colones, formando Periodos, ò Pneumas, que es saber leer con perfección. (p.317-318)

The second part of *El Maestro de Leer* (Orthological Conversations) is composed of the *Cartilhas Castellhana e Latina*, divided into seven levels or degrees, through which the student will naturally reach the summit of the Orthological Faculty, which is to read with sound and meaning, adapted to the expression of affections and “humor”. The Letters correspond, therefore,

to the degrees mentioned above. For the last degree – the crowning of the seven orthological degrees, the author presents a set of text-lessons, each one intended to be read in its own way in terms of meaning, tone and “humor”. Among others, there is a text with a sense of contempt, another with a sense of admonition. Finally, the most common parts of the Catechism are presented in Latin, with the words divided by syllables, as well as Roman numerals.

As can be seen from this brief note, referring to the English, French and Spanish languages, from the end of the 17th century onwards, these composite books designed to teach reading and writing, often called *Primers*, included alphabets and syllabaries, as well as an introduction to grammar and, at the end, texts designed to train reading. These compendiums were essentially associated with communication and the teaching of vernacular languages, using the alphabetic and syllabic methods (synthetic methods). They were sometimes compiled in a single volume, sometimes organised in separate volumes, designed by one or more authors, but duly articulated and connected, in the pedagogical and editorial plans.

### Syllabaries and reading methods

As mentioned above, synthetic learning methods have accompanied alphabetic reading and writing since Classical Greece. Instruction went from the letter to the text, passing through syllables, isolated words and sentences. Since the end of the Middle Ages, vernacular languages have been formalized and teaching methods have gradually moved away from teaching the Latin language.

In European alphabetic languages, a systematic orthography continued to be common – *épellation systématique*, which was used for the Latin language, and children were expected to learn to cut out the syllables of the word. As Anne-Marie Chartier explains, «*Pour lire le Pater Noster, les enfants apprennent à découper les syllabes du mot, à dire: pé-a pa, té-é-erre, ter, pa-ter*» (Chartier, 2007, p. 74). They were expected to continue, cutting out letter by letter and syllable by syllable until the end of the set of words that make up *Pater Noster*. The transposition of Latin syllabification into vernacular languages occurred not only in French but also in German, Dutch and English. However, given the irregularity of English spelling and the convenience of facilitating the understanding of religious texts, Protestants published alphabets in vernacular languages with separate syllables.

Jean Baptiste de la Salle encouraged the learning of reading and writing in French, particularly among poor children and adults and those living in rural areas. He encouraged the creation of schools and published, in 1698, a Syllabary, which inspired many later schooling plans. Bearing in mind the need for uniform communication and understanding of religious texts, Anne-Marie Chartier admits that when Jean-Baptiste de La Salle «*édite à son tour un Alphabet français, contre l'avis des autorités catholiques, ce n'est pas non plus pour des raisons didactiques [...] mais pour faciliter l'instruction chrétienne des enfants pauvres, en leur offrant 'en sus' un savoir-faire utile*» (Chartier, 2007, p. 75).

In La Salle's method, a progressive, properly standardized learning process was envisaged, lasting three years. This progression included a first year to learn to spell and syllabify (two letters and the syllabary); a second year to move from deciphering to reading (1st, 2nd and 3rd books); and a third year to enter into the current reading of Latin texts (psaltery) and French (*Civilité*) (Chartier, 2007, p. 85). Finally, the three major stages of formalized literacy were established, both inside and outside of schools: learning to syllable and decipher; moving from syllable reading to current reading; and finally, reading everything. Charles Demia, founder of several schools, also created a progressive method for learning to read and write, dividing students into classes: those who could read letters, those who could read syllables, those who could read set phrases, those who could read everything and those who could write.

Also in the 18th century, lay teachers began to use texts in French, not religious ones, so that students would be able to read everything. A two-phase learning process was implemented: mastering the entire alphabetic code and then accessing texts. The primers now contain two columns of syllables (from the simplest to the most complex), then lists of words, according to size, and finally sentences. This structure for teaching reading The use of spelling was still common during the 19th century.

During the 19th century, a variation in spelling took place, as a spelling method emerged in which letters were named by their phonetic value. This was called new spelling, as opposed to old spelling, in which letters were named by their names. Synthetic methods were the most widespread, but by the end of the 19th century, they were reformulated to include mixed methods – analytical-synthetic and synthetic-analytical. Learning should take place with simple words that were familiar to the child, which would awaken intuition and the construction of meaning, and which were then broken down into syllables and letters. Millions of syllabaries were published from the end of the 19th century, and they remained until the mid-20th century, when global methods became common (Bellenger, 1980, p.65).

Syllabaries had become part of elementary books for introductory reading and writing. They ensured the overlap among a structure that facilitated reading and writing, a standardization of the language and basic culture, and a school standardization. Regarding the historical-cultural significance of these composite books for introductory reading and writing, Anne-Marie Chartier (2007) concludes:

Premier livre d'initiation culturelle, le livret d'alphabétisation met en scène le 'monde de l'écrit' proposé en référence aux lecteurs novices. Livre introductif à la langue écrite française pour des élèves souvent patoisants, il présente un ensemble de savoirs sur les normes de la langue et les relations entre écrit et oral. Il impose un certain découpage syllabique, la norme des bonnes prononciations et des liaisons, la règle orthographique. Livre d'usage, répertoire ordonné d'exercices, il peut être considéré, à côté des livres de prières et des partitions musicales pour débutants, comme un guide de travail à pratiquer plutôt qu'à lire. (p. 102)

Consequently, in the study of introductory books on reading and writing in the Western World, which inherited Latinization and was a constituent part of Christianity, there are two main lines of observation: the transversality of the models that ensured relative standardization; and the specificity of each vernacular language.

In fact, in an initial historical movement, most languages followed and transposed the same rules of syllabification, which were heavily influenced by the syllabification of the Latin language. Gradually, specific practices and rules were adopted, tending towards the standardization of language and communication in areas of empire and in their respective national-state contexts. By 1810, French syllabaries and English syllabaries were in circulation in Canada.

Syllabaries were used to standardize communication and culture, and were essential in the teaching of vernacular languages. There were variations in literacy, both formal and non-formal, and learning to read was also achieved by methods other than alphabetic-syllabic. Comenius, who had created an encyclopedic glossary, used figuration as a fundamental step towards understanding the meaning and usefulness of words. He then guided students in their decomposition. The syllable, however, remained as a structuring element.

## Syllabaries and the Portuguese language schooling

A means of standardization and transversalization in culture and communication in modern and contemporary Western societies, syllabaries also evolved into specific primers and books. During the 19th century, the syllabic structure was gradually subsumed, sometimes by the inclusion of an initial chapter containing basic rules (later duly applied during learning), sometimes by focusing on the syllabic division based on phonetics, which favored the correct pronunciation of words. This became common in American syllabaries in the second half of the 19th century. One of the most frequent methods of nationalizing syllabaries was the Nursery Primers.

With regard to the Portuguese language, it is generally agreed that two major historical-linguistic cycles can be distinguished: the period of the formation of Portuguese, between the end of the medieval period and the 16th century; the period between the end of the 18th century and the end of the 19th century, when kindergarten primers and school dictionaries appeared. The creative movement of grammaticalization, which, in the first half of the 16th century, sought to give a new face to the Romance languages, was based on the long experience of copyists, clerks and notaries, transmitted orally. All of them, over the previous centuries, had tried to translate the most diverse manifestations of oral communication into the Latin alphabet. In the cultural context of Portuguese, the choice of the Latin alphabetic element cannot make us forget the influence of the other two classical languages: Greek and Hebrew.

Imbued with a pedagogical concern, João de Barros, Fernão de Oliveira and Pêro Magalhães Gândavo, creators of the 16th century alphabets, accompanied their alphabets with their respective syllabaries or syllable charts, which corresponded to an application of the alphabet to orthography. This “orthophonic” meaning was the concern to overcome an etymological vision in order to meet the phonetic dimension of the language. The boldness and creative power of 16th century grammarians allowed not only to overcome, in part, the lack of correspondence between the alphabet and its orthographic application, but also to admit the existence of more than one alphabet at the same time, since the syllabaries themselves did not always correspond to the alphabet presented. After presenting the Latin alphabet, João de Barros admitted “another a b c that we have in which there are some doubled letters” (Barros apud Buescu, 1984, p. 80).

João de Barros considered it essential to learn the language correctly. In his opinion, it was in the mastery of syllabaries (and not the alphabet) that a fundamental step towards effective linguistic ability and literacy resided for the speaker and writer. This is fundamentally due to the phonological dimension that the syllable contains within itself, as a unit marked by versatility and the effect of transversality, with application in other languages. For João de Barros, the syllabary was an effective instrument for the orthographic application of the alphabet, for which he created a syllabic structure, in the form of a game, challenging young learners: “Children, know how to enter this sphere well and you will know how to spell everything very well by syllabando” (Barros apud Buescu, 1984, p. 90).

However, according to João de Barros, the syllabary was also a means of accessing other languages, namely Latin, the study of which should come after the study of Portuguese and not the other way around. João de Barros proposed a broad syllabary for a lengthy exercise in syllabification, without exempting the learner from glossing syllables that were not effectively used: «Given that in our language they do not serve any purpose, These syllables [...] do not seem to me to be without fruit, for example, as they all serve the same purpose in Latin as in other languages. And the work that is done on these will be of great benefit to the least ones». (Barros apud Magalhães, 1994, p. 166).

Generally speaking, it can be said that the most common method of learning to read and write in formal spaces began with knowledge of the alphabet (name and values of characters, spelling, power of graphic signs). From here the learner moved on to syllabification, which constituted the generating axis of an autonomous coexistence of the continuous game of differentiation-continuity-reversibility, fundamental abilities of reading and writing. Writing was an important support for reading, relating and making the phonic and visual elements interdependent. This alphabetic and syllabic method was supported by grammar, which ensured correct and gradual learning.

The periods of greater intensity in elementary education, ensuring a basic level of oral and written communication, were accompanied by the deepening of knowledge and theoretical and practical reflection on the standardization of vernacular languages. With regard to the Portuguese language, after the foundations of grammar and language teaching had been laid in the 16th century, the construction of a pedagogy that would ensure the schooling of a representative and uniform school culture was emphasized in the 18th century, and by the mid-19th century the debate on linguistic standards and the schooling of the Nursery Primer was consolidated.

A quick search for the term ‘syllabary’ in the computerized catalogue of the National Library of Portugal reveals twelve works, three of which relate to the teaching of Portuguese in schools in the 19th century – one of which, called *Silabário Escolar* and coordinated by M. M. Jardim, a Brazilian teacher, was published in 1878 by Empresa Industrial, Rio de Janeiro. The other two syllabaries are *Nova Carta de todas as figura das letras e syllabas, ou o perfeito syllabario da Língua Portuguesa*, by Luiz Gonçalves Coutinho, published by Imprensa Régia, in Lisbon, in 1818, and *Syllabario Portuguez ou arte completa de ensino a ler*, by António Maria Barker, published by Imprensa aos Lavadouros, in the city of Porto in 1834. This same inventory also mentions two recently published syllabaries, intended for teaching reading and phonetic training for children with dyslexia.

In contrast to the reduced number of syllabaries, a search for the word ‘abecedário’ yields a total of 121 titles. And this number more than triples when a search is carried out for the word ‘cartilha’, which rises to 388. It is certain that alphabets are being referred to that do not refer to the ABC, and that there are primers that are not directly intended for teaching reading and writing. Many simplified alphabets were created and published by First Letters Teachers, whose entries included the Rudiments of the Catechism for initiation to reading. In the Portuguese language, the syllabic structure is relatively uniform, so that most manuals, even those that emphasize syllabic methods, articulate the teaching of syllables as well as that of their respective consonants.

The simplification of the alphabet and the relative mechanization of syllabification, particularly by some teachers (who saw this as a delay in the pace of learning and as unnecessary practice for more diligent students), were the subject of frequent criticism. When publishing, in Lisbon, in 1784, *Diccionario Pueril para uso dos Meninos, ou dos que iniciação o ABC, e a soletrar dicções*, Luís Álvares Pinto, a native of Pernambuco who had studied in Lisbon and who went on to found a Music School and a First Letters Class in Pernambuco, criticized his teachers “who mixed vowels and consonants” and tried to propose “a syllabification in keeping with diction” (Pinto, 1784). Jerónimo Soares Barbosa, a humanist and grammarian, Visitor of the Schools of Coimbra by authorization of D. Maria I and in compliance with orders from the Rector of the University of Coimbra, also observed that it was regrettable that children did not have texts to practice reading. He warned, however, that many of the alphabets used by the teachers, although useful, were incomplete, lacking many voices and articulations of the Portuguese language. Still with regard to spelling, Soares Barbosa warned that syllabification should name the letters by their value and not bring to the syllable any sound that was not directly part of its composition.

The rapprochement between orthography and phonology (a dimension sometimes made difficult by writing with etymological roots such as Portuguese) led António Feliciano de Castilho to propose and structure, in 1850, a writing system close to the spoken language. Castilho was also the author of a method for teaching reading and writing – *Método Português* or *Método Repentino*, which included syllabification. The steps of this method are as follows: I. Alphabetical charts; II. Nasal sounds and consonants that precede or follow them; III – Compound articulations; IV- Breakdown into syllables; aural reading; V- Various adjectives that can express the same element of each word; VI- Read words on the blackboard by syllables. Read them over the top (Castilho, 1908, pp. 5-6).

This came to be the *Cartilha Maternal* or *Arte de Leitura* (1876), by João de Deus, which, taking as its core the word broken down into syllables, through a typographic scheme, made it possible to superimpose images. In effect, a correct naming of the sound of a syllable is possible in advance, starting from the word, perceived as a composite whole. This was the main novelty of the João de Deus' *Cartilha* whose version was obtained through a scheme that combined color and the division of words. The break with the alphabetic and syllabic past involved a methodological inversion that anticipated global methods, recomposing the relationship between analytical-synthetic-analytical, which was replaced by the synthetic-analytical-synthetic relation.

### Schooling and the *cartilha maternal*

In 1722 (although the request for authorization dates back to 1719), Manuel de Andrade de Figueiredo, a calligrapher and teacher who had attended a public school, published *Nova Escola para aprender a ler, escrever e contar*. In this work, he presented a handbook of calligraphy, but also a new organization of the school. He structured a new teaching-learning method and presented a curriculum for elementary instruction divided into four “classes” or “treatises”: introduction to reading, calligraphy, spelling, arithmetic. Throughout the work, the author insisted on the name school on several occasions and, in particular, in the dedication to the Portuguese Monarch, he wrote that it was the “first school for reading and writing to be made public in Portugal”. In his opinion, initial teaching should be in Portuguese and be appropriate to the ability and age of the learner. He warned that, in order to later be able to write in correct correspondence with pronunciation, it was essential for students to gradually learn to read and “be taught with precise knowledge of syllables” (Figueiredo, 1973, p. 12).

For Andrade de Figueiredo, the key to learning to read well and to using linguistic ability correctly lay in the game of syllabification and not in knowledge of the alphabet. In fact, in the New School to learn to read, write and count, he argued:

The word is a significant, perfect and complete explanation, which is composed of different syllables. The letter is a sign, which, due to the different shape of each one, is easily understood in meaning, by telling the beginner what it is called, and by memorizing its name, he becomes certain in his knowledge of it; however, as the syllables are infinite due to the variety of places in which the letters are placed in each one, from which it is gathered that with any change of letters, different pronunciations are pronounced due to the variation of the syllables; it seems that in their formation consists the main and greatest work of the child, in which the Teachers must take great care, seeking the most convenient, gentle and easy means, so that the perception of their slight ingenuity is able to easily understand the composition of the syllables. (p.18)

In accordance with the importance given to syllables and the mastery of a syllabification structure by the young apprentice, Andrade de Figueiredo presented five syllable cards: the first, with syllables that begin with *ba* and end in *za*, following the letters of the alphabet; the second card, with syllables that end in the consonant *m*; the third on the letter *l* and which splits into two (depending on whether the consonant *l* is presented before or after the vowel); the fourth, on the letter *r*, which splits into two; finally, the fifth card contains a generalization in application. Andrade de Figueiredo warned that, based on these cards, apprentices could spell all syllables without any work from the teacher. Teachers should encourage various spelling exercises. Likewise, he was in favour of teaching the Portuguese language before teaching Latin, and of teaching through print before teaching through manuscripts.

The inclusion of syllabary tables in reading compendiums was common throughout the 19th century. António Feliciano de Castilho, who, as mentioned, created and taught using the Portuguese Method, incorporated syllabification in the closest possible approximation between speech and writing, promoting what was called aural reading, and even proposing a phonological writing system.

João de Deus aimed to enable poorly trained teachers to quickly teach literacy to a popular audience, including children, using a modern method based on reading words and eliminating spelling. The success of his *Cartilha Maternal* ou *Arte de Leitura* also lay in an invention – distinguishing sounds through colour and, later, through continuous lines (smooth type) and broken lines (embossed type); choosing teaching elements; great effort to disseminate it inside and outside schools. Following the example of João de Deus's *Cartilha Maternal*, in which the typographic effect of dividing and coloring syllables was explored to facilitate reconciliation between the holistic image of the word and the analytical exercise of syllabification, there were primers from the end of the 19th century that focused on the legographic method.

In the context of mother tongues, this pedagogy had been taking its own direction – the approximation between speech and the art of reading. The aim was to bring schooling closer to literacy learning, representative, significant and useful, both for the pursuit of studies and for socio-community communication. This approximation was a re-updating of prosody, as is demonstrated by the *Dicionário Prosódico de Portugal e Brasil*, co-authored by João de Deus himself and António José de Carvalho<sup>2</sup>. In this Dictionary, words are presented with an orthophonic syllabic division, which ensures correct and standardized pronunciation.

The *Cartilha Maternal* or *Arte de Leitura*, by João de Deus, was a training program in which the learning cases were situations of effective use of the language (dispensing with the mnemonic and speculative exercise of syllabification). In addition to having created a graphic solution (printed or scripted) that combined plain type with engraved type and that dispensed with color and illustration – and the economy of artifices, associated with the geometric layout of the page, ensured uniformity of images and register – learning was oriented from the rule to the exception, from the common to the specific (Magalhães, 2013).

The holistic effect, created by the typographic scheme, gave a symbolic value to the representation generated by the diverse whole. The word, as a whole, formed an image that the gray chromatic of the syllables did not interrupt, allowing the advantage of the word as a significant and imagistic element to be taken advantage of, without losing the perception of analysis/composition. Syllabification becomes a facilitator of reading and writing. Syllabaries had been progressively abandoned as a specific typographic product, but syllabification continued to be a fundamental aid to reading and writing.

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<sup>2</sup> António José de Carvalho e João de Deus. *Dicionário Prosódico de Portugal e Brasil*. Lisboa: Pacheco e Barbosa, 1877 [5ª edição revista e aumentada. Porto: Lopes & C<sup>a</sup>. Sucessores de Clavel & C<sup>a</sup>/ Rio de Janeiro: Frederico Augusto Schmidt, 1895].

## Conclusion – Syllabaries and the persistence of the language taught

Current studies on access to reading and writing have proven that the consolidation of the ability to read and write. The development of language skills in children is greatly enhanced by language exercises focused on memorization and syllabification. As children become capable of memorizing larger quantities of words, extracting grapheme-phoneme connections from them, including syllables, they become more capable of taking advantage of the transfer effect.

The use of New Information and Communication Technologies has been a fundamental way of generating language exercises and games, focused on words and syllables, replicating and expanding strategies that had already been largely tested with syllabaries. One of the most frequent uses is with children who show deficiencies in reading and writing skills. It was also mentioned that two recent Syllabaries, designated at the National Library of Portugal, are aimed at children with learning difficulties and dyslexic children. Reading based on syllables is a training technique for acquiring knowledge, transferable to texts or to unknown words.

The importance of the syllable has continued to be highlighted for the regular study of reading, including in French: *«Dans des systèmes d'écriture tels que le français, l'enfant doit acquérir le principe alphabétique, c'est-à-dire établir une correspondance systématique entre des lettres ou groupes de lettres (graphèmes) et des unités sonores abstraites (phonèmes)»* (Chetail & Mathey, 2010, p. 120).

The syllabic structure is so internal to the learning and use of the language that the publication of syllabaries has become dispensable as an independent editorial piece, and the contents of each new lesson are now integrated into primers, manuals or other textbooks for learning to read and write. Thus, syllabification as a support for reading and writing proved to be fundamental and teachers made continued use of it. Syllabaries were cultivated, above all, as a means of supporting spoken language, ensuring a good correspondence between speech and formalized orality. In addition, they were also supposed to facilitate correct writing, that is, in accordance with orthographic and orthophonic rules. They became indispensable for the language being taught.

By providing learning from the part to the whole, and from the elementary to the complex, syllabaries proved to be more suitable for teaching and learning reading and writing by child learners than by adults. Syllabaries have been the fundamental means of teaching and learning spoken and written language, especially in the school environment. Observing syllabification over the long term, as happened with teaching by spelling, they made the syllabary a means, on a material level, and a pedagogical and linguistic method. The formation of vernacular languages, marking Modern Humanism and Rationalism, was associated with the first syllabaries, whose influence and use have continued to the present day. Advances in psychology and psycholinguistics have brought successive revisions and reforms to educational systems, but the elementary nature of syllabaries has ensured the longevity of some structural aspects.

In this text, we have sought to contribute to understanding and justifying the long duration and persistence of syllabaries in the languages taught, including Portuguese, based on a comparative observation, namely with French, English and Spanish. Since the end of the Middle Ages, grammars have been implemented for the teaching and standardization of vernacular languages. The first syllabary of the Portuguese language was structured by João de Barros and constituted one of the basic parts of Grammar. The use of syllabaries proved to be particularly suitable for teaching children, as they provided gradual advances. Measuring, comparing, making children's growth dependent on and developing it through language progression has been one of the prerogatives, if not the central prerogative, of pedagogy, especially school pedagogy. Studies on the acquisition and development of children's language are the basis of scientific pedagogy.

In the languages taught, linguistic supports and didactic means have been developed to exercise the intellectual and practical appropriation of spoken and written language. These acquisitions are often encouraged and stimulated through language games, carefully oriented towards learning and teaching, both inside and outside the school environment. One of these means is syllabaries, since they are based on the syllable as an element that brings together the symbolic representation of the grapheme and the phonic unit of the phoneme. Words and sentences are the symbolic constituents of representation and meaning, composites formed by letters and syllables. The syllabaries were a response to communicational, linguistic and pedagogical demands.

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