# Developing Braille Codes for Languages Other Than English: Best Practices

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## Introduction

The purpose of this document is to provide an overview of best practices and issues to consider regarding the development of braille codes to represent a particular language.

While ICEB affirms the value of braille in any language, the development of codes for languages other than English is beyond our scope and mandate. Nonetheless, we wanted to provide some guidance for those who are seeking to develop braille codes for other languages.

## Important Considerations

Before you begin to develop a code for a given language, it is important to determine whether a code has already been approved for use in that language. The best place to start is *World Braille Usage*. This is a resource that provides basic information on braille codes around the world. Users of this reference book can look up braille codes by language as well as by country, and it also contains contact information for each country’s braille authority. For more details and to download the PDF and BRF versions, please see the “Resources” section at the end of this document. You should also contact the braille authority of the country where the language is spoken. They will be able to advise you of any codes in existence or under development. If there is no braille authority, you should contact the appropriate department of education or a blindness organization within that country.

People often assume that knowledge of one braille code is sufficient to develop codes for other languages and that it is simply a matter of assigning symbols to various dot combinations. In reality, the following expertise is required:

* Knowledge of an existing braille code;
* An understanding of how braille codes are developed;
* A linguistics-based perspective on language and orthography;
* Fluency in the language that the code will represent; and
* Familiarity with the print orthography already in use for that language.

It is absolutely critical that members of the language community (including braille readers) are actively involved in the project. In fact, braille codes that have been implemented successfully are those that have been initiated by members of the community i.e., speakers of the language in question. Well-intentioned efforts that did not begin with speakers of the language are much less likely to receive widespread acceptance because they may be perceived as being imposed on the community from the outside. Furthermore, a braille code must always be developed for braille readers in the community as a whole, rather than a specific individual.

## Additional Requirements

1. The braille code must parallel the print orthography. Some languages have more than one, so this is an issue that requires collaboration with members of the community who will understand the relevant cultural context. It is not up to the developers of a braille code to choose one orthography over another. If there is variation in the print orthography this should not be eliminated in braille. A braille code that does not parallel the print orthographies used by the linguistic community could put some readers at a disadvantage.
2. It is often preferable to use one cell per phoneme, rather than a multi-cell symbol to represent each component (e.g. letter, accent mark, macron). For example, the acute e (é) requires three cells in Unified English Braille (⠘⠌⠑). In French, this symbol and the phoneme it represents are extremely common and only require one braille cell (⠿). It is tempting for those whose background is in English braille to want to break down the components of the print symbol into letter and accent marks, but it is much more efficient for braille readers to have common symbols represented by a single cell where possible.
3. If a language uses a syllabary for its print orthography, do not try to force the braille into an alphabetic system.
4. In order to be considered robust a braille code must include an alphabet – or a syllabary if appropriate. It must also be able to represent numbers, punctuation, accents (if applicable), and any additional symbols that are necessary in order to accurately reflect the print orthography.
5. Where possible, use well-established symbols already used in other braille codes to facilitate learning. For example, several languages use the same symbols for letters, common punctuation and accented characters. This makes it easier for individuals who use more than one language to learn new braille codes.
6. Similarly, if members of the language community speak a second language that already has a braille code, consider whether it is appropriate to ensure that there is consistency between the codes where this is feasible.
7. It is best to develop the basic elements of the code (e.g. alphabet, numbers, etc.) before considering whether or not contractions would be appropriate. Many braille codes do not have contractions. In cases where there are few resources and a relatively small readership, introducing contractions may add unnecessary complications. For instance, introducing a system of contractions would require the development of rules to govern their use, as well as training materials for readers, transcribers and teachers. This could in turn discourage easy use and adoption of the code. If contractions are to be added, attention should be given to frequency of words and groups of letters and the ease of which they may be learned. Ensure that there is no ambiguity caused by the addition of contractions. This is especially important for back translation from braille to print.
8. With regard to braille formatting, follow the guidelines used in the country where the language is spoken in order to ensure consistency.

## Approval

Once a braille code has been developed and approved by the language community it is important to seek endorsement from the local braille authority if one exists. Although they may not be proficient in the language they can verify that the code was developed in accordance with the principles outlined in this document. The code can be publicized and made available to those who need it. Endorsement from a recognized braille authority helps to preserve a record of the code, and can also facilitate its inclusion in *World Braille Usage*.

## Resources:

*World Braille Usage Third Edition*:

<https://www.perkins.org/resource/world-braille-usage/>

International Council on English Braille (ICEB):

[www.iceb.org](http://www.iceb.org)