

mâci-nêhiyawêwin
.....
Beginning Cree

SOLOMON RATT | ILLUSTRATIONS BY
HOLLY MARTIN



University of Regina Press

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Acknowledgements

This book is a result of teaching introductory Cree via satellite, online course offerings, and in the classroom. It is an introductory course on the Cree language with basic grammar using topics that occur in everyday situations. It is primarily designed for those who have no easy access to fluent speakers, so the exercises and grammar explanations are geared for self-study. It has been my experience that those who successfully learn another language have been those who have devoted a lot of time in self-study.

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kinanâskomitinâwâw
I thank you all!

Solomon Ratt
November 2015

CHAPTER ONE

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INTRODUCTION

1. THE CREE

The Cree are the most widespread of Canada's First Nations peoples. According to Statistics Canada figures of 1996 there are approximately 87,555 speakers of the Cree language in Canada. There are five main dialects of Cree spoken in Canada:

- The R dialect speakers, commonly known as “Atikamekw (Cree),” live in the south-western regions of Quebec;
- The L dialect speakers, known as “Moose Cree,” live on the western shores of James Bay, especially in Moose Factory, Ontario, hence the name;
- The N dialect speakers, known as the “Swampy Cree,” range from northern Ontario throughout the interior of Manitoba and mid-eastern part of Saskatchewan;
- The TH dialect speakers, known alternately as “Woods Cree” or “Rock Cree,” can be found in northern Manitoba and north-eastern Saskatchewan;
- The Y dialect speakers, known as the “Plains Cree,” range along the Great Plains regions of southern Saskatchewan as well as north-western Saskatchewan and northern Alberta.

Not all of these dialects of Cree are mutually intelligible although their grammar systems are basically the same. The R dialect is the one that is most radically different from the other four dialects; thus, it is the most difficult to understand by the other speakers of Cree. In Saskatchewan, speakers of the three dialects found here, the N, Y and TH, can communicate in Cree, but there are certain differences in word usages that sometimes need explanation. No dialect is better than any other. This introductory book will be done in the Y dialect.

Of the 74 First Nations in Saskatchewan there are 10 Saulteaux Nations, 7 Dene Nations, 8 Nakota/Dakota/Lakota Sioux Nations and 49 Cree Nations. Of the Cree Nations, 3 are TH-dialect, 3 are N-dialect, and the remaining 43 are Y-dialect. Although there appears to be a healthy number of Cree speakers in the parental age generations in some communities, most Cree communities fear the threat of language loss because the children are not learning the language.

Efforts are underway in many communities to revive the Cree language, with some communities establishing Cree immersion programs while others have core language programs. The programs use a number of methods including aural-oral language teaching and grammar-based programs, and most have introduced writing in what has been an oral language prior to the coming of the missionaries into Cree country. There are two basic writing systems: the syllabics system introduced to the Cree in the mid-nineteenth century and the Standard Roman Orthography (SRO). In this text we will work only with the SRO.

1.1 THE STANDARD ROMAN ORTHOGRAPHY

For this introductory text on Cree we will write Cree using the Standard Roman Orthography (SRO). What follows is a brief introduction on the SRO (for further information see: *How to Spell It in Cree: The Standard Roman Orthography* by Jean Okimâsis and Arok Wolvengrey: miywâsin ink, 2008). One advantage of using the SRO for writing Cree is its consistency: one letter represents one sound. In contrast to Cree SRO, English may have one sound represented by different letters or combination of letters as is evident in the following examples of the sound [ij]: Caesar (ae), each (ea), amoeba (oe), people (eo), meet (ee), me (e), machine (i), seize (ei), piece (ie), psychology (y). The same sound, [ij], is represented in Cree SRO as **î**.

1.1.A CONSONANTS

The Cree SRO has 10 consonants: **c h k m n p s t w y**. The consonants are pronounced similar to their English counterparts, for the most part, but the **c**, **k**, **p**, and **t** need special attention.

The “**c**” in Cree is pronounced like the “**ch**” in “**charge**”, or, depending on dialect, like the “**ts**” in “**cats**”. The following are some of the more common words in Cree with a “**c**”:

cêskwa – *wait*

mîciso – *eat* (VAI)¹

cî – *a polarity question indicator*

mîcisowinâhtik – *a table* (NI)

In English, the “**k**” can be silent, as in “**know**,” or it can be pronounced with a puff of air following it, as the “**k**” in “**kipper**”, or without the puff of air, as in “**skipper**”. The Cree “**k**” is pronounced like the “**k**” in “**skipper**” without the puff of air – except when following an “**h**”; then the “**k**” does have a softer sound. Some of the more common words in Cree with a “**k**” include the following:

kiya – *you*

kîsta – *you too*

kiyawâw – *you* (plural)

kîstawâw – *you* (plural) *too*

In English, the “**p**” can be silent, as in “**pneumonia**”, or have an “**f**” sound when followed by an “**h**”, as in “**phone**”, or can have a puff of air as in “**pot**”, or have no puff of air as in “**spot**”. In Cree the “**p**” has no puff of air and is pronounced like the “**p**” in “**spot**” – except when following an “**h**”; then it has a softer sound. Some of the more common words in Cree with a “**p**” include the following:

pêyak – *one*

pêyakwâw – *once*

pîsim – *sun/month* (NA)

pîsimwasinahikan – *calendar* (NI)

¹ The following abbreviations are for the grammatical items here:

VAI – animate intransitive verb

VII – inanimate intransitive verb

NA – animate noun

NI – inanimate noun

In English, the “t” can have a puff of air, as the “t” in “tan”, or have no puff of air, as the “t” in “Stan”. The Cree “t” is pronounced with no puff of air, much like the “t” in “Stan”. Some of the more common words in Cree with a “t” include the following:

tânisi – <i>how/how are you</i>	tâniwê – <i>where</i> (use for NI)
takwâkin – <i>It is fall.</i> (VII)	tâniwâ – <i>where</i> (use for NA)

1.1.B VOWELS

In Cree we use seven vowel sounds to write in the SRO. We have three short vowel sounds: **a, i, o**; and four long vowels marked by either a circumflex or macron (bar) over the vowel: **â, î, ô, and ê**.

SHORT VOWELS

The short vowels include: **a, i, and o**:

The short **a**: - pronounced like the first “a” in “appeal”:

apisîs – <i>a little bit</i>	awas – <i>go away</i>
api – <i>sit</i> (VAI)	awîna – <i>who</i>

The short **i**: - pronounced like the “i” in “it”:

itôta – <i>do it</i> (VTI-1) ¹	itwaha – <i>point to it</i> (VTI-1)
itwê – <i>say</i> (VAI)	isiyihkâsow – <i>she/he is named</i> (VAI)

The short **o**: - pronounced like the “oo” in “shook”:

otin – <i>take someone</i> (VTA)	otina – <i>take it</i> (VTI-1)
omisi – <i>this way</i>	pipon – <i>It is winter.</i> (VII)

LONG VOWELS

The long vowels are marked with either a circumflex or a macron (bar) over the vowel: **â, î, ô, and ê**:

The long **â**: - pronounced like the “a” in “fa” as in “do, ray, me, fa, so, la, ti, do”:

âstam – <i>come here</i>	âstamîtê – <i>over this way</i>
âskaw – <i>sometimes</i>	âha – <i>yes</i>

The long **î**: - pronounced like the “e” in “me”:

mîna – <i>also</i>	nîpin – <i>It is summer.</i> (VII)
sîkwan – <i>It is spring.</i> (VII)	wîpac – <i>soon/early</i>

1 VTI-1 – transitive inanimate verb-class 1
VTA – transitive animate verb

The long **ô:** - pronounced like the “o” in “or”:

ôta – <i>here</i>	ôtê – <i>over here</i>
ahpô êtikwê – <i>maybe</i>	namôya – <i>no/not</i>

The long **ê:** - pronounced like the “ay” in “day”:

êkota – <i>there</i>	êkotê – <i>over there</i>
nêhiyaw – <i>a Cree (NA)</i>	nêhiyawê – <i>speak Cree (VAI)</i>

1.1.C SRO: CHANTS

CONSONANTS

- c-c-c-c:** cêskwa, cêskwa, cêskwa pitamâ.
Wait, wait, wait a bit.
- h-h-h-h:** hâw, hâw, hâw mâka.
Okay, okay, okay then.
- k-k-k-k:** kâya, kâya, kâya itôta.
Don't, don't, don't do it!
- m-m-m-m:** mahti, mahti, mahti nêhiyawêtân.
Please, please, please, let's speak Cree.
- n-n-n-n:** namôya, namôya, namôya cêskwa.
No, no, not yet!
- p-p-p-p:** pêta, pêta, pêta kimasinahikan.
Bring it, bring it, bring your book.
- s-s-s-s:** sôhki, sôhki, sôhki-sêsâwî.
Hard, hard, exercise hard!
- t-t-t-t:** tâpwê, tâpwê, tâpwê takahki.
Truly, truly, it is truly great!
- w-w-w-w:** wîcîh, wîcîh, wîcîh kiwîcêwâkan.
Help him, help her, help your companion.
- y-y-y-y:** yîkatê-, yîkatê-, yîkatê-kwâskohti.
Aside, aside, jump aside!

VOWELS

- a-a-a-a:** apisís, apisís, apisís néhiyawêk.
A little, a little, speak (you – plural) a little Cree!
- â-â-â-â:** âskaw, âskaw, âskaw âkayâsîmo.
Sometimes, sometimes, sometimes speak English.
- ê-ê-ê-ê:** êkosi, êkosi, êkosi itôta.
That's it, that's it, do it like that.
- i-i-i-i:** itwaha, itwaha, itwaha iskwâhtêm.
Point to it, point to it, point at the door.
- î-î-î-î:** îkatêna, îkatêna, îkatêna êwako.
Set it aside, set it aside, set that one aside.
- o-o-o-o:** omisi, omisi, omisi itwê.
This way, this way, say it this way.
- ô-ô-ô-ô:** ôtê, ôtê, ôtê pê-itohtê.
This way, this way, come this way.

1.1.D DICTATION

Write out the words the instructor says in the spaces below:

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

1.1.E MIMIMAL PAIRS

Minimal pairs are two words with only one sound difference. Examples from English would include:

pat – bat
fit – sit
fat – fit
pot – pit

The difference in sounds can be in consonants or in vowels. Cree also has minimal pairs. Here are a few more common ones:

nahapi – <i>Sit down!</i> (VAI)	api – <i>Sit!</i> (VAI)
nahâpi – <i>See clearly!</i> (VAI)	ati – <i>begin</i> (IPV)
atim – <i>a dog</i> (NA)	maskisin – <i>a shoe</i> (NI)
akim – <i>Count him/her!</i> (VTA)	mâskisin – <i>S/he is crippled from a fall.</i> (VAI)
ôma – <i>this</i> (PR-in)	awa – <i>this</i> (PR-an)
ôta – <i>here</i> (PR)	ana – <i>that</i> (PR-an)
asam – <i>Feed him/her!</i> (VTA)	maskosis – <i>a bear cub</i> (NA)
asâm – <i>a snowshoe</i> (NA)	maskosis – <i>a small piece of grass</i> (NI)
pisiw – <i>a lynx</i> (NA)	ôta – <i>here</i> (PR)
pêsiw – <i>Bring him/her!</i> (VTA)	ôtê – <i>over here</i> (PR)
niya – <i>me/I</i> (PR)	nitomisin – <i>I have an older sister/s.</i> (VAI)
niyâ – <i>Lead/go ahead</i> (IPC)	nitômisin – <i>I am greasy/oily.</i> (VAI)
nîsta – <i>me too</i> (PR)	pôsiw – <i>S/he gets on board.</i> (VAI-3rd person)
nîstâ – <i>my brother-in-law</i> (vocative)	pisiw – <i>a lynx</i> (NA)
pasow – <i>S/he smells it.</i> (VAI)	
pâsow – <i>S/he dries up.</i> (VAI)	

Cree has many minimal pairs that appear in pronouns (PR) and in verb (V) pairs as the following illustrate:

niya – <i>me/I</i> (PR)	niya – <i>me/I</i> (PR)	kiya – <i>you</i> (PR)
kiya – <i>you</i> (PR)	wiya – <i>s/he/him/her</i> (PR)	wiya – <i>s/he/him/her</i> (PR)
nîsta – <i>me too</i> (PR)	nîsta – <i>me too</i> (PR)	kîsta – <i>you too</i> (PR)
kîsta – <i>you too</i> (PR)	wîsta – <i>her/him too</i> (PR)	wîsta – <i>her/him too</i> (PR)
nitisiyihkâson – <i>I am named/called (my name is)</i> (VAI-1st person singular)		
kitisiyihkâson – <i>You are named/called (your name is)</i> (VAI-2nd person singular)		

nitohcîn – *I am from* (VAI-1st person singular)
kitohcîn – *You are from* (VAI-2nd person singular)

nititahtopiponân – *I am of that age* (VAI-1st person singular)
kititahtopiponân – *You are of that age* (VAI-2nd person singular)

In addition to minimal pairs, there are also minimal sets and near minimal pairs. The near minimal pairs can create some problems in spelling and understanding as shown in the following:

acâhk – *star* (NA)
ahcahk – *spirit* (NA)

niyânan – *five*
niyanân – *us*

akik – *mucous* (NA)
âhkik – *seal* (NA)

ohcîw – *s/he is from* (VAI-3rd person)
ôcêw – *a housefly*

As is evident from the foregoing, we must be vigilant in writing the Cree words, if we want to write them correctly. Here are other minimal pairs which can cause problems:

kisik – *and also* (IPC)
kîsik – *the sky* (NI)

sâkinêw – *S/he holds it out.* (VTA)
sakinêw – *S/he holds onto it.* (VTA)

itapi – *Sit that way!* (VAI)
itâpi – *Look that way!* (VAI)

iskwêwasâkay – *a woman's dress/coat* (NI)
iskwêwasakay – *a woman's skin* (NA)

tahkon – *Carry him/her!* (VTA)
takon – *Add it to it!* (VTA)

atotêw – *S/he makes a request of someone.* (VTA)
âtotêw – *S/he tells a story about someone.* (VTA)

pêhêw – *S/he waits for s.o.* (VTA)
pihêw – *a grouse/partridge* (NA)

kinosêw – *a fish* (NA)
kinosiw – *S/he is long.* (VAI)

êkâwiya – *Don't!*
okâwiya – *her/his mother*

miskon – *liver* (NI)
miskon – *Feel him/her!* (VTA)

pâskisam – *S/he shoots at it.* (VTI-1)
paskisam – *S/he cuts it.* (VTI-1)

pimisin – *S/he lies down.* (VAI)
pîmisin – *S/he lays sideways.* (VAI)

sêkihêw – *S/he scares s.o.* (VTA)
sâkihêw – *S/he loves s.o.* (VTA)

pimotêw – *S/he shoots arrows at s.o.* (VTA)
pimohtêw – *S/he walks.* (VAI)

itôta – *Do it!* (VTI-1)
itohtah – *Take s.o. somewhere!* (VTA)

pimiciwan – *There is a current.* (VII)
pîmiciwan – *There is a cross-current.* (VII)

paskinam – *S/he breaks s.t. off.* (VTI)
pâskinam – *S/he uncovers s.t.* (VTI)

otah – *Defeat him/her!* (VTA)
ôta – *here* (PR)

DO:

A. DICTATION: 10 WORDS IN CREE CHOSEN FROM THE PRECEDING VOCABULARY.

B. MARK THE LONG VOWELS IN THE FOLLOWING WORDS:

nahapi – See clearly!

nahapi – Sit down!

asam – Feed him/her.

asam – a snowshoe

maskisin – She/he is crippled.

maskisin – a shoe

maskosis – bear cub

maskosis – small grass

oma – this

ota – here

pasow – She/he smells it.

pasow – She/he is dry.

C. GETTING TO KNOW EACH OTHER: FIRST AND SECOND PERSONS

Go from student to student saying the following information to them, a section at a time. First do the name section with all the students, then move on to the next section. Once you have completed all the sections, then you can do all four sections with each of the students. Students do not get to see these until after the class.

1. NAME:

SPEAKER A: _____ nitisiyihkâson. My name is _____.

kiya mâka, tânisi kitisiyihkâson? How about you, what is your name?

SPEAKER B: _____ nitisiyihkâson. My name is _____.

2. PLACE OF ORIGIN:

SPEAKER A: _____ kayahhtë nitohcîn. I am originally from _____.

kiya mâka, tânitê kayahhtë kitohcîn. How about you, where are you originally from?

SPEAKER B: _____ kayahhtë nitohcîn. I am originally from _____.

3. PLACE OF PRESENT RESIDENCE:

SPEAKER A: _____ mêkwâc niwîkin. I now live in _____.

kiya mâka, tânitê mêkwâc kiwîkin? How about you, where do you live now?

SPEAKER B: _____ mêkwâc niwîkin. I now live in _____.

4. AGE:

SPEAKER A: _____ nititahtopiponân. I am _____ years old.

kiya mâka, tânitahtopiponêyan? How about you, how old are you?

SPEAKER B: _____ nititahtopiponân. I am _____ years old.

D. GETTING TO KNOW EACH OTHER: FIRST, SECOND AND THIRD PERSONS

Go from student to student saying the following information to them, a section at a time:

1. NAME: go to the first student in the circle with your information and your question:

SPEAKER A: _____ **nitisiyihkâson**. *My name is* _____.

kiya mâka, tânisi kitisiyihkâson? How about you, what is your name?

SPEAKER B: _____ **nitisiyihkâson**. *My name is* _____.

Go to the next student in the circle with your information and the information provided by the previous student then ask the question:

SPEAKER A: _____ **nitisiyihkâson**. *My name is* _____.

_____ **isiyihkâsow** awa. (point to the previous student)

This one's name is _____.

kiya mâka, tânisi kitisiyihkâson? How about you, what is your name?

SPEAKER C: _____ **nitisiyihkâson**. *My name is* _____.

SPEAKER A: Point to the previous student then ask: **tânisi isiyihkâsow** awa? *What is this one's name?*

SPEAKER C: _____ **isiyihkâsow** awa. *This one's name is* _____.

2. PLACE OF ORIGIN:

SPEAKER A: _____ **kayahtê nitohcîn**. *I am originally from* _____.

kiya mâka, tânitê kayahtê kitohcîn? How about you, where are you originally from?

SPEAKER B: _____ **kayahtê nitohcîn**. *I am originally from* _____.

Go to the next student in the circle with your information and the information provided by the previous student then ask the question:

SPEAKER A: _____ **kayahtê nitohcîn**. *I am originally from* _____.

_____ **kayahtê ohcîw** awa. (point to the previous student)

This one is originally from _____.

kiya mâka, tânitê kayahtê kitohcîn? How about you, where are you from originally?

SPEAKER C: _____ **kayahtê nitohcîn**. *I am originally from* _____.

SPEAKER A: Point to the previous student then ask:
tânitê kayahtê ohcîw awa? *Where is this one originally from?*

SPEAKER C: _____ **kayahtê ohcîw** awa. *This one is originally from* _____.

3. PLACE OF PRESENT RESIDENCE:

SPEAKER A: _____ mēkwâc ni**wîkin**. *I now live in _____.*

kiya mâka, tânitê mēkwâc ki**wîkin**? *How about you, where do you live now?*

SPEAKER B: _____ mēkwâc ni**wîkin**. *I live in _____.*

Go to the next student in the circle with your information and the information provided by the previous student then ask the question

SPEAKER A: _____ mēkwâc ni**wîkin**. *I now live in _____.*

_____ mēkwâc **wîkiw** awa. (point to the previous student)

This one now lives in _____.

kiya mâka, tânitê mēkwâc ki**wîkin**? *How about you, where do you live now?*

SPEAKER C: _____ mēkwâc ni**wîkin**. *I now live in _____.*

SPEAKER A: Point to the previous student then ask:
tânitê mēkwâc **wîkiw** awa? *Where does this one live now?*

SPEAKER C: _____ mēkwâc **wîkiw** awa. *This one now lives in _____.*

4. AGE:

SPEAKER A: _____ nitita**htopiponân**. *I am _____ years old.*

kiya mâka, tânita**htopiponêyan**? *How about you, how old are you?*

SPEAKER B: _____ nitita**htopiponân**. *I am _____ years old.*

Go to the next student in the circle with your information and the information provided by the previous student then ask the question

SPEAKER A: _____ nitita**htopiponân**. *I am _____ years old.*

_____ ita**htopiponêw** awa. (point to the previous student)

This one is _____ years old.

kiya mâka, tânita**htopiponêw**? *How about you, how old are you?*

SPEAKER C: _____ nitita**htopiponân**. *I am _____ years old.*

SPEAKER A: Point to the previous student then ask: tânita**htopiponêw** awa? *What is this one's age?*

SPEAKER C: _____ ita**htopiponêw** awa. *This one is _____ years old.*