The Cree Syllabary

JOHN D. NICHOLS

The Cree syllabary, or *syllabics*, is a shorthand-based script written left to right, employing geometric characters, some representing syllables and some representing single segments. Created in 1840 for two Algonquian languages of Canada, Cree and Ojibwe, it was adapted in Canada for Athabaskan and Inuit (Eskimo) languages, and, in China, influenced the Pollard script (SECTION 52; Enwall 1994). Until recently it chiefly appeared in printed translations of Christian sacred texts and liturgies, and in handwritten letters and personal records. Syllabic typewriters and, beginning in the 1980s, personal computers have allowed control of the printing technology to shift from missionaries to native speakers; many schoolbooks, periodicals, and official documents now appear in the indigenous languages written in syllabics. Syllabics are particulary valued for the ease and speed with which minimal literacy can be achieved, and for their distinctiveness from the scripts of the dominant colonial languages. Syllabic text looks indisputably Indian or Inuit. In the 1990s, syllabic scripts were being documented for inclusion in international standard character coding for computers.

Algonquian syllabaries

The Cree syllabary was devised by James Evans (1801–1846), a Wesleyan missionary, at Norway House in then Rupert's Land, now Manitoba. Evans had developed a Roman orthography for Ojibwe in Ontario, based on a sophisticated analysis of its sound system, and had presented it in a primer-style syllabary chart. Struck by reports in the mission press of the success of the Cherokee syllabary, and familiar with non-Roman shorthand and Devanagari scripts, Evans experimented with alphabetic and syllabic non-Roman characters for writing Ojibwe.

Arriving at a new mission station at Norway House in 1840, he revised his syllabary for Cree, the local language closely related to the Ojibwe he knew, drawing on British shorthand for most of the characters. In 1841 he printed a hymnbook entirely in syllabics using handmade type, later replaced by type from England made to his specifications. The syllabary was rapidly indigenized, being spread by its first Native

e	i	o	æ	(final)
▽ e	△ i	▷ o	◁ æ	•∘ ▼
⊐ me	Γ mi	⌐ mo	L ma	c m
U te	∩ ti	⊃ to	C ta	⟋ t
9 ke	P ki	⊿ ko	ь ka	⟍ k
⌐ꜿ ne	σ ni	_ꜿ no	α na	ꜿ n
⊔ le	⊓ li	⊃ lo	⊂ la	s l
⟋ re	∿ ri	⟋ ro	⟋ ra	z r
⟍ se	⟋ si	⟋ so	⟍ sa	∧ s
◁ ye	> yi	< yo	> ya	+ y
∩ tce	Γ tci	J tco	L tca	- tc
Y pe	Λ pi	> po	< pa	ı p
▽· we	△· wi	▷· wo	◁· wa	∘ w
▽·· wew	△·· wiw	▷·· wow	◁·· waw	

FIGURE 60. Western Algonquian syllabary, Roman Catholic variant (*Anamie Nagamonan* 1965).

In every community in which syllabics are written, there are local and personal styles in character inventory, shape, and writing conventions. There is no standardized spelling for any dialect of Cree or Ojibwe; however, fitting the shorthand origins of the system, writers may use *plain* syllabics, indicating only the bare outline of syllable structure, or *pointed* syllabics, adding diacritics all the way up to phonemic transcription, the full realization of which is rare. Many writers put spaces or dots between words or prefixes; others write all the characters equally far apart with no word division. The period ⨯ is the only distinctive common punctuation mark, the others being as in English.

Characteristic features

Vowels that begin syllables are written with a triangle syllabic, rotated through four positions to show the vowel quality. Front vowels have a vertical axis and are related by inversion thus: ▽ *e*, △ *i*; back vowels have a horizontal axis and are related by re-

KEY TO THE CREE SYLLABIC SYSTEM.
VOWELS.

as in hate, á	as í in pin, e	as in no, o	as in pun, u	as in pan, a	Final Consonants.
▽	△	▷	◁	◁	
W wá ▽·	we △·	wo ▷	wu ◁·	wa ◁·	
P pá ∨	pe ∧	po >	pu <	pa <	'
T tá ∪	te ∩	to)	tu (	ta (	'
K ká ٩	ke ρ	ko d	ku b	ka b	`
Ch chá ٦	che ſ	cho ⌐	chu Լ	cha Լ	-
M má ٦	me Γ	mo ⌐	mu L	ma L	‹
N ná ᴅ	ne σ	no ᴐ	nu ᴑ	na ȧ	›
S sá ٦	se ⟨	so ⟩	su ٦	sa ٦	^
Y yá ⟨	ye ⟩	yo ⟨	yu ⟩	ya ⟩	

Final w . . . •

„ i . . ·

Aspirated final k ·

Extra signs— X = Christ, ꓛ = r, ꓤ = l, = wi,
" = h before a vowel.
" = a soft guttural h when before a consonant.

FIGURE 59. Western Algonquian syllabary (*Book of Common Prayer* n.d.).

users prior to its introduction by other missionaries, who were often reluctant to adopt it. It has been given an indigenous origin in Cree legend (Dusenberry 1962: 267–69), although some have seen its sources in quill and bead work designs.

The Western Algonquian syllabary, in which the Cree dialects west of James Bay are usually written, is the direct descendent of Evans's syllabary. In 1865, changes introduced to this around James Bay (in the 1850s) were standardized, and additional characters were added, to create the Eastern Algonquian syllabary, used to write Cree and Naskapi east of James Bay, as well as Ojibwe. The most used characters of both sets are given in TABLE 55.1 and as syllabary charts in FIGURE 59 (Western), FIGURE 60 (a Roman Catholic variant of Western), and FIGURE 61 (Eastern).
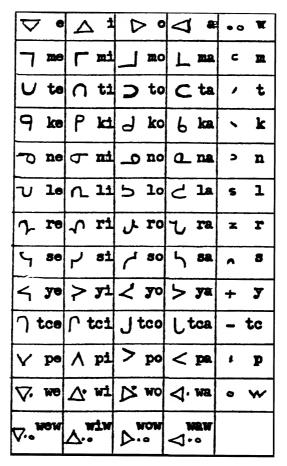
▽ e	△ i	▷ o	◁ æ	● ○ ᵂ
˥ me	˥ mi	˩ mo	˩ ma	c m
∪ te	∩ ti	⊃ to	⊂ ta	⸝ t
⁹ ke	ρ ki	⅃ ko	6 ka	⸜ k
˷ᴑ ne	ᴃ ni	ᴗ no	ᴗ na	⊃ n
∪ le	∩ li	ᴄ lo	ᴐ la	s l
ᴕ re	∿ ri	⅃ ro	ᴜ ra	z r
ᴗ se	ᴕ si	ᴦ so	ᴜ sa	ᴧ s
⊲ ye	⋗ yi	⋖ yo	⋗ ya	+ y
⌐ tce	Γ tci	J tco	∟ tca	– tc
Y pe	∧ pi	⋗ po	⋖ pa	⸝ p
▽᛭ we	△᛭ wi	▷᛭ wo	◁᛭ wa	○ w
▽᛭∙ wew	△᛭∙ wiw	▷᛭∙ wow	◁᛭∙ waw	

FIGURE 60. Western Algonquian syllabary, Roman Catholic variant (*Anamie Nagamonan* 1965).

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ALPHABET,

OR RATHER SYLLABARIUM.

	ā	e, i	ē	o	oo	u	a	
a	▽	△	Ȧ	▷	Ḋ	◁	◁̇	o
p	∨	∧	∧̇	>	>̇	<	<̇	<
t	∪	∩	∩̇	⊃	⊃̇	(	(̇	c
k	９	P	Ṗ	d	ḋ	b	ḃ	b
ch	∩	↑	↑̇	⌐	⌐̇	L	L̇	L
m	⌐	⌐	Γ̇	⌐	⌐̇	L	L̇	L
n	⌐	σ	σ̇	⊿	⊿̇	a	ȧ	ʌ
s	╲	⌐	⌐̇	⌐	⌐̇	╲	╲̇	╲
sh	ʓ	ʃ	ʃ̇	↩	↩̇	ↄ	ↄ̇	ↄ
y	⊲	⊳	⊳̇	⊽	⊽̇	⊾	⊾̇	
r	◡	⌐	⌐̇	?	}̇	ς	ζ	ε
l	⊃	⊂	⊂̇	⊃	⊃̇	⌐	⌐̇	⌐
v	v	∧	∧̇	>	>̇	<	<̇	e
w	·▽	·△	·Ȧ	·▷	·Ḋ	◁·	◁̇·	
X	The character for Christ.

Γ	ȧ	P	a	⊃	(	L	∩·
me	na	ke	nu	to	tu	ma	tin

FIGURE 61. Eastern Algonquian syllabary (Horden 1925).

flection thus: ▷ *o*, ◁ *a*. The vowels form the first row of the chart in that order, following the alphabetical order of Evans's Ojibwe Roman orthography, which used the letters *a e o u* for the same sounds.

Consonant-initial syllables (except those beginning with |w|) are written with syllabics in which the shape shows the consonant, and the orientation shows the vowel. There are two orientation patterns. First, symmetrical shapes for [p] and [t] share the vowel orientations of the vowel triangle, e.g. ∨ *pe*, ∧ *pi*, > *po*, < *pa*, as does the

nonsymmetrical shape for [ʃ]: ꄵ *še*, ꄱ *ši*, ꄳ *šo*, ꄴ *ša*. Second, the nonsymmetrical shapes for [k], [tʃ], [m], [n], [s], and [j]—consisting of a vertical line (in the case of [n], a circle) with a differentiating angle, curve, line, or circle at one quadrant—have the front vowels related to the back vowels by inversion, with the vowels within each set distinguished by reflection, e.g. ꄵ *se*, ꄲ *si*, ꄼ *so*, ꄶ *sa*. As Cree dialects from Manitoba west do not have [ʃ], its row is usually left out of Western syllabaries, although it appears in the original syllabary intended for Ojibwe. The order of the consonant rows in the syllabary charts derives from that in Evans's Ojibwe Roman orthography chart.

The consonants [l] and [r], needed in certain Cree dialects and in foreign words and names, are written in the original Western syllabary with an alphabetic character, reflected to distinguish the two as ꃱ *l* and ꃿ *r*. The Eastern syllabary has full syllabics for [l], namely � *le*, ꃾ *li*, ꃸ *lo*, ꃼ *la* in the second orientation pattern; and for [r], namely ꃻ *re*, ꃺ *ri*, ? *ro*, ꃵ *ra*, with a unique orientation pattern. These sets are ordered at or near the end of the chart. The Western Roman Catholic syllabary in FIGURE 60 has different syllabics for [r] and [l], and a different order of the rows.

Prevocalic [w] is written with a dot at mid line (some local styles use two dots, one above the other). The symbol follows the syllabic in Western, but precedes it in Eastern, and in Western as written on James Bay. The |w| syllabics thus are Western ▽· *we*, △· *wi*, ▷· *wo*, ◁· *wa*, and Eastern ·▽ ·△ ·▷ ·◁. The [w] row may be added to the chart after the vowel row or following the [j] row; or the [w] dot may be treated on the side as a diacritic, or left off the chart entirely. A CwV syllable is written in the same way, with the [w] dot written outside the syllabic although it sounds inside the syllable, e.g. Western ∨· *pwe*, Eastern ·∨.

Consonants closing a syllable are written with small alphabetic characters, called *finals*, originally at mid line, but now usually superscripted; local usage in writing position and relative size varies. The finals are given as a fifth column of the chart following the four vowel columns.

The shape of the Western finals indicates the manner of articulation of the consonant, with the orientation (and in one instance, size) providing further differentiation. A straight line represents oral stops, thus ' -*p*, ´ -*t*, ` -*k*, ⌐ -*c*. A vertical semicircle represents nasals, with ᒼ -*m* and ᐟ -*n* distinguished by reflection. A horizontal semicircle represents sibilants, with ᵔ -*s* and ᵕ -*š* distinguished by inversion. A circle represents semivowels, large and at midline as ᴑ -*w*; and small and above, or as a superscript to a syllabic, as ° -*y*, now usually written with the final ᐝ -*y* in Western Canada.

All but the [w] and [j] finals are replaced in the Eastern syllabary with small *a*-orientation syllabics, e.g. ᐢ -*n*, sometimes handwritten as superscripted or full-size *i*-position syllabics, e.g. ᣓ -*n* or ᣔ *ni*. As in the Western syllabary, a large midline circle ᴑ stands for final [w] and a small superposed or superscripted circle ° for final [j], although many writers use either size of circle for both |w| and [j], or replace the [j] circle with an *a*-position [j] syllabic ᕀ or an *i*-position |j| syllabic ᣇ. Added for word-final Cw clusters in a Quebec Cree dialect are small *o*-position syllabics, e.g. ᑫ -*kw*.

The initial member of a consonant cluster can be written with a final, e.g. Cree ⌐^∩` *mistik* 'tree', ⊲⌐^^ *amisk* 'beaver'. In Ojibwe, writing the initial nasal of a consonant cluster is optional.

[h] or [ʔ] before vowels, or the preaspiration of consonants, may be written with the final " *-h*, e.g. Cree ᒪ"ᐃᐊᑲᐧ *mahîhkan* 'wolf', ⊲^ᖴ"` *askihk* 'kettle, pail'. This character is often treated as the final for the vowel row in syllabary charts but is sometimes omitted from them; writing [h] is an optional feature, used mainly in pointed syllabics. In some styles the most common word-final clusters may be written with ˟, [hk] in Cree and [nk] in Ojibwe.

Vowel length may be marked with a dot over a syllabic, except that [eː] does not contrast with a short vowel and is never so marked. In the earliest syllabic printing, long vowels were shown by slashed or bold syllabics; the superposed dot was intended as the vowel length diacritic only in handwriting. The marking of vowel length is now optional, a feature of pointed syllabics. Some charts add an [aː] column (FIGURE 59), some add three long vowel columns (FIGURE 61), and some treat it on the side as a diacritic or omit it.

Modified *p* and *t* syllabics are available in Eastern for [f] and [ð] in foreign words. Barred *y* syllabics have recently been proposed for Cree dialects with [ð], only one of several recent local innovations in character inventory and shape.

SAMPLE OF NORTHERN OJIBWE IN THE EASTERN SYLLABARY

1. Plain:	⊲ᐱᒋ	·∇ᑕ^	∇ᓂᑕᐧ·ᐃ^·ᖅᐱᒋ∧ᐃ△ᖅᵇ
2. Transliteration:	a-pi-ci	we-tan	e-ni-ta-wkash-wke-pi-ci-pi-i-kek
3. Pointed:	⊲"ᐱᒋ	·∇ᵃᑕ^	∇ᓂ"ᑕᐧ·ᐃ^·ᖅᐱᒋ∧ᐃ"△ᖅᵃᵇ
4. Transliteration:	āh-pi-ci	wen-tan	e-nih-tā-wkāsh-wke-pi-ci-pīh-i-kenk
5. Orthography 1:	aahpici	wentan	e-nihtaa-kwaashkwepicipii'ikenk
6. Orthography 2:	Aapiji	wendan	e-nitaa-gwaashkwebijibii'igeng
7. Transcription:	aːhpidʒi	weːndan	eːnihtaːgwaːʃkweːbidʒibiːʔigeːng
8. Gloss:	very.much	is.easy	knowing.how.to.write.syllabics

1. <ᑕᓂᑕ⊲ᓂᔑᓇᐁ⅃ᵇ,		∇ᑕ	ᒣᐃᔑ ᓂᒪᒪ
2. pa-ta-ni-ta-a-ni-shi-na-pe-mok,		e-ta	me-wi-sha ni-ma-ma
3. <"ᒋᓂ"ᒋ⊲ᓂ"ᔑᑕᐁ⅃ᵃᵇ,		∇"ᑕˣ	ᒣᐃᵃᔑ ᓂᒪᒪ
4. pāh-tā-nih-tā-a-nih-shi-nā-pe-monk,		eh-ta.	me-win-sha ni-mā-mā
5. paahtaa-nihtaa-anihshinaapemonk,		ehta.	mewinsha nimaamaa
6. baataa-nitaa-anishinaabemong,		eta.	Mewinzha nimaamaa
7. baːhtaːnihtaːʔanihʃinaːbeːmong		eːhta	meːwinʒa nimaːmaː
8. being.able.to.speak.Ojibwe		only	long.ago my.mother

1. ᓂᑭᓂᑕᐅᔑᐱᐊᒪᑎᒼ	·ᐊᕐ
2. ni-ki-ni-ta-o-shi-pi-a-ma-ti-min	wa-sa
3. ᓂᗺᓂᐦᑖᐅᔑᐱᐦᐊᒪᑎᒼ	·ᐊᐦᕐ
4. ni-kī-nih-tā-o-shi-pīh-a-mā-ti-min	wāh-sa
5. nkii-nihtaa-oshipii'amaatimin	waahsa
6. ngii-nitaa-ozhibii'amaadimin	waasa
7. ŋgi:nihta:ʔoʒibi:ʔama:dimin	wa:hsa
8. we.used.to.write.to.each.other	far

1. ᑭᑕᔑᑭᑭᓍᐊᒪᑯᔭᐸᓐ		ᐊᕐ	ᐁᑕ	ᐃ·ᐁ ᐅᔑᐱᐃᑲᓐ
2. ki-ta-shi-ki-ki-no-a-ma-ko-ya-pan.		a-mi	e-ta	i-we o-shi-pi-i-kan
3. ᗺᑕᔑᑭᐦᑭᓄᐦᐊᒫᑰᔮᒼᐸᓐ		ᐊᕆ	ᐁᐦᑕ	ᐃ·ᐁ ᐅᔑᐱᐦᐃᑲᓐ
4. kī-ta-shi-kih-ki-noh-a-mā-kō-yām-pān.		a-mī	eh-ta	i-we o-shi-pīh-i-kan
5. kii-tashi-kihkino'amaakooyaampaan.		amii	ehta	iwe oshipii'ikan
6. gii-dazhi-gikino'amaagooyaambaan.		Amii	eta	iwe ozhibii'igan
7. gi:daʒigihkino?ama:go:ja:mba:n		ami:	e:hta	iwe: oʒibi:?igan
8. I.used.to.be.taught.there		and.so	only	that letter/writing

1. ᑲᐅᒋᑭᑫᑕᒪᓐ	ᐊᓂᓐ	ᐁᔑ·ᐁᐸᒃ	ᑲᐃᔑᑕᔭᓐ
2. ka-o-ci-ki-ke-ta-man	a-ni-n	e-shi-we-pak	ka-i-shi-ta-yan.
3. ᑲᐅᓐᒋ ᑭᐦᑫᑕᒫᓐ	ᐋᓂᓐ	ᐁᔑ·ᐁᐸᒃ	ᑲᐃᔑᑖᔮᓐ
4. kā-on-ci-kih-ken-ta-mān	ā-nīn	e-shi-we-pak	kā-i-shi-tā-yān.
5. kaa-onci-kihkentamaan	aaniin	eshiwepak	kaa-ishitaayaan.
6. gaa-onji-gikendamaan	aaniin	ezhiwebag	gaa-izhidaayaan.
7. ga:ondʒigihke:ndama:n	a:ni:n	e:ʒiwe:bag	ga:?iʒida:ja:n
8. by.which.means.I.knew	how	things.were.happening	where.I.lived

1. ᓂᵉ	ᐸᒋᔑᔾ	ᓂᑭ·ᐁᓯ
2. nin	pa-ci-shi-ya	ni-ki-we-si
3. ᓃᵉ	ᐸᒋᔑᔾ	ᓂᵉᑭ·ᐁᵉᓯ
4. nīn	pa-ci-shi-ya	nin-ki-wen-si
5. niin	Pacishiya	Ninkiwensi
6. Niin	Bajishiya	Ningiwenzi
7. ni:n	badʒiʃija	ningiwe:nzi
8. I	Patricia	Ningewance

'It's easy to write in syllabics, only once you are fluent in Ojibwe. Long ago my mother and I used to write to each other when I went to school far away (from home) Letters were the only way I knew what was happening back home. I'm Patricia Ningewance.'

—*Original text by Patricia Ningewance of Lac Seul, Ontario and Winnipeg, Manitoba, lecturer in Ojibwe at the University of Manitoba.*

Note: "Orthography 1" is Northern Ojibwe; "Orthography 2" is Southern Ojibwe (the writer's preference).

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