Meet Cree
A guide to the Cree language

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New and completely revised edition

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Preface

Cree is the most widely spoken indigenous language of Canada.

As an introduction to the major features of the Cree language, this book responds first of all to a practical need: to explore the structure of Cree, to compare it with that of English, and to identify some of the difficulties that speakers of either language experience in learning to speak the other.

An encounter with another language is an aesthetic experience which often goes unrecognized. Like art, language is a prominent medium of cultural expression—as seen in the rich traditional literature of the Cree. But the beauty which lies in the complex structure of language itself is easily overshadowed by practical difficulties. This sketch, in spite of its extremely limited scope, is intended to offer a first glance at the intricacies of the Cree language.

The first edition of this book, published in 1973, was addressed mainly to teachers, nurses, and other Euro-Canadians who live and work in Cree-speaking communities; it was also widely used, we were gratified to discover, in courses on the structure of Cree and as background reading in spoken language programs. While the needs of these two audiences have remained our primary concern in this revised and expanded edition, we have also kept in mind a third: the general reader who may turn to a brief book on the Cree language simply from curiosity.

We are grateful to our friends and colleagues, speakers of both Cree and English, who have in various ways contributed to this book.

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Introduction

This is a book about Cree; it will not teach you to speak Cree. No book alone can do that, for language learning requires practice in several skills: listening to Cree sounds and producing those which have no counterpart in English, forming Cree words and putting them together into sentences, and, finally, using the sentences in new kinds of social situations. Such skills are best taught in the classroom or by a tutor.

To recognize the differences which exist between Cree and English is not only useful in learning to speak Cree. Some of the misunderstandings which arise in cross-cultural situations might well be avoided if there were a greater awareness of language differences.

Knowing something about how a language works is not the same as the ability to speak and understand it. But without some knowledge of the structural plan of Cree, the practical task of language learning would be much more difficult.

Before we can look at Cree, however, we need to take note of some features that all languages share on the following pages.
Language

Speech is a distinctly human ability. Even though certain animals, dolphins for example, are able to communicate with one another to some degree, only human beings can go beyond set messages and the here and now.

We can describe situations which have not been experienced by those who listen. We can create completely new sentences to frame our story. We can talk about events that did not take place (such as My car didn't start, The bus was late, or similar lies of convenience), and we even have words for things that do not exist (such as unicorn or Martian). And we can create words for novel things: both Cree and German, as it happens, came up with words meaning 'flying-thing' when they first needed a term for an artificial bird: Cree pemibakan, German Flugzeug.

When we get tired of our immediate situation, we can talk about things that happened long ago and send verbal signals to one another about events that are yet to take place. Man alone in the animal world can communicate about things and events outside his immediate environment.

Sharing this uniquely human ability, every society in the world has a language, and some are lucky enough to have more than one. We work, play, raise children, share happiness and troubles—all with language. Language not only is the means by which we carry on the daily activities of our society in a particular slice of time; it also ties together succeeding generations. Children everywhere learn the language of their parents, and they learn it in an incredibly short time. Every five-year-old has mastered most of the language structures he or she will need for a lifetime of talking.

Of course, the thousands of languages around the world differ, sometimes drastically, in their sounds (and in many other ways as well). Hearing a foreign language spoken is a baffling experience since its sounds appear to be no more than a jumble of noises. The speaker of the other language, however, has no difficulty in keeping them apart, while your language, in turn, sounds equally unintelligible to him.

Differences between languages rarely "make sense"; it is not a matter of reason or logic that English speakers put their adjectives before nouns, as in Red River, and speakers of French put them after nouns, as in Rivière Rouge, but of linguistic habit. Languages simply are different.

Languages also tend to reflect the preoccupations of a particular culture.

In Arabic, for example, there are many words referring to camels—consider their crucial rôle in traditional desert life—and their parts, whereas the one word, camel, suffices for the needs of most English speakers. A highly mechanized society, on the other hand, demands dozens of words for their favourite mode of transportation and its parts: piston, spark-plug, tie-rod, distributor, etc. Even within one society, not everyone uses the same level of detail in his or her vocabulary; those who make do without a car or know a reliable mechanic may never have to learn the specialized meaning of valve-job. Ordinary city-dwellers will not recognize terms such as beffer, which are common enough in the barnyard, and even in Canada a zoo-keeper may have a fancy camel-vocabulary.

Important matters, it seems, deserve words of their own. But there are other, less obvious indications that our native tongue is not entirely independent of the way we look at the world. Our sense of time, for example, is usually expressed through language. In English verb forms such as be was/is/will be walking, the most prominent feature is a division of time into three discrete parts: past, present, and future. The basic distinction among Russian verb forms, on the other hand, depends on whether the action is complete or incomplete.

Even such seemingly "real" and unalterable things as colours are classified differently in different languages: the Welsh word glas, for instance, covers English blue and part of the ranges of green and grey as well:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>green</th>
<th>blue</th>
<th>grey</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Welsh</td>
<td>glas</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Kin relationships present another case. The English word uncle applies to the brother of either parent. In Cree or in Latin, on the other hand, the two types of uncles are not lumped together:
language, but many societies—in fact the majority—manage quite well with no system of written signs at all. Historically, men (and women too, of course) began to talk to one another centuries before they carved symbolic squiggles onto stones.

Linguistic Patterns

Perhaps the most important trait of language to be examined here is the fact that it is a system.

In all languages words are made up of consonants and vowels. Just how many consonants can be clustered together without a vowel in between varies from language to language, but it is always a definite pattern. In English, for example, we can have *rats* at the end of a word (as in *bursts*) but certainly not at the beginning. Similarly, there are words like *sue* and *soo* and *shoe*—but no English word begins with *sb* (as in *confusion*). Even simple clusters are not free to occur just anywhere. We use *is* in *bats* or *cats* but never at the beginning of a word: most people pronounce *tsetse-fly* as if it were written “*tsetefly*.”

The forms of words fall into patterns which are much easier to recognize than those of sounds. All English verbs, for example, share at least these three forms:

- **they** sing, laugh, dance
- **they are** sing-ing, laugh-ing, dance-ing
- **be/sbe** sings, laugh-s, dance-s

These forms have technical names, to be sure, but it is sufficient to note that the verb which follows *be/sbe* always has an *s*-like sound added to it, that no such sound ever occurs when the verb follows *they*, and that all verbs add *-ing* when they are used with *is/are*.

We can observe the common structure of English verbs even in those cases where the individual forms differ. In the past tenses, for example,
most verbs add -ed but some do not; instead, they use a different vowel, as in sang or swam:

they sang, laugh-ed, dance-d

In spite of the differing forms, however, we can see the same relation between

sing and sang,

laugh and laughed,

dance and danced,

etc.

When words are put together to form sentences, they are again combined systematically. Starting from the examples below, any speaker of English could add new sentences of the same structure without ever stopping:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>John</th>
<th>likes</th>
<th>apples.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The bearded old carpenter ate an entire three-course dinner.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A bald soprano swallowed rotten eggs.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two geniuses were trying to console the crying child.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The columns correspond to word classes such as noun, verb, and adjective, and their roles in the sentence are traditionally known by such terms as subject, object, predicate. But as our example shows, we can recognize the pattern and form new sentences from it without looking at the technical terms.

The emphasis on system in language will be our guiding theme throughout this book. We cannot always manage without technical terms, and in many situations they are useful (sometimes indispensable) as labels for a specific set of examples. But the pattern of actual forms is always more important than the label, and we have tried to give enough examples for the pattern to be recognized.

Sounds are the building blocks from which all utterances are constructed, so we begin our survey of Cree with the sound system. Before we can explore the systematic nature of Cree sounds, however, we need to discuss the issue of Cree dialects; for the local flavour of a language is largely carried by its sounds—in Montréal or Marseille French as in the English of London or New Orleans.

Once we have presented the sound system and discussed the orthography used in this book, we can go on to the very general features which are found in both nouns and verbs; for example, the grammatical category of number which appears in such singular and plural forms as cat : cats or be sings : they sing. Chapters three and four are concerned with the make-up of words while chapter five explores the relationship between words and sentences. Further works about Cree are reviewed in the Appendix.

People do not always speak in sentences. On some occasions we use broken-off pieces of sentences, on others we try to tie a number of sentences together into a paragraph-like structure. The texts of chapter six are examples of connected speech—and of traditional Cree literature.

Cree Dialects

What is "the Cree language"? First of all, even though people often refer to their own language as "the Indian language" this expression must not be taken too literally. There is no one "Indian" language which would be common to all Indians, just as there is no one "White Man's language." Terms of this kind make sense only within a particular region.

In fact, in spite of considerable language loss in North America, well over a hundred indigenous languages are still spoken today, and they may be as different from one another as English is from, say, Japanese.

There are four major dialects of modern Cree: Plains Cree, Swampy Cree, Woods Cree, and Moose Cree. The map shows the various regions in which these dialects are spoken today; in reality, however, the boundaries are much fuzzier than the clear lines on the map suggest on the following page.
The dialects of the Cree language differ in a few sounds and in occasional words, but the differences are relatively minor. Let us look at one word as it appears in the several dialects:

'I'

- niya Plains Cree
- nīna Swampy Cree
- nībā Woods Cree
- nīla Moose Cree

The only difference between these words is a single sound: a y in Plains Cree corresponds to an n in Swampy Cree, a θ in Woods Cree, and an l in Moose Cree. It is this systematic correspondence of y-n-θ-l which sets apart the four major dialects of Cree. To take another example:

'I like him/her'

- nimiywēyimāw Plains Cree
- nimiuwēnimāw Swampy Cree
- nimīθwērimāw Woods Cree
- nimilwēlimāw Moose Cree

Aside from this variation of y-n-θ-l, the dialects of Cree share many common features and a Cree speaker from one dialect community can generally understand a speaker from a neighbouring region, just as an English speaker from Winnipeg can communicate quite easily with a native of Chicago.

In English, French, and other European languages there is usually one dialect which has more prestige than the others. In formal situations, for example, the BBC type of English is regarded as more elegant or more educated than regional dialect, and even in Canada some people try to say new to rhyme with sue rather than with too (an effort which often will merely make them sound silly). In a similar fashion, schoolteachers tend to

*θ (called theta) is pronounced much like the th in the English the or although: in other books it is occasionally spelled tb, db, or b.
regard Parisian French as their model and to look down upon normal Canadian French; there are many French speakers, on the other hand, who make a point of not sounding like a Parisian.

Cree speakers do not have the problem of choosing “the correct way to speak.” Unlike those languages where one dialect is preferred over the others and recognized as “standard,” Cree is equally “proper” when spoken in each and every one of its regional variants.

Plains Cree and Swampy Cree are the most widely spoken dialects; together they account for at least three-quarters of the total number of about sixty-thousand Cree speakers. Most of the examples in this book will fit Plains Cree and Swampy Cree equally well.

The major exception is the use of \( y \) in Plains Cree and of \( n \) in Swampy Cree in the type of words we have illustrated above. To indicate this sound we use a special symbol, \( y \). The letter \( y \) with an acute accent mark, \( ' \), thus indicates the Plains Cree \( y \) which corresponds to Swampy Cree \( n \), Woods Cree \( \theta \), and Moose Cree \( l \).

From this point on, therefore, the Plains Cree words for ‘I’ and ‘I like him/her’ will be written \( niya \) and \( nimiya\-yimaw \). With this special symbol, if we come across a Plains Cree form such as

\[ \text{ka-mi-yitini 'I will give it to you,'} \]

we can predict that in the Swampy Cree region the same form will be \[ \text{ka-mi-nitin.} \]

Similarly,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>'it goes well'</th>
<th>Plains Cree</th>
<th>Swampy Cree</th>
<th>Woods Cree</th>
<th>Moose Cree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>m(i)op(a)yi(w)</td>
<td>Plains Cree</td>
<td>Swampy Cree</td>
<td>Woods Cree</td>
<td>Moose Cree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>m(i)opan(a)yi(w)</td>
<td>Swampy Cree</td>
<td>Woods Cree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>m(i)op(a)Theta(i)w</td>
<td>Woods Cree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>m(i)op(a)l(a)yi(w)</td>
<td>Moose Cree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

or

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>'it is windy'</th>
<th>Plains Cree</th>
<th>Swampy Cree</th>
<th>Woods Cree</th>
<th>Moose Cree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(y)(o)tin</td>
<td>Plains Cree</td>
<td>Swampy Cree</td>
<td>Woods Cree</td>
<td>Moose Cree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(u)(o)tin</td>
<td>Swampy Cree</td>
<td>Woods Cree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(\theta)(o)tin</td>
<td>Woods Cree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(l)(o)tin</td>
<td>Moose Cree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This special \( y \) of Plains Cree can be recognized only when looked at from the point of view of another dialect. Within Plains Cree, it sounds exactly like the ordinary \( y \) which is matched by \( y \) in Swampy Cree and the other two dialects:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>'one'</th>
<th>Plains Cree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>p(e)yak</td>
<td>Swampy Cree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p(e)yak</td>
<td>Woods Cree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p(e)yak</td>
<td>Moose Cree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Contrast two words with the two \( y \)-symbols of Plains Cree:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>'it is difficult'</th>
<th>'properly, straight'</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(a)(n)iman</td>
<td>k(u)w(a)y(a)k</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(a)(n)iman</td>
<td>k(u)w(a)y(a)k</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(a)(n)iman</td>
<td>k(u)w(a)y(a)k</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(a)(n)iman</td>
<td>k(u)w(a)y(a)k</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The use of \( y \), \( n \), \( \theta \), and \( l \) in certain words is the simplest way of telling Cree dialects apart. It is not the only feature, however, which varies from region to region and distinguishes the dialects. In northern Alberta and Saskatchewan, for example, the first vowel of p\(e\)yak will sound like that of n\(i\)ya; in many areas of Manitoba, Swampy Cree has m\(i\)s\(e\)t 'many' instead of the more common m\(i\)h\(e\)t. Where a Cree speaker from central Alberta says e\(a\)-p\(a\)c\(i\)k 'as they sit,' someone from northern Alberta would say e\(a\)-p\(a\)tiw\(a\)w. And, of course, the dialects sometimes use different words; while central Alberta Cree, for example, has o\(s\)i for 'canoe,' most of the other dialects use am\(a\)n. These more localized dialect variations which are found in many communities are confusing when you read about them in a book—and they would take a fairly massive book to describe them all. Fortunately, they are quite easy to learn on the spot.

Finally, there are several other languages (for instance Ojibwa or Saulteau) which are closely related to Cree. Just as German bundert is similar in sound to English hundred (and identical in meaning), so Cree p\(a\)si\(w\) 'he embarks, gets aboard' is similar to Ojibwa p\(o\)s\(i\) and so Cree m\(i\)p\(a\)w
'he sleeps' matches Ojibwa *nipâ*. Similarities like these give an impression of familiarity which is quite deceptive; they are the exception rather than the rule. Cree and Ojibwa are distinct, separate languages whose speakers cannot understand one another any more than the speakers of English can understand German. Yet Cree is more similar to Ojibwa than either is to English. From a wider perspective, the basic structural plans of closely related languages are remarkably similar.

1 The Sounds of Cree

In speaking about sounds we mean the real, audible sounds of a language; that is, we mean neither the letters used to represent these sounds in writing (a, b, c, and so on) nor the names of these letters (for instance, the name “bee” for b or the name “eye” for i). Only some languages have been written down with letters, but all languages have sounds.

The sounds of a language can be approached from two perspectives. The first is to take note of all the minute sound variations which occur in normal speech; their number is extremely large. The second is to describe only those sounds that are distinctive—in other words, only the sounds which are sufficiently different from other sounds to signal a difference in meaning. The second is a less ambitious task perhaps, yet more useful, and our study of Cree will chiefly take this second approach. However, an English example of the first kind of description may help us to understand both more clearly.

Distinctive Sounds

Try saying these two words aloud:

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pin: spin
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You will notice that there is a slight difference between the *p*-sound in *pin*,