



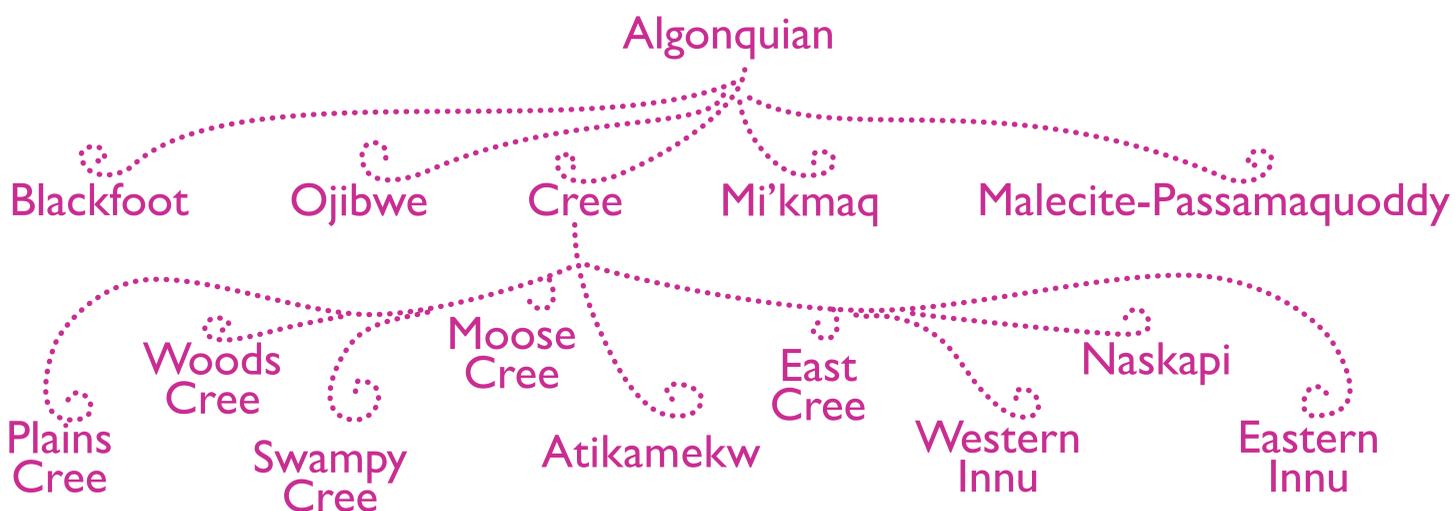
Did you know that **more people speak Cree than any other Canadian aboriginal language**? In 2011, 100,355 Canadians reported a Cree dialect as their mother tongue.

Cree is spoken across a vast area, from the Atlantic Ocean to the Rocky Mountains. Cree is one of the eleven official languages of the Northwest Territories and one of the two principal languages of the James Bay regional government in Québec.



Association PeopleLoup

Cree is part of the Algonquian language family, which includes other aboriginal languages of Canada.



Cree speakers do not use the word 'Cree' to refer to themselves or to their language. The names *Cree*, *Atikamekw*, *Montagnais*, and *Naskapi* were all coined by non-Cree speakers.

In some dialects, the people refer to themselves as **Nehiyaw** and to their language as the **Nehiyaw language**:

<i>nêhiyawêwin</i>	<i>nîhithawîwin</i>	<i>nehirawimowin</i>	<i>nehlueun</i>
Plains Cree	Woods Cree	Atikamekw	Western Innu

Other dialects include their word for 'people' in their language name:



All of these can be translated as **'the people's language.'**

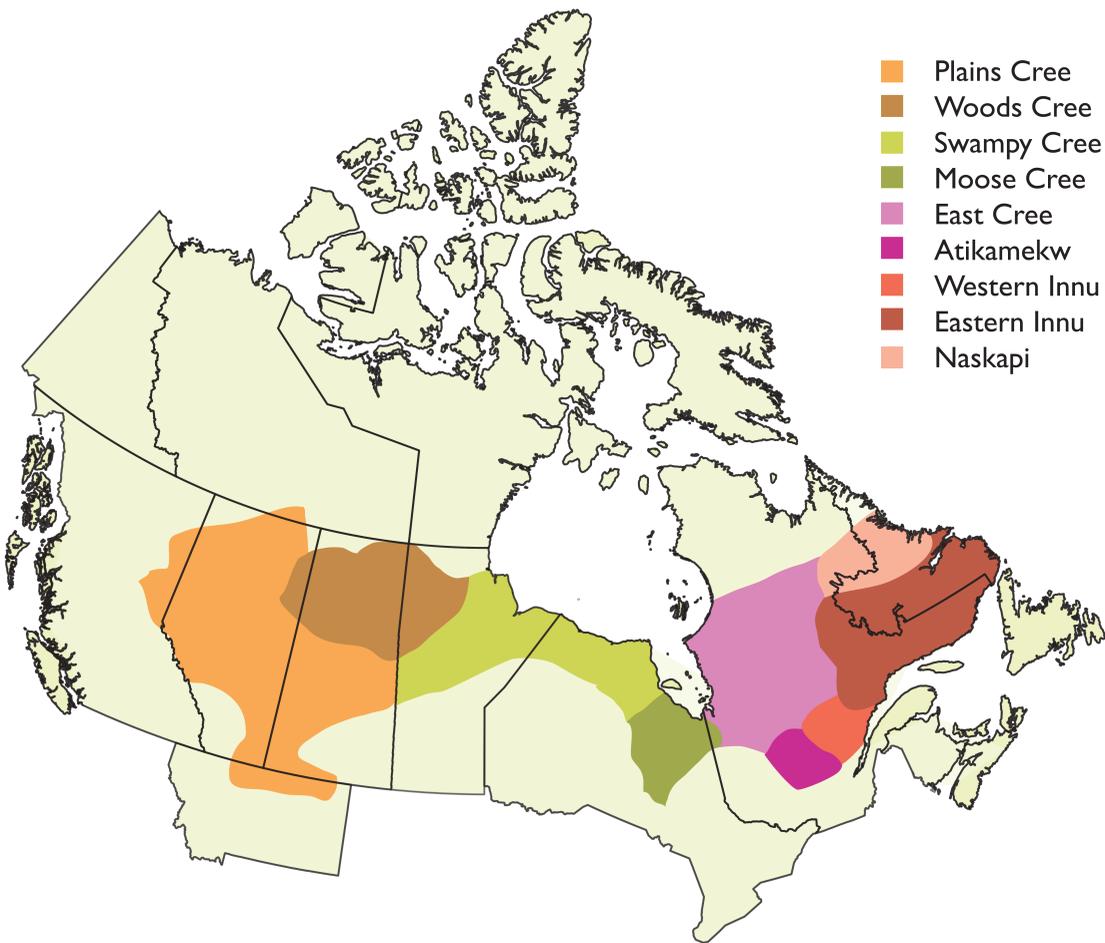


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CREE DIALECTS

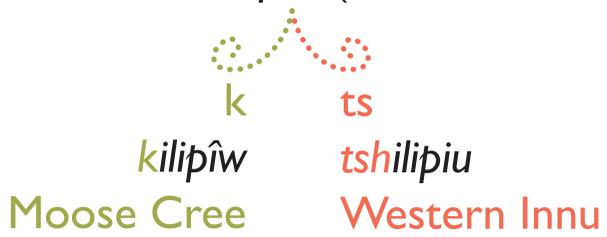
The Cree language is a **dialect continuum**. This means that the dialects of neighbouring communities share many features, but geographically distant dialects can be very different. Cree-speakers from Labrador will have difficulty communicating in their dialect with Cree-speakers from Alberta, if they manage to communicate at all!



Cree dialects are categorized according to the way they have preserved sounds from the ancestral form of the language. Dialects west of Québec have retained the ancestral **k** sound, but other dialects, except for Atikamekw, have changed that sound to **ch** or **ts** before the vowels **i** and **e**.

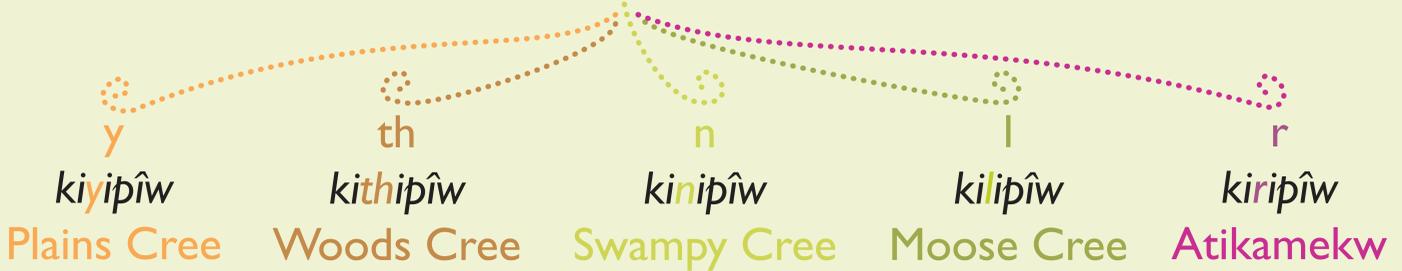
Reading Cree:
 a vowel with ^ over it is pronounced long, so
 î = ii

Ancestral **k** **kiripîw* (he or she is fast)



Cree dialects are further categorized according to their pronunciation of the ancestral **r**:

Ancestral **r** **kiripîw* (he or she is fast)



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SUCH LONG WORDS!

Like most indigenous languages of North America, Cree is **polysynthetic**. This means that a single word in Cree can express complex ideas that would need many separate words in other languages. For example, nine English words are needed to translate this Cree word:

ošêta^hwahkahamwak

ridgeline-elevation of dry land-walk-they

They walk along a ridgeline elevation of dry land.

Reading Cree:
The symbol š is pronounced *sh*.



Quinn Dombrowski

Matt MacGillivray

Like other polysynthetic languages, Cree can create longer verbs by combining existing words. The following three sentences all have essentially the same meaning, but with slightly different emphases. In the first sentence, the concepts ‘run,’ ‘wear,’ and ‘snowshoes’ are all expressed as separate words.

pimipahtâw ê-kikiškawât asâma
she/he runs wearing snowshoes

In the next sentence, **asâm** (snowshoe) is incorporated into the verb ‘wearing,’ creating a new verb, ‘snowshoe-wearing.’

pimipahtâw ê-kikasâmêt
she/he runs snowshoe-wearing

In the third sentence, both ‘wear’ and ‘snowshoe’ are combined with ‘run’ to create a verb that expresses a type of running: ‘snowshoe-wearing-running.’ The whole sentence is now expressed by a single word!

kikasâmêpahtâw
wear.snowshoes.run.s/he
she/he runs wearing snowshoes.

Cree words can include *classifiers*, short chunks of words that indicate an object’s shape or material.

wâp- (white) + -âskw- (long and rigid) → wâpâskwan (white stick)
wâp- (white) + -âpêk- (string-like) → wâpâpêkan (white string)
wâp- (white) + -êk- (flat and thin) → wâpêkan (white sheet)

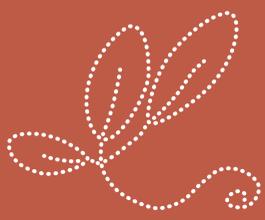
All of the words below mean ‘It is long’ but each one is referring to a different object. Can you guess the shape of the object that is being described?

kinwâskwan

kinwâpêkan

kinwêkan

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ANIMACY AND INANIMACY

Many languages divide all nouns into two categories or genders: masculine and feminine. Cree also **divides all nouns into two categories**, but these are **animate** and **inanimate**.

Animate nouns tend to refer to things that are alive, such as *awâsis* (child), and inanimate nouns tend to refer to things that are not alive, such as *masinahikan* (book). However, this is not always the case, and the category is not always predictable. Small plants tend to be inanimate, but trees are animate. Similarly, most fruits are inanimate, while a few, like raspberries, are animate.

ANIMATE

miskwamiy (ice)
êmihkwân (spoon)
asâm (snowshoe)
ayôskan (raspberry)

INANIMATE

nîpiy (water)
môhkomân (knife)
maskisin (shoe)
iyinimin (blueberry)



Several parts of sentences will change to agree with the animacy of the nouns they contain.

Can you see how the verb ‘like’ and the word ‘this’ change in these sentences?

nimiywêyimâw awa awâsis.
I like **this** child. (animate)

nimiywêyihtên ôma masinahikan.
I like **this** book. (inanimate)

Cree speakers use a different verb for ‘eat,’ depending on whether the food is animate or inanimate!

nimowâwak ayôskanak
I - **eat** raspberries
'I'm **eating** raspberries.'

nimîcin iyinimina
I - **eat** blueberries
'I'm **eating** blueberries.'

Reading Cree:
The letter **c** is pronounced **ts**.

Did you notice the different plural endings for the animate and inanimate nouns? Animate nouns add *-ak* to make plurals, and inanimate nouns add *-a*.

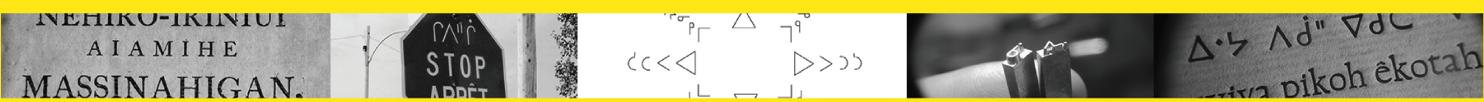
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WRITING CREE

Traditionally, Cree people pass information from one generation to the next orally. Elders and storytellers are highly respected for their knowledge of their people's history, traditions, and culture.

In the past, non-verbal communication methods were also used. Sticks planted into the ground could convey messages such as the direction and distance to a camp or whether help was needed.



Christopher Chen

After Cree speakers came into contact with Europeans, Roman alphabet writing systems were developed and are still in use for nearly all dialects.

Additionally, a **syllabic writing system** was developed over 150 years ago and is used today to write all Cree dialects from Alberta to Ontario, as well as the East Cree and Naskapi dialects of Québec.

Each syllabic symbol represents a consonant and vowel pair. The symbol's shape indicates the consonant and its orientation indicates the following vowel.

DID YOU KNOW?

The first book printed in Canada was written in Cree with the Roman alphabet. **Nehiro-iriniwi aimihe massinahigan** was printed in Quebec City in 1767.

▽ ▲ > <
pe pi po pa

U ∩ ∪ ∘
te ti to ta

The triangle symbol ▲ represents a vowel alone.

▽ e ▷ o
▲ i ◁ a

A dot over the symbol indicates the vowel is long:

↳ = ya
↳̇ = yâ (yaa)

	e	i	o	a	Finals	
	▽	▲	▷	◁	West	East
p	▽	▲	▷	◁	l	<
t	U	∩	∪	∘	/	c
c	∩	∪	∩	∪	-	u
k	9	p	d	b	\	b d
m	7	Γ	J	L	c	L J
n	6	σ	6	9	∪	e
s	6	∩	∩	∩	∩	∩
š	∩	∩	∩	∩	∩	∩
y	4	∩	∩	∩	+	∩
l	∩	∩	∩	∩	∩	∩
w	▽̇	▲̇	▷̇	◁̇		o

Small superscript symbols called 'finals' are used to represent consonants with no following vowel, often found at the end of words. Dialects to the west of Moose Cree use the 'West' finals, while Naskapi, East Cree, and Moose Cree use the 'East' finals.

σ̇ ᵇ
σ (ni) + ᵇ (s) + ᵇ (ka) = *niska*
(Canada goose)

ṧ ṧ <
ṧ (šî) + ṧ (šî) + < (p) = *šîšîp*
(duck)

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THE FUTURE

With its high number of speakers, Cree is one of the three most secure Aboriginal languages in Canada, along with Ojibwe and Inuktitut. Nonetheless, Cree faces an uncertain future. As more young people switch to French or English as their primary language, fewer people are using Cree on a daily basis and fewer children are learning it as their first language.

One challenge for Cree is creating words for new technologies. Because there are so many different dialects of Cree, and no method to standardize the language across the country, many different terms are often created for a single concept. For instance, many different words meaning ‘telephone’ have been coined in Cree dialects across Canada.

Telephone

ayamâkan (tool for talking) - Plains Cree

sêwêpicikan (ringer) - Plains Cree

tâhkâpihkenikan (contact-string) - Atikamekw

ayamihitowinêyâpiy (conversation-string) - Moose Cree

kâ-ohci-ayaminâniwahk (that which is used for talking) - Moose Cree

kaaiminaanuuch (the talking) - Naskapi

kaimitunanut (the conversation) - Innu

kaimimakak (that which talks) - Innu



Norton Ip

Standardizing spelling has also been a challenge for many Cree dialects, as well as the lack of sufficient resources to develop good teaching materials.

Across Canada, efforts are being made to support and promote the use of the Cree language. Cree is increasingly being taught in community centres, schools, colleges, and universities. Contemporary songs, radio shows, TV shows, live theatre, and films feature spoken Cree.

As more Cree communities have become connected to the Internet, online language tools, including dictionaries, interactive lessons and games, are growing in popularity.

Given the challenges the Cree language faces, sustained commitment will be necessary in all regions to ensure that future generations will speak Cree and the language will continue to breathe life into Cree communities across the country.

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