the sounds of plains cree:
a guide to pronunciation

Drawing on the scholarship of Arok Wolvengrey, Jean Okimâsis, and others at the Cree Editing Council in Saskatchewan, as well as on that of Freda Ahenakew and H. Christoph Wolfart, I have used the Standard Roman Orthography (SRO) to represent the sounds of nêhiyawêwin, the Plains Cree language. The work of these scholars has contributed greatly to the accurate preservation of Plains Cree pronunciation. The description below is based on Okimâsis and Wolvengrey’s How to Spell It in Cree, especially chapter 3, “What to Use to Spell in Cree.”

Plains Cree has ten consonants: c, h, k, m, n, p, s, t, w, and y. The consonants h, m, n, s, w, and y sound very similar to their counterparts in English. The consonants c, k, p, and t, however, differ from their English counterparts.

The letter c most commonly represents the ts sound we hear in the English word “bats,” although in some dialects or regional variations of Plains Cree, the c sounds more like the ch in “batch.” In contrast to English, the c never represents the sound of a k (“call”) or an s (“cinnamon”).

The letter k sounds like the k in “skate,” falling roughly between the k in “Kate” and the g in “gate.”

The letter p sounds like the p in “spit,” falling roughly between the p in “pit” and the b in “bit.”
The letter t sounds like the t in “steal,” falling roughly between the t in “teal” and the d in “deal.”

Plains Cree has three short vowels (a, i, o) and four long vowels (â, i, ô, and ê).

- a sounds like the English a in “above” and the English u in “upheaval,” but never like the u in “use” or “put”

- â sounds somewhat like the English a in “rather” or the a in the word “father” if it were spoken with an Irish accent (Okimâsis and Wolvengrey, 7)

- i sounds like the English i in “pit” or “mitt,” but never like the i in “pine” or “mine”

- î sounds like the English i in “nectarine,” but never like the i in “fine”

- o sounds like the English o in “only” or the oo in “foot” or the u in “put”

- ô sounds like the English o in “toe” or oa in “coat,” and sometimes like the oo in “moose”

- ê sounds like the English aay in “bay” or ai in “grain.” The vowel è has no short counterpart.

The “h-consonant” cluster, as Okimâsis and Wolvengrey call it, occurs whenever an h precedes any consonant C. It has a significant effect on the vowel that precedes the h, in most cases equalizing the difference between long and short. This means that it can be very
difficult to distinguish between a short and a long vowel before an \( hC \) cluster.

Plains Cree has distinct and predictable patterns of stress, which are quite independent of vowel length. Two-syllable words generally place the stress on the last or ultimate syllable, as in \( \text{pêyak} \) (pay \( \text{yuk} \)) or \( \text{atim} \) (uh \( \text{tim} \)). Words with three or more syllables place the greatest stress on the third to last, or antepenultimate, syllable, as in \( \text{awâsis} \) (uh \( \text{waa sis} \)) or \( \text{awâsisak} \) (uh \( \text{waa sis suk} \)). Words of five or more syllables place a slight secondary stress on every second syllable preceding the antepenultimate syllable. For example, \( \text{nitâniskotâpân} \) is pronounced “ni \( \text{taa nis ko taa paan} \).” These patterns of stress lend a melodic quality to Plains Cree speech that makes the language very pleasurable to hear.

Readers interested in learning more about Plains Cree grammar and pronunciation will find a variety of sources listed in the bibliography. This book is also accompanied by an audio version, available on the AU Press website.