Background of Ojibwe (Anishinaabemowin)

The language commonly identified as Ojibwe is actually a set of more or less mutually intelligible dialects extending over a vast area of Canada and the Great Lakes states of the U.S. The dialects fall into two broad groupings along a north/south axis. Within the northern group is Oji-Cree, spoken in northern Ontario, and Algonquin, spoken in Quebec and northeastern Ontario. The southern group includes: Odawa (also called Ottawa), spoken along the shores of Lake Huron and Georgian Bay; Eastern Ojibwa, spoken in southeastern Ontario; Southwestern Ojibwe, spoken in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and adjacent portions of Ontario; Saulteaux, spoken in northern Ontario, and in Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta. Transitional dialects between the two main groups include Northern Ojibwe, spoken in northern Ontario, and Nipissing Algonquin, spoken in Quebec. These dialects create a tapestry of interlocking language communities, each with quite distinct cultural and linguistic traditions. The total number of speakers of all Ojibwe dialects taken together is said to be around 50,000, but such a figure is very uncertain due to the rapid attrition of the language that is occurring due to most Ojibwe speakers being bilingual with English or French.
Ojibwe belongs to the Algonquian family of languages, which includes the following languages:

- Wiyot
- Yurok
- Anášana-
- Cheyenne
- Blackfoot
- Fox-Sauk-Kiakapoo
- Naskapi-Montagnais-Atikamekw-Cree
- Menominee
- Ojibwe-Odawa-Nipissing-Algonquin
- OjiCree-Saulteaux
- Potawatomi
- Miami-Illinois-Peoria
- Shawnee
- Delaware
- Natick-Narragansett
- Penobscot-Acadian
- Malecite-Passamaquoddy
- Micmac

**Figure 1: Ojibwe Dialects**

**Figure 2: The Algonquian Language Family**
Ojibwe is customarily called Anishinaabemowin in Ojibwe, though some dialects use Ojibwemowin as well. The word for an Ojibwe person is Anishinaabe. I will use this word to refer to Ojibwe people.

**Writing Systems**

Anishinaabe people use two distinct writing systems. In the south, an alphabetic Roman orthography is used. This writing system was invented in the 1950's by Charles Fiero, a missionary, for use in Minnesota. It is often called the "Double Vowel" system, due its use of doubled-vowel letters to represent long vowels, of which there are 4 in Anishinaabemowin. The vowel symbols are used:

- short vowels: a i o
- long vowels: aa ii oo e
- consonants: b p d t g k z s zh sh n m w y`

Example words: Anishinaabe, 'Ojibwe person'; nika, 'Canada goose'

In the north, a distinct system exists, called syllabics, because each letter stands not for an individual consonant or vowel sound, but for a whole syllable. This syllabary was created by a Methodist missionary named James Evans, at the community of Norway House, in northern Manitoba, in the 1830's. Evans based his syllabary on a British shorthand system. In 1841 Evans published a hymn book in syllabics, using handmade type, and the syllabary rapidly spread among Cree and Ojibwe people without the aid of
missionaries, who were often reluctant to use it, as the newly literate quickly taught the system to others. The syllabary has been given a mythical origin in some areas, while in other places it is said to originate from traditional Algonquian bead and quillwork patterns. Its distinctiveness from the colonial alphabetic writing system has contributed immensely to its popularity, and fueled much grassroots speculation concerning its indigenous origins.

![Figure 3: James Evans](image)

**Sequoyah**

Part of the motivation for Evans's development of a syllabary may have been the reports in the missionary press of the time concerning the considerable success of Sequoyah's syllabary. The following material on Sequoyah is from the Encyclopedia Britannica:

Sequoyah was probably the son of a British trader named Nathaniel Gist. Reared by his Cherokee mother in the Tennessee country, he never learned to speak, read, or write English. He was an accomplished silversmith,
painter, and warrior and served with the U.S. Army in the Creek War in 1813-14.

![Sequoyah](image)

**Figure 4: Sequoyah**

Sequoyah became convinced that the secret of the white people's superior power was written language, which enabled them to accumulate and transmit more knowledge than was possible for a people dependent on memory and word of mouth. Accordingly, about 1809 he began working to develop a system of writing for the Cherokees, believing that increased knowledge would help them maintain their independence from the whites. He experimented first with pictographs and then with symbols representing the syllables of the spoken Cherokee language, adapting letters from English, Greek, and Hebrew. His daughter helped him to identify the Cherokee syllables. By 1821 he had created a system of 86 symbols, representing all the syllables of the Cherokee language.

Sequoyah convinced his people of the utility of his syllabary by transmitting messages between the Cherokees of Arkansas (with whom he
went to live) and those of the east and by teaching his daughter and other young people of the tribe to write. The simplicity of his system enabled pupils to learn it rapidly, and soon Cherokees throughout the nation were teaching it in their schools and publishing books and newspapers in their own Cherokee language.

| D_a    | R_e    | T_i    | ð_o    | O_u    | i_v    |
| S_ga   | T_ge   | Y_gi   | ð_o    | J_gu   | E_gv   |
| O_ha   | ð_hi   | ð_hi   | ð_yo   | ð_hy   | ð_hv   |
| W_la   | ð_li   | ð_li   | ð_li   | ð_li   | ð_li   |
| ð_mam  | ð_me   | ð_me   | ð_me   | ð_me   | ð_me   |
| ð_nan  | ð_need | ð_need | ð_need | ð_need | ð_need |
| ð_qua  | ð_que  | ð_que  | ð_que  | ð_que  | ð_que  |
| ð_sea  | ð_she  | ð_she  | ð_she  | ð_she  | ð_she  |
| ð_de_k  | ð_de_k  | ð_de_k  | ð_de_k  | ð_de_k  | ð_de_k  |
| ð_tle  | ð_tle  | ð_tle  | ð_tle  | ð_tle  | ð_tle  |
| ð_tse  | ð_tse  | ð_tse  | ð_tse  | ð_tse  | ð_tse  |
| ð_we  | ð_we  | ð_we  | ð_we  | ð_we  | ð_we  |
| ð_ya  | ð_ya  | ð_ya  | ð_ya  | ð_ya  | ð_ya  |

Figure 5: The Cherokee Syllabary
The Cree and Ojibwe Syllabary

Evans was also familiar with Roman shorthand and the Devanagari script used widely throughout India. The system that Evans devised was quite amazing in its symmetry. While he originally designed it for use with Anishinaabemowin, his mission society allegedly would not allow him to use it. It was only later when he began working with the Cree that he had the opportunity to use it.

I will first lay out the basic system and then discuss its features.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>e</th>
<th>i/ii</th>
<th>o/oo</th>
<th>a/aa</th>
<th>Final</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>w</td>
<td>•▼</td>
<td>•▼</td>
<td>•▼</td>
<td>•▼</td>
<td>•○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b/p</td>
<td>▼</td>
<td>▼</td>
<td>&gt;</td>
<td>&lt;</td>
<td>&lt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d/t</td>
<td>▽</td>
<td>▽</td>
<td>▽</td>
<td>▽</td>
<td>▽</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>j/ch</td>
<td>ㄱ</td>
<td>ㄱ</td>
<td>ㅈ</td>
<td>ㄴ</td>
<td>ㄴ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>g/k</td>
<td>ㄱ</td>
<td>ㄱ</td>
<td>ㅇ</td>
<td>ㄴ</td>
<td>ㄴ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>m</td>
<td>ㄴ</td>
<td>ㄴ</td>
<td>ㄴ</td>
<td>ㄴ</td>
<td>ㄴ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>ㅅ</td>
<td>ㅅ</td>
<td>ㅅ</td>
<td>ㅅ</td>
<td>ㅅ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>z/s</td>
<td>ㅈ</td>
<td>ㅈ</td>
<td>ㅈ</td>
<td>ㅈ</td>
<td>ㅈ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>zh/sh</td>
<td>ㅈ</td>
<td>ㅈ</td>
<td>ㅈ</td>
<td>ㅈ</td>
<td>ㅈ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>y</td>
<td>ㅅ</td>
<td>ㅅ</td>
<td>ㅅ</td>
<td>ㅅ</td>
<td>ㅅ</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 6: Cree and Ojibwe Syllabary**
From this chart we can see that for all syllables, no distinction is made between long vowels and short vowels, a crucial distinction in Ojibwe phonology. Furthermore, the distinction between weak and strong consonants, such as b (weak) versus p (strong), and d (weak) versus t (strong), is also ignored. Thus a given syllabic symbol can represent up to four distinct syllables of Ojibwe, as in the following:

- **dagoshin**  
  'arrive'
- **daawin**  
  'town, village'
- **mitakamigaa**  
  'there is bare ground'
- **nitaa-**  
  'be good at…'

In syllabics, all four of these distinct syllables are written with the same character, C. This means that one must be fluent in the language in order to properly decode the meanings of messages written in syllabics, because the distinctions that are neutralized are very important, being essentially equivalent to the English contrasts between p/b, d/t and g/k, as well as the vowel distinctions in *heed* versus *hid*, and *mate* versus *met*, among others.

The next thing to notice is that the symbols are systematically organized according to two basic parameters: their shapes, which provides their consonantal values (or none, in the case of vowel-only symbols); and their orientation, which provides their vowel values. For example, simple vowels are represented with a triangle. The determination of vowel quality (as *a, e, i* or *o*), however, is according to the orientation of the triangle.
pointing down indicates \( e \) \( \nabla \)
pointing up indicates \( i/ii \) \( \Delta \)
pointing left indicates \( a/aa \) \( \triangleleft \)
pointing right indicates \( o/oo \) \( \triangleright \)

Notice that the symbols for the syllables \( pe, pii, poo, paa \) show the same pattern. The shape is different, in that one side of the triangle has been removed. But the vowel-orientation parameters are the same as those for the vowels:

pointing down indicates \( pe \) (or \( be \)) \( \nabla \)
pointing up indicates \( pi/pii \) (or \( bi/bii \)) \( \wedge \)
pointing left indicates \( pa/paa \) (or \( ba/baa \)) \( \triangleleft \)
pointing right indicates \( po/poo \) (or \( bo/boo \)) \( \triangleright \)

The same principles apply to the syllabics for \( te, tii, too, taa \). Here the shape is that of a U, though it flattens in its left-right oriented forms. But again, we find:

pointing down indicates \( te \) (or \( de \)) \( \cup \)
pointing up indicates \( ti/tii \) (or \( di/dii \)) \( \cap \)
pointing left indicates \( ta/taa \) (or \( da/daa \)) \( \subset \)
pointing right indicates \( to/too \) (or \( do/doo \)) \( \supset \)
The rest of the syllabic characters show a different orientational pattern. This can be seen, for example, with the symbols ke, kii, koo, kaa:

- Pointing up and to the left indicates ke (or ge)
- Pointing up and to the right indicates ki/kii (or gi/gii)
- Pointing down and to the right indicates ka/kaa (or ga/gaa)
- Pointing down and to the left indicates ko/koo (or go/goo)

This same vowel-orientational pattern applies to all of the remaining syllabic characters.

Let's write a few words to help us understand the system:

- Anishinaabe 'Ojibwe person'
- How many syllables? a ni shi naa be. Five. Now simply find the syllabics to represent these syllables:

- Next try Gichigami 'Lake Superior'
- How many syllables? gi chi ga mi. 4. Now find the syllabics:

- Now one more word: makizin 'shoe'
- How many syllables? ma ki zin. 3. Now find the syllabics:

Here, however, we have a problem, because the last syllable ends in an /n/, that is, it isn't /zi/, but /zin/. This is what the last column of characters in the syllabic chart is designed for, to represent consonant sounds that come at the end of a syllable. These characters are appropriately called finals. Note that their shapes are all simply very small versions of the
syllabic characters for a/aa. For example, the final \( ^{-} \) looks like a little version of the character for ma/maa, \( \text{L} \). So we write makizin, 'shoe' as \( \text{L} \text{P} \text{R} ^{\circ} \).

**Indigenous Origins of Syllabics**

Many people who feel that they were victimized by colonialism desire to distance themselves from colonial identities, and syllabics functions in this important symbolic way for many Anishinaabe people. Its very difference from English writing makes it attractive. Missionaries and aboriginal people have spread syllabics far beyond the two Algonquian languages for which it was designed, Cree and Ojibwe. Syllabics is now used to write Inuktitut, the language of the Inuit, and it is widely used by speakers of Canadian Athapaskan languages, which are related to Navajo and Apache in the U.S. When additional characters are needed, they can readily be created, typically by modifying existing characters in some small way. For example, to represent Inuktitut fe, fii, foo, faa, a small circle is placed on the pe, pii, poo, paa characters.

Because syllabics is an important symbol of cultural sovereignty for many Anishinaabe people, it is not surprising that stories and explanations have appeared which seek to originate syllabics within Algonquian cultural traditions. The most compelling case can be made on the basis of traditional Woodlands decorative patterns, such as we see on the following fire-bag, which was crafted in the early 1980’s in northern Ontario. A fire-bag is a traditional container for flints and other fire-making tools.
Here we can rather clearly see many of the syllabic shapes, such as *ke, kii, koo, kaa, te, tii, too, too,* and *ne, nii, noo,* and *naa.* The following diagram shows two of these relationships, *ke* (قبول) and *naa* (قبول):

---

**Legendary Accounts of the Origin of Syllabics**

Another account of the origin of syllabics, from a website operated by the Samson Cree people of Hobbema, Alberta, suggests that the syllabic system was a gift of the Creator to two widely-separated Cree elders, who then taught it to James Evans:

> Syllabics are characters attached with alphabetical sounds. Historians credit the invention of Syllabics in 1840 to James Evans, a Methodist Minister. Cree Legends hold a different version. Cree Legend indicates
that the syllabic characters were a gift from Kisemanito (Creator) to the Cree people. Kisemanito is said to have given the characters to two Elders namely; Mistanaskowew and Machiminahtik. Mistanaskowew, Badger Bull, was from Western Canada while Machiminahtik, Hunting Rod, was from Eastern Canada. These two Elders received this gift of Syllabics at the same time but independently of each other. James Evans learned about Syllabics from these Elders. He used these Syllabics in the teaching of Christianity to Native People. (from website: 

http://www.wtc.ccinet.ab.ca/nipisihkopahk/SYLLABICS/SYLLABIC_HISTORY/syllabic_history.html)


According to the Montana Cree, the spirits came to one good man and gave him some songs. When he had mastered them, they taught him how to make a type of ink and then showed him how to write on white birch bark. He was told that he must not put down any bad words, for there was great power in his writing. Hence he must exercise every care in the subject matter that he wrote. For a long time, he possessed this ability to write and guarded his secret carefully.

The man grew old. Finally, another spirit came to him and gave him further instruction. This spirit wrote down the names or the initials of all the spirits. When that was done, the spirit showed the old man how to make a little book out of birch bark and how to fasten it onto a piece of
wood. In this book, the old man wrote what amounted to a Cree Bible under the direction of the spirit. He recorded all of the things that happened from the time of Creation down to the present. He faithfully detailed all of the teachings of Ki-sei-men’-to so that there was a record of how the Creator wanted his people to live properly. Toward the end of the instruction period, the spirit mentioned the Wind and said that the Wind was the last of the strong spirits. It can teach man many things, said the spirit, who also warned that the Wind can destroy. The old man put all this material together in his little birch-bark book and returned to his people. From time to time on his way home, he stopped and read all of the material.

When the old man returned to his camp, he taught the people how to read and write. The Cree were very pleased with their new accomplishment, for by now the white men were in this country. The Cree knew that the white traders could read and write, so now they felt that they too were able to communicate among themselves just as well as did their white neighbors. More than that, they were particularly proud of this splendid record, directly from a spirit who had dictated the teachings of Ki-sei-men’-to.

Time went on. The old man died. Before his death, however, he gave this book to one of his friends. No one knows just what happened from then on, but some years later a half breed secured the book, took it to the missionaries, and read the material in it to them. The missionaries
dismissed the good teachings contemptuously and were interested only in learning how to read and write the text. The half breed, who could read the script, taught the missionaries the form. Soon, the missionaries began using this method to write down their Bible, and then started teaching that material to the Cree. Some time later, the same white people claimed that they had invented the form of writing that the Cree use. “That is not so,” says Raining Bird emphatically. “The white men got the material from that breed who stole it.”

**Conclusion**

We have seen that syllabics represents one of the most efficient writings systems ever developed. Extremely systematic, it can be learned in a very short time, though its underspecification of phonemic contrasts makes fluent knowledge of the language a requirement for its interpretation. Almost immediately upon its introduction, it was spread far and wide by Ojibwe and Cree people, and has spread even farther in the last century, as aboriginal people throughout Canada find its difference from the English Roman alphabet an important symbol of their distinctiveness and autonomy. It is possible that its genius lies in the syllabary invented for Cherokee by Sequoyah, but in recent years a number of accounts have arisen suggesting that it was divinely revealed to Cree people, and later appropriated by missionaries, who then claimed that they had invented it.