**Cherokee Sounds**

In the past many different systems have been used to represent the sounds of the Cherokee language. While we will use the Cherokee syllabary to represent Cherokee sounds to the extent possible, these correspondences to the Roman alphabet will prove helpful while you learn the syllabary.

The Cherokee language has six vowel sounds, which we write using the letters a, e, i, o, u, and v. The first five letters have the so-called ‘continental values,’ so that:

**a** is like the **a** in *father* or the **o** in *hot*

**e** is like the **a** in *date* or the **ai** in *bait*

**i** is like the **ea** in *beat* or the **ee** in *feet*

**o** is like the **aw** in *saw* or the **ou** in *brought*

**u** is like the **oo** in *shoot* or the **u** in *true*

The vowel **v** is pronounced through the nose (nasalized), so: **v** is like the **u** in *uncle* or the **u** in *uh-huh* (‘yes’).

The vowels may be of either long or short duration. Although vowel length is typically not indicated in Cherokee texts, we can indicate it by adding **:** following long vowels (e.g. *a*:), leaving short vowels unmarked. The terms long and short refer to actual differences in the amount of time the vowel is pronounced. In musical terms, a short vowel can be compared to a quarter note (one ‘beat’), while a long vowel can be compared to a half note (two ‘beats’).

North Carolina Cherokee is a *pitch-accent* language. Each word contains at least one accent on a particular syllable. This accent can make the difference between two words. Accent is typically not indicated in Cherokee texts, but can be extracted from context by most speakers.

Cherokee has eleven consonant sounds, which we write with the letters y, w, l, n, k, g, t, d, s, h, and ‘. The Cherokee **h** has more prominence in words than the English one, often affecting the sounds of preceding or subsequent consonants. When an y, w, l, n, or m (a ‘resonant’) is preceded by an **h**, its voicing (the vibration of the vocal cords) is reduced or lost, so that the resonant is whispered, thus:

**w** sounds like the **w** in *watt* or *witch*

**hw** sounds like the **wh** in *what* or *which*

**y** sounds like the **y** in *you*

**hy** sounds like the beginning of *hew*

A similar distinction is made for the other resonants but the corresponding whispered sounds do not occur in English.

Some sound change processes in Cherokee cause **h** to move within words. When **h** is to the right of a *voiced* consonant (one in which the vocal cords vibrate) such as **d** or **g**, it *de-voices* these consonants, giving **t** or **k**, respectively.

**s** sounds like the **sh** in *she* or *shoe* in North Carolina Cherokee, and like the **s** in *see* in Oklahoma Cherokee.

**h** sounds like the **h** in *he* or the exclamation *aha*. **h** can also occur before consonants in ways it does not in English, as in **hahni**, ‘*here*,’ or **gihli**, ‘*dog*.’

The letter **‘** represents a glottal stop. This is the sound which we

Represent with a dash when we write the English negative expression *huh-uh*. Using our Cherokee phonetic system we would spell this word **hv’v**. The glottal stop is made by closing the vocal cords to produce a tiny period of silence.

Certain orthographical conventions will also be introduced to aid in pronunciation and interpretation of the sounds when reading in syllabary. While most characters of the syllabary represent a consonant and a vowel – Ꭶ for ‘ga,’ and Ꮎ for ‘na,’ for instance, we can modify these sounds using small marks called *diacritics*. An underline beneath a character indicates that that character’s vowel is silenced – Ꮎ therefore, would be read simply as *n*. Because the syllabary does not account for all voicing distinctions, we can indicate *unvoiced* (or ‘hard’) consonants using a period to the *.left* of a character. This means that while Ꭸ would be read as *ge*, .Ꭸ would be read as *ke*. Finally, a character surrounded by (parentheses) can be optionally pronounced. Hence: ᎣᏏ(Ꮙ)Ꮷ can be read either as ‘o-si-gwo-tsu’ or ‘o-si-tsu.’

*Reading Practice*

The following examples will provide practice in pronouncing Cherokee words. The letters **y**, **w**, **l**, **n**, and **m** are pronounced as they are in English. Pronounce the following words:

wo:yi ‘pigeon’ yo:na ‘bear’

yv:wi ‘person’ nu:na ‘potato’

a:ma ‘salt’ v:le ‘locust’ (insect)

i:ya ‘pumpkin’ no:le ‘and’

no:ya ‘sand’

The letters **h** and **‘** were discussed above. Pronounce the following words with **h** and **‘**

a:’i ‘(s)he is walking’ eha ‘(s)he dwells’

ha:’i ‘you are walking’ heha ‘you dwell’

uha ‘(s)he has it’ (solid object)

The letter **s** has a sound like English **sh** in North Carolina Cherokee. Pronounce the following words.

si:yo ‘hello’ sali ‘persimmon’

se:lu ‘corn’ sohi ‘hickory nut’

su:li ‘buzzard’

The sequence **ts** has the sound of English **j**, **dz**, or English **zz** as in *pizza*, depending on the speaker. Pronounce the following words:

tso:la ‘tobacco’ tsi:yu ‘poplar’

tsa:ni ‘John’ tsu:da ‘cobs’

tsigi ‘that it is so’ tsaya ‘copper’

Many consonants or consonant sequences may be preceded by **h**, except **h** or **‘**. This **h** is always pronounced. It is comparable to breathing out during the middle of a word. Pronounce the following words:

nvhgi ‘four’ wehsa ‘cat’

wahga ‘cow’ tvhga ‘fly’

sihkwa ‘pig’ sahsa ‘goose’

When **h** precedes **y**, **w**, **l**,or **n**, they are whispered. Pronounce the following words:

ihya ‘river cane’ wahya ‘wolf’

kohwi ‘coffee’ ahwi ‘deer’

gi:hli ‘dog’ tsuhla ‘fox’

kv:hna ‘(s)he’s alive’ do:hno ‘why’

Consonants and sequences, except **h** or **‘**, may be preceded by **‘**. Pronounce the following words:

ta'li ‘two’ sv:’gi ‘onion’

ge:’ya ‘it’s flowing’ so:’gwo ‘one’

ga’ni ‘bullet’

The sequence **kt** is not uncommon. Pronounce the following words:

hikto:li ‘your eye’ a:ktaha ‘(s)he knows’

wa:kti ‘(s)he’s going’ di:kta ‘eyes’

The sequence **tsk** also occurs. Pronounce the following words:

tsko:yi ‘worm’ tsga:’i ‘yellowjacket’

tsgili ‘evil spirit’ tskv:’i ‘tree

tskwi:sda ‘a lot’

Several features of the Cherokee sound system are somewhat difficult in the beginning for English speakers because they do not occur in English. Two of the more difficult features are vowel length and (pitch) accent.

Vowel length refers to the time duration of the vowel’s pronunciation. Long vowels are pronounced over twice as much time as short vowels. In musical terms, a long vowel has the length of a half note and a short vowel has the length of a quarter note. The vowel **a:**, ‘long a,’ has the same vowel quality as **a**, ‘short a,’ but twice the duration. In English grammar the terms ‘long’ and ‘short’ are also used but they simply refer to different vowels.

Compare the following lists of words. The words in the left list have short unaccented vowels while the words in the right list have long unaccented vowels.

ama ‘water’ a:ma ‘salt’

hawa ‘alright’ i:ga ‘day’

tala ‘white oak’ ko:ga ‘crow’

tsinagi:’a ‘I’m picking it up’ tsi:nagi:’a ‘I’m picking him up’

a:gi’a ‘(s)he’s eating it’ a:gi:’a ‘(s)he’s picking it up’

Vowel lengths can also determine the rhythm of a word. A word that has one “beat” (or “mora”) may contain two short vowels or a long vowel. Many words contain both sequences of short and long vowels that give different rhythmic combinations.

Another feature of the Cherokee sound system most difficult for English speakers is the use of a pitch accent. In Cherokee the unaccented syllable (vowel) is pronounced with a slightly higher pitch of the voice than an unaccented syllable (roughly two notes higher). The accented syllable of an English word is usually louder.

Compare the following lists of words. The words on the left have vowels without accents while the words on the right have vowels with accents.

i:ga ‘day’ í:ga ‘noon’

a:ma ‘salt’ á:ta ‘young woman’

wo:yi ‘pigeon’ kó:ksti ‘cigarette’

u:hsvhi ‘yesterday’ u:hsv´hi ‘night’

su:na:le:’i ‘tomorrow’ su:na:lé:’i ‘in the morning’

With practice, distinctions between Cherokee sounds should become easier.