

LESSON I

SOUNDS IN SHESHATSHIU INNU-AIMUN

CONSONANTS

Spelling		Sound		Example	
p	(i)	[p]	- like English p , as in 'spot' (especially when word-initial or after a consonant) ¹	<i>pât</i> <i>pûshu</i>	perhaps s/he leaves
	(ii)	[b]	- like English b , as in 'tub' (especially between two vowels, i.e. in intervocalic position)	<i>uâpush</i>	rabbit
t	(i)	[t]	- like English t , as in 'stem'	<i>tâpue</i>	really, truly
	(ii)	[d]	- like English d , as in 'down' (especially between vowels)	<i>patetât</i>	five
k	(i)	[k]	- like English k , as in 'skip'	<i>kâkâtshu</i>	crow
	(ii)	[g]	- like English g , as in 'get' (especially between vowels)	<i>âkushu</i>	s/he is sick
k ^u	(i)	[k ^w]	- like English qu , as in 'quite'	<i>amishk^u</i> <i>kâk^u</i>	beaver porcupine

¹ The description within round brackets refers to the distribution of the sound in Innu-aimun. The symbols within square brackets (e.g. [p], [b]) represent the actual phonetic values of the spelling, as per International Phonetic Association (IPA) transcription conventions.

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sh	(ii)	[g ^w] [Σ]	- as in 'Gwen' - like English sh , as in 'ship' (this sound can occur on its own, and also before one of the stop consonants p , t or k ; before a stop, it is also heard as s)	<i>atkuat</i> <i>uâpush</i> <i>shâsh</i> <i>shîshîp</i> <i>nisht^u</i> <i>mashk^u</i>	caribou (pl) rabbit already duck three bear
ss		[s]	- like English s , as in 'sit'	<i>assî</i> <i>ishkuess</i>	earth, land girl
tsh	(i)	[tΣ]	- like English ch , as in 'church'	<i>tshîsh-teu</i> <i>mîshishu</i>	it is cooked s/he eats
	(ii)	[dZ]	- like English j , as in 'judge'	<i>mîshu</i>	s/he eats it
m		[m]	- as in English 'moose'	<i>mûsh</i> <i>mîsh-tamîn</i>	moose orange
m ^u		[m]	- as in English 'gum' ²	<i>atim^u</i>	dog
n		[n]	- as in English 'name'	<i>nîsh^u</i> <i>mînûsh</i>	two cat
h		[h]	- as in English 'ahead' (found only between two identical vowels, or else as a regular pronunciation of [Σ] among younger speakers, before consonants other than stops)	<i>ûhu</i>	owl

² The ^u in the sequence *m^u* is not pronounced in word-final position, though it may affect the pronunciation of the preceding vowel, as in this case, where the *i* vowel is pronounced [Y]. It does however appear when further endings (e.g., the plural) are added. (See Lesson III for more information.) Note also that though raised ^u occurs after *sh* (*nîsh^u* 'two') and *sht* (*nîsh^u* 'three'), these are exceptional, and consequently are not included in the list of consonants.

VOWELS

(The ^ or circumflex accent over a vowel indicates that it is long)

Spelling	Sound		Example	
<i>e</i>	(i) [e]	- like the vowel in English 'say' (in an open syllable, that is, when the vowel is word-final, or else followed by a consonant plus a vowel)	<i>nete</i> <i>tâpue</i> <i>mâtsheshû</i>	over there really, truly fox
	(ii) [E]	- like the vowel in English 'met' (in a closed syllable, typically a syllable ending in one or two consonants with no following vowel)	<i>eshk^u</i> <i>ishkuess</i>	still, again girl
<i>î</i>	[i]	- like the vowel in English 'bee'	<i>shîpu</i> <i>nîpit</i> <i>nipît</i> <i>mîna</i> <i>nîpîsha</i>	river my tooth in the water berries tea (lit. 'leaves')
<i>i</i>	[ɨ/↔/ɪ]	- like the vowel in English 'bit', 'the', 'sofa'	<i>nishk</i> <i>nipî</i> <i>amishk^u</i>	goose water beaver

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<i>â</i>	[a/ə]	- sound ranging from the a of 'fat' to the a of 'father'; before or after u , may be heard as a more back sound [A] or [ɑ]	<i>tshiâshk^u</i> <i>pâshu</i>	gull s/he is dry
<i>a</i>	(i) [↔]	- like the vowel in English 'sofa' (in an open syllable)	<i>namesh</i>	fish
	(ii) [ø]	- like the vowel in English 'but' (in a closed syllable, especially one ending in m^u)	<i>petam^u</i>	s/he hears it
<i>û</i>	[o]	- varies between the 'o' of English 'tone' and the vowel of English 'June' or 'tool'	<i>kûn</i> <i>kûkûsh</i>	snow pig
<i>u</i>	(i) [o]	- similar to above (typically found in an open syllable)	<i>âkushu</i> <i>mashkushu</i>	s/he is sick grass, hay
	(ii) [Y]	- like the vowel in English 'put' (typically found in a closed syllable)	<i>muk^u</i>	just, but
	(iii) [u]	- like the vowel in English 'do' (typically found after the sound i)	<i>mîkushû</i>	s/he is red

The English sounds given here are only approximations. In particular, the Innu-aimun vowel sounds *e*, *î* and *û* are pure vowel sounds, and do not have the off-glide that characterizes English tense vowels (e.g., 'say',

'boat'), but tend to be steady vowels, more like they would be in languages such as French or German.

Innu-aimun vowels noted as 'long' are not distinguished from 'short' vowels simply by phonetic quantity, or length, but also by quality or timbre. Short vowels tend to be reduced (as are English unstressed vowels) to a neutral centralized [↔] as in 'the', while long vowels preserve their distinct quality. Among younger speakers, the short vowels *i* and *a* have almost completely fallen together, so that the first syllable of words like *nimish* and *namesh* are indistinguishable. The rounded vowels [û] and [u], while not always distinguished – for example, both are realized as [o] in final open syllable – may be differentiated in word-initial position. Thus word-initial *û* is heard as [o], while word-initial *u* may be pronounced [w↔], [wY] or [Y], depending on its historical origin.

Diphthongs, or combinations of two vowels, can also occur:

<i>eu</i>	[ew]		<i>ishkueu</i>	woman
<i>au/âu</i>	[aw]	– cf. English 'loud'	<i>nuâpamâu</i>	I see him/her
<i>îu</i>	[yu]	– cf. English 'you'	<i>mîkushîu</i>	s/he is red
<i>ei</i>	[ey]	– cf. English 'day'	<i>utei</i>	his/her heart
<i>ai</i>	[ey]	– cf. English 'may'	<i>maikan</i>	wolf
<i>ui</i>	[uy]	– cf. English 'phooey'	<i>apuî</i>	oar, paddle

Examples of vowel oppositions³

i vs *a* (often not distinguished)

<i>nimish</i>	[nImIΣ]	my older sister
<i>namesh</i>	[n↔mEΣ]	fish

<i>amîshk^u</i>	[↔m↔Σk ^w]	beaver
<i>mashk^u</i>	[m↔Σk ^w]	bear

a vs *u*

<i>ushkan</i>	[w↔Σk↔n]	his/her bone
<i>ushkun</i>	[w↔Σk ^w Yn]	his/her liver

i vs *u*

<i>tâtînam^u</i>	[tatIn∅m]	s/he touches it
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³ Not all of the pairs below are found on the recording, since some of these vowel contrasts appear to have been lost in the speech of younger community residents, among them our recorded speaker, Kanani Penashue. In general, when an Innu word or phrase is missing from the CD, this means that it was not possible to obtain from our speaker.

a vs â	<i>tâtunam^u</i>	[taton∅m]	s/he opens it
	<i>nitakushin</i>	[ntogoΣ↔n]	I arrive (see 1.ii) below)
	<i>nitâkushin</i>	[ntagoΣ↔n]	I am sick
î vs i	<i>ushkat</i>	[YΣΣg↔t]	at the beginning
	<i>ushkât</i>	[YΣΣgat]	his/her leg
	<i>tshimîn</i>	[tΣ↔min]	you give it to me
u vs û	<i>tshimîn</i>	[tΣ↔m↔n]	you drink
	<i>tshîman</i>	[tΣim↔n]	match
	<i>tshinuâu</i>	[tΣ↔n(↔)w□w]	it is long
	<i>tshînuâu</i>	[tΣin(↔)w□w]	you (pl)
	<i>ukussa</i>	[YkYss↔]	her/his son
	<i>ûkuma</i>	[6okYm↔]	her/his grandmother

Some phonological characteristics of Sheshatshiu Innu-aimun

Processes affecting vowels

1. Labialization

- (i) Short *i* and short *a* tend to be labialized by an immediately following *-ku* or *-k^u* or *-m^u* and pronounced *-uku*, *-uk^u* or *-um*.

<i>mishtik^u</i>	stick, tree	pronounced [mIΣtYk ^w]
<i>atim^u</i>	dog	pronounced [↔tYm]

- (ii) The vowel *u* may have an influence in labializing a front vowel of a preceding or following syllable. This process is often referred to as 'vowel harmony'.

<i>pipun</i>	winter	pronounced [p Yp Yn]
<i>takuan</i>	it is (in a place)	pronounced [t Ygw Yn]

- (iii) A word which begins with the vowel *u* and a labial consonant *m* or *p* may cause rounding of the vowel following this consonant. The initial *u* vowel may, alternatively, be copied to the next syllable. In either case, initial *u* may then be deleted.

<i>umashinaikan</i>	his/her book	pronounced
[(u)muΣneyk↔n]		
<i>ume</i>	this	pronounced [(u)mwe]

2. Word-initial short vowel deletion

Short vowels in word-initial position before a following consonant or consonant cluster tend to be deleted, as the following examples illustrate:

<i>akûp</i>	coat, jacket	pronounced [g Yp]
<i>ishkuess</i>	girl	pronounced [ΣkwEs]
<i>ashtâu</i>	s/he puts it	pronounced [staw]

In addition, short *i* and *u* in the initial syllable of a word – and elsewhere – tend to undergo deletion between two consonants with identical, or nearly identical, points of articulation, as in:

<i>pimûteu</i>	s/he walks	pronounced [pmotew]
<i>nitassî</i>	my land	pronounced [n8t↔si]
<i>mîshishuâkan</i>	table	pronounced [mitΣwan] ⁴

⁴ The *tshsh* [tΣΣ] cluster that results reduces typically to [tΣ], which does not undergo voicing to [dZ]. In addition, this word shows the loss of the *ka* that occurs in the sequence *-âkan*, which is often pronounced as *-ân*.

Processes affecting consonants

1. *sh/h* alternation

Among younger speakers, particularly, the sound noted *sh* [ʃ] tends to be pronounced as *h*, especially in intervocalic and word-final position:

<i>Sheshâtshît</i>	in/to/from Sheshatshiu	pronounced [ʃeʃatʃit] or [ʃehatʃit]
<i>shîshîp</i>	duck	pronounced [ʃiʃip] or [ʃihip]

2. Consonant cluster simplifications with *tshish*

- (i) An initial cluster *tsh* + *t* (which arises from the loss of short *i* or *a*) will undergo simplification to [st], as in :

<i>tshîtatussen â?</i>	do you work?	pronounced [st↔tYssEna]
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- (ii) Clusters within a word will reduce to *ss* or *tsh* after the loss of a short vowel, as in:

<i>tshissenitam^u</i>	s/he knows it	pronounced [sEnd□m]
<i>tshishennu</i>	elder	pronounced [tʃEno]

- (iii) The cluster *tshn* which results when a vowel is deleted in the sequence *tshin* is regularly pronounced as *tn*:

<i>nîtshinân</i>	our (excl) house	pronounced [nitnan]
<i>uâtshinâkan</i>	juniper, tamarack tree	pronounced [watnak↔n]