

Wenesh Waa Oshkii-Bmaadizijig Noondamowaad? What Will The Young Children Hear?

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This essay discusses the practical realities of creating a bi-lingual home, specifically with an endangered language. It begins with a brief introduction to Anishinaabemowin and then describes language activism at several levels—from informal community instruction to full-credit post-secondary courses. Organized around the steps taken to produce fluency and transfer a full aesthetic and cultural understanding of the language, this essay attempts to convey the need for curriculum as well as community support for language revitalization.

In our house, with each passing exchange of meaning, we take, or we miss, an opportunity to use an indigenous language. We wake up, give kisses, tell jokes, tease one another, stop arguments or wipe tears; and with each act we make a choice to use English, or Anishinaabemowin. My goal is for all of us to make those choices un-self-consciously, to make them instinctive dreamtime choices that echo into the day. If we can honor the language and use it regularly, then like dreams remembered, it will guide and define us in ways that connect us to our home, our ancestors and to one another.

This short essay offers some of what I have learned while struggling to keep a language alive and in use in a busy modern household. Sometimes it is like waging war on English and you must have strong defenses, offensive strategies and an endless supply of patience and assistance. At other times it is the most natural and easy form of play, a blanket of comfort that shelters a small community from the larger, sometimes harsher, landscape. I will be honest, we don't yet have days where everyone speaks Anishinaabemowin all the time, and perhaps we never will. But we do try and I think that is what matters. We make space and give children a foundation for bi-lingual learning in the place where it matters the most, the home.

First, let me describe the landscape. Anishinaabemowin is a language shared by people living within, or connected to, over 220 separate sovereign nations that surround the Great Lakes in Canada and the United States. Twelve of those nations are located in Michigan (Lebeau, 2005). According to the 2000 US Census, there are 58,000 American Indians in Michigan. Washtenaw County, where we live in the city of Ann Arbor, is home to 1,161. Most interestingly, the highest number of Native Americans is not in any of the northern or western counties where the reservations are located. It is 20 minutes away from us in Southeast Michigan where 13,000 Native Americans live in neighboring Wayne, Oakland and Macomb counties. People still expect reservations to be exotic places where old people speak another language and they expect that "Indians" stay on them.

When I go to work at the University of Michigan, I teach Anishinaabemowin to over 250 students. When we host a weekly language table (see Figure 1, opposite page) as many as 30 to 35 people show up. It is a place where the

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language is nurtured at all levels. Our weekly class meetings began six years ago around a kitchen table but grew in size and complexity. Teachers, elders and students now gather in a conference room on campus where coffee, a chalkboard and a copier are available. We currently meet for three hours every Thursday and host students from age 11 to 62. Anyone is welcome and some come from several hours away. The only requirement is a desire to learn and a willingness to listen and then practice speaking. We always begin with review of some basics. Then we make time for oral presentations, which range from simple statements to short dialogues or stories depending on the speaker's skill. When possible, we work to write short non-fiction pieces about important historical and current events. Teachers are expected to speak entirely in the language unless English is necessary to explain a concept. Students are expected to use the language in class and set goals for themselves, including plans to use the language outside of class.

Seeing the language as part of the wider world gives us a reason to nurture the language at home. Four hundred years ago, the area was protected and controlled by the Three Fires Confederacy which was, and still is, an alliance of Odawa, Ojibwe and Bodewatomi communities, all speaking only slightly different dialects of Anishinaabemowin.¹ Last summer, the Three Fires Confederacy hosted a gathering attended by over 2,000 people. Conducted in both English and Anishinaabemowin, the allied nations crafted a declaration stating that "the Spirit has always been the centre and foundation of the ways of our Ancestors... our children are living vessels and it is our responsibility to protect, nurture and cultivate the knowledge of our Ancestors for our children's future." They agreed that "in education, our children must have a way of learning that is based on Our Story, and our original ways of knowing and teaching" and that a clan system model should be used in teaching children the concepts of: Anishinaabemowin language, governance, lands and resources, judiciary, cultural based education, citizenship and the economy (Three Fires Confederacy, 2008). Watching young people at this gathering wander with their friends in and out of the lodge, I was reminded that they are always moving between two worlds. Most importantly, this declaration and the many prayers and lessons offered in Anishinaabemowin reminded me that to be successful in either world, they will need to leverage the best of both.

To access the dominant culture, we need only pay attention to the world around us. To access an older, less visible world, children need elders, teachers, role-models and a deep well of confidence. Not many kids spend time with elders today and sadly not many elders we know speak Anishinaabemowin. But they are there, retirees from General Motors, ladies who watch birds, former hockey players and some of the best cooks we know. The reservations in Michigan each have only zero to five first-language speakers, and those they do have are often over 65. Urban areas are more mixed. For example in Lansing, Detroit and Ann Arbor there are a few younger speakers who are willing to share what they know. Many of our teachers come from Walpole Island, Curve Lake or other Canadian communities. I am blessed with the opportunity to teach at the Univer-

sity of Michigan with Howard Kimewon, who is a first-language speaker from Wikwemikong Unceded First Nation on Manitoulin Island in Lake Huron. This past year was a reminder for us that the cycle of lives is always turning. Irving “Hap” McCue who taught Anishinaabemowin for 35 years at the University of Michigan and contributed to the Eastern Ojibwa Chippewa Ottawa Dictionary walked on this past March. The teachers who learned the language as a first language are leaving, and we are entering an age when the teachers are second language students. In time, sociolinguists will certainly note shifting nuances in the way the language is used, but change is inevitable and fear of change is not a good reason to become defensive and inactive. Fear of the future is no reason to consider euthanasia. Some might prefer to let a language die. Certainly that was the intention of Colonel Pratt and generations of boarding school prefects and missionaries. Many have rightly reviled Pratt’s (1892/1973, p. 261) call for “killing the Indian and saving the man.” But few have given him credit for understanding something we would do well not to forget. Taking aim at the language was indeed an effective form of cultural genocide (see e.g., Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). Tearing children away from their homes is how it was accomplished. History has proven it is incredibly difficult to maintain ethnic identity without the language running like lifeblood through every daily act. If we are to learn from this lesson, the language must certainly be restored. And more importantly, the educational system that took it away cannot be depended upon to bring it back. We should not look for an answer in politics, policy or pedagogy alone. We must find the answer in practice and action. To reverse the damage, the language must be returned to the children and the home.

As we strive to revitalize a language, it is important to consider what is known about producing proficient bi-lingual adults. Language is now described as a complex system that is dependent on many variables. Learners need to listen, understand, speak and creatively use a language in order to be considered truly fluent. Certain teaching techniques can help, but it is important to remember that there is no single solution for any individual or community. It is also important to understand language revitalization as a collaborative effort. “Language learning and language use are dynamic processes in which regularities and systems arise from the interaction of people, brains, selves, societies and cultures using languages” (Ellis & Larsen-Freeman, 2006, p. 577). This means that there are no wrong ways of doing things, only ways that produce different results. This also means that communities must foster interaction which depends on use of the language. More than simply learning a language, students and teachers must work together to make sure that the language is a part of the community—in homes, at work, at play, during significant events.

So, how does one really revitalize a language at home? What works? What doesn’t? What can others learn from our efforts? In our home we have one parent who is fluent and literate as a second-language speaker, one parent who is a proficient third language learner and a ten year old and five year old who are novice level speakers working on literacy. I view our progress as an evolution from walking to one day dancing, from the basic beginnings to participating in

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the shaping of a living modern language. Certainly there is much more to be learned and ultimately all that we do can be cast aside or stolen again by any future generation. But we believe every word is worth learning, part of a universe of knowledge worth sharing, so we continue to crawl, walk and run toward our goal.

Bmode – To Crawl

Knowing that we are working to create bi-lingual speakers who are all exposed constantly to English, the first step toward family fluency is understanding the tools available. Fluent speakers often tell learners to “think in the language.” To translate that for my family, I had to use applied linguistics and begin mapping the differences between English and Anishinaabemowin. It is simply not efficient to wait for adults to learn through total immersion. And really, can there be total immersion in any American home at this time in our present century? Unlike students who study abroad, or immigrants who find themselves nearly drowning in the language of a new culture, learners of indigenous language are faced with the opposite metaphor. We stand in a desert waiting desperately for each drop of water and encounter more mirages than reservoirs. Changing orthography, dialect debates, valuable data buried in library archives, all can present barriers that are hard to overcome. So we began with the basics and worked our way from puzzle pieces to a picture.

Although the rich complexity of verb conjugations, prefixes, suffixes and infixes is often celebrated and stands as a testament to the intellect of the ancestors, there is also a time for simplification, reduction and focus. For Anishinaabemowin, this begins with the importance of verbs and the meaning of the seven pronouns. Rand Valentine’s *Nishnaabemwin Reference Grammar* (2001) is an invaluable tool, but I just couldn’t say “let’s study personal pronouns of precedence and their adverbial-like bases” and get much enthusiasm. What I can say is, “verbs are the heart of Anishinaabemowin.” Then I can explain that instead of starting with the nouns, we begin with a root verb at the center of a sentence, or an event at the center of a story. The perspective is always one of circular observation. A speaker should be attempting to describe what is above, in front, behind and below. Like a network of nerves, words carry meaning outward. The term “root verb” is apt in this agglutinative structure. We have spent time talking about the types of verbs and the ways we can play with them to make them take on new meaning. When we are just eating we say “n’wiisinimi,” when we know what we are eating we say “n’miijinaa” if it is one type of food and “n’mwaa” if it is another. Rice and bread and corn are in a class often called “animate,” while meat, pizza and sandwiches are “inanimate.” Figuring out why items fall into one group versus the other is immediately explained as a futile task. Using them correctly quickly is a highly rewarded skill.

To understand the pronouns, we often turn to a set of teachings called the “Seven Grandfathers.” The use of the number seven is not unique to Anishinaabe culture, but it serves as an especially useful tool in teaching the pronouns, especially because several of them do not exist in English. For instance, there is

a singular and plural form of the second person. To render this concept understandable to children we talk about “one of you” and “all of you.” There are also two forms of “we.” Again, to make sense of inclusive and exclusive markers we talk about “just us (not the listener)” and “all of us here (including the listener).” Thinking long and hard about who is the speaker and who is the listener fits with some of the actual Grandfather Teachings which are represented by seven verbs: Nbwaakaawin (Wisdom), Zaagi’idiwin (Love), Minaadendamowin (Respect), Aakwa’ode’ewin (Bravery), Debwewin (Truth), Dibaadendiziwin (Humility) and Gwekwaadiziwin (Honesty). In one of the songs we teach the children, we say, “Gdaa dbaadendizimi / We all should be humble. . . Gdaa naadamami ji ni ishpigaabawiying. / We should help each other raise up.” We are always working to connect the language to these traditional concepts. Another example is the shirt we recently created for students of Anishinaabemowin in our area. The front of the shirt is the familiar University of Michigan cheer, “Izhaadaa Giizhigowaande / Go Blue!” The back of the shirt reads, “Chipiitenimm Debendaagozijig / Respect the Locals.” These are just a few of the ways that we work at home to simplify and demystify the structure of the language. My peers might call this applied linguistics, my kids call it homework.

Bmose – To Walk

Just as one takes the language apart to explain it, you have to put it back together to teach students how to use it. This is where we cross disciplines from linguistics to curriculum and theories of education. The home and the big outdoor community lodge are models of multiple intelligences at work both in the instructors and the students. At home we are all students continually teaching one another. What the adults can read and explain once, the children are often better at remembering. Even my doctorate in linguistics is no match for the clever mind of a Kindergartner at play. I might imagine and document the ways language can change—she takes it and makes it her own. Most American parents are familiar with the exasperated sigh of a child who says “whatever” (with strong emphasis on the second syllable). I recently heard my youngest daughter use the Anishinaabe word “wenesh,” (meaning “what or how”) with the exact same intonation. It is for lightening fast minds like these that I have to create lessons or ways to practice.

The first step is to begin transferring as much of the day as possible into Anishinaabe. “Wenesh waa biiskaman? / What are you going to put on?” is common in the morning. We can say “miigwetch” for our meals or “gaye nishisnoo / it’s not fair” when we have to eat our broccoli. One wall has been made into a chalkboard and each week below the Anishinaabe name of the month the seven days of the week appear in Anishinaabe as well. The “ezhichige / to do” list is written below that. These may seem like mundane and obvious habits, but this is where the learning begins. To say “jiimshin / give me a kiss” each night before bedtime, or “boonikwishin / leave me alone” when you need some space. These instinctive utterances need to gradually be transferred from one language to another.

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The next step is to add other speakers and gain confidence in using the language during less practiced activities. As preparation for new experiences, we have translated many children’s books into Anishinaabemowin and we read them often at home. Popular favorites, including *Zhaawskwaa Waawanon miinwaa Gokosh Wiyaaas / Green Eggs and Ham* and *Miimii Miikaan Giizhod Nimosh / The Pigeon Finds a Hotdog*, are excellent toolboxes when it comes time to cook your own Gizhod Nimosh with speakers from Wikwemikong.

Household dialogues are a great way to start but we also found we needed to graduate to more culturally significant non-fiction. When we spent time in Fond du Lac Minnesota we learned to make “nooskatchinagan / winnowing baskets” by tying “wiigob / basswood” around the edges (see Figure 2 below). Whole categories of specialized words will be lost if children aren’t trained to always ask for teachings in the language. It is simply not enough to learn the arts and crafts of the culture without the original words. Not everyone still knows

Figure 2. Pat Northrup showing Raina Dow and Shannon Noori how to make a winnowing basket.



these words, so it is important to respect the limitations of teachers, but often if a child doesn't ask, a teaching is not given. Teaching the importance of offering to carry information forward is as important as teaching the words themselves.

For all of this, the assessment is the ability to move through the day, traveling easily and without stress. When we first began to use the language at home everyone was so worried about making mistakes that "Anishinaabemowin Time" was not as fun. In fact, the first two years were much harder than any of us imagined they would be. However, it is important not to give up. One year is needed as groundwork and the second is when habits form. We often use Nokomis-nibaagiizis as a reminder to celebrate accomplishments. Looking up at Grandmother moon, the girls can sing in a language that stories say is understood equally by the birds and trees. Sharing a sip of cool water from a copper cup and eating a strawberry leaves and all, they are reminded that some things have been in this place long before they ever arrived and will remain here long after. Retelling the story of Shkaakaamikwe² and her four daughters who stand in the cardinal directions is part of a connection to the past that extends beyond anything the contemporary commercial world can offer.

Bmapto – To Run

After crawling through the lessons of structure and taking the first few steps in the form of planned lessons, it is time to think of running. "Bmapto / to run" is to take off moving so fast you don't have time to think about one foot stepping in front of the other or what to do with your arms. This happens when the language is used beyond the artificial playground we have created. Whenever we are able to understand a speaker or a situation that could only occur in Anishinaabemowin, I know we are running. To explain this phenomenon, I sometimes tell the story of a day in the lodge when a woman we had not yet met sat near my daughters. As the leader's long prayer in Anishinaabemowin began, she leaned over and whispered to my girls, "don't you wish you could understand him?" At first they gazed back slightly offended, thinking she was accusing them of not knowing what he said, but then my oldest daughter realized this woman twice her age was wistfully longing to understand and assumed they too didn't know the words. She leaned over and began to translate as the tobacco, the water, the food and each direction were blessed and the spirits were thanked. And as those words flowed from the leader to the listener through my daughter, I think she realized there was a reason for all the time we spent at home practicing the language.

Moments of spirituality and language revitalization are poignant and powerful. But it is important that children and adults both remember the language can go anywhere in this busy modern world. Our language has to keep up with our interests. It should follow mom and dad into the lodge, but it should also be part of a screaming crowd cheering in unison for the home team to win. The entire Great Lakes region is obsessed with hockey in a way that other parts of the country are not. Several of our teachers are former players and everyone has some kind of story about learning to skate. However, at the University of Michigan, the year the team went to the NCAA championships, we had one

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player who could recall phrases his Grandma used to use in Cree and five other team members enrolled in class. So, the kids counted goals, checks and penalty time in Anishinaabemowin and yelled “nitaaw mwebage / great skating” from the stands. Best of all, they learned the entire Fight Song in the language and in fact we then put it on the college-level final exam. Once again, although far less spiritual, there was a place where a sub-community was defined by the ability to use Anishinaabemowin and the power of pride is immense.

There needs to be a reason to speak Anishinaabemowin. Of course if you ask the girls on an average day they’ll say the reason is so that you can ask one another “g’gii boogit ina” (did you fart) in the supermarket without anyone else know what you are saying. But even that means they see the language as a way to laugh with one another when the world isn’t listening. They have an identity not easily shaken or manipulated by others. As Jon Reyhner (2006, p. 39) notes in his book on language restoration, “success in school and in life is related to people’s identity.” What better gift to give a child than a strong sense of identify?

Figure 3. Shannon Noori and Fionna Noori dancing at Language Camp



Niimi – To Dance

The last component of any successful language program, at the college level, or at the kitchen table is the ability to use the language creatively. This is by far the highest hurdle we have before us. To be honest, I rarely encounter published evidence of Anishinaabemowin as a modern language and I spend a great deal of time looking. There is an increasing array of vernacular exchange, on Facebook,

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via text messaging, in the form of dialogues created for the classroom and even songs that are original. But more often our resources are translation of great works or transcriptions of everyday speech. There is as yet, no collection of short stories, no novel, no instance of drama entirely in Anishinaabemowin. And so, as teachers we work to fill this void. The few instances of Anishinaabe literature that were created in the language (not translated to the language) are the result of teachers stretching their own boundaries. Because I have an Master of Fine Arts Degree in Creative Writing, my own contribution has been in poetry. I am the only member of my household who tries to publish in the language, but I am hopeful that my attempts will at least inspire others to make contributions of their own. Kimberly Wensaut (2007), a nearby teacher of Potawatomi, recently published “Jak she gego mine jo zhna gego / Everything and nothing,” a poem about remembering and humility. It is a lovely poem that makes perfect sense to me across a few differences in spelling. It stands as a reminder that we can understand all the dialects of our language. In fact that is how we know they are not separate languages. It made my heart sing to see it in print on the page and it made my heart weep now knowing the living Nokomis / Grandmother mentioned in this poem is another one of the elders who walked on in 2008. There is much for us to do and so little time in which to do it. As part of one humble attempt to give voice to our aspirations I wrote a love poem to the symbol of our community language classes. Titled, “Anishinaabemowin Dopwin / Language Table,” it plays with ideas of animacy and inanimacy and the notion that our prayers for change may one day be answered.

N’zaagitonaa eyaa’iyang, Anishinaabemowin Dopwin,
We love you, Language Table
gdo’mijim
your food
gdo’pabwinan
your chairs
dopwini kaadan
your legs
ikidowinan
the words
enendamowinan
the ideas
ezhi-baabiiwiyaang ezhi-maadookwiyaang ensa gizhigag
the way you wait for us and the way you share with us every day.

Giishpin bi izhaamigoyin,
If we come to you
bi namadabiyaang,
and we sit
miinwa gigidoyaang,
and we talk

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gdaa bi bimaadiz na?
will you be alive (for us)?

Giishpin semaa miinigoyin, aaniish ge ezhi naadamoyingiba?
If we offer you tobacco, what will you help us become?

Waabzheshii wii aawiyaang wii chi waasa waabandamaang ge ni ezhiwebag?
A marten looking far into the future?

Pukane wii aawiyaang wii nagamoyaang?
A grasshopper making a song?

Gimewan wii aawiyaang wii naamademeyaang oshkiwaaskoneing?
Rain on a new flower?

Anishinaabemowin Dopwin, N' Bazigeminaa,
Language Table, Our Sweetheart,

Gawiin pisagaag eta g'da'aawesii.
You are not only a flat board.

Wii Nakweshkodaading, ingoji g'daaw.
You are a meeting place.

Kinomageng ingoji g'daaw.
You are a university.

Kina nda'anamewinaanin miinwa nda'bwajigewinaanin
All our prayers and dreams

Ndo maamaawi'iyaami
gather there

biinjiiying kiin e-ayaawiiyin mitigo'ode.
inside your wooden heart.

N'zaagitonaa, Anishinaabemowin Dopwin,
We love you, Language Table,

kaa waabaamigoo miinwa, miinwa, miinwa, miinwa pane.
we'll see you again, and again, and again, and again forever.

Conclusion

Mewenzhaa...jibwa Giizhigokwe gii bi dagoshin maampii aakiing, Shkaakaamikwe gii baabaabaabiinchiged biinish, gekpii kina goya maajtaawaad.

Long ago...before Sky Woman arrived here on earth, Mother Earth waited and waited until finally someone started.

So often when attempting to translate, I find the translator's nightmare and delight, something that cannot be rendered equally in two languages. "Mewenzhaa" is one such word. It's a bit like saying, "long ago and once upon a time which you should know about but I was not there"; it is an idea contained in a word. As Peter Burke once noted, "translation between languages is like the tip of an iceberg. It is the most visible part of an activity sometimes described as cultural translation." This is actually what I want children and adults speaking Anishinaabemowin to learn, that the act of moving between languages is one of moving between cultures. How much more fun is it to say "baabaabaabiinchiged" than "waited and waited?" Our words are an epistemology; our grammar is a map. Our stories are our history. Learning is infinite and communal. Diversity is the ability to benefit from multiple perspectives. These are the reasons we speak Anishinaabemowin at our house. Miigwetch gii bizindaawiyeg. Thanks to you for reading. I should note that the conjugation I chose implies you are not reading alone. So find a child, find a language and expand the ways you understand the world, quickly, before our linguistic options dwindle.

Mii'iw

Notes

¹For more detail about this alliance see Richard White's book, *The Middle Ground*, which should be required reading for all Michigan high school students. Instead, Americans are often still given only a pan-tribal national glimpse of Native American history.

²To hear the song to *Shkaakaamikwe* and read the full text, go to <http://www.umich.edu/~ojibwe/songs/motherearth.html>

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