

Waabandan miinawaa Idan Anishinaabaateseg
See It and Say It Anishinaabemowin Movies
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“I asked my mother if she thinks Á’pistotooki can still hear us
with all this technology. Yes, she said.”

—Shirlee Crowshoe

Shirlee Crowshoe reminds us the Creator can still hear us as our stories change. In this essay, we share the way a group of stories about Ojibwe life in the 1950’s on the Fond du Lac Reservation in northern Minnesota moved across generations and became animated videos. We begin with the background of the project and its original goals, then share the way the project was funded, completed and shared. Lastly, we review the lessons learned as we created the videos so that others might imagine similar projects and avoid some of the challenges we faced. We believe what we learned from the experience about the challenges of endangered Indigenous language documentation and revitalization can be of value to others who adhere to the adage, “forewarned is forearmed.”

The Ojibwe spoken in Minnesota is part of an Anishinaabe language diaspora that includes 163 Ojibwe, Odawa and Potawatomi Nations in the United States and Canada. All three of the languages considered Anishinaabe by speakers share similar grammar and belong to the Algonquian language family. Of these, based on the experience of the authors, Odawa and Ojibwe are most alike with only slight variations in pronunciation and a minimal number of vocabulary differences. Based on the dialect that is dominant at various gatherings the authors have led or attended, Ojibwe is primarily spoken west of Sault St. Marie in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula and west of Chicago, Illinois in Wisconsin and Minnesota while Odawa is more prevalent in Ontario, but also parts of Michigan. Potawatomi is spoken in the southern Great Lakes region and parts of Kansas and Oklahoma. This project focuses on the western Ojibwe dialect which is spoken in Minnesota and Wisconsin, but there is sometimes language variation within that region due to marriage, migration and educational experiences. It is always important to understand the range of variation in an area as well as the dialect a community is working to revitalize.

The current number of Ojibwe speakers can be hard to estimate. One way to understand the fluctuation of speakers is through attendance at language camps and conferences. For example, an average of 500 speakers and learners attend the annual Anishinaabemowin-Teg Conference; and several summer camps, including Kiwenz Language Camp hosted by the Fond du Lac nation, have seen attendance well over 400 in some years. Both gatherings have seen an increase in attendees under 30 in recent years. At the 2018 Anishinaabemowin-Teg conference 52 young people between the age of 14 and 21 attended a special session for youth and elders.

Anishinaabe languages have been written for hundreds of years, first by traders and missionaries in the early 1700s, and later by teachers and storytellers within Anishinaabe communities. A writing system based on shapes, called syllabics, was created by James Evans around 1840 and is primarily used in northern Ontario and Manitoba. However, in Minnesota, where this project began, most teachers and speakers use the Roman alphabet and a double vowel system created by Charles Fiero and a group of fluent elders in the late 1950s (Noodin 2014, 20). Several dictionaries and resources for grammar have been created including the *Ojibwe People’s Dictionary*, the *Nishnaabemwin Odawa and Eastern Ojibwe Online Dictionary* (Naokwegijig-Corbiere and Valentine

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n.d.) and the *Nishnaabemwin Reference Grammar* (Valentine 2001), but there is still a need for more learning materials. Surveys conducted by *Nagaajiwanaang Genawendangig Anishinaabemowin* (the Fond du lac Reservation Language Program) at the conclusion of the production found students wanted more ways to hear, decode and practice the language they were learning.

The “See and Say” Video project began as a way to help speakers at several levels while also preserving stories and complex language samples. The goal was to create short videos with bilingual Ojibwe and English captions and companion booklets. Fluent speakers and highly proficient students can enjoy the videos with sound only. Students with some proficiency can benefit from seeing the Ojibwe transcription without translation. Teachers can use the videos in class to discuss grammar and improve comprehension. Students studying outside of class or entirely independently can use the videos and booklet with explanatory material at home.

To translate, record, animate and transcribe a set of stories *Nagaajiwanaang Genawendangig Anishinaabemowin* received funding from a Minnesota Indian Affairs Council Dakota and Ojibwe Language Revitalization Grant. As the primary organizers, Janis Fairbanks (*Ozhaawashkogiiizhigokwe*) and Ricky DeFoe (*Gwiiwizens*) were responsible for assembling a team to do the work, setting and meeting deadlines and resolving issues that threatened to change or end the project. Work was completed between January 1 and June 30, 2017. The team included fourteen members, each an expert in their own field, from communities across Anishinaabe country. The importance of choosing the perfect blend of talent cannot be stressed enough. In this case, the project began with stories written in English by Janis. These stories were then translated by Leona Wakonabo (*Bizhikiins*) and Geraldine Howard (*Ningaabiianook*), filmed by Nicholas Hansen, illustrated by Jonathan Thunder (*Manidoo Gwiiwizens*), and transcribed by Ricky, Margaret Noodin (*Giwedinoodin*), and Dan Jones (*Gaagigebinesoban*) with assistance from Carmen Jones (*Gizhigo Binesiik*), Misty Rose Peterson (*Gizhibaawaanakwadook*), and Language Advisory Board member Marcus Ammesmaki (*Manidoo Maa'ingan*) (see Figure 1).

The stories chosen for the project confirm the connection between language, culture and landscape, while sharing the memories of an Anishinaabe elder. They were originally written as part of an unpublished autobiography, *Sugar Bush Babies: Generations of Ojibwe Grandmothers* by co-author Janis Fairbanks. The women of Janis's stories take notice of the world and the web of relationships necessary for survival. They speak Ojibwe and are heirs to centuries of knowledge about living among lakes, swamps and dense forested areas. Janis is able to retell the stories now because she was a good student. “I always liked visiting old ladies,” she explains. “They usually were calm and quiet and said or did interesting things.” Although the American system of education prevented Janis from hearing Ojibwe outside Anishinaabe homes during these early years, she has used the language as much as possible during her lifetime. Her brother, Ralph Fairbanks, is a respected speaker, storyteller and teacher and Janis is now Anishnaabemowin Program Coordinator for her Nation, the Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa. It was in this capacity she agreed the following stories could be used for the “See and Say Ojibwe Immersion Video Project: Stories from the 1950's Revisited in 2017”:

1. *Gibiini'aanaanig Giigoonhyag* (Cleaning Fish)
2. *Ginaadoobiimin* (We Are Fetching Water)
3. *Nanaandawawiizo miinawaa Onandawaabamaan Anoojenaanzo-onid-asiniin* (She Finds Berries to Pick and Searches for Agates)
4. *Omagakii-ban gii Bagidenjigazo* (Frog Burial)
5. *Izhaa Mazinaatesijigewin* (Going to the Show)

6. *Madweyaanimad* (Hear the Winds Blow)
7. *Oshki-miskwaaniganike* (Making a New Roach)
8. *Adaawenan Gitigaaniaabajichiganan* (Shopping for Garden Tools)
9. *Wepwaaganiked* (The Pipe Maker)
10. *Epiitendaagoziyang Mitigoog* (The Way We Respect Trees)
11. *Nokakamageng Kitigaaning* (Turning Over the Garden Soil)

Figure 1. Janis Fairbanks, Dan Jones, Geraldine Howard, Margaret Noodin and Leona Wakonabo (left to right) stand together at the completion celebration.



The stories span several seasons and include work, play, traditional arts and contemporary entertainment. The vocabulary and phrases included in the narratives are an invaluable archive of material for learners. Whether she was fishing with her mother, gardening with grandmother or digging a hole alone, Janis learned to look for life in the water and on the land. She recalls her Grandma as an Anishinaabe woman who spoke of “Lady Cedar” and had an ongoing relationship with the natural world. By allowing her stories to become the core of the “See and Say” project, Janis ensured the lessons of all the grandmothers before her will continue.

The stories were translated into Ojibwe and recorded simultaneously. Each story was read aloud, line by line, by Geraldine and Leona who are both first language Ojibwe speakers from the Leech Lake Band of Chippewa Indians. The women were filmed and recorded so that both a visual and audio record of the translation process was created. Although the resulting videos are two to three minutes long, the translation recordings average nine to eleven minutes. Some lines were repeated for sound quality, others were debated by the speakers and recorded with variations in vocabulary and grammar. It was important to allow the women to consult with one another and take as long as they felt was necessary. If the project had begun with stories told directly in Ojibwe by fluent speakers this step could be skipped. However, an increasing number of communities have elders who grew up hearing their heritage language but never having the opportunity to continue using it as an adult. This translation project

allowed memories of an Anishinaabe childhood to be recorded first in English and then in Ojibwe even though the school system experienced by the author nearly caused the language to be lost. Through this type of collaboration, communities are working to reconcile the history of boarding schools.

During this project, the team found many examples of the ways in which Ojibwe is different from English. For instance, in the story “*Gibiini’aanaanig Giigoonhyag* (Cleaning Fish)” the statement “they were really biting” changed to “*gii-wendabakadewag noongom giigoonhyag*” which means “they really were hungry today, the fish.” The phrase maintains the rules of Ojibwe as it describes the actions of the fish. It also neatly deconstructs the English idiom by clarifying the fish were easy to catch because they were hungry. Throughout the story, the translators include many examples of the inclusive first person plural “we,” a distinction which does not exist in English. For instance, when one of the speakers says “*ganage igo nisimidana gidayaawaanaanig*” which means “possibly as many as thirty we have,” it is clear the speaker is including the listener because she did not say “*indayaawaanaanig*” which would have meant the fish belonged only to the speaker and not to the listener.

Later in the same story, one of the characters explains the bountiful fishing expedition by saying: “I must have put some special *asemaa* in that water. The Creator and the fish decided to give us our supper.” It is interesting to note that Janis’ original English version included the Ojibwemowin word *asemaa* without translation. The word is often translated as “tobacco” but she invoked the older history of exchanging valued smoking mixtures used for prayer which extends long before the arrival of tobacco in North America. Her use of *asemaa* allowed the word to mean any mixture from cultivated *nicotiana tabacum* to hand-harvested *ginigawin* (‘kinnickinnic’) made of *miskoobiimag* (‘red willow’ / *cornus stolonifera*) and *zaagaakomin* (‘bearberry’ / *arctostaphylos uvaursi*). The women translating the story understood all of this and used the same word, *asemaa*, but as an animate object being offered by a first-person speaker. Their translation, “*asemaa ningii asaa imaa nibiing*” literally means “tobacco I put him/her in the water.” Continuing the confirmation of a connection between an offering and a good harvest, the women changed “the Creator and the fish decided to give us our supper” into “*Manidoo gigiimiinigonaaan jiminwanjigeyang*” which literally means “the Creator gave all of us (including the listener) the ability to eat well.” Leona chose the word “*Manidoo*” as a translation for “Creator” which resulted in significant goodspirited debate among the transcribing team who knew at least four other words for the same entity. Throughout the stories, similar lessons of grammar and syntax contribute to revitalization efforts and leave a legacy of language for future students of Ojibwe.

After the recordings were made, transcription was done by a team with a wide range of dialect usage, levels of speaking fluency, levels of literacy, and familiarity with the precise nuances of the two translators’ speech patterns. Because everyone considered one another friends and relatives, there was often a desire to allow broad variation and the group had to be reminded that students benefit from consistency and predictability when learning a language. Although the transcribers wanted to honour the greatest possible amount of variation to represent the full spectrum of the language, it was agreed that the videos should not use the same word or part of speech or grammatical construction in ways that might confuse learners. For example, the team used Brendan Fairbanks’ *Ojibwe Discourse Markers* (2016) as a resource to limit the infinite ways one might write *mii*, *mii dash*, *miinawaa* and other independent elements used to connect ideas, emphasize thoughts, add emotion and sometimes give order to statements and phrases.

Transcription work needs to be methodical and systematic and began with the team dividing the work into phases. Ricky, Dan, Misty and Carmen created preliminary versions of each story. Ricky noted that their work began with everyone learning to listen carefully and utilize new technology. He also noted that transcription “really tests one’s patience.” According to Ricky, “the trick was to create an atmosphere with no disruptions.” As the second phase of transcription began, Margaret and Marcus helped review the text for consistency in orthography and grammar. A linguist familiar with several dialects, Margaret relied on the local experts for final adjudication. Often, the changes she suggested were focused on consistent use of past tense and pronoun prefixes and suffixes. The group used the double vowel writing system and agreed on *The Ojibwe People’s Dictionary* as the primary resource for spelling adjudication because it features the two translators as contributors, and because it is the most common dictionary used in the communities surrounding Fond du Lac. Several meetings were held in person to complete the work, but an equal number of hours were spent on conference calls and a portion of the work was done via email as the group reached consensus about the final versions.

After translation, recording and transcription, the various parts of the project needed to be assembled as movies with subtitles. The “See and Say” videos are a blend of sound, writing and creative animation. They do not attempt to record precise movements or give viewers the illusion they are witnessing movement in real time. Instead, they are brilliant, culturally relevant drawings brought to life in ways that decode the language and action. As film and animation historian Thomas Lamarre notes, “decoding goes beyond an imitation or reproduction of live-action cinema and opens up new possibilities for expression” (Lamarre 2002, 333). The animator for the project was Jonathan Thunder, an Ojibwe painter and digital media artist currently residing in Duluth, Minnesota. His art and animation is familiar to many Anishinaabeg, and his work is frequently appreciated outside the circle of the Great Lakes. His artist’s statement on the site, thunderfineart.com explains:

My work explores personal themes of identity and internal dialogue through story and characters. I depict expressive characters whose emotions and thoughts manifest viscerally in their physical form. The bodies of my subjects often appear fragmented, animalistic, or partially obscured. My art acts as the scrapbook recording an evolving identity.

Jonathan depicts the Anishinaabe worldview and records what is sometimes lost in translation. Whether it is the gentle oscillation of the fish in *Gibiini’aanaanig Giigoonhyag* (‘Cleaning Fish’), the hypnotic way the *miskminaatigoog* ‘raspberry bushes’ move across a dreamscape of texture in *Nanaandawawiizo miinawaa Onandawaabamaan Anoojenaanzoonidasiniin* (‘She Finds Berries to Pick and Searches for Agates’) or the way the leaves fall east to west in *Madweyaanimad* (‘Hear the Winds Blow’), his images are an integral part of the story about the way Anishinaabe people are connected to their animate environment.

Many times, he caught bits of the stories that might have been forgotten as the memories moved from one language to another. For instance, in the story *Izhaa Mazinaatesijigewin* (‘Going to the Show’) the original lines are: “She’s sitting pretty tall there, shaking her hair” and “She’s just busy shaking her head, so her hair flies in her face, she likes it.” In the translation, these lines changed to become the following:

Wenda jiibadaakodabiwi wewebikwenid.
Just so, she is becoming a stiff sitter shaking her head.

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Wenda ojaanimizi wewebikwe bagizod.

Really she is busy shaking her head as if she is swimming.

Mii igo izhi miziwe ezhiizhisenid, wiinizisan. Ominwendaan.

So there all over the place is how it moves, the hair. She likes it.

To soften the difference between the original version and the idea of sitting stiffly, in the animation, the young protagonist is perched in the back of a pickup truck, leaning against the cab window, watching the road as it disappears. Most of her face is covered by hair flying over her eyes. Only a wideopen smile can be seen beneath the dark black strands (see Figure 2 below).

Figure 2. The wind made visible in Jonathan Thunder's drawing from the story *Izhaa Mazinaatesijigewin* ('Going to the Show').



The metaphors and idioms are different. "Sitting pretty" in English becomes "sitting stiff" in Ojibwe. Shaking her head "so her hair flies" in English becomes "as if she is swimming" in Ojibwe. As the project team reviewed the animations, they agreed these subtle variations in the language can be difficult to learn, yet they are just as important as vocabulary and conjugation if languages are to be retained in their fullest dimension. The "See and Say" videos contain many examples like this. Just when the translation might feel jarring, Jonathan's art and animation fills the gap and illustrates how the experience represented by adjectives and nouns in English is represented by verbs and verb phrases in Ojibwe.

The eleven finished videos can be accessed on the Fond du Lac Nation's website at <http://fdlrez.com/ojibwe/lessons.htm>. The booklets are available as two downloadable documents at <http://fdlrez.com/ojibwe/downloads/FDLOjibweVideoProjectBrochure.pdf> and <http://fdlrez.com/ojibwe/downloads/FDLOjibweVideoProjectBrochure2.pdf>. Students and teachers in the Fond du Lac community and beyond can enjoy the stories. The team also preserved the valuable linguistic data not used in the videos in the Indigenous Language Archive at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Placing the metadata, original full recordings and final translation documents in the archive ensures future linguists, teachers and speakers can learn more about the video project in the future. Too often, important conversations that can give insight about language change, maintenance and acquisition are not preserved.

After the project ended, the team considered the lessons learned and thought about advice that would be important for others who might consider similar work. As with many grant-funded efforts, the date money became available, and the date by which all funds needed to be spent were beyond the control of the team. In this case, the time allotted for completion changed from the requested one year proposed to six months. The team had to adapt their original vision to fit the funding and timeframe which resulted in less time for editing. Another problem that is all too common in language revitalization was the loss of Larry Smallwood (*Amikoban*), a first language speaker, whose sudden illness and departure to the life beyond before the project had even gotten underway, left a gap resulting in no male voice on the videos. The story most impacted by both challenges was *Oshkimiskwaaniganike* ('Making a New Roach'), which was meant to include both male and female dialogue but ended up with two female voices. One of the women had to recite a bit of dialogue that should have been spoken by a male speaker.

A second challenge which the team sensed could have been improved was the process of consensus used during transcription and editing. Although it was important for the work to be the result of community effort, Margaret and Ricky suggested that a Style Guide, much like those used by publishers of dominant languages, could be used to assist with future work. To confirm the areas where improvement was needed, the group worked with a version of *Madweyaanimad* ('Hear the Winds Blow'), which was provided by Brendan Fairbanks. He took a look at the version the group had finalized as part of the "See and Say" project and suggested further corrections based on linguistic analysis and current orthographic trends in the region. Both versions of the story are posted online and a simple analysis of his corrections shows where further improvement could make the work more consistent.

The corrections fell into several main categories. Only 8% of the edits related to actual word choice and meaning. And while many learners consider it to be a significant challenge, dialect variation accounted for only 12% of the changes and an additional 15% were due to sound quality. The most significant issue was format and style. A full 65% of the changes were simply inconsistent use of various symbols. The team was attempting to navigate literacy habits that had evolved over several decades. For instance, Margaret and Dan recalled single vowel spelling with diacritical markers in the 1970s and 1980s. Others could remember a time when the first person prefix always began with the letter "n" while most students today learn the first person prefix depends on the first letter in the root verb. As a part of the process of revitalization, the use of spaces, apostrophes and hyphens to separate prefixes, tenses, and root words has varied widely over time. All systems can be effective but within one project it is important to determine which rules to follow and then remain consistent.

It should be stated that the word choices and speech patterns of Geraldine and Leona were always honoured, but the way in which their oral translation was represented on the page was edited to ensure that it was as readable as possible. In communities where identity is often closely associated with dialect and word choice, often resulting in heated debates and sometimes even preventing students from continuing their studies, it is important to note that negotiating a single way to record the language before each project can eliminate much of the confusion. Certainly, a shared system across the entire linguistic diaspora would have advantages, but in the case of Ojibwe, where there are clear eastern and western regions and several contemporary dictionaries, it is not necessary for everyone to use the same system to make progress in revitalization. What is most essential is that teams who choose to create resources together, host classes or lead community gatherings need to negotiate standards in advance so that

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students can focus on learning and find the synergies rather than be hindered by lengthy discussions of differences.

Despite the challenges and necessary hard work under a deadline, the project was viewed as deeply satisfying for everyone involved. *Maamakaadendagwad* ('it is amazing') to "See and Say" the words beneath the images as the stories unfold. When the movies debuted at the Community Center in Fond du Lac in the summer of 2017 with all the collaborators present, the storyteller stood in the audience watching her younger self peeping between the ferns on screen and for a moment everyone stepped back in time (see Figure 3 below).

Figure 3. A young Janis Fairbanks as drawn by Jonathan Thunder in the story *Ginaadoobiimin* ('We Are Fetching Water').



The "See and Say" videos add to the understanding of Anishinaabe stories as world literature and serve as important resources for communities working to create accessible learning material. The project serves as an example of: sociolinguistic research, digital humanities with open online accessibility, literary theory providing examples of narrative structure and as a contribution to the breadth of world literature. The stories work against what critic Emily Apter describes as "the entrepreneurial bulimic drive to anthologize and curricularize the world's cultural resources" (Apter 2013, 3). They unite Anishinaabe storytellers and their audiences across a vast diaspora, rather than divide people along linguistic or political lines.

By moving the tales from one language and one generation to the next the project preserves Anishinaabe oral and literary traditions for future students and critical thinkers. It shows that "translation is a way of thinking again about how literatures and cultures relate to each other, how outside forces have brought about changes in the relationships among literary systems, and what challenges are inherent in these changes" (Shields 2013). Ojibwe is a living language and storytelling is a living art. One day perhaps, when the next generation is working in new and as yet unimagined formats, Anishinaabe children will ask their mothers: *Geyaabi ina Chidebenjiged ginoondaagoonaanig?* ('Does the Creator still hear us?'). If we have allowed our stories to travel through time with us the answer will still be: *Enya*.

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