

The Development of Ojibway Language Materials

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Ready-made language materials for Aboriginal language teachers and their students have always been lacking. Funding to purchase or make teaching resources has not been made available. Most teachers are expected to make the resources for their own classrooms. They have been struggling to do this, and one of their biggest problems is the lack of sufficient time. I too have been struggling to have ready-made materials, and this was the motivation for me to develop them myself as much as I could. This work is based on the development of language materials and the research that has been done. One of these, the language text, is soon to be published.

In 1974 the number of youth suicides in Wikwemikong First Nation was tremendously high. A huge meeting was held to talk about what had happened and what was causing such despair. The Elders who spoke called everyone present to account for it. Many said that the root of the problem was the people's loss of identity as individuals and as a Nation. The words of one Elder in particular really spoke to me. As he talked about the problems, the causes and effects of not knowing traditions, the effects of residential schools, the current identity crisis, and the loss of language and culture, he pointed out that children and youth were not being taught these things in school: neither their language, nor their culture, nor their traditions, nor their values. As a result, they "have" a lost identity. Then he pointed to everyone in the room, saying, "Those of you who know the language and culture, what are you doing about it?"

The culmination of his words led to my own Nishinaabemwin revitalization and struggle for tradition, which began in 1986 when I was hired to teach Native languages at Trent University. No teaching materials were available for me to use, and this alone was a graphic lesson in the need for language materials. I was not the only person struggling with the issue; the other teachers were in the same predicament. I was motivated to help out in any way I could to make a difference. So began my journey in developing materials for language teachers in revitalizing Nishinaabemwin. I began to collect Nishinaabe words and to record the language.

More resource materials are available now than in 1986, and more readily. However, there are still not enough materials to meet the continuing needs of Native language learners and teachers.

The Nishinaabeg language was never written. It has always been an oral tradition because there was no need to write. Today we have come to the point where the language must be written; it must be recorded in order

to preserve it for the children. Many Elders did not want the language written, whereas others have said it should be. The modern learners of the language agreed with these Elders; they wanted it written because they were accustomed to having everything written. Writing is a way of learning for them, and so written language became a tool for making learning easier.

When the written language was first being developed, those of us in the field adopted the phonetic writing system. The early linguists borrowed English letters and tried to write the language to their best ability. However, there were problems with this method: it was not consistent. Native language teachers and Elders wanted to have their own writing system, something consistent, something that was easy to read and pronounce. Chuck Fiero, a linguist who worked with many Elders for research reasons, tried to find out what the speakers needed. He showed that Nishinaabeg had three short vowels and four long vowels. The Nishinaabeg language patterns are shaped by these seven sounds.

We also found out that the language has other unique sounds. The Odawa language seems to have more nasal sounds than Ojibwe. Ojibwe has four clusters of nasal sounds: *nh*, *hn*, *ns*, and *nz*. However if *h* occurs in the middle of a word it is omitted. There is also a glottal stop, which is a catch in the throat. Sometimes the *h* is written to show the presence of the glottal stop. And finally, some specific letter sounds do not occur in Nishinaabemwin; these are *f*, *l*, *q*, *r*, *u*, *v*, *x*.

Nishinaabemwin teachers have developed a vowel syllable song to teach beginning speakers the sounds of the language, just as English teachers may use an ABC song with English learners. This is a playful way of familiarizing students with all the sounds of the language. They find it helpful as they begin to read and to write Nishinaabemwin. A vowel syllable chart was developed to accompany the song, which was sung by Irene Snache. An asterisk before a syllable, for example, **ja*, indicates that a sound is rare and that there may be no words beginning with that sound. Two basic methods, then, are used: audio (song) and visual (text) cues. In other words, singing and seeing reinforces the learning.

In Canada there are 11 Aboriginal language families, 53 languages, and over 200 dialects. There is a mother language in each language family, and others extend from it. For example, Algonkian is the mother language for Abenakis, Algonkin/Algonquin, Blackfoot, Cree, Delaware, Malecite, Micmac, Montagnais/Naskapi, Ojibway, Ottawa/Outaouais, and Potawatomi.

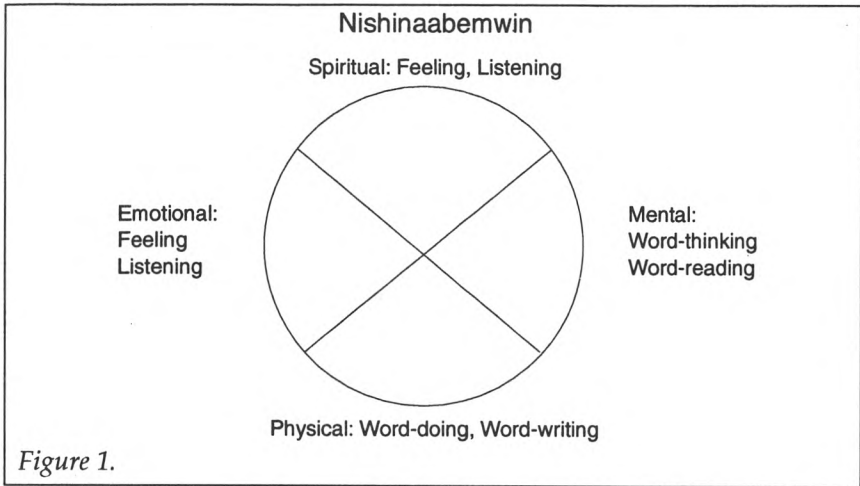
In Ontario there are five dialectal regions where the same language is spoken. These are Manitoulin Central dialect, South-Eastern Ojibway, Chippewa language, the Plains Ojibway, and the Northern Ojibway. Words may have a different meaning in some regions than in others. For example, *maajaan* means "to come" in one region, but means "to go" in

another region. In teaching the language, I check that students are aware of these differences. This helps them respect the unique dialects of each First Nations community.

On Manitoulin Island there are seven First Nations consisting of Ojibway, Odawa, and Potawatomi peoples who speak the Manitoulin Central Ojibway dialect. These communities understand each other's language. However, the same object can sometimes have a different name. For example, *goodaas* means "dress" in my community, and *mnjigoodenh* means "dress" in Odawa. To avoid miscommunication, it is good to know the meaning a word in one dialect area may have in another area. Here is another example. What is known in Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota as Chippewa language, and which belongs to the same Algonquian mother language, is actually known as the Ojibway language in Canada. Plains Ojibway is another dialect in the mother language of Algonquian. Neighboring Ojibway understand northern Ojibway. However, some other neighboring communities speak other languages such as Cree. The point to learners is this: although speakers in various regions say some words differently, their distinct ways of saying particular words is not wrong; it is simply different.

In teaching and writing, I follow the four parts of the Medicine Wheel teachings: the spiritual, emotional, physical, and mental (Figure 1). The spiritual represents our feelings. Many words describe feelings, and Ojibway is known as the "feeling language." It is like a sing-song when it is spoken. At gatherings of the same speakers, one can hear a lot of laughter. This too tells us that it is a feeling language. When we speak it, we feel it. The emotional represents word-watching. When we speak, we watch what another person is saying. As we watch, we feel the other person's spirit. Thus watching is important in Nishinaabemwin communication. The physical represents word-doing. In the Nishinaabe language we do, we feel, and we watch, and this is how we learn. The mental represents word-thinking. When we speak in the language, we think about what we are going to say to another human being. In this way we are careful of what we are going to communicate so that we do not harm another's physical being or spirit.

The spiritual focus is on listening, which is important if a learner is to hear what is said. The emotional focus is on word-speaking. In order to reproduce these sounds, we first have to hear them. Yet hearing is more than hearing. We pick up other cues from people as we listen and become aware. These cues can influence our spirit as we listen to the feeling within the words. The physical focus is on word-writing. Since Nishinaabemwin has become a written language, a physical aspect of learning the language is writing it. The physical activity of writing reinforces what we are thinking. The mental focus is on reading the new written words of Nishinaabemwin. Thus our words, or language, are medicine to one's



spirit. As the language is put back together, the language and the learner become whole, for the teachings and values are reflected in Nishinaabemwin words themselves.

In 1996, 10 years after I began teaching the language, many Nishinaabeg Nations came together at the “Finding a Common Writing System” conference. Ontario Nishinaabeg, along with Ojibwe, Chippewa Algonquian and Saulteaux from Quebec, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta came to a consensus on adopting a writing system that would be spearheaded by the Native Language Instructors program at Lakehead University. Native language teachers in Ontario learn this system so that written Nishinaabemwin will be more consistent throughout the Nations. Quebec linguists adopted a Circumflex Writing System (which is a mark over vowels), and this reflects the French influence: I call it the “teepee” writing system. Ontario (English influence) adopted the Double Vowel Writing system.

I organized *Gdi-nweninaa* (Our Voice—Our Sound), a collection of Ojibwe and Odawa words, into six themes that represent an approach to language learning. Aboriginal language students and teachers suggested this as an easier way for them to find Nishinaabemwin words. Chapter One gives the words for names of birds, fish, insects, farm animals, forest animals, herbs, trees, plants, and flowers. Chapter Two has the theme of time and includes measurement of time, division of days, sky world, months, commerce, counting, and weather. Chapter Three is about relations, along with human anatomy, tasks, mental thoughts, illnesses, Aboriginal regalia, contemporary clothing, and household belongings. Chapter Four gives the various aspects of community such as people, geography, holidays, chores, occupations, and public buildings. Chapter Five consists of a number of recreational activities such as games (toys and sports), camping, musical instruments (traditional and contemporary),

travel, and hobbies. Chapter Six contains names for kitchen utensils, foods, fruits and berries, vegetables, and meat. Most of the entries in *Gdi-nweninaa* are nouns, both animate and inanimate, and each entry is extended to show the prefixes and suffixes that are used to create the possessive, plural, locative, pejorative, dubitive, and preterit forms of the words. Some verbs are also listed.

The Revitalization of the Nishinaabemwin Language research project started in 1998 with the development of language materials. These are *Gdi-nweninaa*, *Eshkintam mzinagan*, *Eko-niizhing-mzinagan*, *Oshime geyaabi-mzinagan*. A reference committee of four experts on Nishinaabemwin orthography advised on the development of the text and writing system. One of the most innovative aspects of this research project is the development of the hockey CD-ROM, an interactive game that teaches Nishinaabemwin hockey-related terms in a way kids enjoy. It is geared to youth, but it can be used for adults too. Crossword puzzles will also accompany the first text of *Eshkintam mzinagan*. Flash cards are being developed to teach the language to students. These can be used in many ways: concentration games, Nishinaabemwin jeopardy games, and so forth. After all these projects are completed, the last part of the project will be the computerized Nishinaabemwin spell-check.

All these recreative activities reflect the revitalization of Ojibway Nishinaabemwin thought and language, the rebirth of our cultural identity as a people. Putting these into practice is equivalent to regaining our voice, recovering ourselves, reclaiming our landscape, and reimagining our place in the cosmos.