

Background of the Ojibwe Language

Ojibwe is part of the Algonquian language family. Ojibwe is linguistically related to a number of languages of people across North America including Penobscot, Delaware, Shawnee, Cree, Menominee, Cheyenne, and Blackfoot.

There are Ojibwe communities in Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, North Dakota, and Montana. Ojibwe people live across an even wider territory in Canada including communities in Ontario, Manitoba, Quebec, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and even British Columbia. The Ojibwe represented here is spoken in Minnesota and Wisconsin, although speakers from vast distances can understand each other.

Although dialects in Ojibwe reflect a number of factors, a central influence on the development of Ojibwe dialects in our region was the separation of Ojibwe bands at Sault Ste. Marie during the Ojibwe migration. Accounts vary, but this occurred 400 to 600 years ago and was likely a process that took decades as different communities established themselves slowly over time. Ojibwe bands and communities that migrated along the northern shore of Lake Superior developed slight differences in dialect from those who migrated along the south shore of Lake Superior. Grand Portage, Bois Forte, and Ojibwe bands in Ontario are the descendants of those who took a northern route along Lake Superior in their migration. While there are important differences between northern and southern dialects, they are way more similar than dissimilar.

In 1992, the *Guinness Book of World Records* listed Ojibwe as one of the most complex languages in the world, based on its many verb forms. However, it is important to remember that this is relative: other languages such as Spanish are not inherently less sophisticated, but instead share with English a linguistic heritage as Indo-European languages. Furthermore, a language like Spanish shares more cognates with English as a result of hundreds of years of cultural and linguistic interaction with English. It is doubtful that a first speaker of Cree or another Algonquian language would find Ojibwe more difficult to learn than English or Spanish. While it is true that Ojibwe can be a challenging language for English speakers to learn, Ojibwe is a language of verbs and mastering the basics of Animate Intransitive Verbs (VAI), allows one to describe a wide variety of actions.

It is important to remember as you learn Ojibwe that it is not English. Ojibwe is its own form of communication linguistically unrelated to English. We cannot say everything in Ojibwe exactly how it sounds in English. Likewise, Ojibwe provides ways of describing the world around us that are unique. As a result of Ojibwe people living in our region for hundreds of years, Ojibwe provides means of describing and understanding the land we live on that is more precise and comprehensive than English.

Accordingly, there are many Ojibwe words that English has adopted. These include moose (mooz), muskellunge (maashkinoozhe), and moccasin (makizin). Many places in Minnesota and Wisconsin have retained their Ojibwe names including the Mississippi River (Misi-ziibi), Milwaukee (Mino-aki), and the Mesabi Range

(Misaabe). There are a number of lakes across Minnesota and Wisconsin still known as Chetac (Zhede) or Pokegama (Bakegamaa). Even places as far away as Ossining, New York (Asiniing) are known by their Ojibwe name. Ojibwe was so influential on English speakers that they often identified other tribes by their names in Ojibwe and not by what these tribes called themselves. Tribes known by their Ojibwe names include the Winnebago (Wiinibiigoo), Assiniboin (Asinii-bwaan), and Eskimo (Ashkimo).

Ojibwe is highly descriptive. This is especially true of nouns that were introduced into Ojibwe communities within the last one hundred fifty years. Perhaps the most well known example is Miini-baashkimasigani-biitoosijigani-bakwezhigan (blueberry pie). Each part of this word meticulously describes the pie. Miin is a blueberry, baashkimasigani is the jam, biitoosijigani are the layers, and bakwezhigan is the pastry.

Animate and Inanimate

The Ojibwe language is divided between animate and inanimate. While English does not include an approximate division, other languages have comparable divisions. Romantic languages such as Spanish, French, or Italian, feature a division between masculine and feminine. The division between animate and inanimate roughly reflects Ojibwe worldview. **Animate nouns** include people, animals, and plants. However, there are many nouns that are animate in the Ojibwe language that English speakers do not think of as living. For example, asiniig (rocks), are animate in the Ojibwe language. Objects used in ceremonies are also animate, including asemaa (tobacco), opwaaganag (pipes), and dewe'iganag (drums). Most food, body parts, and cloths are **inanimate**. But there are notable exceptions including bakwezhigan (bread), nishkanzh (my fingernail), and giboodiyegwaazonag (pants). Sometimes animacy varies by community. For example, odaabaanag (cars) are not animate in all communities. Sometimes there are teachings about why a particular noun is animate that relates specifically to Ojibwe worldview. Other times however, the animacy of noun is simply idiomatic. It is important to remember that Ojibwe is a language just like any other: an ever-changing means of communication created and maintained by people. Language is not always a logical formula: not everything in a language is going to make perfect sense. Part of learning Ojibwe is just having to know the animacy of individual nouns. This is extremely important as you must use an animate verb to describe the action of an animate noun.

Even more than English, **Ojibwe is a language of verbs**. There are four types of verbs in the Ojibwe language, Animate Intransitive Verbs (**VAI**), Inanimate Intransitive Verbs (**VII**), Animate Transitive Verbs (**VTA**), and Inanimate Transitive Verbs (**VTI**). Knowing these verb forms is important, as the way each of these verb forms is conjugated is different. While it may seem technical or like linguistic jargon, transitive versus intransitive simply refers to the nouns involved in an action. **Intransitive verbs refer to a noun performing an action. Transitive verbs refer to a noun performing an action on another noun.**