

Reader's Guide

Bebikaan-ezhiwebiziwinan Nimkii: The Adventures of Nimkii

Where is Anishinaabemowin spoken?

It is currently used in nearly 150 Anishinaabe communities in and around Quebec, Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, North Dakota, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota.

Please note that at this time Anishinaabemowin remains an endangered language because it does not have adults using the language with children at home. This book is intended to change that.

The good news is that Anishinaabemowin, like all other languages spoken right now on earth, is a "living language." However, the reason it can feel much harder to learn for speakers of English is that Anishinaabemowin belong to a different language family. Anishinaabemowin is one of 26 Algonquian languages. English is one of 445 Indo-European languages.

What makes Anishinaabemowin special?

Anishinaabemowin is "agglutinative" which means the words are long chains of connected meaning. Something that might take many words to say in English can be just one word in Anishinaabemowin. For example people commonly say to one another "Giga-waabamin" which looks and sounds like one long word and means "I will see you." One must study to understand what the pieces of a word (known as morphemes) mean. These parts of meaning, the morphemes, are made up of connected sounds, called phonemes. Sometimes you can guess meaning based on one sound or meaning. For example, you can probably guess what a new word like "mansplain" means because you understand the morphemes you have heard separately. Anishinaabemowin speakers often like to talk about how the word blueberry pie is actually like a recipe: wiishkobi-miini-baashkiminasigani-biitoosijigani-bakwezhigan (sweet-blueberry-mashed jam-sandwiched between-bread crust).

Another important fact to know about Anishinaabemowin is that because it is still living - there are no right and wrong ways to say a word and words are formed as they are spoken. In English, if you wanted to speak about a fawn it would be considered most correct to say fawn each time. In a living language, how you describe or say the word for fawn would depend on the mood and perspective of the speaker. One might say gidigaagoons (little spotted one), oshkiwaawaashikeshiins (new little deer) or another word that represents the animal you encounter or are remembering.

Another interesting thing is that in Anishinaabemowin, prepositions are within the word - the words themselves tell you whom you are talking to. At its core, the language is relational and focused on connection. There is less separation focus on nouns and many nouns. You could say that the language reflects the idea that your actions are connected and have a wider impact (as opposed to what the individual is doing and separating them from their actions).

We are all related!

One last thing - in many European languages you may know that nouns have gender and are often labeled as feminine or masculine. In Anishinaabemowin, there are also two types of nouns. They are sometimes described as inanimate (non-living) or animate (a living thing with agency) but they do not always fit that description.. Sometimes these are mysterious. Would you have guessed that "feather" is animate?

How did Nimkii get her name?

I named her Nimkii because she was small and black which made me think of a thunderstorm and at first I called her "Nimkiins" for Little Thunder.

Why is the book organized by seasons?

In most indigenous cultures seasons define the timing of important events. From harvesting foods such as wild rice and strawberries to knowing when the smelt will run to when it is time for stories to be told - it seemed natural to structure Nimkii's adventures with the seasons.