

Anishinaabemowin

by Patrick Littell

Anishinaabemowin, also known as Ojibwa, Ojibwe, or Chippewa, is among the most-spoken American Indian languages in North America today. It is a member of the Algonquian family of languages, which were the first languages to be encountered by English settlers in North America. Coming across new and strange plants and animals, the settlers had to borrow words for them, so many words in English – including "moose", "raccoon", "opossum", "squash", and many others – originally come from Algonquian languages!

A few varieties of Anishinaabemowin, spoken in Michigan and Ontario, sound very different from other varieties. These dialects, called "Nishnaabemwin" by their speakers, have undergone a startling sound change in the last fifty years or so. By comparing Nishnaabemwin words to those of a closely related dialect, Minnesota Ojibwe, you can discover what happened, and even predict Nishnaabemwin words from their Minnesota Ojibwe relatives.

Can you discover an algorithm – a step-by-step procedure – for turning Minnesota Ojibwe words into Nishnaabemwin words? Write the missing Nishnaabemwin forms in the blanks.

A line above a vowel, as in "ā", indicates that the vowel is long.

Minnesota Ojibwe	Nishnaabemwin	English
amik	mik	"beaver"
mitig	mtig	"tree"
okosimān	kosmān	"pumpkin"
makizinan	mkiznan	"moccasins"
niwābamigonān	nwābmignān	"he or she sees us"
makwa	<u>mkwa</u>	"bear"
adōpowin	<u>dōpwin</u>	"table"

Now consider the following data. You will need to modify your algorithm slightly to handle these forms.

Minnesota Ojibwe	Nishnaabemwin	English
mōz	mōz	"moose"
ginebig	gnebig	"snake"
manidō	mnidō	"Manitou, spirit"
mitigwāb	mtigwāb	"bow"
opwāgan	pwāgan	"pipe"

Finally, here are a few more forms. Can your algorithm be modified to handle these as well? If your algorithm is correct, it should work for all the forms on this page.

Minnesota Ojibwe	Nishnaabemwin	English
jīmān	jīmān	"canoe"
ēsibanag	ēsbanag	"raccoons"
aninātig	ninātig	"maple tree"
anishinābēmowin	nishnābēmwin	"Indian language"
gichi-mōkmān	gchi-mōkmān	"American"
mīgwan	mīgwan	"feather"
gwīwizens	gwīwizens	"boy"
nimishōmis	nmishōmis	"my grandfather"

Now that you've seen all the data, what is the algorithm you've devised? Write out a step-by-step procedure for getting a Nishnaabemwin word from its Minnesota Ojibwe relative.

Many possible answers. Correct ones will have the results that every odd vowel deletes, counting from the left, except for the final vowel in a word, and except for long vowels, which "restart" the counting process anew with the next vowel.