

nokom acitch wabak



*"With the song of the birds, with the cry of the animals,
with the wind in the trees, we learned the language."*

Richard Kistabish [Translation]



*"It took one hundred paddle strokes to memorise. Now we
learn in a fixed place. We see the same thing over and
over again and we forget how everything else is called."*

Richard Kistabish [Translation]

Towards an action plan for the decade of indigenous languages

The Anicinabe language, or Anicinabemowin, is the link between our spirit and the tangible world; it connects us to a particular territory. Like all indigenous languages, it was born from the contact between the land, the trees, the animals, everything around us, and our spirits. Its roots are anchored in Mother Earth, who carries them as much as she carries it, because although the language comes from a territory, it allows us to carry that territory with us, through identity.

In the safe space of the canoe, in the centre of the family, sitting between his father and mother, the Anicinabe child learned his language. With each paddle stroke, the landscape changed and the child named what he saw.

Fast disappearing languages

95% of the world's languages could become extinct or endangered by the end of this century.

(United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues.)

The majority of endangered languages are indigenous languages.

In 2016, only 16% of Indigenous people in Canada were able to speak their ancestral language.

(Anderson, 2018)

Table: Use of anicinabemowin at home by different communities.

COMMUNITY	PERCENTAGE OF ANICINABEMOWIN SPEAKERS	MAIN LANGUAGE SPOKEN
Kitcisakik	56.4%	French
Lac Simon	52.6%	French
Abitibiwinnik (Pikogan)	41.9%	French
Kitigan Zibi	17.4%	English
Long Point (Winneway)	9.5%	English
Kebaowek	3.6%	English
Timiskaming First Nation	1.9%	English



On several occasions in history, Quebec has passed laws to reinforce the use of French in several public spheres, such as education, business, municipal affairs or the integration of newcomers. Each time, the linguistic rights of English-speaking communities have been respected, but what about those of Indigenous people? In fact, the indigenous linguistic heritage, in Quebec as elsewhere in the country, has been severely damaged by multiple attempts to eradicate it.

Even though official policies to eliminate indigenous languages seem to be over, this does not mean that power relations are non-existent and that there are sufficient resources to ensure the transmission of indigenous languages. It should be remembered that political discourses in favour of the dominance of French and English have largely contributed (and still contribute) to the marginalisation of indigenous languages in the public space.

The loss of the territory also means the loss of the language

Today, Canada's First Peoples are living with the impacts of colonization, including sedentary life and residential school trauma. For some individuals, families and communities, the pain is still very much alive and the healing process is taking place one step at a time. The prohibition of cultural practices and the use of anicinabemowin in residential schools, as well as land dispossession, will have caused many losses, resulting in a significant break in the transmission of ancestral knowledge and language to younger generations.

Anicinabemowin is a land-rooted language. It describes the land's features, the medicinal properties of plants, sacred sites, the seasonal cycles, etc. With it, traditional knowledge can be transmitted without the inevitable distortion that any translation entails. Anicinabemowin has the secrets of traditional food; it preserves the place names and all the knowledge of our ancestors. We were forced to live on reserves; as a result, we lost the land and, with it, the language that is intimately linked to it.

Today, the destruction of ecosystems, sedentarisation and climate change in recent decades are factors that can explain the erosion of the language and the generation gap.

The anicinabemowin spoken in the past referred to objects, actions, responsibilities and realities of a way of life rooted in Nitakinan (the land). This is why the vocabulary used by the elders is sometimes difficult to understand for the new generation, since their way of life is completely different. The isolation of the communities, their dispersion over two Canadian provinces, and the use of two official languages (French and English) are elements that have had a considerable influence on the communities, creating several local variants of the anicinabe language. Although these differences are a richness of the language, they can sometimes present difficulties for communication. It is sometimes difficult to translate certain words or expressions from Anicinabe to French or English, as

they do not necessarily have an equivalent in these languages. For example, the word 'respect' does not exist in Anicinabemowin, which does not allow for insults. Respect is implicit in the very structure of the language, the relationship of respect to living beings is implicit in the language. Translation therefore requires interpreting ideas according to the context and the people involved in the dialogue. This is a delicate interpretation exercise and it must be done by competent people.

Language: an essential right

The reconciliation that all of Canada has been talking about since the Truth and Reconciliation Commission cannot be achieved without the recognition of language rights. How can we talk about bridge-building and social inclusion while allowing an important part of indigenous culture to disappear along with their language? To include means to allow others to fully experience their cultural identity.



Indigenous languages should be allowed to become part of the soundscape and visualscape of the territory inhabited by Canada's First Peoples, as stated in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples:

"Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons." (United Nations, 2007, p. 7) [Article 13]).

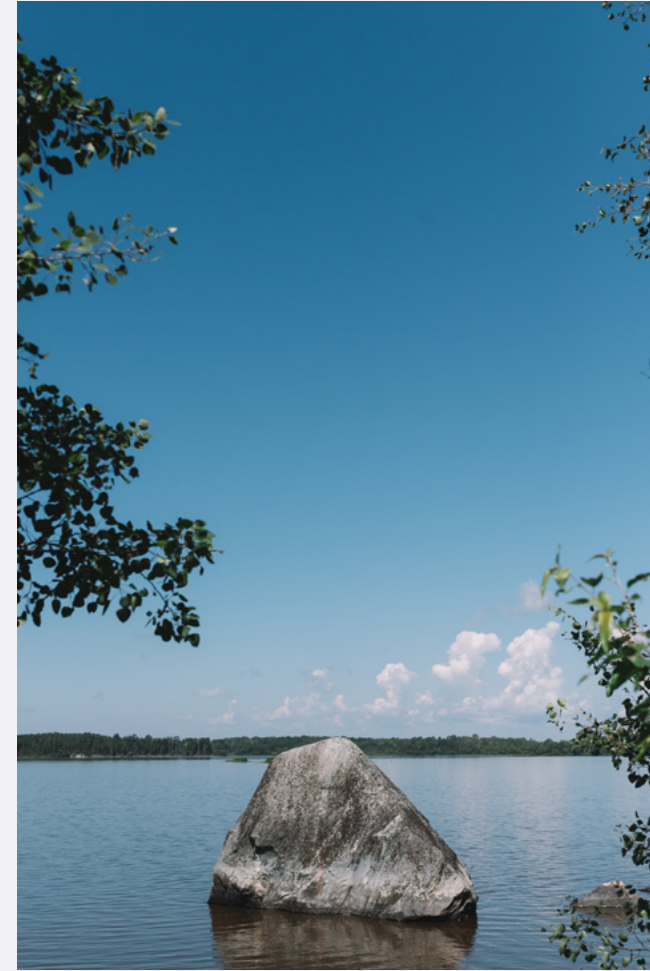




A reconstruction and updating exercise

Updating our language by creating new words will be necessary both to preserve the knowledge it contains and to adapt it to contemporary life. The challenge will therefore be to enrich the language so that it is useful and necessary in everyday life, while reconciling the oral and written traditions. This work will be all the more difficult as each community has its own particularities in the way it uses and transmits the language.

Nevertheless, for the future of anicinabemowin, the communities must initiate a dialogue about the path to be taken in order to update it. Several Indigenous peoples around the world have led the way, so we can follow in their footsteps by taking inspiration from promising initiatives to consider our own courses of action.



The basis for reconstruction

The first thing to do is to accept history. To accept on both sides that this is indeed a history of colonisation. Only then can we start decolonising.

Once this has been said and accepted, we can honour the memory of our ancestors, restore their image and their memory. Their spirit and their memory will show us the way; but to do this we must listen and make an effort to recall their teachings.

It will be an arduous, complex task, requiring us to dig up, searching through the archives, selecting the best information, and sowing it again in the minds of each member of our communities. We will need to recover the memory and teachings of our ancestors in order to regain our sense of belonging, our identity and dignity. To this end, we will also need access to all existing archives and heritage materials that have been taken away from our communities.

Accessing all the knowledge that concerns us is essential to enable us to create the space where the language can evolve freely, from tree to tree, from portage to portage, from education to health, until the language ecosystem invades our entire territory. And that also means getting our language rights recognised.

"We must first name the discomfort. Then we can tame it." Richard Kistabish [Translation]

Sharing responsibilities, duties and obligations



Each of these steps will require sharing responsibilities, obligations and duties. Decolonisation is a two-sided movement. For the colonisers, it is the need to give us space and for the colonised to take our rightful place. History has caused Indigenous people to forget their responsibilities, obligations and duties. Today, they have a duty to restore their culture and language in a holistic way. Governments and other populations, for their part, have a duty to help them. In order to achieve all these steps, it is imperative to create protected time and spaces. Language is absent from homes and workplaces because it does not have the space to survive. Parents are too busy with everyday tasks and feeding their families to learn the language. In schools, children do not have time either as they have to learn the content required by the Ministry of Education's curriculum. We must now give time and space for the language to be learned in the territory, in its natural habitat. Presently, the Anicinabe language is a bit like the Val-d'Or caribou herd: weakened, smaller in number and enclosed in a small territory that no longer corresponds to their ecosystem. Even though everyone knows they are on

the verge of extinction, no one is doing anything about it when they need a protected area created for them. Just like these caribou, we need to create time and space for the anicinabemowin.

Protecting the Anicinabe language requires the creation of protected spaces where it can be used, spoken, learned and transmitted. These spaces can take several forms and be adapted to different contexts. They enable speakers to have easy and regular access to safe times and places to use, learn, speak and transmit the language, in the territory and elsewhere.

It is the establishment of these protected spaces, in all areas of life — education, health, economy and employment, justice, territory, etc. — which constitutes the heart of the decade of Anicinabe language. This will be done with a human approach that leaves plenty of room for experimentation, mistakes and adjustments, and with a pace that respects people and makes room for empathy.



One step at a time

This will require us to rethink everything, but pekatc, let's take the time to do it right and let's also be aware that every little thing counts, every stone thrown into the water causes action, creates an impact and produces concentric circles that move outward. Thus, change is never achieved by the masses, but by manifestations of a few people, by small movements.

Giving ourselves the right to make mistakes

These protected areas for language are more easily achieved in a community than anywhere else. It will be difficult in the areas of education, economy, businesses and organisations where Anicinabe people work. It will be a challenge, but we must face it together and to do so we must adopt a spirit of openness to change and innovation. It will be essential to experiment and, above all, to give ourselves the right to make mistakes. After all we have been through, we need to make our own mistakes to learn and know how to start over.

Tools at our disposal

We will be able to use the technologies at our disposal to speed up the transmission of the language. Technology could make it easier for people in our communities to learn, anywhere, anytime. They will be able to hear their language, read it and write it. In other words, technology may become a protected area in itself and allow anicinabemowin to increase its scope.





"It takes time and protected spaces to learn in the territory and on the move".

The Anicinabe strategy for the Decade of Indigenous Languages: Protected spaces for speaking our language in the territory and on the move.

The Decade of Indigenous Languages will take place from 2022 to 2032. Ten years to take structuring actions to protect, enhance and revive the Anicinabe language. This decade will be divided into three main phases that interact and influence each other.

Phase 1

RECOGNITION AND VALUING

Recognising the right to speak, learn and transmit the language. Placing the Anicinabe language at the heart of the healing and reconciliation process, using an approach that respects each person's pace.

- Launching of the Decade
- Proclamation and signatures
- Touring the communities with the exhibition on language
- Valuing the language and its speakers
- Sharing our vision and mobilise the communities, allies and partners
- Create a working group on the language

Phase 2

REPARATION AND RESTORATION

Creating with communities, allies and partners the necessary conditions to speak our language, in the territory and elsewhere. Establishing protected spaces in all areas of life: health, education, justice, territory, etc.

- Making the most of available resources
- Developing tools for communities, allies and partners
- Supporting pilot projects in the fields of education, health, justice, territory, etc.
- Establishing protected spaces for language in all areas of life: health, education, work, justice, territory, spirituality, etc.
- Publicising and sharing experiences, learning and outcomes.

Phase 3

AUTONOMY AND TRANSMISSION

To live and transmit our culture and language freely on our territory. To think autonomously and sovereignly about the future of our nation and our communities.



Photos: Marie-Raphaëlle LeBlond, Christian Leduc, Christophe Migeon, Marie-Pier Valiquette