



Deaf-centric and Sovereign: Translation as a Tool for Changing Audism and English Dominance

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ABSTRACT: This essay explores the way two languages typically considered “less-common” can be connected through creative composition, translation and interpretation. Working together in a course on Great Lakes History at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, three co-authors confront the problem of creating culturally informed translations of two indigenous texts. One author is the professor of the course and an Anishinaabe poet sharing her own work with students. One author is a writer and sign-language interpreter. One author is a long-distance Anishinaabe cultural consultant. In the class, students learn to read and recite two texts originally composed in Anishinaabemowin and translated into English. With Deaf students enrolled in the course, an additional translation into American Sign Language (ASL) is needed. An ASL interpretation of each text based only on the English translation is useful, but does not contain the full meaning of the Anishinaabemowin original. Together the team created an ASL version which reflects more detail and cultural nuances. The primary aim of this essay is to demonstrate a method for reducing audism by using inter-cultural methodologies to produce more accurate translations and decolonial and deaf-centric interpretations. A secondary aim of the essay is to compare and contrast Anishinaabemowin and ASL leading to the suggestion that more work should be done to directly connect indigenous and sign languages.

KEY WORDS: American Sign Language; creative composition; translation; decolonial and Deaf-centric interpretation; Anishinaabem



INTRODUCTION

When first introduced to a new language, people often ask how to say or sign a single word. Speakers look for simple word-to-word translations and interpretations for an action, object or idea. But language does not flow in isolation and, in moving from one language to another, translation and interpretation is never simple. The answer depends on context, a shared sense of meaning and who is involved in the discourse. The most rich and complex understanding of a language is produced when the additional layers of culture, location and identity are included. Many times, these layers of language are most visible in the poems, songs and other creative works produced by the artists of a community.

In this essay we introduce two languages which operate as minority languages in English-speaking nations where speakers are often unaware of one another despite the fact that their languages have several characteristics in common. We then introduce the setting of this case study which is a specific university course where both languages are used and translation followed by interpretation is needed. By sharing our experiences teaching and interpreting two specific texts, while attempting to honor and accurately represent each language used, we offer an example of auto-ethnography where the researchers also serve as participants. Within an indigenous research paradigm, this is a narrative of self within society and is a form of metacognitive awareness elders have encouraged for many centuries.

The primary aim, as we bring these pieces of the puzzle together, is to demonstrate a method for reducing audism by using inter-cultural methodologies based on close reading and linguistic analysis to produce accurate translations and decolonial and Deaf-centric interpretations. A secondary aim of the essay is to compare and contrast Anishinaabemowin and ASL leading to the suggestion that more work should be done to directly connect indigenous and sign languages.

ANISHINAABEMOWIN

Anishinaabemowin is a geopolitical term which encompasses three closely related Algonquian languages: Odawa, Potawatomi and Ojibwe. Anishinaabemowin has a range of dialects, is centered on verbs and is agglutinative which results in many directional and descriptive meanings added to a single root to create such delightful words as “makademaashkikiwabo” for the “black medicine water” known as coffee, or “maamwimaashkogaabawiyaang” for the phrase, “together we stand strong.” For centuries stories were encoded in images on the land, on rock faces and on birch bark scrolls, but most speech was never recorded and transmission of knowledge was entirely oral. Rivers, lakes and gathering places throughout the region still reflect the language of those who served as stewards of the area. In the 1700s the language began to be transcribed by explorers, traders and missionaries and in the 1800s alphabets were developed. In the northern region a syllabic system based on one symbol for each phoneme became common while many other areas use the Roman alphabet without the letters *f*, *l*, *v* or *r* and double vowel combinations to represent length. Today, 163 federally recognized indigenous nations located within the



boundaries of Canada and the United States consider Anishinaabemowin the heritage language of the people (DeFoe et al. 52). Forty-eight of these nations are on the coast of the "Great Lakes" (Ontario, Erie, Huron, Michigan and Superior) in the United States which are understood to be a single freshwater system called Gichigaming in Anishinaabemowin.

In the United States and Canada, where a small number of indigenous language programs exist, Anishinaabemowin is often housed in departments of "foreign" languages despite its primary presence on the continent. Unfortunately, colonization and the permanent settlement of missionaries and capitalists have had devastating consequences for indigenous people, cultures and languages. As the United States was being formed, the second President, John Adams, predicted, "English is destined to be in the next and succeeding centuries more generally the language of the world than Latin was in the last or French is in the present age" (Armitage 71). As the nation grew in land base, treasury and military power, English also grew in linguistic dominance. Although Native Americans were granted citizenship in 1924, and the right to govern themselves in 1936, these rights were offered in English. America's relationship with Native Americans is one of denial and restriction of identity intended to result in extinction or assimilation (Noori 5). In 1819, the Civilization Fund Act provided money to societies who would "educate" Indian students but the goal was to "civilize" Indians by getting rid of their traditions and customs and teaching them to read and write English. Captain Richard Pratt, notable for his work during the Indian Wars, was given responsibility for Indian Education in the United States in 1879. Considered a forward-thinking educator willing to give native students a chance (if they abandoned all traces of their native roots), he opened the doors of Carlisle boarding school to continue the work begun by early French, German and Spanish missionaries (Noori 4). Many indigenous-language programs can be traced directly to the eventual closing of Indian boarding schools a century later with the renewal of indigenous culture during the American Indian Movement in the 1970s. Based on criteria outlined by the UNESCO ad hoc expert group on endangered languages (7), Anishinaabemowin is extremely endangered due to the dominance of surrounding languages, a decline in intergenerational language transmission, a decreasing number of speakers who represent a low proportion of speakers within the total population and a relative lack of materials for education and language maintenance. The largest advance in indigenous-language instruction came in 1990 with the passage of the Native American Languages Act, in which acts of linguistic suppression and extermination were recognized and funding was appropriated to support the study of indigenous languages (Noodin 5). Despite these challenges, revitalization efforts in many parts of the world have begun to turn the tide of loss as communities focus on the recovery and use of Anishinaabemowin because, like ASL, the language is one facet of identity for those who continue to use it.

AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE

Like Anishinaabemowin, English and all other languages, American Sign Language (ASL) developed to serve a particular community of users beginning in 1817 when Thomas Gallaudet and a Deaf French man named Laurent Clerc established the

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Connecticut Asylum for the Education and Instruction of the Deaf and Dumb (now the American School for the Deaf) (Valli et al. 13). Among the first students who attended the school were children from Deaf families, who were already using signs, and residents of nearby Martha's Vineyard, a community that had already established their own sign language (Shaw and Delaporte 158-159). The French signs and language structure demonstrated by Clerc, influenced by signs already in use, gave way to a budding new communication system that grew into a sophisticated language with all the important linguistic characteristics (e.g. it can be broken down into parts, it changes over time, members of a community share the language). Like Anishinaabemowin, the lexicon is extremely productive and descriptive.

ASL was not formally studied or researched, until William Stokoe joined the faculty at Gallaudet University in 1955. During his tenure (and against the advice of many of his colleagues), Stokoe worked diligently to bring ASL into the light of linguistics, publishing a significant paper, *Sign Language Structure* (1960), co-authoring the *Dictionary of American Sign Language on Linguistic Principles* (1965), and establishing the Linguistics Research Laboratory in 1972. Following the work of William Stokoe, considered by Jane Maher and others to be the "father of linguistics in the field of American Sign Language" (1), studies in ASL and in Deaf Culture by leaders such as Clayton Valli, Carol Padden, Tom Humphries and more, have shown that ASL is rich in its own syntax and grammar, is heavily tied to tradition and culture, and continues to grow and expand as new generations carry the language forward in changing times.

Still, like Anishinaabemowin, the history of ASL is weighted with suppression, colonization, and discrimination. As the American School for the Deaf began to thrive in its educational success for Deaf students, a significant push by Alexander Graham Bell and followers took hold to eradicate the use of sign language in Deaf education and focus on teaching the deaf to lip read and speak English (an educational approach called Oralism). As Harlan Lane explains, Clerc believed "the overriding purpose of education was personal fulfillment, for Bell it was integration with the hearing majority" (341).

In 1880 at the Second International Congress on the Education of the Deaf in Milan, educators of the Deaf gathered to discuss further the role of sign language in Deaf education. A critical shift occurred at the Congress of Milan, which affected the use of ASL and the perspective on the language as legitimate and valuable:

[T]he meeting was conceived and conducted as a brief rally by and for opponents of manual language. Setting aside the speeches of welcome and adieu, and the excursions and visits, we find that the Milan congress amounted to two dozen hours in which three or four oralist reassured the rest of the rightness of their actions in the face of troubling evidence to the contrary [...]. (Lane 387)

By the end of the conference, Oralism was voted in as the preferred and more superior educational method, pushing sign language into the shadows.

[...] the meeting at Milan as the single most critical event in driving the languages of the deaf beneath the surface [...] is the single most important cause—more important than hearing loss—of the limited educational achievement of today's deaf men and women [...] (Lane 387)



Of course, the Deaf community still used ASL (as is witnessed in other minority cultures faced with similar language suppression); however, for decades after the Congress of Milan, ASL was viewed negatively by hearing people as well as by many deaf people (Maher 82), classifying ASL as broken English or English on the hands and securing English as the more revered and preferred language. William Stokoe worked to right this wrong, but even after his diligence and dedication, the Deaf community continues to fight for rights and autonomy to its native language. Well into the twenty-first century when ASL is recognized not only as a language but a foreign language taught in many high schools (Reagan 609-611) and the third most frequently studied language in universities across the nation (Looney and Lusin 2), a more subtle discrimination remains: Audism.

Tom L. Humphries, an academic, author, and educator of Deaf culture and communication, coined the term Audism (Humphries 11) and aligned it to racism, saying that audism is 'the notion that one is superior based on one's ability to hear or behave in the manner of one who hears.' (Eckert and Rowley 105) The theory of audism may be broken down into several different aspects (individual audism, institutional audism, and more), but for the purpose of this paper, we will focus on Metaphysical Audism, "the linguisticism of spoken language over sign language, which is similar to efforts to make English the official language of the United States, where a majority language is stratified above a minority language" (Eckert and Rowley 106). One might argue, then, that Audism is blatant prejudice often based in misunderstanding which Humphries et al. document in advice given from pediatric audiologists, in unsupported claims by the Alexander Graham Bell Association about the superiority of spoken language skills over sign language skills and in unsubstantiated comments by literacy experts (2-3). However, there are also instances, in parenting, teaching and sign language interpretation, when audism may show up as an accidental hazard of the process. But in truth, as Eckert and Rowley state, "any type of audism has repercussions and is an avenue in which the cycle of oppression continues to be perpetuated" (110).

Noting the strong parallels between Anishinaabemowin and ASL, these two languages become perfect vehicles to examine closer the challenges of reducing English dominance in translation and interpretation. In doing so, we attempt to avoid shallow interpretations and omissions and bring to light a more holistic and accurate experience for those who are new to both cultures.

LEARNING TO LOVE LAKES

The setting for this case study of minority languages, translation and interpretation is a course about the largest freshwater system of lakes on earth. The course, "American Indians in the Great Lakes", examines the ways in which the lake can be viewed as a living non-human entity, formed after the ice-age 10,000 years ago, and connected to a range of plant, animal and human communities. Through oral histories from multiple perspectives, and primary documents in numerous fields of study, students trace the connection people have forged with the lakes over time. Students are asked to examine oral and written histories along with ancient and contemporary creative



works to think about the way many perspectives create a more complete representation of the world. They are especially encouraged to study the connection between community beliefs and a desire to serve as stewards of the environment which has been widely recognized (Burton, Davidson-Hunt, Duranti). Unfortunately, although researchers in environmental rhetoric, sociology and philosophy have explored the relationship between language and environmental ideologies (Norton, Perley, Peterson) this body of research is predominantly focused on English speaking contexts. Anthropologists Keith Basso and Thomas Thornton have emphasized the power that language has to shape community beliefs and individual motives and have highlighted how indigenous knowledge has the capacity to inform future scientific practices which is why several texts in Anishinaabemowin are included in the syllabus.

When deaf students enroll in the course there is a need for interpretation from English and Anishinaabemowin to American Sign Language. This proved to be a challenging task and subsequent sections of this essay explain the challenge of translation and interpretation from Anishinaabemowin to ASL. A significant outcome was the formation of a team. When it became clear that a dependence on English as the lingua franca led to some information not being transmitted, the instructor and interpreter reached out to a cultural expert to help enhance the ASL interpretations. Together, the three brought to the work a different set of language skills and a personal knowledge of the landscape and waterways being described. Margaret Noodin, the course instructor and author of the poem discussed, was raised in Minnesota where the identity of the people on the land is deeply rooted in a connection to water and is a descendent of Irish, Metis and Anishinaabe people who lived in the northern areas of the watershed. She has spent 30 years speaking and teaching Anishinaabemowin and uses it regularly at home. Christi Craig is a native Texan, but has lived in Wisconsin near Lake Michigan for the last twenty-five years. During her time at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, her daily commute includes a drive by the shores of the lake, where she continues to study and appreciate the constant changes in form and color and its effect on those around it. Her first language is English, and she works professionally as an ASL interpreter. Miigwaans Osawamick-Sagassige, the cultural consultant, considers ASL his first language and it is through the lens of ASL that he has learned to use English and Anishinaabemowin. He is a student from Wikwemikong Unceded First Nation on Manitoulin Island who knows first-hand the significance of water walkers and water ceremonies.¹ All three of us wanted to find a way to best represent the Anishinaabemowin meaning for students and after doing this work for the class, chose to write this essay to confront the issue of English dominating and shaping minority languages. The intent with this project was to use English not as a standard or central guide but more an unavoidable conduit. For various historical and biographical reasons, English is the only language spoken by all three of the authors. No one person operates in all three languages, but together we have worked to translate and interpret the voice of Gichigaming, the Great Lakes. Additionally, while seeking to provide accurate ASL interpretations of Anishinaabemowin, it became apparent that these languages, and the communities

¹ Miigwaans' introduction in ASL can be viewed here: <https://youtu.be/-sAqVSCdvdv>. (Accessed 26 Aug. 2018).



they serve, potentially have many features in common that are worthy of critical comparison.

TRANSLATION AND INTERPRETATION

We understand that by offering an improved process for translating Anishinaabemowin to ASL we are working directly against the history of misinterpretation that is still visible in the Great Lakes region. The Anishinaabe language lingers in the names for places which are voiced but no longer understood which is the topic of a TedX talk given by Margaret Noodin.² These proper nouns are the result of attempts by Europeans to represent the glottal stops, long vowels and consonant combinations of North American languages. They were hearing a new language, but not understanding the meaning of the words. When settlers and immigrants did take time to learn the meaning of the names their translations were often noun-based and unable to convey the networks of kinship forged by actions and exchange. In a recent reprint of the 1899 novel, *Ogimawkwe Mitigwaki: Queen of the Woods*, Potawatomi author Simon Pokagon stated: "It is indeed mortifying for me to consider that outside of the proper names of lakes, streams and places, our language is being almost entirely ignored by the incoming race" (83). He understood two important concepts relevant to our work today: translation and interpretation represent change and a lack of translation can lead to language extinction and a missed opportunity to have a relationship with a place.

As we worked to translate and then interpret Anishinaabemowin for the Great Lakes course, we acknowledged that the texts, in this case a song and poem, were both written first in Anishinaabemowin and then translated by the authors into English. This meant that any loss or shift in meaning was recognized and consciously modified by the speakers of Anishinaabemowin who continue to work against assimilation by striving to represent Anishinaabe ontologies in their English versions. For example, the water song translation uses a second person pronoun to speak to the water, which reflects the transitive animate verb construction of the Anishinaabemowin; and the poem has several instances where one of several possible English translations is chosen to best represent a compound Anishinaabemowin noun. Interpretation began at this point, after the translation choices had been made by the bi-lingual authors, but not all the translation decisions were conscious or recorded so the interpretation into ASL depended upon both ASL fluency and cultural knowledge.

It is also important to note that in this case study, the authors were working within the framework of a 50-minute university level classroom where information moves quickly. While the instructor knew Anishinaabemowin and English, the first interpreter had no knowledge of Anishinaabemowin, was not a member of the Anishinaabe community, and depended entirely on English to understand the text and interpret linguistic and cultural information into ASL in short succession. Because of this, the first in-class interpretations were influenced by the natural tendency in sign language interpreting which is to hear the main language of the speaker, filter

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ddyFh1Rdho4>. (Accessed 26 Aug. 2018).



information, home in on the most important aspects and concepts and work for meaning in the message.

But in moving from Anishinaabemowin to English, meaning has been filtered already, so that any interpretation from English to ASL is lacking in layers of information and is shaped by the framework of the colonizing language. Most notably, pronoun differences and morphological connections are shifted. “Wiin” which is a third person pronoun without gender implications, must become “he” or “she” in English. Meanwhile, the second-person plural, which is made clear through prefixes and suffixes used to modify a verb, can be inclusive or exclusive in Anishinaabemowin, but is indicated by only one pronoun in English. “Ningikendaamin” (we-all-know-including the listener) becomes “we know” and the exact scope of knowing in English is not as clear. Additionally, networks of meaning are obscured when “gizaagitoomin zaaga’igan” is translated as “we love the lake.” It is not possible in the English translation to show the ontological synergy of “zaagi-” which serves as the root verb of “love or be open to something” and the central morpheme of “lake.”

In Ruth Ann Spooner’s dissertation, she discusses the work of a group of Deaf students whose English teacher “integrated a unit consisting of ASL translations of English literary works into their English class” (xiv). Her findings show that in removing English as the main language in which these students must read and understand the stories (such as “The Tell-Tale Heart” by Edgar Allen Poe) and instead giving them access to ASL translations of these literary canons, they experienced a deeper meaning and greater connection to the stories:

the translations allowed the students to experience the power of literature and engage in reading for purposes beyond basic comprehension. Second, the translations made the texts available to the students in their own *preferred* language (or native language...). . . . Not only this, but the translations also tapped into a vital part of the students’ linguistic identities, which provided them with a sense of validation about their language and literacy practices [...]. (Spoonier 198)

While Spooner is speaking to the translation process from English in print to ASL, which is different from the process of interpreting in the moment from English to ASL, her points stand out as pertinent and applicable to our investigation of lessening the power of English by providing a translation of important Anishinaabe literature in the student’s first language.

Highlighting the fact that Anishnaabemowin and ASL are two languages often framed and filtered by one majority brings us to the central purpose of this paper: to explore ways we can minimize the influence of English so that linguistic and cultural meanings are more greatly understood and experienced. This includes a closer study of the source text, a comparison of how one might interpret the text from the English and how an Anishinaabe user of ASL translates the text.

SIGNING A SONG

The first Anishinaabemowin text used in the course is a song. As students study the geologic history of the Great Lakes Basin and watershed, they learn “Nibi Nagamowin”



("The Water Song") written by Daisy Kostus and Doreen Day. The song is an essential part of the work done by the Mother Earth Water Walkers who believe that humans must recognize their place in the global ecosphere by giving thanks for the water which is essential for life. Students discuss the Anishinaabe concept of water as an active agent in a changing relationship rather than a commodified resource.

The class begins by comparing the song as it was written in Anishinaabemowin and the translation in English. The Anishinaabe word for water, "nibi", is typically an inanimate noun, but in this song, the women speak to the water using a conjugation that implies the water is the second person, saying "water, we love you." Moving a noun between inanimate and animate classes is something fluent speakers of Anishinaabemowin do easily, but this is not considered "correct" in English. Nothing about the Anishinaabemowin usage appears wrong grammatically because the songwriters also shifted the verb to a transitive animate form which reflects a relationship between two persons. Many objects and parts of nature are addressed this way in Anishinaabemowin and the students discuss the social and legal implications of considering humans dependent upon, and in many ways less important than, various elements of the natural world.

Students also learn to sing the song in Anishinaabemowin. It begins with a set of non-lexical syllables called vocables, which are commonly used by indigenous womens' singing groups in the Great Lakes area. These sounds are repetitive, easy to learn and allow singers to focus on breathing and sound before meaning. The two lines of vocables are followed by three lines of lyrics and the five lines together constitute a stanza which is repeated in its entirety four times once for each direction, or season, or verb type, depending on how one views the significance of four in Anishinaabe culture.

Way yaa way yaa way ya ho
Way yaa way yaa way ya ho
Nibi gizaagi'igoo (Water we love you)
Gimiigwechwenimigoo (We are thankful for you)
Gizhaawenimigoo (We bless you)

The song can be found on the Mother Earth Water Walk website so that students can share it with others or sing it again outside class.³

A simple ASL interpretation of the song incorporates standard ASL signs such as WE (the index finger moves slightly out from the chest and circles back), YOU (index finger points out toward the placement of WATER), and BLESS-YOU (both hands in an A-handshape move out from chin into open 5-handshapes circling in front of body). This translation could be provided by interpreters without any background in Anishinaabemowin.⁴

When Miigwaans interpreted the song in ASL, he chose to record his translation outside near the water. Careful observers will see that his signs for "nibi" (water) echo the rhythm of the water itself resulting in motions that extend beyond the frame used by Christi. Along with this rhythm in the movement of his signs, his signs are also

³ <http://www.motherearthwaterwalk.com/>. (Accessed 8 Jun. 2019).

⁴ A video of Christi's interpretation can be viewed here: <https://youtu.be/vW4CalbU9yw>. (Accessed 8 Sept. 2018).



idiosyncratic to Anishinaabe culture. WE is signed in a much greater circle out from his chest, visualizing a larger community, which reflects the fact that Anishinaabemowin has both an inclusive and exclusive second person plural. As well, when signing We bless you, the single 2nd-person pronoun You is not used. Instead, his sign is a two-handed circle drawn in front of him in an all-encompassing way of expressing *the whole of you* which reflects the plural second person. In both cases, he is recognizing and signing pronouns used in Anishinaabemowin but not available in English. He is quite specifically making sure that he says “we” meaning “all of us” including the listener, not “just us” which would exclude the listener and indicate only the speaker and his or her community. This is his way of broadening the meaning of the song to include native and nonnative people. Additionally, his “you” is plural to show he means again to include the listeners in his phrase which would in Anishinaabemowin be translated as you all, indicating the water is of course made of more than one living non-human entity. This is something all speakers of Anishinaabemowin would do.⁵

Beyond the implications of vocabulary and grammar comparisons, it is important to look at the aesthetic and cultural value of each version. In her overview of sign language poetry, Rachel Sutton-Spence suggested viewers look for several elements including repetition, balance, neologisms, metaphors and presence during the performance (Sutton-Spence 2003). Miigwaans’s version of the song is beautifully paced and reflects the rhythm of the Anishinaabemowin version which contains long, multisyllabic words that string pronouns and verbs into one-word phrases. The peace and poise of his performance mirrors the contents of the lyrics and he captures the metaphor contained in the use of “zaagi” which in English means “love” but in Anishinaabemowin is also a part of words that express outward motion. In their discussion of folklore, Sutton-Spence and Kaneko point out how poems and stories in sign language are deaflore and signlore and transmit a cultural view of the world. In this case, we see Miigwaans representing both Anishinaabe oral traditions and deaf culture.

ODE OR ELEGY

The second Anishinaabemowin text translated and interpreted for the Great Lakes course is a poem typically shared with students at the end of the semester as part of a meditation on change and loss. Change is constant and sometimes the penultimate result of change is loss. As the Great Lakes and the cultures connected to them continue to change, care must be taken to not cause imbalance to the point of ecocide. “Wenesh Waa-zhiwebag Maampii Chigamigong” was originally written in Anishinaabemowin by Margaret and then translated into English. The Anishinaabemowin title literally asks, “What will happen here in the place of the great sea?” The English title, “A Poem for the Children of the Great Lakes,” is not a direct translation but instead gestures to the subject of the next generation living along the same shores. As the poet and instructor, Margaret discussed the epigraph which inspired the poem, an Ulster proverb. “Bíonn dúil le béal farraige ach cha bhíonn dúil le

⁵ Miigwaans ASL interpretation of “Nibi Nagamowin” (“The Water Song”) can be viewed here: <https://youtu.be/QXL16hSo14A>. (Accessed 8 Sept. 2018).



béal uaighe” translates from Gaelic into English as “There is hope from the mouth of the sea but not from the mouth of the grave” and uses yet another minority language to make a connection between language, place and identity.

The poem has been translated several times as part of classroom accommodations on the campus, but this case study offered an opportunity to mindfully, and in a more permanent way, represent Anishinaabemowin ideas in ASL. From the first moment of Miigwaans’ interpretation of the poem, it becomes clear that a direct move from Anishinaabemowin to ASL will impart much greater cultural meaning for a Deaf student studying their connection with water and with place. Miigwaans introduces the poem by fingerspelling the first few words, but then dives into a beautiful interpretation that translates (very simply) into: a poem for you, the *many* children (emphasized by body language as much as sign) of the Great Lakes. And again “Great Lakes” is signed in such a way that includes an all-encompassing vast expanse of space, so much so that his signs move beyond the limits of the video screen.

The poem consists of three stanzas with the first serving as a connection between the poet and the water. Chigaaming (the great sea) and its surroundings are equated with life and community.

Chigaaming shkitoyaanh bagosendamyaaanh,
In the sea I can hope
jibaaygamigong anamiyaanh chikeyaanh.
in the grave I pray alone.

The second stanza asks rhetorical questions about what can be saved and what might fuel the future. There is an allusion to seasonal rotation as life is slowed and the preserved through drying, or an absence of water.

Wenesh waa ezhiwebag pii baasadengak kaanan?
What happens when the bones are dried?
Pii niibishensan mitigens bid?
When the little leaves have become sticks?
Pii gokoshag taawagag ziitaaganing?
When the sow’s ears are in salt?

Many indigenous communities were given commodities as part of treaty agreements and the food was often dried, salted and preserved in ways that barely served to sustain life. The pork that is mentioned is a direct connection to colonial recipes that replaced the tradition of meat dried with berries.

The poem ends with the certainty that language and the ability to communicate are as vital to existence as breathing.

Maamwimaajaan ina Anishinaabemoyaaanh miinwaa neseyaaanh?
Do they leave together, the language and the last breath?
Enya gonemaa enya
Yes maybe yes
mii wii boonendaamaang
it will be forgotten
mii wii waanendamaadizoyaang
we will forget ourselves



pii chigaming gaawin noondoosiimaang
when we no longer hear the big waters.⁶

The original poem depends on a representation of waves lengthening as they reach toward the shore which is apparent in the use of long vowels and the increasing length of each line. Miigwaans echoes this in his ASL version with body language and signs that extend beyond the typical field of interpretation.

Returning again to the idea that English alone cannot sustain full Anishinaabemowin meaning in translation, the first stanza serves as a simple but powerful example. In moving from Anishinaabemowin to English and then to ASL, the line “in the grave I pray alone” would lead the interpreter to incorporate the ASL sign for PRAY, which is two hands grasped together in front of the chest, guiding an ASL user to visualize one person praying in a more Western religious and perhaps colonial way. In Miigwaans’ interpretation from Anishinaabemowin to ASL, his sign for PRAY takes on a deeper cultural meaning. He uses a neologism to represent the word, which is a small palm-centered gesture with his thumb and two fingers pinched together. This is not a typical ASL sign, and when asked what it might be several Anishinaabe viewers immediately thought of both an offered pinch of tobacco or the motion of a small feather used during the burning of sage. The ambiguity was perfect for the poem and contributed several appropriate layers of meaning not possible with mere words on a page.

In the third stanza where words build on each other like waves build along the shoreline, Miigwaans again incorporates this cultural understanding in his interpretation not only through ASL signs but in the movement and length of those signs. At “Maamwimaajaan ina Anishinaabemoyaanh miinwaa neseyaanh?” (“Do they leave together, the language and the last breath?”) Miigwaans signs BREATHE in ASL but enhances the meaning by stretching out the sign and moving in a way that resembles waves pressing into the shore (or the person) and retreating. In some ways, this may seem inconsequential to a non-native user of ASL or non-native speaker of Anishinaabemowin, but in considering these texts in a new way through this project, the subtle differences in interpretation directly from the source native language to ASL proves that even tiny aspects of meaning gained provide a more broad and profound understanding for students, Deaf and hearing alike.⁷

CONCLUSION

As the team worked across languages to create deaf-centric and sovereign versions of the Anishinaabe song and poem, we were challenged to rely as little as possible on English. The language that surrounds us all day, every day was moved from the primary position to a role of support. Once this was done, the texts could operate according to their own relativity to sound, image, rhythm and meaning. Cultural

⁶ The rhythm and repetition in Anishinaabemowin can be heard at <http://ojibwe.net/stories/fall/children-of-the-great-lakes/>. (Accessed 28 Aug. 2018)

⁷ Miigwaans’ ASL interpretation of “Wenesh Waa-zhiwebag Maampii Chigamigong” (“A Poem for the Children”) can be viewed here: <https://youtu.be/Oah7Rbfzoc>. (Accessed 28 Aug. 2018)



content moved from Anishinaabemowin to ASL with English serving merely as a vehicle.

We found ourselves asking how these texts would be best represented to the world in ASL, setting aside the context of the class. Miigwaans posted his version of the song and poem on YouTube with several “likes” from his personal followers immediately. It is clear that inviting him to do more interpretation of Anishinaabe texts would widen the Anishinaabe diaspora to include native users of ASL, who are often not involved in revitalization conversations. Margaret felt that the combination of Anishinaabemowin and ASL represented an aesthetic evolution she would strive for in the future. ASL disrupted the modern sense that language is global and disposable and restored to it an essentiality common in “less common” languages. Much the way the water is often taken for granted, linguistic diversity is also often overlooked. By restoring the practice of listening and coming together across a divide, the humility and care required for doing translation and interpretation became obvious. By combining our skills, we found a world between the dominant pattern of discourse, one focused on acculturation and inspired accommodation, not unquestioned assimilation. We stood on the shoreline together, each facing our own direction.

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