



## Indigenous Languages

### A Entry Point to Reciprocal Relationships with the Natural World

Begin by discussing with students how the English language commonly separates us from the land while Indigenous languages connect us to the land. For instance, in the English language many words, phrases, idioms and sayings with negative connotations are connected to nature.

Brainstorm with students a list of English words associated with nature that have negative connotations. (I.e: Dirty language/jokes, a soiled reputation, a seedy neighbourhood, watering things down, going nuts, be a guinea pig, freak of nature, etc.) Then challenge students to think of English words, connected to nature, that have a positive association (force of nature, a ray of sunshine, down to earth, reach for the stars, tip of the iceberg, etc.)

In contrast in many Indigenous languages, words can be found that honor and create relationship with the land. For instance, Potawatomi scholar Robin Kimmerer in her book *Braiding Sweetgrass* writes that the word for plants in many Indigenous languages translates to *those who take care of us*. Students learn some of the words below and record them in their Outdoor Learning Journal. Teacher can also add words to anchor charts around the classroom. The audio of words and phrases are available on the QUBS website to help facilitate language learning.

Anishinaabemowin:

- Ode means heart: Strawberry- odemin (heart berry)
- Nibi means water and translates into “the giver of Life”
- Aki means (earth and Land),

Anishinaabe Knowledge Keeper and plant expert Joe Pitawanakwat shared with QUILLS that the importance of the land to the Anishinaabe is revealed by the fact that aki is embedded in many other key terms as:

- Akinamooshin- scientific inquiry
- Akiwesiihn- Old person
- Akinomaage- To teach
- Naa'akinagewin- Law

Mino Bimaadizowin is also an Anishinaabe phrase that is used widely. This translates into *to live a good life* and is what folks in community commonly say when they are striving or working towards achieving in their lives. Anishinaabe community member Kim Debassige, who is currently a member of the urban Indigenous community in Kingston, explains that when you break down the word and look at it more closely the parts of the phrase can be understood as follows:



Mino -Bimaadizowin Aki (to live a good life)  
Mino (good)  
Bim (along in space and time, by direction, along, expanse. Particular to land and time.  
aad (way of being, life, character or nature)  
izi (s/he animate, is in state or condition  
ow (this)  
in (to act)

As we can see for the Anishinaabe living a good life refers to how one interacts in a good way with land and time. This refers to interactions on this physical and on other spiritual planes.

Similarly, Kanyen'kehá:ka community member Nathan Brinklow from Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory, shared with QUILLS that in Kanyen'kéha the word for fire is **ótsire**. This word is also embedded in the word for family. For instance, the word for family is **kahwà:tsire**. This shows the manner in which Kanyen'kehá:ka people value both family and the elemental power for fire.

Additionally, Nathan shares that land is so important to many Indigenous groups that the name for many important locations is derived from their geographical features. For instance:

- Toronto is derived from the Kanyen'kéha word Tkaronto which means trees that reflect the water.
- The Kanyen'kéha word for Kingston is Katarokwi which means place of mud and sticks.
- The word for Quebec in Anishinaabemowin is Kebek which means where the river narrows.
- Last, the word for Saskatoon in Cree is Misâskwatômina which means fruit trees of many branches.

As we can see there are many ways in which Indigenous languages reflect and invite us to enter into reciprocal relationships with the natural world.