Algonquian Trade Languages Revisited

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The long-standing conventional wisdom regarding the languages of hunter-gatherers was that their societies have so little sociological differentiation that there are no grounds for particular hunter-gatherer languages or particular varieties of hunter-gatherer languages to have sufficient prestige to function as trade languages. However, in Rhodes (1982) it was shown that the Algonquian languages around the Great Lakes have been in a sociolinguistic hierarchy with respect to one another for at least the last two centuries. In that hierarchy Cree has the highest status, followed by Ojibwe and Menomini, with Potawatomi as the lowest status language. Based on the evidence of the late twentieth century it was proposed in that paper that the Ottawa dialect of Ojibwe was the trade language in the lower peninsula of Michigan and adjacent regions of southern Ontario since at least the beginning of the nineteenth century. This was shown on the map in Figure 1.

However, over the last few years, more documents have come to light which require us to revise some assumptions and enable us to sharpen that view.

That there existed an intertribal communication system involving the use of trade languages is indisputable. But there are two points of inaccuracy regarding the identity of the trade languages in use. First, the lingua franca in use in Michigan territory and the adjacent parts of Ontario was not Ottawa and, second, there was more than one trade language in use west of Lake Michigan.

On the question of which variety of Ojibwe served as the trade language in the Michigan territory it turns out that the assertion in Rhodes (1982) that it was Ottawa was mistaken. That assertion was made on indirect evidence, but we now have direct historical evidence that the dialect we now call Southwestern Ojibwe was the trade language in Michigan and southern Ontario early in the nineteenth century. The most crucial document attesting this was written in January of 1837 by the Rev. Simon Saenderl, the Redemptorist priest who was successor to Frederic Baraga at L’Arbre
Croche, to the Rt. Rev. Frederick Rese, the Bishop of Detroit. That letter includes the following:

I am at great pains to learn Chippewa, as this is the official and diplomatic language of all Indians and the medium of communication between the various tribes. An educated Indian must speak Chippewa the way a man of breeding in Germany must speak French. (Saenderl 1837)

What makes this statement all the more remarkable is that L’Arbre Croche (near modern Harbor Springs, Michigan) had been an Ottawa settlement dating back to at least 1750 (Tanner 1987:61).

Given that context, the question needs to be asked whether Saenderl and his contemporaries understood that they were dealing with two different
dialects of Ojibwe and whether they used the terms Ottawa and Chippewa to refer to them in the way we would. Fortunately there is a lot of evidence to answer that question in the form of contemporaneous documents produced in Michigan and at L’Arbre Croche. In particular L’Arbre Croche was where the great Ojibwe lexicographer, Frederic Baraga, lived from 1831 to 1835, the period during which he did his early language work. His dictionary (Baraga 1853) and grammar (Baraga 1850) both clearly document the dialect we now call Southwestern Ojibwe (Rhodes and Todd 1981). The dictionary contains a small number of forms labeled Ottawa and Algonquin. So it was clear that he knew that dialectally distinctive forms existed. There were also documents produced at L’Arbre Croche specifically in Ottawa during the 1830s, for example, _Jesus o Bimadisiwin_ [Life of Jesus] (Baraga 1837). These further confirm that the missionaries fully understood the differences between Chippewa (= Southwestern Ojibwe) and Ottawa in a way that is consistent with late twentieth century records of Southwestern Ojibwe (Nichols and Nyholm 1995) and Ottawa (Rhodes 1975, 1982). Examples of lexical differences between the dialects consistently attested in both nineteenth- and twentieth-century sources are given in (1).

(1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Baraga’s Dictionary Chippewa</th>
<th>Modern SW Ojibwe</th>
<th>Baraga’s Dictionary Ottawa</th>
<th>Baraga’s Life of Jesus</th>
<th>Modern Ottawa</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Ijinikasowin</em></td>
<td><em>izhinikaazowin</em></td>
<td><em>Anosowin</em></td>
<td><em>anosowin</em></td>
<td><em>noozwin</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Ogin</em></td>
<td><em>ogiin</em></td>
<td>* Ogashiwan*</td>
<td><em>ogachiwan</em></td>
<td>* wgashwan*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Oshtigwân</em></td>
<td><em>oshtigwaan</em></td>
<td><em>Ondib</em></td>
<td><em>ondib</em></td>
<td><em>wndib</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Nibiwa</em></td>
<td><em>niibiwa</em></td>
<td><em>Nibina</em></td>
<td><em>nibina</em></td>
<td><em>niibna</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Oma</em></td>
<td><em>omaa</em></td>
<td><em>Ajonda</em></td>
<td><em>ajonda</em></td>
<td><em>zhonda</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notably missing from this chart are the oft-cited proximal deictic forms _maaba_ and _maanda_ ‘this’ animate and inanimate, respectively. That is because the dialectal status of these forms may have changed between the early nineteenth and late twentieth centuries. Recent work shows that these forms are distinctively Ottawa at the end of the twentieth century, but the nineteenth-century evidence is that closely related variants were once available in Southwestern Ojibwe. Baraga lists them as in (2).
However, the forms in (2) both have a final nasal which is absent in any Ottawa attestation, with one possible exception. Mandan occurs exactly once in Baraga’s (1837) Jesus o Bimadisiwin [Life of Jesus] (pg. 173) and mabam does not occur at all. On the other hand, maba and manda are quite frequent throughout the text. Similarly, in the somewhat later Sifferath Ottawa Cathecism (1869), only maba and manda occur.

The morphological evidence is also consistent with the view that Baraga—and by implication Saenderl—knew that Chippewa and Ottawa were distinct, as shown in (3) (cf. Rhodes 1975).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Baraga’s Otchipwe grammar</th>
<th>Modern SW Ojibwe</th>
<th>Baraga’s Life of Jesus</th>
<th>Modern Ottawa</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kego ikkitokên</td>
<td>gego zegiziken</td>
<td>Kego segisike</td>
<td>gego zegizikenh</td>
<td>‘Don’t be afraid’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[gi-ikkitogoban]</td>
<td>izhinikaazogoban</td>
<td>ijinikasogoba</td>
<td>zhinkaazgobà</td>
<td>‘he would be called’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ijiaian</td>
<td>izhaayaan</td>
<td>Ijaià</td>
<td>zhaayaanh</td>
<td>‘(that) I go’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thus, there can be no question that when Saenderl says that “[Chippewa] is the official and diplomatic language of all Indians and the medium of communication between the various tribes” while living in an Ottawa village, he is giving direct evidence that Southwestern Ojibwe was the trade language in that area at that time.

However, by the middle of the twentieth century, Ottawa had supplanted Southwestern Ojibwe as the trade language. Andrew Medler, Bloomfield’s “Eastern Ojibwe” speaker spoke Ottawa to Bloomfield in 1939, as shown in Rhodes (1975). So the question arises, when did the shift from Southwestern Ojibwe to Ottawa take place?

Given the evidence currently available, that question cannot be answered precisely. However, making a few reasonable assumptions, the window can be made fairly narrow. Baraga’s dictionary was still useful enough to be revised and republished in 1878, suggesting that Southwestern Ojibwe retained dominance into the 1870s at least.
The next appearance of a probative text is in 1912, collected by Edward Sapir in Sarnia, Ontario. Sarnia is a Chippewa settlement. Its history, including how the Sarnia band ended up on the east side of the St. Claire River, is laid out in Plain (2007). The previous attestation of an Ojibwe dialect in Sarnia is forty years earlier in Wilson’s (1874) work, *The Ojebway Language: A Manual for Missionaries and others Employed among the Ojebway Indians*. As discussed in Rhodes (2005), Wilson worked in Sarnia between 1865 and 1872, and the variety of Ojibwe he documented is Southwestern Ojibwe with a few phonological characteristics of Eastern Ojibwe. This is quite different from the language of Sapir’s text. What Sapir recorded has traits both of modern Ottawa and of Eastern Ojibwe. Let us look at some of the key linguistic characteristics of Sapir’s text.

The most obvious initial feature of Sapir’s text is that it records a vowel-deleting dialect, a clear characteristic of modern Ottawa and Eastern Ojibwe in contrast to Southwestern Ojibwa. Example forms are given in (4).

(4) a. *miskwâdâswâng* (line 2) = *miskwaadesiwan* ‘painted turtle’
   b. *pi nîc gât’ kîjêp*’ (line 3) = *bi-onishkaad gigizheb* ‘as he gets up in the early morning’
   c. *kît’kê[n]* (line 6) = *ikidoken* ‘don’t say it’

There are also forms with vowel reduction but not full deletion, as in (5). Notice that Sapir transcribes vowels in weak positions with some form of *i* regardless of their underlying quality.

(5) a. *ningînâbindam*’ (line 4) = *ningii-inaabandam* ‘I dreamed’ (*i* for *a*)
   b. *mî kî nq y*’ (line 12) = *miikanaang* ‘on the road’ (*i* for *a*)
   c. *gî mā- p-i* (line 13) = *gmaaapii* ‘after a while’ (*i* for *o*)

The positions in which most of these reduced, but undeleted vowels occur are ones in which the open transitions of more contemporary versions of Ottawa occur as shown in Rhodes and Buszard-Welcher (1996) and discussed at length in Rhodes (1985).

(6) a. *waabndang* [wɒːbʌ̯nd̥ŋ] ‘that he sees it’ (cf. [5a])
   b. *mookmaan* [moʊ·kˌʊ·ma·ŋ] ‘knife’ (cf. [5b])
   c. *gmaa* [gˌmɑː] ‘later’ (cf. [5c])

Because the Sarnia text is short, there aren’t many lexical items which point to the dialectal affiliation of the text. There are two, however, and both point to Ottawa rather than Eastern Ojibwe. They are given in (7).
On the other hand, the morphological characteristics of this text that suggest Eastern Ojibwe affiliations. All of the endings given in (3) with distinctively Ottawa forms, either losing a final nasal or replacing a final nasal with nasality of the preceding vowel all have the n-ful forms in Sapir’s text, as shown in (8).

(8) (all forms re-spelled)
   a. Gdaazghidnigoomin (line 5) ‘we are turned over’ (-min ‘1st pl. independent’)
   b. noondoonaan (line 8) ‘(if) I hear you’ (-y)aan ‘1st sg. conjunct’
   c. kidke[n] (line 6) ‘don’t say it’ (-ken ‘neg. imperative’)

The form in (8c) requires some comment. The final n is cut off in the reproduction, but nasality is not marked on the e and the n-less morpheme here would be nasal. Since Sapir does not miss nasality anywhere else in the text, the high likelihood is that the n must be there but has been cut off.

With regard to the n-ful morphemes, it is worth noting that Bloomfield collected a text from Andrew Medler in 1939 in which Medler recounts having n-ful forms where he grew up near Saginaw, Michigan in the late 1800s (Bloomfield 1958:181). This makes it likely that the spread of this Ottawa feature across formerly non-Ottawa speaking areas is late, after vowel deletion and other lexical substitutions had gone through.

On the basis of the Sarnia text I conclude that Ottawa didn’t spread across Michigan until the end of the 1800s at the earliest and I therefore propose the first revision of the map of Great Lakes trade languages as in Figure 2.

Let me close this section with a few remarks about vowel deletion in this area. One of the most obvious differences between twentieth-century Ottawa and twentieth-century Southwestern Ojibwe is that all of Bloomfield’s work with speakers in this area in the mid-twentieth century suggest that vowel deletion came to Ojibwe relatively late. He writes full-vowel forms in The Dogs’s Children (Williams 1991; recorded in 1941) and reduced-vowel forms in Eastern Ojibwa (Bloomfield 1958; recorded around 1939). In Rhodes (1985), I pointed out ways in which inconsistencies in Eastern Ojibwa suggested that vowel deletion was further advanced than he let on. In this Sapir text, collected twenty-seven years earlier and a mere
thirty miles north of the home of Bloomfield’s speaker, we have proof positive that that was the case.

The second point on which Rhodes (1982) was mistaken was that it was not known at that time that there was a second variety of Ojibwe in use west of Lake Michigan. Nichols (1995) reports the existence of a creolized form of Ojibwe in a document from the 1820s by Edwin James, a physician and naturalist. James called it Broken Oghibbeway. He attested that it is “used by the traders and the people of mixed blood in speaking with the Menomonies and Winnebagoes also many of the Sioux, Saxes and Foxes” (quoted in Nichols 1995:1). Based on James’s witness, we revise our map as in Figure 3, recognizing that the boundaries are only approximate, in no small part due to the flux of tribal groups in this area during this period.
There are some features of Broken Oghibbeway that are important to the question of where varieties of Ojibwe were spoken in the nineteenth century. According to Nichols, Broken Oghibbeway contains unmistakably Ottawa features. This is of interest because in this time frame the nearest Ottawa is spoken hundreds of miles away from the area in which Broken Oghibbeway was attested. This warrants a closer look at some details of Broken Oghibbeway here.

Although Broken Oghibbeway is attested only in a single document, there is enough data to enable Nichols to show that it is Ojibwe based, and that it has simplified verb inflection. In specific it lacks stem animacy agreement and conjunct inflection. Based on the examples Nichols cites, it is also likely that, contra Nichols, it had fixed SVO word order, as in the examples in (9).\[^{1,2}\]

\[
(9) \text{a. SV} \\
\quad (i) \langle \text{nishenaube wuk okai tokoshin} \rangle \\
\quad \text{/nishnaabe+wag o+ga+dagoshin/, expected: da-dagoshinoog anishinabeg} \\
\quad \text{Indian+3.PLURAL 3+FUTURE+arrive} \\
\quad \text{‘The Indians will come.’ (pg. 11)}
\]

1. There are only two examples cited by Nichols that are not clearly SVO, but both have other complexities.

\[
(13) \text{a. } \langle \text{menominie okemenetone awa} \rangle \\
\quad \text{/Manoomini o+gii+(me)+nitoon+aawaa/, cf. ogii-nitoonaawaa ‘they killed it’} \\
\quad \text{Menominee 3+PAST+?+kill+1-LESS.PLURAL} \\
\quad \text{‘It is some Menomonie that is murdered.’} \\
\quad \text{(lit: ‘they killed a Menominee’) (pg. 12)} \\
\text{b. } \langle \text{kaween nekusketone kekoons neenetone} \rangle \\
\quad \text{/gaawiin ni+gashkitoon giigoons ninitoon/, expected: gaawiin nigashkitoosiin giigoons ji-nisag} \\
\quad \text{not 1+be.able fish 1+kill} \\
\quad \text{‘I can not catch fish.’ (pg. 16)}
\]

2. Examples of Broken Oghibbeway are cited verbatim from Nichols (1995), and therefore use his apparatus, which he describes as follows:

Examples of BOj cited from the manuscript are given as spelled by James and enclosed within angled brackets. Below these citations are presented partially analyzed retranscriptions in a contemporary Ojibwe phonemic
b. VO

(i)〈ne ka we natotun wawwun un〉

/ni+ga+wii+nadodan waawan+oon/, expected: niwii-nandodaanan waawanoon.

1+FUTURE+DESIDERATIVE+ask.for egg+0.PLURAL

‘I will ask for eggs.’ (pg. 14)

(ii)〈netai neetone keen〉

/ni+daa+nitoon giin/, expected: giin gidaa-nisin

1+MODAL+kill you

‘I should kill you.’ (pg. 13)

The strongest evidence that Broken Oghibbeway did not have Ojibwe word order are examples like those in (10), where even in the normally flexible Ojibwe word order the goal (a relative root complement) must be immediately preverbal almost obligatorily.

(10)〈me appe neke eshoun wahkiagun〉

/mii apii ni+gi+izhaan waakaa’igan/, expected: mii iwapii waakaa’iganing gaa-izhaayaan

it.is.so when 1+PAST+go.there fort

‘At the time I went to the fort’ (pg. 16)

At the end of each example, I include the number of the page on which that example appears in the original article.

In the tables which follow, single words in Nichols’ interpretation of James’ spelling are drawn from Nichols’ examples.

3. Nichols added “cf. mii apii ezhaayaan waakaa’iganing” to this example, but, for example, not a single instance of the verb izhaa in Kegg’s texts has a postposed goal.
Nichols claims, but does not argue for, an Ottawa source for Broken Oghibbeway. The lexical items that suggest an Ottawa source are the content question words as shown in (11).

(11)

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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anish</td>
<td>aaniish</td>
<td>(tunish)</td>
<td>tani</td>
<td>aaniish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘how?’</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anindi</td>
<td>aaniindi</td>
<td>(tunipe)</td>
<td>tanipi ‘where?’</td>
<td>aa(n)pii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘where?’</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awenen</td>
<td>awenen</td>
<td>(wenesh)</td>
<td>weni</td>
<td>wenesh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘who’</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However, the picture is not entirely clear. Ottawa also has n-less forms for pronouns, emphatics, and some number suffixes, but Broken Oghibbeway has n-full forms, as shown in (12).

(12)

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<tr>
<td>Kin</td>
<td>giin</td>
<td>(keen)</td>
<td>ki</td>
<td>gii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘you (sg.)’</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nin</td>
<td>niin</td>
<td>(neen)</td>
<td>ni</td>
<td>nii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘I’</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Win</td>
<td>wiin</td>
<td>(ween)</td>
<td>wi</td>
<td>wii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘he, she’</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kawin</td>
<td>gaawiin</td>
<td>(kaween)</td>
<td>kawi</td>
<td>gaawii, gaay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘not’</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-min gi-tchinemin</td>
<td>-min imbimosemin</td>
<td>(-men)</td>
<td>-mi nindinendami</td>
<td>-mi nindinendaami</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘we (ex.) walk’</td>
<td>‘we (ex.) walk’</td>
<td>‘we (ex.) think’</td>
<td>‘we (ex.) think’</td>
<td>‘1st pl.’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These facts add up to suggest that Broken Oghibbeway is a white man’s invention. The SVO word order is like English and French, and unlike Algonquian free or Siouan SOV word order. The fact there are both Ottawa and Southwestern Ojibwe forms and that the closest Ottawa villages were more than 200 miles away, suggests that the creators of this language had contact with both Ottawa and Chippewa speakers, a scenario much more likely for white traders than either Menominees or Siouan speakers. Finally, the fact that James claims that Broken Oghibbeway is used by
traders and Métis makes this all the more likely. Since the twentieth-century evidence is that many, if not all, Menominees were fully fluent in Ojibwe, presumably Southwestern Ojibwe. Since fluent Ojibwe speakers would readily understand Broken Ogghibbeway, it is likely that Broken Ogghibbeway was used primarily by whites and Métis.

In conclusion, as a result of deeper historical research, it is now possible to clarify the geographical distribution of trade languages in the immediate Great Lakes region. There were four varieties of Ojibwe, including a creolized form, with Southwestern Ojibwe being the most widespread.

REFERENCES


Ottawa: Carleton University.


Washington: Smithsonian Institution.


