Language, Identity, and Summer Camp:

A Comparative Study  
  
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*Abstract* - In August of 2016, the Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education at Brandeis University published a survey of North American Jewish summer camps entitled *Connection, Not Proficiency*.1 Groundbreaking in its area of study, the report explains the religio-cultural as well as linguistic setting of Jewish summer camps, eventually concluding that the camps tend to focus on identity-reaffirmation rather than perfectionism. As narrow as the field is when it comes to studying Jewish summer camps, my research concerns an even narrower field: indigenous language revitalization summer camps. Many indigenous programs of revitalization are younger than that of Modern Hebrew (which began in earnest in the late nineteenth century). To what extent can the relatively expansive knowledge of Hebrew revitalization work as a pattern for indigenous language revitalization? To what extent do Jewish summer camps and indigenous language revitalization summer camps resemble one another? In an attempt to answer some of these questions, my research utilizes my own personal experiences at Bemidji State University’s Ojibwemowin Niibinishi Gabeshi (Ojibwe Language Summer Camp) and contrasts it with both with the contents of *Connection, Not Proficiency* and the lived experiences of an attendee at Camp Teko (a Jewish summer camp located in Long Lake, Minnesota). We find that the goals and methods of Ojibwemowin Niibinishi Gabeshi overlap in several meaningful ways with the existing canon of Jewish summer camps. While this connection seems rather unlikely, it could reveal a surprising new hope in language revitalization work: the existence of multiple models for successfully creating new generations of speakers.

# Introduction

Ojibwe (sometimes called Chippewa, Ojibwa, Ojibway, or referred to by its dialects) is a North American indigenous language spoken by across the Northern United States and parts of Canada, mostly around the Great Lakes region. As a high school student living adjacent to the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe reservation in Cass Lake, Minnesota, I attended Bemidji State University’s Ojibwemowin Niibinishi Gabeshi (Ojibwe language immersion summer camp) for three years. Understanding that I had had the great privilege of partaking in an incredibly unique program, I searched for a pool of research against which I could come to situate Ojibwemowin Niibinishi Gabeshi in a greater schema of language revitalization. Surprised but grateful, I found kinship with existing work on Jewish summer camps.

# Method

This study uses rather unconventional methods. Rather than experimental, the work displayed here is comparative, reflective, and at times almost autoethnographic. The opinions and experiences showcased in this research as they relate to Ojibwemowin Niibinishi Gabeshi are wholly my own and do not represent the findings of work with other human subjects. Information on other language and summer programs was collected from outside resources and the existing work of other scholars. Some information regarding Jewish summer camps was loosely verified through personal communications with a friend who had attended Camp Teko, a specific Jewish summer camp that my research uses to make direct comparisons. In total, this work is experiential and research-based and does not contribute to any experimental canon in the field.

# Results & Discussion

In a general comparison of Bemidji State University’s Ojibwemowin Niibinishi Gabeshi and the Connection, Not Proficiency survey published at Brandeis University, a few key similarities became apparent. Overwhelmingly, these programs tend to focus on the whole person and a sort of cultural competency rather than a bare proficiency in the language. This is achieved through a variety of means. Primarily, there is a practice Benor calls “infusion,” such that language is a means of connection with identity. At a Jewish summer camp this might be prayer in Hebrew; at Ojibwemowin Niibinishi Gabeshi it was the playing of traditional games in Ojibwe. Complementary to this practice, however, a few strategies also enhance language with culture: the strategic hiring of (linguistically proficient and culturally proud) staff members and connection to institutions or people outside the camp that use the language. Not infrequently, Jewish summer camps strive to connect students to the state of Israel, or to other Jews around the world. Camp Teko, sketched out further in Table I, has direct connections to Temple Israel in Minneapolis. In my experience, Niibinishi Gabeshi connects students to cultural resource centers on BSU’s campus and makes students aware of intertribal structures of government. Paramount, these types of programs (for Hebrew or Ojibwe) create strong bonds between campers.

With all of this said, there are certainly a number of questions that remain. The first divergence one might consider is that very few Jewish summer camps are marketed as Hebrew summer camps, let alone Hebrew immersion programs. Yet, at the same time, these Jewish summer camps strike a similar tone to BSU’s Ojibwemowin program. Does this mean that the Ojibwemowin Niibinishi Gabeshi strays from its goal? I suspect not--rather, it seems to me that these programs are positioning themselves in different discourses of ideology. For many speakers of Hebrew (and for many people of Jewish heritage), the project of language revitalization is far in the past; the present is an age of diaspora which comes with its own challenges to language and identity. The Ojibwe language community, on the other hand, finds itself currently in the project of “saving” what some call a “dying” language. This context understandably puts pressure on Bemidji State University to center their approach (or, at the least, their discourse) around language.

Another valuable question that has not escaped me as a researcher is the mere acceptability of comparing Jewish and Ojibwe communities. Wholesale comparison of marginalized groups is never something to be taken lightly. In this analysis, I hope to shed light, not on entire communities of speakers, but on specific methods of revitalization and language instruction. Table I is included to give the reader an impression of the sheer variety of language- and identity-focused opportunities for young students, even within a short geographical range (all of the programs listed take place in Minnesota, with the majority located in the Cass Lake or Bemidji area). Research of the scope presented here does not--and likely could not--attempt to generalize across an entire language community.

## Tables and Figures

The table referenced in the body of the analysis is presented below:

1. Programs and their features

A screenshot of a cell phone

Description automatically generated

# Conclusion

In conclusion, revitalization can and often does look the same in radically different contexts and for radically different speakers and learners. This should not come as a surprise. Nor should it come as a surprise that a strong method of teaching in these revitalization contexts involves much more than language, and instead strives to introduce students to the resources and personal connections they will need to continue into adulthood as proud and proficient members of the community. In essence, Benor’s “Survey of Hebrew at North American Jewish Summer Camps” likely has applications far outside the realm of Jewish summer camps, and instead offers a framework for examining language programs outside the community that orients itself towards Hebrew.

##### References

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