

Nouns

1 Overview

The **nouns** of Southwestern Ojibwe belong to one of two grammatical classes (often called **genders**), **animate** and **inanimate**. All nouns making reference to **people**, **spirits** and **mythological beings**, **animals**, **birds**, **fish**, **insects**, and **trees** are grammatically animate. Many nouns referring to plants are animate, but not all are. Most, but not all, nouns referring to non-living things of human manufacture such as furniture, tools, and clothing are inanimate. Many words specifying natural features such as lakes, rivers, and ground are inanimate as well.

In order to introduce these categories, here are some examples of the most common subgroups of both animate and inanimate nouns.

Some Examples of Animate Nouns

People

Anishinaábe	‘person, Ojibwe’
ikwé	‘woman’
iníni	‘man’
mindimoóyenh	‘old woman’
akiwéenzii	‘old man’

Spirits & Mythological Beings

manidoó	‘spirit’
jiíbay	‘spirit, ghost’
Animikií	‘Thunderbird’
wiíndigoo	‘cannibal spirit’
Gichi-manidoó	‘Great Spirit, God’

Animals

awesíinh	‘wild animal’
waágosh	‘fox’
zhaangwéshi	‘mink’
amík	‘beaver’
wazháshk	‘muskrat’

Birds

bineshiính	‘(song)bird’
migízi	‘bald eagle’
opíchi	‘robin’
aándeg	‘crow’
zhííshiib	‘duck’

Fish

gíigoonh	‘fish’
namé	‘sturgeon’
ogaá	‘pickerel’
ginoózhe	‘northern pike’
asaáwe	‘perch’

Insects

manidoóns	‘insect’
zagíme	‘mosquito’
oóji	‘fly’
meméngwaa	‘butterfly’
enigoóns, éniḡ	‘ant’

Trees

wiigwaasaátig	‘birch tree’
gíízhik	‘white cedar’
gaawaándag	‘white spruce’
okikaándag	‘jack pine’
zhíngwaak	‘white pine’

Some Examples of Inanimate Nouns

Items of Human Artifice

onaágan	‘plate’
moókomaan	‘knife’
adoópowin	‘table’
apábiwin	‘chair’
babágiwayaan	‘shirt’
makízin	‘shoe’
dikinaágan	‘cradleboard’

Natural Features

akí	‘land, earth’
nibí	‘water’
wajiw	‘mountain’
ziíbi	‘river’
zaaga’ígan	‘lake’
Gichígami	‘Lake Superior’
nagwéyaab	‘rainbow’

2 Number (Singular and Plural)

Nouns can be either **singular** or **plural**. Plural nouns take a plural suffix, which ends in **g** for animate nouns, and **n** for inanimate nouns. Here are a few examples, using words that have already been introduced.

Animate Singulars and Plurals

Anishinaábe	‘person, Ojibwe’	Anishinaábeg	‘people, Ojibwes’
ikwé	‘woman’	ikwéwag	‘women’
iníni	‘man’	iníniwag	‘men’
mindimoóyenh	‘old woman’	mindimoóyeg	‘old women’
akiwénzii	‘old man’	akiwenziíyag	‘old men’
waágosh	‘fox’	waágoshag	‘foxes’

Note that though the plural suffix is somewhat variable, in all cases it ends in a **g**. Now consider the following inanimate nouns.

Inanimate Singulars and Plurals

onaágan	‘plate’	onaáganan	‘plates’
moókomaan	‘knife’	mookomaánan	‘knives’
adoópowin	‘table’	adoópowinan	‘tables’
apábiwin	‘chair’	apábiwinan	‘chairs’
babágiwayaan	‘shirt’	babigwayaánan	‘shirts’
makízin	‘shoe’	makízinan	‘shoes’

In all cases here, the plural ends in an **n**. When you learn a new noun, you will have to learn its gender, and if it has a plural, its plural form. A few words that define mass quantities do not usually have plurals, just as in English. Here are a few examples:

nibí	‘water’
bingwí	‘sand, ashes’
manoómin	‘wild rice’

Here is the full list of singulars and plurals for the words we have seen so far:

Singular	Plural	English Singular
Anishinaabe	Anishinaabeg	person, Ojibwe
ikwe	ikwewag	woman
inini	ininiwag	man
mindimooyenh	mindimooyenyag	old woman
akiwenzii	akiwenziiyag	old man
manidoo	manidoog	spirit
jiibay	jiibayag	spirit, ghost
Animikii	Animikiig	thunderbird
wiindigoo	wiindigoog	cannibal spirit
Gichi-manidoo	Gichi-manidoog	Great Spirit, God
awesiinh	awesiinyag	wild animal
waagosh	waagoshag	fox
zhaangweshi	zhaangweshiwag	mink
amik	amikwag	beaver
wazhashk	wazhashkwag	muskrat
binesiinh	binesiinyag	bird
migizi	migiziwag	bald eagle
opichi	opichiwag	robin
aandeg	aandegwag	crow
zhiishiib	zhiishiibag	duck
giigoonh	giigoonyag	fish
asaawe	asaaweg	perch
manidoons	manidoonsag	insect
zagime	zagimeg	mosquito
oojii	oojiig	fly
memengwaa	memengwaag	butterfly
enigoons	enigoonsag	ant
wiigwaasaatig	wiigwaasaatigoog	birch tree
giizhik	giizhikag	white cedar
gaawaandag	gaawaandagoog	white spruce
okikaandag	okikaandagoog	jack pine
zhingwaak	zhingwaakwag	white pine
onaagan	onaaganan	plate
mookomaan	mookomaanan	knife
adoopowin	adoopowinan	table
apabiwin	apabiwinan	chair
babagiwayaan	babagiwayaanan	shirt
makizin	makizinan	shoe
dikinaagan	dikinaaganan	cradleboard
aki	akiin	land, earth
wajiw	wajiwag	mountain
ziibi	ziibiwan	river
zaaga'igan	zaaga'iganan	lake
nagweyaab	nagweyaabiin	rainbow

3 Further Notional Subclasses of Animate Nouns

Most students who come to Ojibwe are intrigued by a substantial group of nouns which are grammatically animate but which do not appear to be “alive.” For example, the linguist Leonard Bloomfield noted several subclasses of items that were animate in Menominee, a sister language of Ojibwe.¹ These included ‘boards and timbers, including canoe parts; animal hides; corn, wheat and their products; tobacco and associated objects; shells and beads; moving machines (except ships); gambling instruments; money and coins. In addition certain body parts and secretions, plants and plant products natural features, and many other objects are animate in gender.’ (Nichols 1980:21).

Here are some examples of items from these classes.

nabágisag, ‘board, plank’ waáginaa, ‘canoe rib’	nabágisagoog, ‘boards, planks’ waáginaag, ‘canoe ribs’
amíkwayaan, ‘beaver hide’ bizhikiínsiwayaan, ‘calfhide’ wazháshkwayaan, ‘muskrat hide’	amikwayaánag, ‘beaver hides’ bizhikiínsiwayaánag, ‘calf hides’ wazhashkwayaánag, ‘muskrat hides’
mandaámin, ‘corn’ bakwézhigan, ‘bread’ abwaájigan, ‘bread cooked by open fire’	mandaáminag, ‘corn plants’ bakwézhiganag, ‘breads (loaves)’ abwaajigánag, ‘breads...’
asámaa, ‘tobacco’ biindaákwaan, ‘snuff’ opwaágan, ‘pipe’	asémaag, ‘tobaccos’ opwaáganag, ‘pipe’
manidoominéns, ‘bead’ és, ‘shell’ miígis, ‘mide shell’	manidoominénsag, ‘beads’ ésag, ‘shells’ miígisag, ‘mide shells’
odaábaan, ‘car’ ishkodewidaábaan, ‘train’ nabagidaábaan, ‘toboggan’	odaabaánag, ‘cars’ ishkodewidaabaánag, ‘trains’ nabagidaabaánag, ‘toboggans’

¹This section follows Nichols 1980:20ff very closely.

ataádiwin, 'playing card'
danéns, 'club suite card'
bezhigoobií'igan, 'ace'

ataádiwinag, 'playing cards'
danénsag, 'club suite cards'
bezhigoobií'iganag, 'aces'

zhoóniyaa, 'money'
aabita-zhoóniyaans, 'nickel'
bezhizhoóniyaans, 'dime'

aabita-zhooniyaánsag, 'nickels'
bezhizhooniyaánsag, 'dimes'

In addition to these subcategories, there are other items of note. For example, celestial bodies are animate:

dibik-gíízis, 'moon'
gíízis, 'sun'
anáng, 'star'

dibik-gíízisoog, 'moons'
gíízisoog, 'suns'
anángoog, 'stars'

Also, snow, ice and stones are animate, but water is inanimate.

goon, 'snow'
asín, 'stone,' asiniíg, 'stones'

mikwám, 'ice' pl. -iíg
nibí, 'water' (inanimate)

There are also many common items that are somewhat unexpectedly treated grammatically as animate:

akík, 'pail, kettle'
aágim, 'snowshoe'
asáb, 'net'
giboodiyegwaázon, 'pants'

akikoóg, 'kettles, pails'
aágimag, 'snowshoes'
asabiíg, 'nets'
giboodiyegwaázonag, 'pants (pl.)'

In an analysis of Cheyenne animate terms, a language related to Ojibwe, Strauss and Brightman 1982 claimed that objects within the Algonquian worldview that are considered to have "power" are grammatically animate. Things have power by virtue of either being alive or being viewed as especially "sacred things." Yet there are many objects that Ojibwe people treat as animate, such as snowshoes and pants, which do not seem exceptionally sacred in their social evaluation.

The anthropologist Regna Darnell has claimed too that “power” is the primary reason for including items in the animate class of nouns in Cree, though the reason that something has power can be associative. Darnell claims that hides of animals are animate because in some way the hide retains the power of the animal, but meat (Oj. wííyaas, inan.) and bones (Oj. okónan, inan.) don’t. Darnell claims that pants are animate because anything associated with procreation will be animate, and because pants have close contact with reproductive organs. In Minnesota Ojibwe (and the Cree that Darnell was studying) many body organs associated with procreation are animate, though most body parts are inanimate. But still it is not clear why the following word are animate:

nindénigom, ‘my nostril’	nindiniígan, ‘my shoulder-blade’
ninjíígwán, ‘my thigh, my lap’	nimaámaa, ‘my eyebrow hair’
ninaán, ‘my calf’	niniíshk, ‘my tonsil’
nishkánzh, ‘my nail’	

In many languages, one grammatical gender may be chosen to be used to mark items as singled out because of their particular cultural importance or salience, and it is possible that some words are placed in the animate category for this reason, such as snowshoes, pails and nets.

It also true that gender can be used somewhat opportunistically to allow for new items of vocabulary. For example, makízin, ‘shoe,’ is inanimate, but makízin, ‘tire’ is animate. Tires resemble shoes, and the change of animacy allows the use of the same word. Note too, odaminowaágan, ‘toy,’ is inanimate, but odaminowaágan, ‘doll,’ is animate. Another clear case where this phenomenon applies is in the use of nouns as names of individuals or groups. For example, gichi-mookomaan, ‘butcher knife,’ is inanimate, but gichi-mookomaan, ‘whiteman,’ is animate. According to popular lore, the term for whiteman, which literally means, ‘big knife,’ has to do with the long swords wielded long ago by U.S. cavalrymen.

4 Gender Shifting

There are several interesting bits in Ojibwe literature where gender shows shifting, and these can throw light on the system behind animacy. Here are several examples where gender shifting takes place.

In one case, the item undergoing gender shift is the culture hero Wenabozho's backside. In a popular tale, Wenabozho has killed some ducks and geese by trickery, and after burying them in the sand to cook and extolling his backside to keep watch, he falls asleep. In the story, when Dakotas approach, Wenabozho's backside shouts out to him, and in all cases where the backside speaks, it is clearly animate in gender, even though the word for backside in this story, *ninjiid*, 'my rectum,' is normally inanimate. So speaking seems to be a canonical **animate** act.² And, indeed, there are no first and second verb forms for VII verbs, only third. First person refers to the speaker(s), and second person to the one(s) addressed by the speaker(s).

In another case, this time from the Odawa dialect of Ojibwe, a young man fasts in order to have a vision to guide his life. He has a vision of a mirror. A mirror is normally inanimate in gender, but in this story, when it becomes a visiting spirit, it becomes animate. I have heard a similar story from western Ontario (Charles Fiero, p.c), too. In this case, a man is seeking a vision and is approached by an unknown spirit. The spirit promises the man that he will live as long as the spirit does, if he accepts the spirit's protection. The man jumps at the chance, only to learn later that the spirit was a leaf, which lives only a single season. The word for leaf, *aniibiish*, is normally inanimate, but in this exchange, is animate.

Rand Valentine

²This account is from Nichols 1980:21-22.

The Mirror Being

Told by Andrew Medler of Walpole Island, Ontario
Transcribed by Leonard Bloomfield
from Bloomfield 1958

(1) Bezhig nini gii-mkadekegban, aw kiwenziinh gii-zhitood wiigwaamens waadzhi-mkadekenid niw wgwisan. (2) Gaa-giizhtood dash mii gii-webi-mkadeked aw shkinwe. (3) Pane biindig gii-yaa, ge go gii-wezhho kakzhe maa wnowaang. (4) Niibna dsogon gii-yaa maa wiigwaamensing, gii-baabiitood iw gegoo ji-naabndang. (5) Endso-ggizheb dash gii-zhaa maaba kiwenziinh ko gii-ggwejmaad niw wgwisan manj iidig gaa-naabndamnigwen. (6) Wgii-gnahmawaan niw wgwisan gaa wii nkwetwaasig niw bi-ggwejmigod mandaagninwan iw ji-zhwenmigod.

(7) Mii dash ko pane endso-ggizhebaawgak gii-zhaad maaba kiwenziinh gii-waabmaad niw wgwisan gii-ggwejmaad, Wegne-sh gaa-bwaadman? (8) Baamaa dash ngoding dbikak gii-bi-yaamgadni **iw waawaabmowin**. (9) **Wgii-goon** dash **iw** ji-zhwenmigod ge go ji-naadmaagod manj iidig pii iw ge-ndawendmogwen ji-wiidookaagod.

(1) Once upon a time a certain man fasted; that old man had built a hut in which that son of his was to fast. (2) When he had finished building it, then the young man began his fast. (3) He always stayed in the hut, and he painted his cheeks with charcoal. (4) Many days he stayed there in that hut, waiting for that which he should see in a vision. (5) Every morning this old man would come and ask his son what sort of vision he had. (6) He warned his son not to accept the elegant man if he should come and offer to bless him.

(7) Then always, every morning, this old man went there and saw his son and asked him "What have you dreamt?" (8) Finally then one night there came **that mirror** [inanimate]. (9) **It** [inanimate] told [animate] him that it would bless him and that it would help him at any time whatever when he might want it to help him.

(10) Ggizheb dash gii-bi-dgoshin miinwaa niw oosan gii-ggwejmigod miinwaa, Aanii-sh naa gaa-naabndaman? (11) Aw dash shkinwe wgii-wiindmawaan iw gaa-naabndang **waawaabmowin iw** gaa-zhi-waawiindmawaad.

(12) Aw dash kiwenziinh wgii-naan niw wgwisan, **Gdaa-nkwetwaa** iw maanoo jizhwenmik. (13) Mii maanda niigaan da-nigiizhgak ge-mno-aabjitooyan.

(14) Miinwaa dash e-aasho-dbikak gii-bi-yaa **aw waawaabmowin**. (15) Maaba dash shkinwe **wgii-nkwetwaan** iw jizhwenmigod. (16) Maaba dash kiwenziinh wgii-giiwewnaan niw wgwisan, ge go mii gii-shamaad.

(17) Gmaapii dash maaba shkinwe gii-wiidge. (18) Ge go mii gii-maajaad waa-dzhi-giiwsed, gii-maajiinaad wwiidgemaagnan ge bezhig wshiimenyan. (19) Maaba dash shkinwe wgii-bwaadaan wii-bi-yaanid myagi-nishnaaben waa-binsigwaajin. (20) Gnimaan niwgon wgii-kendaan wii-bi-dgoshninid. (21) Mii dash gii-zhitood iw baagndibehgan, ge go gii-goodood iw ji-baatenig weweni.

(22) Wgagwejmigoon dash niw wwiidgemaagnan, Aanii-sh waa-naabjitooyan iw bgamaagan?

(10) In the morning his father again came there and asked him, “What kind of vision have you seen?” (11) Then the young man told him that he had seen the vision of a **mirror** [inanimate], for that was what he called **it** [animate].

(12) The old man said to his son, “You must accept the offer of this being [animate] to bless you [animate]. (13) In days to come you will have good use of this.”

(14) The next night **that Mirror Being** [animate] came again. (15) The young man accepted **his** [animate] blessing. (16) The old man led his son home and gave him food to eat.

(17) In time this young man married. (18) Then he went hunting, taking along his wife and a younger brother of his. (19) Now the young man dreamt that men of a different tribe were coming to kill him. (20) He knew that they were going to come in four days. (21) So then he made that war club and hung it up to dry properly.

(22) Then his wife asked him, “What are you going to use that club on?”

(23) Wgii-wiindmawaan dash iw gaa-naabndang. (24) Ggizheb waabang gga-maajaa ji-wiindmawdwaa giw Nishnaabeg widi gaa-bi-njibaayang ji-bi-naadmawwaad ji-miigaan'gidwaa giw myagi-nishnaabeg.

(25) Ggizheb dash gii-maajaa maaba kwe gii-giiwebtood ge go gii-dbaajmod, gaa-dgoshing widi endaawaad.

(26) Mii dash gii-wiindmaadwaad kina giw ninwag e-zhi-ndawendang maaba nini wii-bi-nsigod niw myagi-nishnaaben.

(27) Mii dash ge-aasho-ggizhebaawgak maaba nini gii-noondwaad aazhi go bi-yaanid niw waa-nsigjin. (28) Wgii-mkwendaan dash iw e-naabndangba ge go mii gii-ndodang **iw waawaabmowin** ji-wiidookaagod aazhi go wii-miigaazod.

(29) Mii dash aazhi go gii-bi-dgoshninid niw waa-miigaan'gojin. (30) Wgii-naan dash wshiimenyan, Gego wiin zegziken. (31) Naamyahii yaan maa nbaagning. (32) Mii dash gaa-zhichged aw gwiiwzens gii-negooded naami-nbaagan.

(23) Then he told her what he had seen in his vision. (24) "Tomorrow morning you must go and tell those people where we came from to come and help me fight those men of a foreign tribe."

(25) On the next morning this woman went off and ran home and told her message, when she had arrived where they dwelt.

(26) Then all those people told each other what this man wanted who was going to be sought out and killed by those foreign people.

(27) When the next morning came, this man heard them come who were coming to kill him. (28) He remembered the vision which he had seen long ago, and now he willed that **the mirror** [inanimate] should stand by him now as he was about to fight.

(29) Now they arrived who were going to fight him. (30) Then he said to his young brother, "Do not be afraid. (31) Stay there under the bed." (32) That was what the boy did: he crawled under the bed.

(33) Mii dash gii-miigaazod maaba nini. (34) Gaa wii dash gii-naagzisii. (35) Mii go eta **iw waawaabmowin** gii-bepeshaabiigmog. (36) Gonda dash maagaanaajig gaa wii wgii-waabmaasiwaan. (37) Nishaa dash wgii-bijndibewaan. (38) Gegaa dash go kina e-ni-nsaad mii iw gii-gnjibhiwenid. (39) Bangii dash eta maanoo gii-ni-maajibhiwewan maanoo.

(40) Gii-bi-dgoshnoog dash giw waa-naadmaagjin. (41) Aazhi dash gegaa kina wgii-nsaan pii giw ninwag degshinwaad. (42) Mii dash e-god, Aanii-sh naa giw waa-miigaangijig?

(43) Mii dash gaa-naad, Aazhi go kina gegaa gaa-nsagwaa. (44) Bngii eta ngii-shkonnaag. (45) Gii-gnjibhiwewag. (46) Ge giinwaa wii-saanwezyeg ngii-shkonnaag.

(47) Wgii-noopnanaawaan dash giw nyaadmaagjin, ge go mii iw kina giw gaa-nsaawaad. (48) Bezhiig dash eta wgii-biinaawaan. (49) Mii dash gii-gnoonaawaad, Miinwaa maanda da-zhichgesgwaa waa-wiindmaw giw Nishnaabeg gaa-bi-njibaayan, miinwaa da-zhichgesgwaa wiikaa maanda.

(33) Then this man fought. (34) He was not visible. (35) There was just **the mirror** [inanimate] flashing the bright sunlight. (36) Those men who were fighting him could not see him. (37) He simply smashed their skulls. (38) When he had killed nearly all of them they fled. (39) Only a few of them were able to run away.

(40) Then they arrived who were going to help him. (41) He had killed almost all of those others when those men arrived. (42) They said to him, “Where are those people whom we are to fight?”

(43) He told them, “By this time I have killed almost all of them. (44) I have just spared a few. (45) They have run away. (46) I spared them so that you, too, might have some amusement.”

(47) Then those who were helping him went in pursuit and then they killed all of them. (48) Only one they brought back with them. (49) Then they spoke to him: “Go tell those people at the place whence you have come that they are not to do this way again, that they must never do this thing again.”