

Closing the Gap

A CLOSER LOOK: REVITALIZING INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES

The history, cultures and identities of Indigenous peoples are embodied and shared in their languages. There is a well-documented decline in linguistic diversity in Canada; only three of over 60 Indigenous languages are expected to survive into the next century.¹ With the risk of linguistic extinction comes the risk of losing centuries of information, traditional knowledge, understanding of the land around us, and the ability for culture and traditions to be fully passed forward to future generations.² Former Chair of Native Studies at St. Thomas University Andrea Bear Nicholas has noted: “Since language is the foundation of culture, its destruction in individuals on a mass scale inevitably leads to the disruption, even destruction, of whole communities and cultures.”³ The majority of Indigenous mother-tongue speakers are aging, furthering the decline of the strength and prevalence of these languages.⁴

This decline stems from the oppression and forced assimilation of Indigenous peoples, embodied in many government policies from the Indian Residential School (IRS) system to the *Indian Act*. Underinvestment in the protection and revitalization of Indigenous languages has further contributed to this decline, despite many grassroots efforts by Indigenous peoples in all Treaty and title territories. Lack of enduring institutional support and critical attention from federal and provincial governments has not permitted language revitalization projects to fully succeed and more is urgently needed for Indigenous languages to thrive.

THE PATH FORWARD

In 2003, a Task Force comprised of Indigenous language and culture leaders, guided by Elders and advised by a circle of experts, was struck to provide recommendations to the Minister of Canadian Heritage on a national strategy to preserve, revitalize and promote First Nations, Inuit and Métis languages and cultures. The Task Force was “inspired by a vision that sees First Nation, Inuit and Métis languages as gifts from the Creator carrying unique and irreplaceable values and spiritual beliefs that allow speakers to relate with their ancestors

¹ Nicholas, A. B. 2011. “Linguicide: Submersion Education and the Killing of Languages in Canada.” *Briarpatch Magazine*.

² Kirkness, V. J. 1998. “The Critical State of Aboriginal Languages in Canada.” *Canadian Journal of Native Education*.

³ Nicholas, A. B. 2009. “Linguistic Decline and the Educational Gap: A Single Solution is Possible in the Education of Indigenous Peoples”.

⁴ Ibid



and to take part in sacred ceremonies.”⁵ Its report and recommendations provide a concrete foundation for furthering this work.

To support Indigenous languages, within the first 100 days the newly elected federal government will:

- Increase investments in existing efforts and initiatives to revitalize Indigenous languages, including immersion programs.
- Work with the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) on a National Action Plan to revitalize and promote Indigenous languages.
- Work with the AFN on an Indigenous Languages Act consistent with the principles in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) Calls to Action.

EVIDENCE AND OTHER VOICES

David Corson, in describing Norway’s language policy for their Indigenous Sami population and using this as a point of reference for Canada’s linguistic policy underscores the implications of losing languages:

“... Canada has given official-language status only to the languages of the colonizers themselves... It reinforces the injustices of dominant-group educational policies and practices that have left aboriginal peoples with few alternatives other than linguistic assimilation and eventual cultural assimilation.”⁶
“Through this rapid language loss, the majority of aboriginal and many official-language minority children in Canada are losing touch with who they are, where they come from, and what place there might be for them in the contemporary world. Their cultures are being gradually stripped from them.”⁷

Verna J. Kirkness, a member of the Fisher River Cree Nation and national leader in education, highlights the cultural loss that Canada would suffer should the current rate of linguistic decline continue:

“What do you lose when you lose a language? The short answer is that you lose your culture... Language is best able to express most easily, most accurately and most richly, the values, customs and overall interests of the culture... You are losing the things that essentially are the way of life, the way of thought, the way of valuing, and a particularly human reality.”⁸

Mary Jane Norris notes the importance of targeting children as the focus of language revitalization strategies:

“Children are the future speakers of Aboriginal languages; their language outcomes are critical to the maintenance and revitalization of their languages. Language outcomes of children today have significant implications for the language status of future generations.”⁹

⁵ Task Force on Aboriginal Languages and Cultures June 2005. *Towards a New Beginning: A Foundational Report for a Strategy to Revitalize First Nation, Inuit and Métis Languages and Cultures*. Report to the Minister of Canadian Heritage.

⁶ Corson, D. 1996. “Official-Language Minority and Aboriginal First-Language Education: Implications of Norway’s Sami Language Act for Canada.” *Canadian Journal of Education*.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Kirkness, V. J. 1998. “The Critical State of Aboriginal Languages in Canada.” *Canadian Journal of Native Education*.

⁹ Norris, M. J. 2007. “Aboriginal Languages in Canada: Trends and Perspectives on Maintenance and Revitalization.”



The United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues makes clear the full range of implications of Indigenous languages loss:

As a result of linguistic erosion, much of the encyclopedia of traditional indigenous knowledge that is usually passed down orally from generation to generation is in danger of being lost forever. This loss is irreplaceable and irreparable. Customary laws of indigenous communities are often set out in their languages, and if the language is lost the community may not fully understand its laws and system of governance that foster its future survival. The loss of indigenous languages signifies not only the loss of traditional knowledge but also the loss of cultural diversity, undermining the identity and spirituality of the community and the individual. Biological, linguistic and cultural diversity are inseparable and mutually reinforcing, so when an indigenous language is lost, so too is traditional knowledge on how to maintain the world's biological diversity and address climate change and other environmental challenges.¹⁰

¹⁰ http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/Factsheet_languages_FINAL.pdf

