



New Words & Language Adaptation¹

Why do languages adapt?

All languages need words and expressions for talking about experiences and objects in daily life. As daily life changes, languages adapt by creating new words. Newly created words or expressions in a language are known as *neologisms*.

All languages are highly creative and have ways to create new words and adapt existing words when the need arises. For example, languages such as English and French have had to create new words and expressions to describe developments in technology and lifestyles that didn't exist historically. Consider words needed for the workplace, going to the grocery store, writing an email or paying a credit card bill. New words for technology



Photo by Jo-Ann Rich for FirstVoices

include *computer*, *cellphone*, and the *Internet*. Developing new words is an important part of language revitalization as it means that the language remains useful to the people who speak it.

Why is creating new words for First Nations languages important?

Before European contact, First Nations interacted with one another and shared words or developed new words for items and ideas. This natural process of language adaptation was interrupted by colonization and residential schools.

This interruption has created gaps in First Nations languages, leaving many languages without words to describe common parts of twenty-first century life. Luckily, there are many ways to change this!

“Revitalizing any language requires modernizing the vocabulary, publishing a standard writing system, and developing methods to incorporate new words into the language.”

- Mohawk Language Standardisation Project (1993)

WHAT ARE THE ISSUES & CHALLENGES?

1. Should First Nations languages be used to discuss twenty-first century life? Your community might decide that your language should only be used to discuss traditional activities and cultural objects.
2. Keep in mind that a language is more likely to be revitalized successfully if it can be used in all areas of life. Even before European contact, First Nations were interacting and sharing words, and developing words for new items and ideas. If we don't create new words in our languages, speakers may find it quicker and easier to just use the English word, potentially leading to further language loss.
3. If your community wants to create new words, the next challenge is understanding how new words are developed and building consensus around who will create them. FPCC's Language Revitalization Planning Program can help your community organize a group of fluent speakers to be responsible for developing new words.

¹ FPCC would like to thank Sarah Kell for providing the research and examples to inform this fact sheet.

What can I do?

There are several ways to create new words in your language.

1. New words can be built using word parts that already exist in your language.
2. You can describe or “talk around” new items or concepts by using descriptions of what the item or concept looks like, or the action it does.
3. You can revive an old word from Elders’ memories or early records. It is important to remain true to the integrity and nature of the traditional language. Adapting new words or concepts from what already exists helps to support this.
4. Borrowing a word from another language is a common process. Some communities prefer to create new words rather than borrow words, but borrowing happens naturally whenever two or more languages are in contact. Many B.C. First Nations languages already have words that were borrowed from French through Chinook Jargon, the trade language

COMMUNITY PROJECT EXAMPLES

PROJECT NAME	DESCRIPTION
The Mohawk Language Standardization Project (1993) https://kanienkeha.net/the-mohawk-language-standardisation-project/	The process of standardization and establishing community consensus
Updating the Sauk Lexicon: Strategies and implications for Language Revitalization https://tinyurl.com/yeh5nxt	Methods of vocabulary expansion in the Sauk language
‘Navalish’: The Shifting World of the Navajo Language https://tinyurl.com/yrcn6ygg	Navajo’s verb-based language structure and experiences with language shift

spoken in the Pacific Northwest in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is up to your community to decide whether to borrow words and, if so, from what language(s). The Indigenous Sami people decided that when they need to borrow a word, they will first try to borrow from a related language. If that language doesn’t have the word either, then they will look to English.

When borrowing a word into your language, remember to adapt it to your language’s sound system. If there are sounds in a borrowed word that do not exist in your language, you can replace them with the closest sounds in your language.

TECHNOLOGY & LIFESTYLE LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

Developing language for technology and lifestyle changes means creating words for things that don’t exist in traditional languages. Some examples are going to the grocery store, going to the doctor’s office or the dentist, and paying your credit card bill.

Words for technology include computer, cell phone, the internet, and other modern devices. Developing new words is an important part of language revitalization as it means that the language can be used to discuss modern concepts.

WHERE CAN I LEARN MORE?

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**FIRST PEOPLES’
CULTURAL COUNCIL**

For more information:

First Peoples’ Cultural Council
1A Boat Ramp Road
Brentwood Bay, BC V8M 1R3

T (250) 652-5952
E info@fpcc.ca
www.fpcc.ca

