

Indigenous Languages Recognition, Preservation and Revitalization

A Report on the National Dialogue Session on Indigenous Languages: Abridged Version

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This is an abridged version of the report by Suzanne Gessner & Lorna Wanosts'a7 Williams. The full report is available in English and in French (*Reconnaissance, préservation et revitalisation des langues autochtones. Rapport sur la séance de dialogue national sur les langues autochtones*) at: <http://www.fpcc.ca/about-us/Publications/>



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1. Introduction

a. Dialogue Session on Indigenous Languages

A national dialogue session on Indigenous languages was held June 24-26, 2016 in Victoria, BC. The session was hosted by the First Peoples' Cultural Council who invited twenty Indigenous language experts from across Canada along with representatives from the Department of Canadian Heritage to discuss approaches to Indigenous language revitalization in Canada.¹ The dialogue was built around four themes: (1) language rights, legislation and policy, (2) community-based revitalization, (3) education, and (4) urban strategies. A report was produced which may be used as a starting point for further consultations on the development of a new federal approach to addressing the need for recognition, protection and revitalization of Indigenous languages such as legislation and an Indigenous languages commission. **This is an abridged version of the report.**

2. Situational Analysis of Indigenous Languages in Canada

a. Language Context

- Approximately 60 Indigenous languages in Canada
- 10 separate and distinct language families
- Most languages have multiple dialects, often with issues with multiple writing systems
- Only 3 languages account for two-thirds of all mother-tongue language speakers
- Most languages have relatively few fluent speakers
- Most languages are not spoken by children, a key indicator of language survival
- Language and cultural identity are intrinsically linked; maintaining both is urgent

b. Community Context

- 617 First Nation communities and 53 Inuit communities with many Indigenous people living in urban areas
- According to the 2011 National Household Survey (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, 2013, p. 4) the Indigenous population was 1,400,685 and included:
 - 697,510 people who are Registered Indian
 - 213,900 people who are Non-Status Indian
 - 59,115 Inuit people
 - 418,380 people who identified as Métis
 - 11,780 people who are identified as "Other Aboriginal" (meaning those who reported more than one identity group or those who reported being a Band member with no Aboriginal identity and no Registered Indian status)

¹ The First Peoples' Cultural Council (FPCC) is a provincial Crown Corporation formed by the government of British Columbia to administer the First Peoples' Heritage, Language and Culture Program. FPCC assists B.C. First Nations in their efforts to revitalize their languages, arts and cultures. First Peoples' Cultural Council serves 203 B.C. First Nations, 34 languages and a number of First Nations arts, culture and educational organizations.

- According to the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, in 2014 48% of registered Indians, or 448,163 people out of a total of 936,225, reside off-reserve (Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, 2015). In addition, there are non-status Indians, Métis and Inuit people residing in urban and rural areas. There are significant Indigenous populations in towns and cities throughout Canada.
- There is very little language or cultural infrastructure in communities
- Very few people have access to quality language learning
- Much of the data collected on the languages is not accessible to communities

c. Context: Indigenous Rights, Legislation & Policy in Canada

Indigenous peoples have been drawing attention to the state of Indigenous languages and the urgent need to preserve, revitalize and maintain our languages for decades. Certain events have given rise to renewed optimism. The current federal government has promised to implement the **United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples** which contains several articles that support the recovery, revitalization, preservation and education of and in the Indigenous languages of Canada. In addition, the Ministerial mandate letters, signed by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, made the federal government's commitment to Indigenous peoples clear, and the commitment to the recognition, preservation and revitalization of Indigenous languages being no exception.

The second event which gives rise for renewed optimism is the release and promised implementation of the **Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission**, which contains four *Calls to Action* relating to language and culture.

All three territories (Yukon, Northwest Territories, and Nunavut) and one province (Manitoba) have **legislation** in place that either recognizes or protects Indigenous languages. In addition, Bill S-212 short-titled the *Aboriginal Languages of Canada Act* is before the Senate. The Bill sets out a framework for the formal recognition, preservation, and revitalization of Canada's Indigenous languages, but because it is a Senate bill, it cannot address the need for secure and adequate funding.

d. Context: Community-Based Indigenous Language Revitalization

Though Indigenous language statistics may give the impression there is little being done for languages, there are concerted efforts nationwide to maintain and strengthen languages in Indigenous communities despite immense challenges.

Language Initiatives: Preschool

Head Start Centres, Daycares and Preschools. Facilities for early childhood education are common in communities throughout Canada. Where language programming is offered, it is limited, providing language and cultural awareness but not building fluency in a language.

Language Nests. A Language Nest reconnects generations through a full immersion environment for preschool children where all activities are conducted in the Indigenous language. The model has proven success in creating fluent young speakers.

First Language Acquisition in the Home. Some children are learning their language as a first language in the home from parents, grandparents or other caregivers. Returning all Indigenous languages to the home through natural transmission is our hope for the future.

Language Initiatives: Children and Youth

The most common community-based language initiatives offered to children and youth are **language and culture camps**, which connect language back to the land, and **after-school language programs**. They develop language and cultural awareness rather than fluency.

Language Initiatives: Adults

Adult Language Classes. Adult language classes are offered in some communities or by post-secondary institutions. Most focus on teaching grammar and do not create fluent speakers, though some more recent post-secondary programs aim to develop fluency.

Adult Immersion Programs and Camps. While these programs are rare, intensive immersion provides the opportunity for adult second-language learners to develop fluency.

Master/Mentor-Apprentice Language Learning. This proven method of language learning pairs a fluent speaker with a motivated adult learner. The pair engages in one-on-one language immersion through everyday activities for a concentrated period of time.

Language House. A language house is an adult language learning program that uses full immersion. Adults live (or spend concentrated time) together with a fluent speaker, or with advanced speakers together, and agree to only use the language in the house.

Courses for Silent Speakers. Silent speakers may have a good understanding of the language but do not speak it. Courses using Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) can help silent speakers overcome language blocks and begin speaking again.

Everyday Language Use. In some communities, fluent speakers use their languages with other fluent speakers and with learners. However, there are many communities where fluent speakers are not using their languages on an everyday basis.

Language Initiatives: Elders

Elders Groups. Typically, communities may organize a weekly Elders' group where Elders have the opportunity to come together to speak in their language with each other. For many communities, Elders are the only fluent speakers in the community. As such, they are often very actively involved in any and all language initiatives.

Status, Evaluation & Awareness

Though there are many community-based language initiatives across Canada, most lack rigorous evaluation processes to evaluate their success. Further, there isn't a knowledge bank of tried strategies that is easily accessible. Language immersion is the best evidence-based model for first and second language acquisition, but communities have insufficient capacity to offer many language programs, immersion or otherwise. We lack

adequate baseline statistics on Indigenous language use across Canada. The census provides estimates for some languages but there are challenges with census data. Some communities and jurisdictions track this information though typically not on a recurrent basis, thus it is not possible to track progress.

Communities vary widely with respect to attitudes and perceptions about languages, language use and revitalization initiatives. However, it is fair to say that negative attitudes (e.g., shame, perceived value of English, etc.), which developed as a result of colonization, still persist. Strategies are needed to strengthen motivation and resolve. In addition, non-Indigenous communities tend to lack knowledge of local Indigenous languages. For examples, general awareness of Indigenous languages through the use of signage and place names in Indigenous languages is virtually non-existent in most communities in Canada, whether on or off reserve.

Documentation, Archiving & Research

While some languages are fairly well documented, most are not. To our knowledge, very few languages have a proficient system for the archiving of, and for the provision of access to, language data. Some languages have some technological tools for documentation and archiving (e.g., FirstVoices, a shared tool for community-based language data curation) but the lack of funding has been a huge barrier to a robust response to community needs. Some communities collaborate with linguists, anthropologists or educators on linguistic research, documentation or curriculum development and some communities have their own researchers to carry out such work. Ownership of data is a concern. High quality documentation, archiving and research is essential to ensure the continuation of all languages. Due to the aging of fluent speakers and knowledge holders, this work is urgent.

e. Context: Indigenous Language Education

Education Range

1. Early Childhood: 0 – 3 years of age, family and community programs, health and social programs, infant care, language nests
2. Preschool: 4 – 5 years of age, immersion, language nests, preschool preparation
3. K-12: 5 – 18 years of age. Immersion, integration model, parallel models, multi-ethnic/multilingual model
4. Adult education programs, upgrading programs, employment preparation, post-secondary preparation programs
5. Post-secondary institutions, college, across university disciplines but largely focussed on education, linguistics, second language acquisition, social programs
6. Community and land-based language learning programs

Issues, Challenges and Possibilities

1. Indigenous peoples in Canada are multicultural and multilingual trying to thrive in a country that is committed to universalism and denial of difference.
2. The Indigenous peoples in Canada are mobile and make their homes in both their homelands and away in diverse communities and urban areas. While many maintain

a connection to their homelands, government policies have forced a division amongst all the Indigenous peoples in Canada and caused displacement and disconnection.

3. People working on Indigenous language revitalization in institutions must weave and negotiate many contexts, such as the traditional world, the contemporary western oriented world, and the decolonization of colonized historical relations.
4. Language programming must take a multi-levelled approach: language learning for every age and every level of language ability.
5. Technology can play an important role in supporting language revitalization. While communities should continue to be encouraged to make use of technological supports for language learning, for true revival of a language in all aspects of family and community life, a multi-faceted approach is needed. Technology is one tool.
6. Develop and implement a plan to counter the negative view of Indigenous languages amongst school communities and Indigenous communities, such as the belief that learning an Indigenous language is primitive, can impede learning English, and is not useful and important to employment or living in our contemporary world.
7. Design and implement Indigenous language programs that are guided by the appropriate policy and policy amendments, that are accredited and recognized in all requisite institutions, particularly post-secondary institutions. This means that attention should be paid specifically to Indigenous languages and their needs.
8. Management, planning and funding are fragmented across ministries in both federal and provincial governments which are not designed to work in a coordinated fashion. Resources need to be coordinated.
9. Dedicated, sustainable and consistent funding for Indigenous language and development programs from development to implementation is required. This should include funds to initiate and develop comprehensive K - 12 Indigenous language curriculums and develop the curriculum for all subjects in the Indigenous languages; community and land-based language learning programs as well as post secondary Indigenous language programs.
10. Funding is necessary to support: (a) resource development, language documentation, archiving, resource collection and coordination. (b) increasing language domains in the community including parent language-learning to support their children, and (c) connecting language learning to the land.
11. Develop a program in post-secondary institutions to increase certified Indigenous language teachers who are fluent, literate, and are knowledgeable in language instruction that is based on an Indigenous worldview and suitable for language recovery and revitalization. Graduates' certifications must be recognized as equal to other teachers in the province.

Culture in Language Learning

- Cultural practices are the most common settings for Indigenous language use in the community where key words, phrases and spoken language are heard.
- The worldview is distorted when confined only to an institutional setting in a curriculum designed for exposure only. Because the curriculum is often based on a second language template for learning English or French, the language is understood

through those other languages and leads to misinterpretations and misuse of concepts in the language.

- When teaching the language, it is important to consider where the language will be used. Where will students hear the language? Do they have opportunities to use the language with their family or in the community? Where would they learn from speakers and Elders in the community? Curriculum needs to be connected to real-life communicative settings.
- Land-based learning benefits all students because their learning is embedded in their language and culture. It provides opportunities to learn through a strong cultural lens.

What Works and Supports Language Education?

- Community programs on language acquisition, using multiple strategies, e.g., parent/infant programs provide motivation and support for parents to learn the language so that infant children hear the Indigenous language first. The participation of parents in a language nest alongside their children and fluent speakers, for example, can be a motivating factor for parents to increase their fluency level.
- Postsecondary opportunities in the community.
- Language, culture and community champion fostering and mentoring and guidance. Working together for a common goal. Developing teams to work together on curriculum with speakers, artists and educators.
- Physical evidence of the presence of the language in the community through signs, media, and public speaking activities helps provide a supportive environment.
- Overarching leadership and administration of language that includes all levels of education in schools and community – partnerships, sharing, long-range planning, language promotion, networking across languages and dialects of a language.
- Listening to what is needed in the communities as articulated by people in the field will result in changing or modifying institutional structures to meet the needs and goals of the communities.

f. Context: Indigenous Languages in Urban Areas

The people who speak Indigenous languages in Canada live both on reserves and in urban and rural communities. People have been displaced due to institutional policies including those of health, justice, education, social services and consequences of status regulations. There are significant challenges when families relocate or reside in communities where the First Nations language is not widely used.

Despite jurisdictional disputes between the federal and provincial government over spending responsibility for First Nations peoples residing off-reserve, there is a continually growing Indigenous service capacity in towns and cities. There are some Indigenous language programs offered in urban contexts designed to create awareness of the language and promote community.

The federal government has made a stated commitment to improve relationships with Indigenous peoples, primarily by implementing the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. This raises several points with respect to Indigenous languages in urban areas, as follows:

- Any law recognizing Indigenous languages and mandating funding to protect and revitalize Indigenous languages should be made applicable on and off-reserve.
- What needs to happen to increase the number of speakers of Indigenous languages among people residing in towns and cities?
- What are the off-reserve dimensions which need to be considered in the implementation of the TRC recommendations?
- What are the types of initiatives which can be implemented in cities and towns to educate the general public about Indigenous languages? Public education is critical for enabling change.

3. Goals and Principles for Action

Goals and principles for action were put forward by the education working group and were revised and agreed upon by all participants in the dialogue session.

a. Goals

Our goal is the recognition, recovery and revitalization of all Indigenous languages in Canada. We aim for Indigenous language medium education for all. We must support each language to create, produce and sustain fluent speakers at all ages, within the necessary legislation, policies, funding and resources.

b. Principles for Action

1. **COLLABORATION.** *All decisions and actions* for Indigenous language development and implementation must be a collaborative process led by Indigenous language experts and Indigenous people of each Indigenous language.
2. **ACCESSIBILITY.** *All Indigenous people must have accessibility and opportunity to learn* their Indigenous homeland language regardless of place of residence, and all who choose for their children (from preschool to Grade 12) to be educated in the medium of their mother-tongue must have that option. To this end, legislation must be enacted immediately according that right to all Indigenous People. The legislation must, thus, include guarantees of adequate funding to prepare curriculum, train fluent speakers to be immersion teachers, train non-fluent teachers to be speakers, and provide for parallel programs (immersion and non-immersion) in communities where not everyone will opt for immersion. Additionally, funding must be made available for immersion proponents to be involved in the development of this legislation.
3. **SUSTAINABILITY.** *Funding must be permanent, sustainable and encompassing* to support Indigenous people in implementing their homeland language goals and objectives. Funding must be based on what is needed to implement initiatives to recover, restore and maintain the vitality of Indigenous languages wherever Indigenous people reside.
4. **BELONGING.** Our teachings are “*we belong to the language*”; the language does not belong to us, but we must ensure that the appropriate principles of ownership, control, access and possession (OCAP) apply to Indigenous languages.

5. **IDENTITY.** Indigenous languages in Canada encompass *a diversity of worldviews, histories, identities, cultures and knowledges* that are vital to the identity of Indigenous peoples, and are intrinsic and inherent in each of these languages.
6. **GUARANTEE.** We envisage legislation that will include *a national Indigenous Language Commission with regional offices* to support each Indigenous homeland language and will provide a statutory guarantee of the funding necessary to support language revitalization initiatives. We need a coordinated and collaborative approach and investment across all ministries, institutions and organizations.

4. Priorities for Investment

Immediate action and investment is needed. Numerous commissions and reports with recommendations for Indigenous languages have been completed. Action on these recommendations must begin at once. The current status of Indigenous languages in Canada demands urgent action. However, in spite of the precarious status of our languages, we have witnessed a number of success stories where things can be turned around in a period of less than ten years. With adequate funding, community, school board and university support, one community has gone from fewer than ten fluent speakers to a community with a preschool to Grade 3 immersion school and a vibrant language environment where families are using the language at home. Much can be accomplished with adequate funding, appropriate methodologies and community engagement.

Here we summarize the key recommendations.

a. Investment: Indigenous Rights, Legislation & Policy in Canada

Recommendations

- Implementation of the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission Call to Action* regarding Indigenous languages, particularly those regarding state recognition such as an Indigenous Languages Act and the Languages Commissioner.
- Examination of Section 23 of Canada's Constitution regarding minority language rights as a model with respect to the recognition, recovery, revitalization, preservation and education of and in Indigenous languages.

b. Investment: Community-Based Indigenous Language Revitalization

Creation of Speakers

- Immediate investment in grants and training for communities for the creation of new fluent speakers using evidence-based immersion methodologies for all age groups (preschool language nests, immersion for children, adult immersion courses, master/mentor-apprentice immersion opportunities, immersion language houses) in addition to programs which heal Silent Speakers so they can begin speaking again.
- Creation of a National Framework Model to guide communities.
- Implementation of rigorous assessment and evaluation of all programs.
- Youth need to be targeted and supported as the next generation of speakers.

Documentation

- Thorough and adequate documentation of each language in Canada.
- Invitation to holders of language data and resources to return them to communities.

Awareness and Attitudes

- Short and long term initiatives to increase status and awareness of Indigenous languages.

Collaboration and Sharing

- Creation of a Language Institute to encompass a variety of functions such as knowledge mobilization and resource sharing; consultation on design of such an institute is required.

c. Investment: Indigenous Language Education

Recommendations

Investment is required to meet the goal of education for all Indigenous people in the medium of their homeland language. This is an exceedingly comprehensive area with interdependent areas requiring investment including:

- Policy and legislation
- Planning
- Documentation, archiving and resources
- Language as a subject programming
- Immersion language programming
- Teacher education, preparation, training and professional development
- Supporting domains of language use
- Awareness and promotion
- Media and communication
- Research

d. Investment: Indigenous Languages in Urban Areas

Recommendations

Access and opportunity for all Indigenous people to learn their homeland language regardless of place of residence. Some key ways in which this can be achieved include:

- Each public school setting in towns and cities could offer Indigenous language immersion.
- Friendship centres or other Indigenous entities could offer adult immersion programs and language nests where appropriate.
- Mentor-apprenticeship programs could be offered widely.
- Language learning and teaching resources could be available to those who need it through regional/language family-based clearinghouses.
- Funding could also be made available on an individual level through bursaries.

Appendix: List of Participants

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