

Aboriginal Languages in Canada

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Introduction

Our languages are sacred to this land. They are gift from the Creator and it is our responsibility to respect and protect that gift.¹

Aboriginal languages are the indigenous languages of Canada and they are important in the context of language heritage. Language and culture help Aboriginal communities maintain a strong identity, and literacy and language help an Aboriginal person have an awareness and sense of self.² “Aboriginal languages are the basic media for the transmission and survival of Aboriginal consciousness, cultures, literatures, histories, religions, political institutions, and values.”³ Canada’s Aboriginal languages are diverse, and they are thousands of years old.⁴ Many of them disappeared, and at least a dozen are facing extinction.⁵ In this paper, Canada’s Aboriginal languages will be examined in terms of historical backgrounds and demographic trends.

Historical Overview of Canadian Aboriginal Languages

The Aboriginal languages of North America do not belong to a single family or conform to a single uniform type. These languages are remarkably diverse and they have rare types of linguistic organization.⁶ In spite of the genetic and typological diversity of Aboriginal languages that have existed since “prehistoric times,” their complicated grammars and rich vocabularies have not been recognized by the general public.⁷ The total number of different languages in North America has been estimated to be “between 200 and 500,” which is about the same as the number of Amerindian tribes or nations.⁸ Although many attempts have been made to reduce this large number by relating certain language families with others, none of these has been widely accepted.⁹ “North America is unquestionably one of

the most complex linguistic regions in the world” and the majority of Aboriginal language families in North America seem to be independent from one another.¹⁰ Goddard states that there were about 209 native North American languages still spoken in 1995, perhaps approximately half the number that existed five hundred years ago. He also notes that this number is misleading because many of these were spoken by a small number of elderly speakers, and that “nearly 80% of the extant native languages of North America were no longer spoken by children.”¹¹ The number of Aboriginal languages has decreased since the first contact with Europeans and many are on the verge of extinction.¹² In Canada, there are 51 or 52 distinct Aboriginal languages and they are grouped into eleven distinct families and isolates. The term isolate is used for a family which consists of only a single language.¹³

Although there is no agreement on the details of genetic classification, Cook and Howe state that Canada’s Aboriginal languages belong to ten language families and isolates, that Inuktitut is a separate language family, and that Michif is a unique mixed language. The following is the genetic classification of Aboriginal language families and isolates of Canada: Algonquian, Inuktitut (of the Eskimo-Aleut family), Athabaskan, Siouan, Salish, Tsimshianic, Iroquoian, Haida isolate, Kutenai isolate, and Tlingit isolate (Beothuk isolate was spoken in Newfoundland until its extinction in 1829). Cree and Ojibwe belong to Algonquian and they are Canada’s most widely spoken Aboriginal languages. “Since contact languages do not descend from a single parent language, they do not belong to genetic classification in terms of language or isolates.” Michif is an example of a contact language exclusively spoken by Métis, who are descendants of French Canadian fur traders and Cree or Ojibwe women. While Michif uses Plains Cree words and grammar for its verbs, and French words and grammar for its nouns, it is not mutually intelligible with either Cree or French.¹⁴

Cook states in “Aboriginal languages: history,” that the hypothesis of the movement of indigenous peoples from northwest to southeast is supported by linguistic evidence. Here he describes eight Aboriginal languages “verging on extinction” and “are probably extinct now”: Abenaki and Delaware of Algonquian, Tagish, Han and Sarcee of Athabaskan, Tuscarora of Iroquoian, Sechelt of Salish, and Southern Tsimshian. With respect to classification of language survival, the number of speakers is used as the most reliable indicator. Concerning data analyses, Cook points out two factors that should be carefully considered in

examining the sources of the estimates. One is that the sources of speaker population estimates have different degrees of reliability and limitations depending on the various ways of data collection. The other is that young people were not eager to be counted in an estimate twenty years ago, for “an aboriginal language was not considered an asset or something to be proud of.” Now the attitudes of young people have changed, and even those whose fluency in Aboriginal language is limited are willing to be counted. While the figures of speaker populations should be taken with care, it is clear that the speakers of Aboriginal languages have significantly reduced over one generation.¹⁵

There are various factors that lead to the decline of languages. In the case of Aboriginal languages, Norris indicates two aspects other than the influence of dominant languages and modernization: “the prohibition of indigenous language use in residential schools” and “the fact that most Aboriginal languages were predominantly oral.”¹⁶ Kirkness wrote in 1980 that “most Indian languages were oral and had no written orthography (alphabet). Several languages have utilized the Cree syllabary designed in 1841 by James Evans, a missionary in Northern Manitoba.”¹⁷ This tradition of oral mode is still valued among Aboriginal peoples today and it is preserved and passed on to young people. Similarly, Leavitt states that “Until very recently, the Native languages developed entirely in the oral mode,” and that the domination of spoken English and English literacy in Native communities threatened Native languages. It is also stated that “In some cases, the intruding language has undermined oral tradition by imposing a new reliance on writing for the authentication of knowledge and ideas.” However, in Native Communities, “the transmission of a distinctive culture still depends upon the maintenance of Native languages in their oral mode.”¹⁸

Residential schools were operated across Canada between 1800 and 1990. They were funded by the federal government and operated by churches (Roman Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, and Presbyterian). Aboriginal children were separated from their families and their communities to attend residential schools.¹⁹ It is stipulated in *Aboriginal Peoples Survey 2001 – Initial findings: Well-being of the non-reserve Aboriginal Population*, that “The system has contributed to a loss of language and culture among Aboriginal people, as a key objective of the residential school system was the assimilation of Aboriginal children.”²⁰ Milloy describes in *A National Crime*, how at residential schools “Principals shouldered

the task not only of language training but also of developing a pedagogy of prevention, rewards or punishment to make English or French 'in and about all schools as far as possible the only allowed means of communication.'²¹ Linda Jane writes in a preface of *Residential Schools: The Stolen Years*, that "the last one hundred years of our history is full of black holes made by the theft of our language, our religious practices and traditions."²² Kirkness states that "Permanent mental and even physical scars were left on parents and grandparents in Canada, particularly in those who attended residential schools . . . Years of being denied the use of their own language in such institutions, and by being punished when the language was spoken, definitely had a lasting effect." Therefore, there were many Aboriginal parents who would not teach their children their own language for many years. Instead, parents taught children only English, so that their children would not have to go through the experiences they had endured.²³ While positive self-image is regarded as a very important factor for acquiring literacy skills in any language, it is considered that "aboriginal students often fail to thrive in the public education system" as a result of many negative effects on their self-esteem, including failure to use the mother tongue as a language of instruction.²⁴ In "*You Took My Talk*": *Aboriginal Literacy and Empowerment*, it is again pointed out that "the philosophy of the old residential school system purposely excluded aboriginal families from the educational process." Therefore, the system "engendered" the negative attitude to formal education in generations of Aboriginal people.²⁵ "Confusion and uncertainty about the retention and use of our Aboriginal languages has been a phenomenon since the arrival of Europeans to this land"²⁶ However, there are some changes. Owing to government policies to promote multiculturalism and Aboriginal peoples' hope to maintain their own language and culture, Aboriginal peoples' attitudes have changed.²⁷

In 1984, the Northwest Territories Legislative Assembly passed its first Official Languages Act and declared seven Aboriginal languages as official Aboriginal languages. In 1990, by the amendment of the Act, English, French, Cree, Chipewyan, Inuktitut, Dogrib, Gwich'in and Slavey were given equal official status. Owing to legislative changes and funding by the federal government, the Territorial government has promoted various programs. Educational and research programs on Aboriginal languages have started throughout Canada at colleges and universities.²⁸

The Royal Commission on the Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) issued its final report in November 1996, including the studies of Aboriginal language use and retention. In the Report, RCAP clearly describes the reason for decline of the Aboriginal language: “the rupture in language transmission from older to younger generations and the low regard many Aboriginal people have had for traditional language proficiency as a result of policies devised by government and enforced by churches and the educational system.”²⁹ Kirkness offers her comments to the Report: “I take exception both to the scant treatment of Aboriginal languages in RCAP and its failure to make Aboriginal languages the central focus on which to build all other factors that affect our lives.”³⁰ In January 1998, the government responded to the RCAP report, setting out a policy framework for future government action based on four objectives. One of them states that “Renewing the Partnership: this commitment included an initial Statement of Reconciliation acknowledging historic injustices to Aboriginal peoples and establishment of a \$350-million ‘healing fund’ to address the legacy of abuse in the residential school system” and it also included other elements related to “the preservation and promotion of Aboriginal languages.”³¹ Although the government policy framework was viewed optimistically by some Aboriginal people, “The government’s general approach to the RCAP report has been the subject of critical observations by national and international human rights bodies.”³²

The State of Aboriginal Languages

According to the 1996 Census, among eleven Aboriginal language families (ten First Nations and Inuktitut), the three largest families – Algonquian (147,000), Inuktitut (28,000), and Athapaskan (20,000) – accounted for 93% of people with an Aboriginal mother tongue. The other eight language families and isolates represent the remaining seven percent.³³ Cree, Ojibway and Inuktitut have large population bases for long-term language survival and these are likely to be passed on to the next generation.³⁴ The Census data show that in 1996 about 800,000 people reported an Aboriginal identity and that only 207,000 (26%) reported an Aboriginal language was their mother tongue. There were 145,000 people (18%) who spoke Aboriginal language most often in the home. Some 233,000 Aboriginal respondents (30%) reported that they were able to speak and understand an Aboriginal language well enough to converse.³⁵

In analyzing Aboriginal languages in Canada's urban areas in 1996, Norris and Jantzen state that only 9% of Aboriginal people in census metropolitan areas/census agglomerations, excluding reserves, reported an Aboriginal mother tongue, compared to 26% of the total Aboriginal population, and 40% of the Aboriginal population residing outside cities. The greatest difference between Aboriginal populations within and outside cities is concerning language use in the home. Only 3% of Aboriginal people residing in cities reported that they used an Aboriginal language in the home, compared to 31% of the population outside of cities and 18% overall. City residents reporting knowledge of an Aboriginal language are likely to learn it as a second language rather than as a mother tongue.³⁶ The data also show that Aboriginal languages are spoken particularly little in the home among urban Aboriginal women in the childbearing ages. This implies a serious state for the intergenerational transmission of Aboriginal languages, and a tendency for young Aboriginal people in cities learning an Aboriginal language as a second language, rather than as a mother tongue. The less an Aboriginal language is spoken at home, the less it is passed on as a mother tongue to the younger generation.³⁷ Parenting practices and the use of language in the home are influential not only in the development of the worldview and socialization of children, but also in their adaptation to the learning processes of reading and writing.³⁸ The rate of Aboriginal children in Canada that had an Aboriginal language as a mother tongue was 20%, and it was much lower in cities at only 5%. Considering "UNESCO's caution that a language is endangered if it is not learned by at least 30% of the children in the community," it seems apparent that increased urbanization of Aboriginal people can contribute to the process of further language erosion. Norris and Jantzen conclude that although "Aboriginal languages are very much present in their distribution and diversity in urban areas throughout Canada," Aboriginal people are faced with difficulties in maintaining that presence.³⁹

Aboriginal Peoples Survey 2001 – Initial Findings: Well-being of the non-reserve Aboriginal Population analyzes, in "Aboriginal Languages," the strength of Aboriginal languages among North American Indian people, Inuit in non-reserve areas, and the Métis, and also examines factors concerning maintenance and revival of these languages. Overall, many of the Aboriginal languages spoken by North American Indian and Métis people in non-reserve areas

are on the decline. Retention and transmission of Aboriginal languages is not easy because of few opportunities to practice and fewer opportunities to learn an Aboriginal language. The 2001 Census revealed that key indicators of Aboriginal language strength declined for North American Indian and Métis people from 1996 to 2001. The percentage of non-reserve North American Indian people with an Aboriginal mother tongue decreased from 16% to 13% and their use of an Aboriginal language in the home declined from 8% to 6%.⁴⁰ Similarly, the use of Aboriginal language by the Métis declined from 8% in 1996 to 5% in 2001. At the same time, the use of an Aboriginal language at home declined from 3% to 2% in five years, and for mother tongue with a decline from 6% to 4%.⁴¹ Census data showed that between 1996 and 2001, the percentage of North American Indian children aged 14 and under who were able to carry out a conversation in Aboriginal language declined from 12% to 9%. Similarly, Aboriginal languages use at home, fell from 6% to 5%. The strength of Aboriginal languages among Métis children declined between 1996 and 2001. Only 1% of Métis children in 2001 spoke an Aboriginal language at home compared to 3% in 1996. The percentage of Métis children with an Aboriginal language as their mother tongue decreased from 3% to 2%.⁴²

In the Canadian Arctic 82% of Inuit of all ages could carry on a conversation in Inuktitut in 1996, and the percentage remained unchanged in 2001. Inuktitut was the language used most often at home by 68% of Inuit, and this decreased to 64% in 2001. The proportion of Inuit who reported Inuktitut as mother tongue was 77% in 2001, slightly down from 78% in 1996. In 2001, 64% of Inuit children used Inuktitut most often at home, down from 68% in 1996. In urban and rural areas and in the Far North, parents were cited as the people most likely to help young people learn the Aboriginal language, followed by grandparents. Both parents and schools contribute to teaching children an Aboriginal language. "Aboriginal Headstart," a pre-school program designed for Aboriginal children, introduces children to the basics of many Aboriginal languages. The majority of Aboriginal adults, approximately 60%, felt that keeping, learning or relearning their Aboriginal language was very or somewhat important. The support for Aboriginal languages is the strongest among Inuit as nearly nine in ten Inuit adults stated that their language was very or somewhat important.⁴³

Census data suggests a continued decline of Aboriginal languages although Aboriginal fertility is relatively high. It also reveals that a decline in the

intergenerational transmission of Aboriginal languages as a mother tongue has continued and that a tendency of learning Aboriginal languages as a second language has become notable.⁴⁴

Conclusion

Minority languages in the world are at risk and Canada's Aboriginal languages are especially endangered.⁴⁵ Various studies show that Aboriginal languages are in danger of extinction if the current trend continues. Aboriginal languages have declined due to modernization, the influence of dominant languages, the residential school system, and the tradition of oral mode of Aboriginal languages.⁴⁶ Although past experiences have affected Aboriginal people negatively in many ways, it is clear that the majority of them think the maintenance as well as the revival of languages is greatly significant for them. Language is influential in developing a cultural identity. Aboriginal people consider their languages are the essence of who they are as Aboriginal people.⁴⁷ In conclusion, I would like to quote a passage from the book written by Verna Kirkness, an educator of Cree heritage:

I believe we cannot compromise our Aboriginal languages.
We have no choice but to ensure their survival as a means of
communication and of who we are.⁴⁸

Notes

¹ Verna J. Kirkness, *Aboriginal Languages: A Collection of Talks and Papers*, (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1998) 8. Verna J. Kirkness is "Professor Emerita of the University of British Columbia's Faculty of Education, has worked in the field of Aboriginal education for over four decades." With this author's respects, the passages from *Aboriginal Languages: A Collection of Talks and Papers* are quoted both in introduction and conclusion.

² The Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs, "*You Took My Talk*": *Aboriginal Literacy and Empowerment*, Minutes of Proceedings and Evidence of the Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs, Second Session of the Thirty-fourth Parliament, 1989-90, House of Commons, Issue No. 43, December 1990, 71.

³ Marie Battiste, "Maintaining Aboriginal Identity, Language and Culture in Modern Society," *Reclaiming Indigenous Voice and Vision*, ed., Marie Battiste (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2000) 199.

⁴ "*You Took My Talk*": *Aboriginal Literacy and Empowerment*, 73.

⁵ Mary Jane Norris, Canada's Aboriginal Languages," *Canadian Social Trends* Winter 1998, Statistics Canada-Catalogue No. 11-008, 8.

⁶ Ives Goddard, introduction, *Handbook of North American Indians, Languages*, ed. Ives Goddard, vol. 17 (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1996) 1.

⁷ Eung-Do Cook, "Aboriginal Languages: History," *Language in Canada*, ed., John Edwards, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 125.

⁸ Peter Bakker, *A Language of Our Own: The Genesis of Michif, the Mixed Cree-French Language of the Canadian Métis*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) 29.

⁹ Bakker 29.

¹⁰ Michael K. Foster, *The Canadian Encyclopedia (CE): year 2000 edition*, (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc. 1999) 1585.

¹¹ Goddard 3.

¹² Cook 125.

¹³ Foster 1585.

¹⁴ Data in this paragraph is based on Cook and Howe. Eung-Do Cook and Darin Howe, "Aboriginal Languages of Canada," *Contemporary Linguistic Analysis*, 5th edition, eds., W. O'Grady and J. Archibald, (Toronto: Addison Wesley Longman) 249-309. "Aboriginal languages," University of Calgary, Aug. 20, 2005 <http://www.fp.ucalgary.ca/howed/abor_lang.htm> Kirkness wrote in *Aboriginal Languages: A Collection of Talks and Papers* in February, 1997 that "Michif, the language of the Metis Nation, does not always appear in the lists of Aboriginal languages. The Metis are actively promoting its inclusion (p.17)."

¹⁵ Cook 129-139.

¹⁶ Norris 8.

¹⁷ Kirkness 48.

¹⁸ Robert Leavitt, "Language and Cultural Content in Native Education," *First Nations Education in Canada: The Circle Unfolds*, eds., Marie Battiste and Jean Barman, (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1995) 127-128.

¹⁹ Statistics Canada, Housing, Family, and Social Statistics Division, *Aboriginal Peoples Survey 2001 – Initial findings: Well-being of the non-reserve Aboriginal Population*, Cat. No.: 89-589-XIE, Minister of Industry 2003, 22.

²⁰ Statistics Canada, *Aboriginal People's Survey 2001*, 22.

²¹ John S. Milloy, *A National Crime: The Canadian Government and the Residential School System, 1879 to 1986*, (Winnipeg: The University of Manitoba Press, 1999) 39.

²² Linda Jane, *Residential School: The Stolen Years*, 2nd edition (Saskatchewan: University Extension Press, 1995) preface viii.

²³ Kirkness 63. In "Information Package," by Indian Residential School Survivors Society, it is stated that "attendance at residential schools has meant failed relationships, broken homes, inability to keep a job, drug and alcohol abuse, suicidal feelings, loss of culture, loss of family history, loss of language and so much more (p. 10)." This "Information Package," updated 14 May 2003, was available at XWI7XWA Library on UBC campus on August 16, 2005.

²⁴ The Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs, *"You Took My Talk": Aboriginal Literacy And Empowerment*, 29.

²⁵ The Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs, *"You Took My Talk": Aboriginal Literacy And Empowerment*, 35.

²⁶ Kirkness 3.

²⁷ Cook 137.

²⁸ Cook 138.

²⁹ Kirkness 17.

³⁰ Kirkness 24.

³¹ Mary C. Hurley, Law and Government Division & Jill Wherrett, Political and Social

Affairs Division, *The Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*, PRB 99-24E, 4 October 1999, Revised 2 August 2000, Sept. 23, 2005.

<<http://www.parl.gc.ca/information/library/PRBpubs/prb9924-e.htm>>

³² Hurley and Wherrett, *The Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*.

³³ Mary J. Norris and Lorna Jantzen, "Aboriginal Languages in Canada's Urban Areas: Characteristics, Considerations and Implications," *Not Strangers in These Parts: Urban Aboriginal Peoples*, eds., David Newhouse and Evelyn Peters, Policy Research Initiative, CP22-71/2003, 94. Mother tongue is defined as the first language at home in childhood and still understood by the individual at the time of the census. Home language is defined as the language spoken most often at home by the individual at the time of the census. *The Daily*, Tuesday December 2, 1997 "1996 Census: Mother tongue, home language and knowledge of languages."

³⁴ Norris and Jantzen 95.

³⁵ Norris and Jantzen 94.

³⁶ Norris and Jantzen 100. The terms are explained in the Notes: "The term 'cities' is used interchangeably with census metropolitan area (CMA) and census agglomeration (CA). A CMA is a very large urban area, including urban and rural fringes and reserves, with an urban core population of at least 100,000. A CA is a large urban area, including urban and rural fringes and reserves, with an urban population of at least 10,000 (p.117)."

³⁷ Norris and Jantzen 102.

³⁸ *"You Took My Talk": Aboriginal Literacy And Empowerment*, 37.

³⁹ Norris and Jantzen 114.

⁴⁰ Statistics Canada, *Aboriginal Peoples Survey 2001 – Initial findings: Well-being of the non-reserve Aboriginal Population*, 28. It should be noted that this data is for North American Indians living in non-reserve areas and are not representative of the total Aboriginal population. Aboriginal languages are spoken and understood more widely in First Nations communities (28).

⁴¹ Statistics Canada, *Aboriginal Peoples Survey 2001 – Initial findings: Well-Being of the non-reserve Aboriginal Population*, 28-29.

⁴² Statistics Canada, *Aboriginal Peoples survey 2001 – Initial Findings: Well-being of the non-reserve Aboriginal Population*, 29.

⁴³ Statistics Canada, *Aboriginal Peoples Survey 2001 – Initial Findings: Well-being of the non-reserve Aboriginal Population*, 29-32.

⁴⁴ Norris and Jantzen 115-116.

⁴⁵ Lynn Drapeau, "Aboriginal Languages: Current Status," *Language in Canada, ed., John Edwards*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 156.

⁴⁶ Norris and Jantzen 94.

⁴⁷ Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, *Aboriginal Women: A Profile from the 1996 Census*, Second Edition, Cat. Number: R2-162/1996, (Minister of Public Works and Government Services Canada, 2001) 2-1.

⁴⁸ Kirkness 26.