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## 5. Keeping our languages alive: strategies for Indigenous language revitalization and maintenance

*Onowa McIvor and Adar Anisman*

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### INTRODUCTION

Since time immemorial, Indigenous languages have thrived in their homelands. In the land now called Canada, more than 500 years ago foreigners arrived from lands afar and brought with them their languages. Through many devastating events such as genocide, colonialism, linguistic imperialism, new disease, forced relocation, the upset of Indigenous economic, social and political systems as well as the most likely influential factor – the enforcement of English (and French)-only residential schools for most Indigenous children – First Nations languages have declined in use and some have become dormant (Galley 2009; McCarty 2003). It is estimated that at the time of contact there were 450 Aboriginal languages and dialects in Canada belonging to 12 language families, but in the last 100 years alone, at least ten of Canada’s Aboriginal languages have become extinct (Norris 1998). Today, almost 70 Indigenous languages are still spoken in Canada, belonging to 12 different language families (Statistics Canada 2017). Only three of these 70 languages (Cree, Inuktitut and Anishnaabe) are expected to persist and flourish in Indigenous communities. However, Dr Lorna Wanosts’a7 Williams reminds us, “All of them are endangered. There are no exceptions” (Cardwell 2010). In addition, research reveals that the number of speakers alone is a poor measurement of the health of a language; rather, what is most important is intergenerational transmission, especially how many children are learning the language (Barrena et al. 2007; Norris 2004).

Over the past 50-plus years, Indigenous people have begun a process of reclaiming their languages and working towards their revival and use in communities, and are becoming increasingly sophisticated in their methods of revival. The purpose of this chapter is to summarize the literature to date on Indigenous language revitalization strategies and to provide discussion questions and future directions for the continuation of Indigenous languages.

## DISCUSSION

### **Why is it Important to Ensure the Survival of Indigenous Languages?**

Of the approximately 6000 languages presently spoken in the world, up to 90 percent have been predicted to disappear within the next 100 years (Crystal 2000). Recent estimates suggest that 46 percent of the world's languages may no longer be transmitted by the end of the twenty-first century (Child Language Research and Revitalization Working Group 2017). Further, it is estimated that 96 percent of the world's languages are spoken by only 4 percent of its people (Bernard 1996). Every time a language dies, so does an expression of human experience like no other (UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages 2003), as well as unique and irrecoverable knowledge in science, linguistics, anthropology, prehistory, psychology, sociology, history, cosmology, ecology, spirituality, and religious studies. Newer research suggests also that maintaining heritage languages and cultures is correlated with the welfare of the speaker community. Researchers have reported lower suicide rates (Hallett et al. 2007) and lower rates of diabetes (Oster et al. 2014) in speaker communities and individuals who have maintained their ancestral language. Additionally, Jenni et al. (2017) reported a range of positive effects on the well-being of adult language learners, such as cultural and spiritual healing, gaining positions of leadership in their community, and using the language as a coping mechanism.

### **What are Indigenous Communities Doing to Revive and Continue their Languages?**

Communities in Canada and abroad are employing creativity, ingenuity, innovation, and fierce determination to maintain and revive Indigenous languages. The following is a summary of current strategies being employed and research done in Indigenous communities, mainly in North America but with some exemplar models from further afield as well.

#### **Documentation and preservation**

Although documentation of a language is sometimes seen as a passive exercise that does not actively create new speakers, some Indigenous groups advocate for preservation activities (Blair et al. 2002), including creating dictionaries, recording elders speaking the language, and the creation of interactive recordings. Documentation exercises can provide resources for teachers and learners in the act of recovering or continuing a language (for example, the Squamish Dictionary Project (2011), the *Alberta Elders'*

*Cree Dictionary* (LeClaire and Cardinal 2002), and the Tł̨ch̨ print and online dictionary (Dogrib Divisional Board of Education 1996)). In recent years, language documentation has become more collaborative, with a larger focus on community control over the documentation process, and end-products that can benefit the community (Hermes 2012). Advances in technology make documentation materials available to groups of learners who are spread over large geographical distances (Siekman and Sikorski 2013). Web-based technologies such as websites and applications (commonly referred to as “apps”) are increasingly employed. FirstVoices™ (First Peoples’ Cultural Foundation 2017) and the Northwest Territories government’s Dene languages apps (Government of the Northwest Territories 2012) are prominent examples of multimedia technology, documenting, and archiving Indigenous languages using text, sound, and video clips. Other apps such as Aikuma (Bird et al. 2014) allow speakers to document their language themselves. The Algonquian Linguistics Atlas makes documented materials available to speakers and learners in a culturally appropriate way (Junker and Stewart 2011). The website includes an interactive user interface, online dictionaries, verb paradigms, conversation apps, and classroom activities. Fitzgerald (2017) affirms the preservation of knowledge that language documentation affords by way of verbal arts such as poetry and song. Increasingly, initiatives such as the Breath of Life Institution train community members to use archival documentation materials in language revitalization (Fitzgerald and Linn 2013). Lastly, the creation and work on orthography also overlaps with documentation and resource creation. Many Indigenous language groups have developed their own writing systems or continue to refine the one they have (Hinton 2001b; Seifart 2006).

### **Curriculum and resource development**

First Nations scholars insist that curriculum development is necessary to successfully create a language transmission process (Kirkness 2002). Dr Marianne Ignace, a community-engaged linguist, authored a guide for developing First Nations language curriculum to assist community members in the process (Ignace 2016). Researchers also focus on creating culturally appropriate, land-based curricula (Jansen et al. 2013). Most often, communities create print resources (Wilson and Kamana 2001); however with the advance of technology, more communities are able to develop and produce culturally relevant curricula (Galla 2016). Some multimedia examples include the award-winning *Wapos Bay* animated TV show (Jackson et al. 2005), the multimedia dictionary created by De Korne and the Burt Lake Band of Ottawa and Chipewa Indians (2009), the Arapaho version of the Disney movie *Bambi* created by Stephen Greymorning



the program's success," when describing the certificate, bachelor's, and master's degrees in Indigenous Language Revitalization at the University of Victoria. Other teacher training programs and graduate and postgraduate degrees for Indigenous language teachers are offered in Hawai'i, New Zealand, and Australia (Whitinui et al. 2018); Arizona (Lockard and Hale 2013); Saskatchewan (Sterzuk and Fayant 2016); and Alaska (Marlow and Siekmann 2013). The University of Alberta also runs a summer institute each year called the Canadian Indigenous Languages and Literacy Development Institute (CILLDI), based on a similar program run at the University of Arizona called the American Indian Languages Development Institute (AILDI), both of which focus on teaching Indigenous languages and training language teachers. In some communities, trained teachers are learning the language to become language teachers (Hinton 2011; Jim 2016).

### **Policy development and political advocacy**

Another focus of Indigenous language revitalization work is on policy change and strategic planning, organizing, and fundraising at federal or provincial levels (First Peoples' Cultural Council, FPCC, 2013; Morcom 2017). Galley (2009) discusses the deep connection between reconciliation<sup>1</sup> and language revitalization, and stresses the importance of legislative and budgetary justice to the process. De Korne (2010) notes improvement in Indigenous language education policies in the United States (US) and Canada, especially in community-controlled schools; while Ball and McIvor (2013) report on studies on community-controlled schools that showed that the children increase their language use and have higher self-esteem. One such success is the creation of the federal Aboriginal Languages Initiative (ALI) in 1998, which disburses nationwide funding for community-based language projects (Norris 2004). The Assembly of First Nations operates the NIB Trust Fund, which distributes funding for community language, culture, and education projects by residential school survivors and groups (NIB Trust Fund n.d.). Some private sector funders which focus on reconciliation through culture and language revitalization also exist. In 2015, the main funder in Canada of research in the humanities, the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), released new recommendations for forming partnerships with Aboriginal communities, supporting research on Aboriginal knowledge, and increased support in training of Aboriginal researchers (McNaughton and Rock 2015).

Kirkness (2002) stresses pushing for legislation to protect Aboriginal languages and the right to use them. In June 2005, the Task Force on Aboriginal Languages and Cultures (2005) produced a report with a

proposed strategy to preserve, revitalize, and promote the Indigenous languages of Canada. A decade later, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) released its report with 94 Calls to Action (TRC 2015). Calls to Action 10 and 14 specifically focus on language maintenance and revitalization, calling to create an Aboriginal Language Act to protect Canada's Aboriginal languages and to ensure the rights of their speakers. In December 2016, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced plans to legislate an Indigenous Languages Act in an address before the Assembly of First Nations (Office of the Prime Minister 2016). The announcement included assurances that the Act will be co-created alongside the three recognized Indigenous groups in Canada (First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples). These efforts are now under way, moving across Canada from west to east, and ending in Ottawa where the drafting of the Act will commence by early 2018 (Bellegarde 2017).

### **Language planning**

Increasingly communities are recognizing that long-term planning is a crucial first step towards long-term continuation or revival of their language. There are a number of resources now available to assist communities in this undertaking (see FPCC 2013; McIvor 2015b).

### **Research**

Kirkness (2002) states that seeking answers to important questions through research is critical to addressing issues of recovering and maintaining Indigenous languages. Some Indigenous communities and organizations are choosing research partnerships to further the multifaceted language revitalization efforts in their communities (Blair et al. 2002; Czaykowska-Higgins et al. 2017; Kelly 2015; Little et al. 2015). Other groups of researchers are choosing to focus their research on aspects of language revitalization such as the attitudes of young people towards language loss and learning (see McCarty et al. 2006; Bradley 2013). There is also a growing cadre of Indigenous researchers focusing on language research in their own communities and language groups, driven by Indigenous methodologies (Billy 2009; Johnson 2013; McIvor 2012; Pitiwanakwat 2009; Rosborough 2012; Rosborough and Rorick 2017; Thompson 2012).

### **Language classes**

Language classes are probably the most common form of language teaching; however, it is not a method that generally creates new speakers (Bear Nicholas 2009; Blair et al. 2002). These initiatives involve teaching the language as a subject in school for children, or in evening classes

for adults (Grenoble and Whaley 2006; Hornberger 2008). Stephen Greymorning (2000) shares the Arapaho people's experience of fully implementing language teaching as a subject in the K-12 school system and later realizing that it was not creating new speakers. Problems with this approach include low instruction hours, and teaching via translations rather than in the target language (FPCC 2014a). However, language classes have been shown to create interest in the language for learners and can lead to longer-term investment in the creation of new speakers through other methods.

### **Bilingual schooling**

Several examples of bilingual, community-controlled schools exist, such as the well-known Rock Point Community School of the Navajo Nation in Northeast Arizona (Boseker 2000) and the first bilingual Cree-English school which opened in Thompson, Manitoba in 2001 (Fulford 2007). By the early 2000s Nunavik reported having 14 K-3 bilingual Inuttitut-English schools (Louis and Taylor 2001). Bilingual schools are an important contribution to language revitalization strategies in First Nations communities (McIvor and McCarty 2016). However, due to the dominance of English, they tend to have varying degrees of success in reviving languages (May 2008). McCarty (2003) believes that well-implemented bilingual schooling programs have positive effects; while Blackfeet activist Darrel Kipp (2000) warns against bilingual schooling strategies, as they are based on transitioning to full-English language development.

### **Immersion practices**

*Cross-generational/community-based* Many communities engage in summer immersion-style programs (Alexie et al. 2009; Daniels-Fiss 2005; Jacobs 1998; Lee 2016), which are usually intensive, one- or two-week sessions that often have the advantage of learning outside the classroom for a daily-life experience of the language.

*Early childhood focused* Te Kōhanga Reo or “language nests” programs, which began in the early 1980s, are an early childhood immersion program exclusively using the traditional language as the vehicle for interaction and instruction (King 2001; Te Kōhanga Reo 2017). Te Kōhanga Reo is considered one of the most successful language revitalization models in the world (McClutchie Mita 2007) and has been an inspiration to efforts both within Aotearoa (New Zealand) and internationally (King 2001). Now, in both Aotearoa and Hawaii, entire generations of speakers have emerged through immersion programming (Warner 2001; Wilson and Kamana 2001).

Due mainly to the success of ‘Aha Pūnana Leo (Hawaiian language nests), Hawaii is seen as a leader in the US and abroad: as a model and a symbol of hope to other endangered language groups (‘Aha Pūnana Leo 2017; Wilson and Kamana 2001). Although the Hawaiian people now have K-12 immersion schools and university-level programs in their language, ‘Aha Pūnana Leo preschools continue to be the foundation of Hawaiian language revitalization (‘Aha Pūnana Leo 2017).

Immersion programs are being created at the preschool and elementary levels in select places across Canada. For example, a language nest exists at the Okanagan Indian Band (Chambers 2014, 2015), Adam’s Lake First Nation (McIvor and Parker 2016; Michel 2012) and in the communities of Onion Lake and Kahnawà:ke (Jacobs 1998; McKinley 2003), with an increasing number of language nests being supported in British Columbia (BC) (FPCC 2014b).

*K-12 immersion* The achievement of immersion schools from kindergarten through to high-school graduation is no small feat. The Maoris and then the Hawaiians were the first Indigenous groups to accomplish this goal, and where oral proficiency has been shown to be strong (Wilson and Kamana 2011). Since 1997, the Maori have offered primary and secondary instruction exclusively in Maori for ages 5–18 (Harrison and Papa 2005). Since 2001, the Cherokee immersion school in Oklahoma has opened, and since 2014 it has offered K-6 complete immersion (Peter et al. 2011).

In BC, there are currently four schools which offer substantial immersion (FPCC 2014a): the SENĆOŦEN language nest and K-4 immersion program; the Xit’olacw school, which offers K-2 immersion; the Okanagan Indian Indian Band school, which offers four hours of immersion a day, grades 1–7; and the Chief Atahm school, which offers a language nest, K-3 immersion, and grades 4–7 bilingual education (Billy 2009; McIvor and Parker 2016; Michel 2012). Elsewhere in Canada, successful immersion schools that have been documented include the Mi’kmaq Eskasoni school, which offers K-2 immersion; the Waskaganish immersion school (Ball and McIvor 2013; Osborne et al. 2009), and the Kiiizhik Gakendaasowin Anishinaabe K-2 immersion program (CBC News 2015). The oldest immersion school in Canada is the Mohawk Kahnawà:ke school, which has been operating since the 1970s, and today offers K-6 immersion, in addition to a language survival school for grades 7–11 (Maracle et al. 2011).

*Adult-focused immersion* Several adult-specific immersion methods exist. The Master–Apprentice language learning program (Hinton 2001a; Hinton et al. 2002) was successfully implemented in California, as a

one-on-one immersion program pairing young people with proficient speakers to spend time together exclusively in the language. In BC, this program is referred to as Mentor–Apprentice (at the preference of the speakers) and has been successfully implemented by the First Peoples’ Cultural Council since 2008 (FPCC 2012).

Language houses are another adult immersion method, in which a small group of learners meet or live in a house for three to six months (Johnson 2014). In addition, one community has an adult immersion program that meets five days a week from September to June, sharing meals and conversing with elders and other community resource people (Maracle and Richards 2002). S. Neyooxet Greymorning has also reported a highly successful immersion modal called Accelerated Second Language Acquisition,<sup>TM</sup> which he has been using with children and adults in Arapaho territory (Greymorning 2005). Adult immersion, in addition to producing speakers, often also produces language resources for other learners (Hermes et al. 2012). According to McIvor (2015a), the main benefit of adult group immersion programs is the higher amount of language input and exposure hours, as well as the immersion method.

### **Home-based learning**

New directions in language revitalization efforts are increasingly converging on the home. School-based language provides a good “safety-net” but cannot replace the home as a center for language and cultural transmission (Qanatsiaq Anooe et al. 2017; Walsh 2010). Parents who are speakers or active learners can and should use their language skills with their children and family (Hinton 2013). Hinton (2013) emphasized the importance of language planning in the home, and choosing between full immersion, one-parent-one-language (OPOL), or for current learners, teaching the children at the same time as they learn themselves. Other language revitalization strategies, such as bilingual and immersion schools, archival documentation materials of language and culture, dictionaries, and collaborative culture projects, all support the revitalization of the language in the home (Dixon and Deak 2010; Hinton 2013). Hinton (2013) highlights some of the challenges of bringing the language home, such as the lack of speakers to talk to, the presence of the majority language in everyday life, and children who are not always willing to learn the language. While these challenges are often reported, language speakers and learners are more and more sharing stories of success (Hinton 2013).

### **What Methods are Working Well?**

Hermes (2007) draws upon the work of Aguilera and LeCompte (2007), Kipp (2000), McCarty (2002), and Wilson and Kawai'ae'a (2007) to assert that: "the Indigenous-immersion method is quickly being recognized as one of the most effective tools for restoring Indigenous language" (Hermes 2007, p. 58). Long-time Indigenous language revitalization advocates Grenoble and Whaley (2006, p. 51) state that: "total-immersion programs are the best option for revitalizing a language." Leanne Hinton, co-creator of the Master–Apprentice program, states that: "[i]mmersion schools . . . have had by far the best results in developing oral fluency among the children" (Hinton 2010, p. 39). Additionally, other learner success stories are emerging, such as the Anishinaabemowin kindergarten (Morcom and Roy 2017), the adult-focused Okanagan language house (Johnson 2014), and the SENĆOTEN Mentor–Apprentice program (Jim 2016), as well as stories from Mentor–Apprentice participants in BC (Jenni et al. 2017). However, it is reflected in the literature that total immersion is not always possible (at least initially) and that communities may need a graduated or partial-immersion approach (Aguilera and LeCompte 2007).

Aguilera and LeCompte (2007) studied three Indigenous communities' experiences with language immersion and emphasize that immersion language learning can be done successfully without affecting the performance of students in English. They advocate for the well-educated, bilingual, bi-cultural adults who will no doubt contribute in important ways to their nations and society as a whole. Peter et al. (2003) describe a "Culturally Responsive Evaluation" model which was created by an "Immersion Team" with the Cherokee Nation in Oklahoma. It is a tool they continue to refine, and describe as an open-ended and culturally responsive tool which effectively identifies the strengths and weaknesses of their program, and facilitates improvement. In 2016, a research collaboration between the University of Victoria and community partners produced an Indigenous language learner's self-assessment tool, which is designed to be culturally appropriate and relevant to Indigenous adult language learners (McIvor and Jacobs 2016).

Norris (2004) explains Canada is one of the only nations to collect data on language use and ability. Wetzel (2006) emphasizes that many studies are done on the status of Indigenous languages, but little is done to capture the revitalization work being done, and particularly the outcomes of such efforts. One nationwide study has emerged in Canada involving nine partners and three universities ([www.netolnew.ca](http://www.netolnew.ca)), which holds much promise for the future of collaborative and far-reaching language revitalization research. Ball (2009) states that there has been no research done on Indigenous children's language learning needs. Clearly, much more

research is needed into the efficacy of Indigenous language revitalization strategies.

### **What Stands in the Way of Indigenous People being Successful in Reviving and Continuing their Languages?**

Barrena et al. (2007) and McIvor (2015a) detail several reasons why communities struggle to revive their languages, including low number of speakers; lack of status for the language or official support; and external social, economic, and political pressures to give up the language. Delaine (2010) additionally highlights the lack of support for Indigenous language learning in public schools in Canada. Although in some ways a victory, the Aboriginal Language Initiative (ALI), which started by providing \$5 million a year to be divided equally amongst provinces and territories (Andrews Miller 2008) and has grown since to \$8 million a year, is still less than adequate (Chambers 2014). Given the most recent census population statistics of Aboriginal people totalling 1 400 685 (Statistics Canada 2011), the ALI funding adds up to about \$3.50 per person per year for Indigenous language revitalization. Additionally, reports suggest that not all funding is spent annually (Everett-Green 2016), and even with additional funding the final sums are much lower than what is required to properly support Indigenous languages. However, some provinces and territories supplement this federal funding to make language revitalization more possible for Indigenous people. The TRC has called for more language funding and for the creation of an Aboriginal Languages Act (TRC 2015). Language revitalization efforts can also be hindered by a lack of interest from young people, and multi-generational shame that remains for many Indigenous nations (Jenni et al. 2017; McCarty et al. 2006). Jenni et al. (2017) discuss the lasting effects of the trauma of residential schools on the ability of speakers to share their language with their family and friends, and the psychological barriers to teaching the language to others.

### **FUTURE DIRECTIONS: WHAT MUST BE DONE IN ORDER FOR INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES TO SUCCESSFULLY REVIVE AND CONTINUE THEIR LANGUAGES?**

The Government of Canada must take action beyond the acknowledgment of and apology for the residential school experiences suffered by Indigenous people (Galley 2009). While individual payments to victims of residential schools are an important gesture, they will never bring back

the languages. The most meaningful impact the government could make is ensuring Indigenous languages thrive once again through substantial, stable, long-term investment. Since the Government of Canada's 2009 apology, the TRC's Calls for Action have been published (TRC 2015). In 2016, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced that the Government of Canada will introduce an Indigenous Languages Act in accordance with the TRC (Office of the Prime Minister 2016).

### **Indigenous Languages must be Given Official Status by being Declared the Founding Languages of this Land**

To draw attention to important work that has already been done: the *Towards a New Beginning* report completed by the Task Force on Aboriginal Languages and Cultures in 2005, and the TRC in 2015, outline many recommendations that if followed would solve many problems. These include the call for national organizing, the creation of a National Centre for Indigenous Languages (NCIL) similar to the former National Aboriginal Health Organization (NAHO) (discontinued under the Harper government) to coordinate orthographies, learning resources, curriculum, databases of speakers, and research efforts.

### **A Life-Span Approach to Language Revitalization is Necessary**

Communities must be supported to develop “whole community” approaches. Languages must be re-established as living, working languages in families and communities. The languages must move back into the home and out into the community. Hermes (2007) gives examples such as hosting informal dinners, community events, and ceremonies that ensure the language is used, thereby creating an arena for language practice to occur in the community. Family leadership and community leadership are key in the transmission of Indigenous languages (Qanatsiaq Anooe et al. 2017). We cannot rely on schools alone to “save” these languages (Hornberger 2008).

## **CONCLUSION**

Given the history of Canada and other settler nations around the world, there is much reason to be discouraged about the continuation of Indigenous languages. However, Indigenous nations are growing at unprecedented rates (Statistics Canada 2017), and growing numbers of Indigenous community members insist that their languages must continue

and flourish for future generations. Many communities foster new knowledge and sophistication in the methods they are undertaking to revive and continue their languages.

With efforts aimed at every member of the community regardless of age, the languages can thrive again. The First Peoples of Canada have been burdened with the responsibility of ensuring that Indigenous languages do not die, but partners and allies also need to do more to ensure this outcome. The reduction of Indigenous languages in Canada over the past 150-plus years has been systemic and purposeful, as well as an unfortunate byproduct of mass immigration and colonial settlement. However, given the proper support and resources, communities could bring back their languages in one generation. These languages can continue and flourish given the appropriate and adequate support from fellow citizens, all levels of government, non-governmental organizations, and private industry. Let us work together to see the founding cultural heritage of all nations prevail and thrive in our lifetimes for the cultural benefit of all.

## NOTE

1. We follow the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's (2015) definition of reconciliation as "establishing and maintaining a mutually respectful relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples" (*ibid.*, p. 6).

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