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Life and death of Canada's founding languages (and not the two you think) in
*TRANSFORMING THE ACADEMY: INDIGENOUS EDUCATION, KNOWLEDGES AND
RELATIONS*

Edited by Malinda S Smith

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TRANSFORMING THE ACADEMY

INDIGENOUS EDUCATION, KNOWLEDGES AND RELATIONS

Edited by Malinda S Smith

UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA | EDMONTON, ALBERTA, CANADA

**Transforming the Academy: Essays on Indigenous
Education, Knowledges and Relations**

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8. Life and death of Canada's founding languages (and not the two you think)

Onowa McIvor, University of Victoria

Most Indigenous languages in the land now called Canada are on the decline. I have seen the language die in my family in one generation through the premature deaths of both my maternal grandparents. My grandparents chose not to pass their language Muskego-Nihîyaw (Swampy Cree⁷⁴) to their children either due to their own learned disregard for the language or a belief that their children would truly be better off without it, or both. I fear I will witness the death of most of the first languages of this land within my lifetime.

Many factors have contributed to the devastation of Indigenous languages, particularly over the last 100 years. Of course, this varies depending on the region as each territory has its own story. For instance, some parts of Canada have had much longer sustained contact with settlers (east coast versus the west coast). Further still, some languages appear to be safer from extinction due to population size and vast reach of territory (such as the Anishnaabe⁷⁵ and the Cree⁷⁶) or due a more remote location (many Inuit communities).

However, many of the factors that have contributed to the decline of Indigenous languages are common across Indigenous nations, such as the effects of contact with Europeans in the form of disease (some nations had 50-80 percent of their population wiped out by contact with European-introduced diseases to which they had no immunity), warfare, the creation and enforcement of colonial law banning cultural, spiritual and governmental practices (all of which were important vessels for continuing the language), and lastly, the erosion of land and water-based sustenance lifestyles due to the diminishment (through various means) of territory.

In addition, there are many contemporary contributors to the continued and further devastation of the first languages of the land now known as Canada. They include the (unofficial) promotion of monolingualism in Canada through the lack of support or encouragement for a state-supported multilingual society; the globalization, expansion and promotion of English worldwide; a plethora of competing and pressing issues facing First Peoples' communities due to the lingering effects of colonization such as poverty, addictions, mental health issues, physiological health issues, treaty negotiations/struggles, (re)building

⁷⁴ Saskatchewan Indian Cultural Centre. (n.d.). Swampy Cree. Retrieved from <http://www.sicc.sk.ca/swampy-cree.html>

⁷⁵ Anishinaabemadaa. (2011). Home. Retrieved from <http://www.anishinaabemadaa.com/>

⁷⁶ Online Cree Dictionary. (n.d.). About Project. Retrieved from <http://www.creedictionary.com/>

self-governance, and relentlessly new and reoccurring environmental battles with government and industry.

There are also a number of current challenges facing many communities who are tackling the revival or continuance of their language(s).⁷⁷ These include dialectical differences that can be enormously divisive and stall the efforts to revive a language while the negotiations carry on about “what is to be done” about dialectical differences. Secondly, in many communities we have very few speakers and of those, many are elderly and have health conditions that make it difficult for them to work outside the home for extended periods of the day as is necessary for teaching groups of students. Thirdly, those speakers who are well enough to do paid work outside the home are often doing so at other jobs that may or may not be related to language.

Lastly, there is a lack of understanding of second language learning in Indigenous communities for two reasons. One is that this is a relatively new phenomenon in First People’s communities. Since time immemorial First People’s languages have been passed on naturally from the mouths of parents and grandparents to unborn babies, infants and young children who learned it as a first language or perhaps grew up concurrently bilingual (if also exposed to English or other languages).

The other reason many First Peoples’ communities do not understand how to teach their language effectively is due to a lack of opportunity for exposure to relevant and accessible theoretical knowledge and practical skills of second (or subsequent) language learning. Although an entire field of study has developed within institutions of higher learning that is focused on second language acquisition theory and practice, it was largely developed apart from the reality of Indigenous language loss and the efforts being made to revive them. Therefore, most Indigenous communities are not benefitting from this knowledge or having the opportunity to adapt it to their situation and reap the rewards of these practices.

So, where do we go from here?

Some of the first languages of this land already have gone to sleep⁷⁸. Others still may meet this end. Without some radical changes in this country now called Canada, all of the first languages could meet this end. However, this does not have to be the way this story ends:

First, Canada and the provinces and territories within must embrace and encourage multilingualism (beyond French/English) and beyond the rhetoric of multiculturalism which “celebrates” the multiplicity of Canada without much in the way of state- support to promote multiple languages and cultures. The Northwest Territories (11 official languages, 9

⁷⁷ McIvor, Onowa. (2009). Strategies for Indigenous Language Revitalization and Maintenance. Retrieved from <http://www.literacyencyclopedia.ca/pdfs/Strategies for Indigenous Language Revitalization and Maintenance.pdf> ; First Voices. (2011). First Voices: Language Legacies Celebrating Indigenous Cultures. Retrieved from <http://www.firstvoices.com/> and First Peoples’ Language Map British Columbia. (n.d.) Sleeping Language. Retrieved from <http://maps.fphlcc.ca/node/124>

⁷⁸ First Peoples’ Language Map British Columbia. (n.d.) Sleeping Language. Retrieved from <http://maps.fphlcc.ca/node/124>

Indigenous⁷⁹) and Nunavut (Inuktitut⁸⁰) already recognize the languages indigenous to their respective territories as official alongside the introduced official languages of Canada.

Second, Canada as a nation, the provinces, and those territories that have not already done so, need to formally recognize Canada's first languages as the founding languages of this land and elevate them to equal standing with the existing colonial official languages.

Third, in June 2008 the Prime Minister made an official apology to those affected by the residential school era⁸¹ in Canada. Now, to support the work of First People's to revive and continue their languages, a commitment must be made to allocate resources that are equal to – if not greater than – that which were given to create and operate that residential system (adjusted for inflation and in recognition that it takes greater resources to rebuild something than it does to destroy it. A bomb is a useful metaphor for this.)

Fourth, a new generation of Indigenous scholars specializing in Indigenous second language acquisition must be supported to work alongside community advocates, activists, speakers and learners to make the best use of the limited resources and limited time we have to turn the tides. In the meantime, I call upon those who currently hold this knowledge and these skills to respectfully join Indigenous communities in their efforts and offer your expertise to assist them in making the very best use of the time they have with the most fluent speakers today.

Fifth, research and the experiences of other groups internationally tell us that the only way to create new speakers is through immersion methods (such as Language Nests,⁸² full-immersion schooling, the Accelerated Second Language Acquisition method, and the Master-Apprentice Language Learning Model). Therefore, the resources and shared expertise to create and sustain immersion programs for parents of young children, infants, preschool-aged children, K-12 schooling and adult are critical to the revival and continuation of the first languages of this land.

The First Peoples of this land did not arrive at this situation alone, and therefore the monumental task of saving⁸³ our languages should not be our burden alone to shoulder. If mainstream Canada held the first languages of this land in higher esteem, wanted these languages to be taught to all children (regionally), this task of saving our languages would become considerably more manageable.

⁷⁹ Language Commissioner of the N.W.T. (n.d.). Language Commissioner of the N.W.T. Retrieved from <http://www.nwtlanguagescommissioner.ca/>

⁸⁰ Inuktitut Living Dictionary. (n.d.). Inuktitut Living Dictionary. Retrieved from <http://www.livingdictionary.com/>

⁸¹ CBC News. (2008, May 16). Residential Schools: A History of Residential Schools in Canada. *CBC Canada*. Retrieved from <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/story/2008/05/16/f-faqs-residential-schools.html>

⁸² First Peoples' Cultural Council. Pre-School Language Nest Programs. Retrieved from <http://www.fpcc.ca/language/Programs/Language-nest.aspx>

⁸³ Cardwell, M. (2010, November 8). The Fight to Revitalize Canada's Indigenous Languages. Retrieved from <http://www.universityaffairs.ca/fight-to-revitalize-canadas-indigenous-languages.aspx>

As co-inhabitants (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) of this land, this is our shared history and therefore it is our shared future and shared responsibility too. If you are not Indigenous to this land, consider your contributions to the language revitalization movement⁸⁴ as rent for this beautiful place you are able to call home. I certainly plan to spend the rest of my life fighting for a happier ending to this story and I hope you will too.

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⁸⁴Native Media. (Producer). (2010, July 29).Language Revitalization Efforts. Video retrieved from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=swGWrswhLzM&feature=player_embedded