11.1: Indigenous Languages and the Legacy of Residential Schools

Many of the Indigenous languages spoken in what is currently Canada are quite endangered, because of deliberate strategies by the settler government. For over 100 years, children from Indigenous communities were forced to attend residential schools where they were severely punished for speaking their home languages. The consequence was that fewer and fewer Indigenous people were able to maintain fluency in their languages.

"Indian children should be withdrawn as much as possible from the parental influence, and the only way to do that would be to put them in central training industrial schools where they will acquire the habits and modes of thought of white men."

Sir John A. MacDonald, 1883

Why so few?

A YouTube element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here: https://ecampusontario.pressbooks.pub/essentialsoflinguistics/?p=223

Video Script

A lot of our attention so far has focused on English, which is convenient because it’s a language that we all know, but we
can learn a lot about mental grammar by looking at other languages. Canada has an incredibly rich and diverse history of languages that were spoken by Aboriginal peoples long before European settlers arrived. Linguists estimate that there were more than two hundred different Indigenous languages spoken in this region, and these languages were quite different from each other — they formed about 15 different language families.

At the time of the 2016 census in Canada, there were still about two hundred and thirteen thousand people speaking about 64 different Indigenous languages from 12 different language families. Some of these languages, like Cree, Inuktitut and Ojibwe, are quite healthy, with thousands of speakers. But many more Indigenous languages are critically endangered — they have only a few hundred or a few dozen speakers who are quite elderly. When those speakers die, the language could die with them.

Why have so many of the Aboriginal languages been lost? It’s tempting to attribute it to economic and cultural pressures — TV shows and books and music are all in English, and everyone wants to speak English to get a job — but it’s not as simple as that. From the time that European settlers first arrived in this region, they engaged in deliberate strategies to try to eliminate First Nations people and their culture and language. The settlers engaged in war with the Indigenous people and brought new germs that caused devastating epidemics. The Europeans took over fertile land to grow their own crops and forced Indigenous people to live in small, confined reserves that could not sustain the crops to feed their people.

And these strategies aren’t just from hundreds of years ago: between the 1960s and the late 1980s, the Canadian government seized thousands of Aboriginal children from their homes and placed them forcibly in foster homes and adoptive homes largely with white families, which meant that the children did not learn their parents’ language. This forced adoption is sometimes called the “sixties scoop”, and it continued the tradition of the residential schools.

The residential school system existed in Canada for more than 100 years, and the last residential school closed in 1996, not very long ago. Aboriginal children were taken from their families and forced to live in quite appalling conditions in schools that were run by the government and by the churches. The person who initiated the system was Sir John A Macdonald, Canada’s first prime minister. He was quite clear that the whole purpose of taking children from their families was to make sure that they grew up without knowledge of their history, language, and culture. Here’s his attitude about children who grow up in their families and communities:

“When the school is on the reserve the child lives with its parents, who are savages; he is surrounded by savages, and though he may learn to read and write, his habits, and training and mode of thought are Indian. He is simply a savage who can read and write.”

And here’s what his plan was:

“Indian children should be withdrawn as much as possible from the parental influence, and the only way to do that would be to put them in central training industrial schools where they will acquire the habits and modes of thought of white men.”

He was completely open about his goals: he wanted Aboriginal children to stop thinking and speaking in the ways they learned in their families and communities, and to start thinking and speaking like white men.

In 2015, Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission issued its report, after years of consulting with survivors of
residential schools. The executive summary begins this way:

“These residential schools were created for the purpose of separating Aboriginal children from their families, in order to minimize and weaken family ties and cultural linkages, and to indoctrinate children into a new culture—the culture of the legally dominant Euro-Christian Canadian society.”

The TRC’s Calls to Action acknowledge the crucial role that Indigenous languages will play in achieving reconciliation between Aboriginal people and the larger Canadian population. Here are just some of the Calls to Action.

- We call on the federal government to draft new Aboriginal education legislation including protecting the right to Aboriginal languages [and] the teaching of Aboriginal languages as credit courses.
- We call upon the federal government to enact an Aboriginal Languages Act that incorporates the following principles:
  - Aboriginal languages are a fundamental and valued element of Canadian culture and society, and there is an urgency to preserve them.
  - The federal government has a responsibility to provide sufficient funds for Aboriginal-language revitalization and preservation.
  - The preservation, revitalization, and strengthening of Aboriginal languages and cultures are best managed by Aboriginal people and communities.
  - Funding for Aboriginal language initiatives must reflect the diversity of Aboriginal languages.
- We call upon post-secondary institutions to create university and college degree and diploma programs in Aboriginal languages.

So there is a need for language preservation, revitalization and teaching. What can linguists do to help with these efforts? Of course the most important thing is to work with Aboriginal communities, to listen to the community members and find out from them what they think would be most valuable.

Some linguists have helped to document Indigenous languages, recording and transcribing speech and stories from native speakers. This is especially crucial when the speakers are elderly and the language is critically endangered. Documenting a language also involves doing phonological, morphological and syntactic analysis to be able to write grammar books and dictionaries for the language. Some linguists have also helped to develop writing systems for languages that didn’t have any written form. If a language has been documented, then linguists can help to create educational resources and curriculum material that language teachers can use, and can help to train language teachers.