Bringing Indigenous Languages Back to Life

Ú sıyam.

Pardon? Ú sıyam. That’s how the phrase “O Siem” is written in the Skwomesh (Squamish) language. People texting on cell phones sometimes abbreviate it to OCM. “O Siem” denotes respect and honour.

If your knowledge of Skwomesh is lacking, you’re certainly not the only one. This Coast Salish language is one of North America’s most endangered. In 2014 there were only seven fluent speakers left.

Going, Going …

More than 7,000 languages are spoken on Earth. By 2100, more than half this number is likely to disappear.

Why? Largely because 5,000 of the world’s languages are spoken by mostly middle-aged or elderly indigenous peoples. Many of these languages are not recorded anywhere. As speakers pass away, the languages will die with them.

The Impact of Residential Schools

Throughout history, languages spoken by the more powerful, dominant groups have spread, while languages spoken by smaller groups have declined. In Canada, English and French have been the dominant languages. They have gradually replaced aboriginal languages.

Did You Know?

Nearly 80 percent of the world’s population speaks only one percent of its languages.

The residential school system in Canada that lasted from the 1870s to the late 1990s greatly contributed to the decline of many indigenous languages. Under this system, young aboriginal children were removed from their homes – often against the wishes of parents – and placed in boarding schools to be assimilated. They could be severely punished for speaking their own languages.

The legacy of this practice of language suppression was carried forward to the next generation. As adults, residential school survivors often spoke only English to their own children. Soon only the oldest members of the community still used the traditional languages. In many cases, children and their grandparents did not share a common language.

What is Lost When a Language Dies?

Languages are much more than a way of communicating. They define a culture. They contain the stories, songs and histories that have been passed down for generations. Languages have particular words that describe certain cultural practices or ideas that may not translate easily into another language.

For instance, indigenous groups often have a wealth of knowledge about local lands, animals and plants, and ecosystems. They have had close contact with nature over thousands of years. Much of what they know is encoded in their languages. So when the last speaker of a language dies, the world loses the knowledge that was contained in that language.

That’s why many indigenous communities are working with linguists and organizations to document, maintain and revitalize

Definitions

ASSIMILATE: to absorb a culturally distinct group into the main culture
CULTURE: the behaviors and beliefs of a particular social, ethnic, or age group
INDIGENOUS: being an original inhabitant of a particular place
LEGACY: something such as a tradition or problem that exists as a result of something that happened in the past
SUPPRESSION: forceful prevention
their languages. It’s a race against time. As the elders grow more frail, there’s an urgency to capture their wisdom and pass it along to the younger generation.

REVITALIZATION

The Pacific Northwest, including much of B.C. as well as the U.S. states of Washington and Oregon, is considered one of five ‘hotspots’—places on the planet with the most unique and threatened languages.

Skwxwú7mesh sníchim is one of these languages. In 2014, three 20-something members of the Squamish Nation committed to reversing its decline. Recognizing that language classes alone would not teach them how to speak fluently, Khelsilem (who uses his traditional name), Jaymyn La Valle and Joshua Watts moved into a three-bedroom apartment in North Vancouver. They call it Language House. By living together, they hope to find opportunities to practice their ancestral language outside of the classroom and in more natural settings such as over the dinner table.

“If we don’t pull together and put in work, there aren’t going to be any speakers left,” says Ms La Valle, a university student. “I don’t want my language to die.”

Meanwhile, in the southeastern part of the province, Marissa Philips hopes to see a revival of her Ktunaxa language. The language is related to no other on Earth and only a handful of people speak it fluently. She is helping to post recordings, interactive games and written material online. There is even a college level online course.

“Since the younger generation is so well-adapted to using technology, it only makes sense to me,” says Ms Philips. “We’re going to be losing a lot of who we are as the Ktunaxa nation…once those elders have passed on.”

DID YOU KNOW?

In June 2015, a report from Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission recommended that the government acknowledge aboriginal language rights and fund efforts to revitalize and preserve these languages.

Other efforts to preserve indigenous languages are happening across the country. University of Alberta student Paige L’Hirondelle, 19, studies Cree everyday. Fewer and fewer people speak the language, and nobody in her family can use it. Learning the language helps Ms L’Hirondelle reconnect with her own history, culture and traditions.

It’s no easy task, though. Cree is very complicated, and the same words can have different meanings depending on the intonation. Ms L’Hirondelle is working with a linguistics professor who is designing an electronic Plains Cree to English dictionary.

“I feel much better speaking my own language. It comforts me. It’s who I am,” she says.

Ancestral languages meet modern technology

As they work to preserve their languages, these learners have tools that their ancestors never had. Mobile apps, digitized archival recordings and online dictionaries make a daunting task a bit easier.

A National Geographic project called Enduring Voices documents endangered languages worldwide with film, video and audio. ‘Talking Dictionaries’ give listeners a chance to hear some of the most little-known sounds of human speech.

FirstVoices is an online Canadian project that even offers an indigenous language texting app. It contains custom keyboards for indigenous languages.

“It is exciting when my daughter asks me to text words to her in our language,” says Samantha Etzel who is learning Sencoten, a language of the Saanich Nation outside Victoria.

Gateway to the past

Meanwhile, back at Skwomesh Language House in North Vancouver, Khelsilem blogs and makes instructional videos about the Skwomesh language. He and his roommates hope to launch a six-month Skwomesh immersion program. He’s seen that immersion programs have worked well to increase the number of Mohawk language speakers in Ontario and Quebec.

“Our language carries the knowledge, wisdom, and guidance of our ancestors,” he writes. “It defines what’s important, and what is good. It describes things in such detail and beauty, we cannot help but feel the strength of our ancestors by the more we learn of our language.”

Definitions

INTONATION: the pattern or melody of pitch changes which distinguishes kinds of sentences or speakers of different language cultures

TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION: a group of people tasked with learning the truth about what happened in residential schools in Canada and reporting back to all Canadians
Answer the following in complete sentences:

1. Explain how language is much more than just a means of communication.

2. How many languages are spoken on Earth?

3. How many of the world’s languages are indigenous languages?

4. What will likely happen to many of the world’s languages by the end of the century?

5. Explain why this will probably happen to many of the world’s languages by the year 2100.

6. Why is British Columbia considered an endangered language ‘hotspot’?

7. How are many indigenous communities trying to save their languages?

8. List at least three examples of grassroots efforts to revitalize Canadian indigenous languages.
BETWEEN THE LINES

An inference is a conclusion drawn from evidence. A plausible inference is supported by evidence in the article and is consistent with known facts outside of the article.

What inference(s) can you draw from the fact that 80 percent of the world’s population speaks one percent of its languages?

BEYOND THE LINES

The preface for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s final report reads as follows:

“Canada’s residential school system for Aboriginal children was an education system in name only for much of its existence. 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 Commission heard from more than 6,000 witnesses and stories of abuse and death were numerous. Read some of the Commission’s key recommendations (Google “TRC” “CBC” and “recommendations”). Then visit the TRC website at www.trc.ca

Should darker chapters in a nation’s history be ignored or do you think that the TRC had important work that needed to be done? Which three recommendations do you think are the most pressing and important? Why?

JUST TALK ABOUT IT

1. As you see it, what is the significance of this story? Explain.
2. What connections can you make between this article and your own experiences learning a second language? Explain.
3. Imagine that you have a grandparent whose first language is one that only he or she speaks. Would you devote a few hours each week to learn it? Explain your reasons.
4. In July, the head of the Assembly of First Nations called for the nearly 60 indigenous languages spoken in Canada to be declared official along with English and French. Brainstorm a list of implications for this action. For what reasons would you support such a move? For what reasons would you be opposed?

ONLINE

Visit our student website at www.news4youth.com and click on the What in the World? tab to:

1. Play games and learn aboriginal languages through FirstVoices, a Canadian project that provides a range of web-based tools that can be used to learn over 60 languages. They include a ‘Language Tutor’ that provides online lessons in vocabulary and comprehension. Work through the lessons at your own speed. Compare the sound of your own voice speaking a phrase to a recorded version (or visit http://www.firstvoices.com/).
2. Listen to over 80 talking dictionaries (or visit http://livingtongues.org/).
3. Read a Globe and Mail article from July that explores an Assembly of First Nations’ request to declare all aboriginal languages official (or visit http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/afn-asks-ottawa-to-declare-all-aboriginal-languages-official/article25378218/). ★