

Canada's Aboriginal Languages

By Mary Jane Norris

Canada's Aboriginal languages are many and diverse, and their importance to indigenous people immense. Language is one of the most tangible symbols of culture and group identity. It is not only a means of communication, but a link which connects people with their past and grounds their social, emotional and spiritual vitality. Although loss of language doesn't necessarily lead to the death of a culture, it can severely handicap transmission of that culture. For Aboriginal people, great losses have already occurred. During the past 100 years or more, nearly ten once flourishing languages have become extinct; at least a dozen are on the brink of extinction. When these languages vanish, they take with them unique ways of looking at the world, explaining the unknown and making sense of life.

Societal factors often contribute to the decline of languages. Without doubt, the forces of dominant languages and modernization exert a strong influence on any minority language. In the case of Aboriginal languages, historical events such as the prohibition of indigenous language use in residential schools have also contributed to this process. In addition, the fact that most Aboriginal languages were predominantly oral may also have diminished, in an already difficult environment, their chances of survival.

As of 1996, only 3 out of Canada's 50 Aboriginal languages had large enough populations to be considered truly secure from the threat of extinction in the long-run. This is not surprising in light of the fact that only a small proportion of the Aboriginal population speaks an Aboriginal language. Of some 800,000 persons who claimed an Aboriginal identity in 1996, only 26% said an Aboriginal language was their mother tongue and even fewer spoke it at home. This article explores which of Canada's Aboriginal languages are flourishing and which are in danger of disappearing. It also examines the factors that differentiate viable languages from endangered ones. And finally, it compares language use and maintenance patterns between 1981 and 1996 to understand what happened to Aboriginal languages over the years and what the future may hold for them.





Some languages large, others tiny

The current 50 languages of Canada's indigenous peoples belong to 11 major language families — 10 First Nations and Inuktitut. Most families consist of separate but related member languages, and each member language may include several dialects. Exceptions comprise the Haida, Tlingit and Kutenai families — known as the isolates — which cannot be further broken down into individual languages.

Some language families are large and strong, others small and vulnerable. The three largest families, which together represent 93% of persons with an Aboriginal mother tongue, are Algonquian (with 147,000 people

whose mother tongue is Algonquian), Inuktitut (with 28,000) and Athapaskan (with 20,000). The other eight account for the remaining 7%, an indication of their relative size. Tlingit, one of the smallest families, has a mere 145 people in Canada whose mother tongue is that language. Similar variations apply to individual languages — Cree, with a mother tongue population of 88,000, appears immense when compared with Malecite, at 660.

Geography influences size and diversity of languages

Geography is an important contributor to the diversity, size and distribution of Aboriginal languages

CST Language classification: "viable" and "endangered"

This article's classification of language survival is based on M. Dale Kinkade's 1991 study, "The Decline of Native Languages in Canada." Other classification schemes exist, but there is general agreement as to which languages are viable and which endangered. Kinkade divides Aboriginal languages into five groups: already extinct, near extinction, endangered, viable but with a small population base, and viable with a large population.

- Languages near extinction are considered to be beyond the possibility of revival, since generally only a few elderly people know them. (These languages are not discussed in this study because reliable Census data are not available.)
- Languages considered endangered are still spoken by enough people to make survival an outside possibility, given sufficient community interest and educational programs.
- Languages that are viable but small tend to have more than 1,000 speakers and are spoken in isolated or well-organized communities with strong self-awareness. In these communities, language is considered one of the important marks of identity.
- Viable languages have large enough population bases that long-term survival is relatively assured. In this article, the terms "healthy", "strong" and "flourishing" are used alternatively to describe viable languages.

For discussions on viable and endangered Aboriginal languages see UNESCO. 1996. *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger of Disappearing*. Edited by Stephen A. Wurm. Paris: Unesco Publishing; Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. 1996. *Gathering Strength*. Vol. 3. Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services Canada; Indian and Northern Affairs Canada. 1990. *Indians and Inuit of Canada*. Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services Canada.

across Canada's regions. Open plains and hilly woodlands, for example, are ideal for accommodating large groups of people. Because of the terrain, groups in these locations can travel and communicate with each other relatively easily and often tend to spread over larger areas. On the other hand, soaring mountains and deep gorges tend to restrict settlements to small pockets of isolated groups. British Columbia's mountainous landscape with its numerous physical barriers was likely an important factor in the evolution of the province's many separate, now mostly small, languages. Divided by terrain, languages such as Salish, Tsimshian, Wakashan, Haida, Tlingit and Kutenai could not develop as large a population base as the widely dispersed Algonquian (particularly Cree and Ojibway) and Athapaskan languages, whose homes

are the more open central plains and eastern woodlands.

In some instances, geography can also influence the likelihood of a language's survival. Groups located in relatively isolated regions, away from the dominant culture, face fewer pressures to abandon their language. They tend to use their own language in schooling, broadcasting and other communication services and, as a result, are likely to stay more self-sufficient. Communities living in the northern regions of Quebec, Nunavut, the Northwest Territories and Labrador — the Inuit, Attikamek and Montagnais-Naskapi — are examples of such groups.

Because of their large, widely dispersed populations, the Algonquian languages account for the highest share of Aboriginal languages in all provinces except British Columbia and the territories, ranging from 72%

in Newfoundland to practically 100% in the other Atlantic provinces. In both British Columbia and the Yukon, the Athapaskan languages make up the largest share (26% and 80% respectively), while Inuktitut is the most prominent language in the Northwest Territories (77%) and practically the only one in Nunavut (virtually 100%). British Columbia, home to about half of all individual languages, is the most diverse in Aboriginal language composition. However, because of the small size of these language groups, the province accounts for only 7% of people with an Aboriginal mother tongue.

Large languages more likely to flourish

There are a number of factors which contribute to a language's ability to survive. First and foremost is the size of the population with an Aboriginal mother tongue or home language. Since a large base of speakers is essential to ensure long-term viability, the more speakers a language has, the better its chances of survival.

Indeed, Inuktitut, Cree and Ojibway — the three most flourishing languages — all boast over 20,000 people with an Aboriginal mother tongue. In contrast, endangered languages rarely have more than a few thousand speakers; often they have only a few hundred. For instance, the two smallest and weakest language groups, Kutenai and Tlingit, have mother tongue populations of 120 and 145 respectively.

Passing on language critical for survival

To survive, a language must be passed on from one generation to the next. The most effective way of making this happen is to speak it in the home where children will learn it as their mother tongue. Spoken in the home, language is used as the working tool of everyday life. In contrast, when learned as a second language, it is often used in potentially limited situations only as

CST Language indicators

Mother tongue population (MT): those people whose first language learned at home, and still understood, is an Aboriginal language.

Home language population (HL): those people whose language spoken most often at home is an Aboriginal language.

Knowledge or ability population (Kn): those people who speak an Aboriginal language well enough to conduct a conversation.

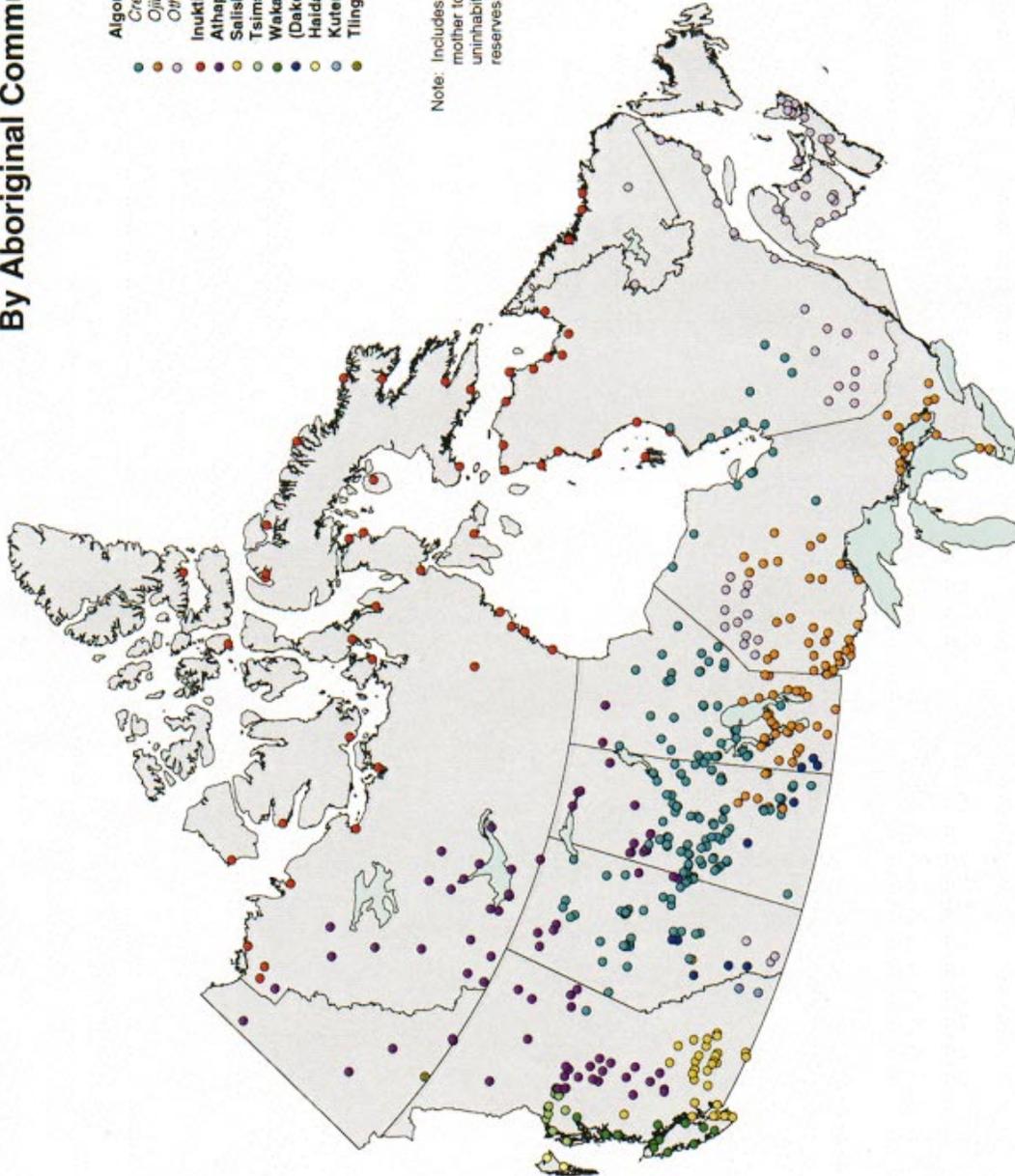
Index of continuity (HL/MT): measures language continuity, or vitality, by comparing the number of those who speak a given language at home to the number of those who learned that language as their mother tongue. A ratio less than 100 indicates some decline in the strength of the language (i.e., for every 100 people with an Aboriginal mother tongue, there are fewer than 100 in the overall population who use it at home). The lower the score, the greater the decline or erosion.

Index of ability (Kn/MT)¹: compares the number of people who report being able to speak the language with the number who have that Aboriginal language as a mother tongue. If for every 100 people with a specific Aboriginal mother tongue, more than 100 persons in the overall population are able to speak that language, some clearly learned it as a second language either in school or later in life. This may suggest some degree of language revival.

1. Harrison, B. 1997. "Language integration: Results of an intergenerational analysis." *Statistical Journal of the United Nations ECE*. 14: 289-303.

DISTRIBUTION OF ABORIGINAL LANGUAGES By Aboriginal Communities, 1996

- Algonquian Family
- Cree
- Ojibway
- Other Algonquian Languages
- Inuktitut Family
- Athapaskan Family
- Salish Family
- Tsimshian Family
- Wakashan Family
- (Dakota) Siouan Family
- Haida Family
- Kutenai Family
- Tlingit Family



Note: Includes communities with minimum single mother tongue population of 20. Excludes uninhabited and incompletely enumerated reserves.

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 1996. Produced by the Geography Division, Statistics Canada, 1998.

may be the case, for example, in immersion programs. There is, therefore, no equivalent to learning a language as a mother tongue.¹ Because unlike other minority language groups, Aboriginals cannot rely on new immigrants to maintain or increase their population of speakers, passing on the language from parents to children is critical for all indigenous languages' survival.²

Language vitality declines between 1981 and 1996

Between 1981 and 1996, the index of continuity has declined for all Aboriginal languages. Although the number of people reporting an Aboriginal mother tongue increased by nearly 24% between 1981 and 1996,³ the number of those who spoke an Aboriginal language at home grew by only 6%. As a result, for every 100 people with an Aboriginal mother tongue, the number who used an indigenous language most often at home declined from 76 to 65 between 1981 and 1996.

Although most languages experienced a steady erosion in linguistic vitality during these years, endangered ones suffered the most. For example, the index of continuity for Salish languages fell from 35 in 1981 to only 12 by 1996. Tlingit and Kutenai, as

languages most often spoken at home, had practically disappeared by the 1990s. Given that in 1996 there were only 120 people with a Kutenai mother tongue, it is not hard to see why there is serious concern for the survival of this language. In contrast, although the continuity index dipped for the relatively strong Cree as well, it did so by considerably less, from 78 to 65. Although Inuktitut did experience a slight erosion in the early 1980s, the past decade has seen the index stabilize at 84.

By 1996, these rates of language erosion resulted in strikingly different continuity levels for viable and endangered languages as a whole. For every 100 speakers with an Aboriginal mother tongue, an average of about 70 used an indigenous home language among viable groups, compared with 30 or fewer among endangered groups.

The younger the speakers, the healthier the language

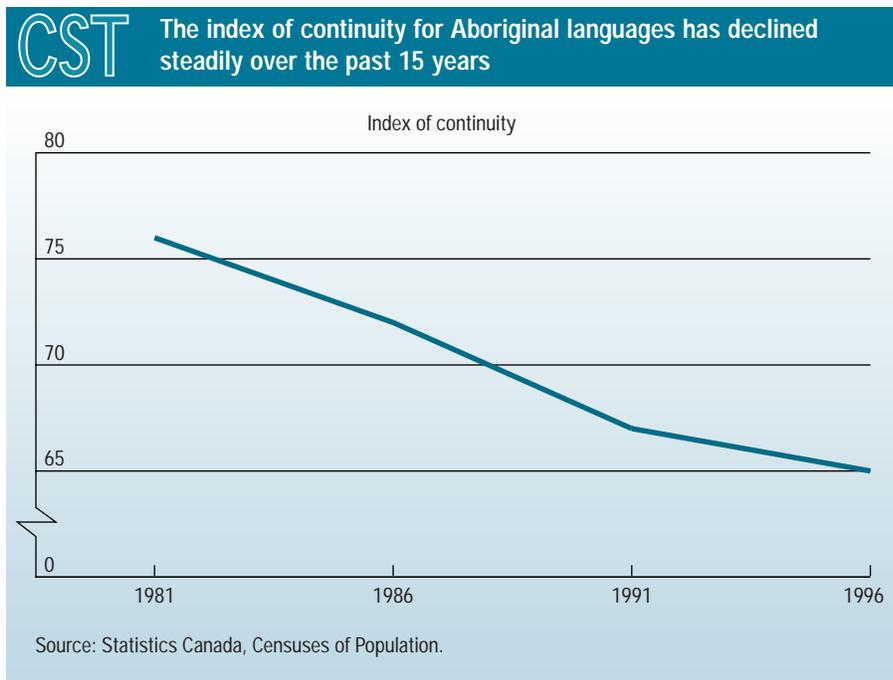
Age also plays an important role in how healthy languages are and what the future may hold for them. The average age of those who speak an Aboriginal language or have it for a mother tongue

reveals the extent to which language transmission has been successful. The higher the average age, the fewer young people have learned or still understand the language and the older the people who still speak it. When these older people die, so may the languages.

For indigenous language groups as a whole, average ages are getting higher. Two main factors are responsible for this trend. First, although fertility rates are still high they are declining, translating into relatively fewer children. And second, the proportion of the Aboriginal population with an indigenous mother tongue is decreasing with younger generations. In fact, in 1996 only 20% of children under 5 had an indigenous mother tongue.⁴ Overall, between 1981 and 1996, the average age of the population with an Aboriginal mother tongue rose by 3 years, to reach 31 years in 1996. Similarly — although to a lesser extent — the average age of Aboriginal home language speakers increased by nearly 2 years, to 27 years in 1996.

4. In comparison, 60% of those 85 years and over, and 30% of 40- to 44-year-olds reported an Aboriginal mother tongue in 1996.

1. Some 75% of those who have learned the language at home are fair to excellent speakers, compared with 23% of those who have learned it at school only. Yukon Executive Council Office. 1991. *A profile of Aboriginal languages in the Yukon*.
2. For example, immigration spurred the growth of the Chinese mother tongue group from 95,000 in 1971 to 517,000 in 1991. B. R. Harrison. 1997. "Language integration: Results of an intergenerational analysis." *Statistical Journal of the United Nations ECE* 14: 292.
3. The growth in Aboriginal mother tongue populations is attributed to the high fertility rates of the Aboriginal population. To a lesser extent, adults relearning their mother tongue and more people reporting their Aboriginal mother tongue may also have contributed to the growth.



Aboriginal Languages	Mother Tongue Populations	Index of Continuity	Index of Ability	Average Age of Population			Status of Language**
				Knowledge	Mother Tongue	Home Language	
Total	208,610	70	117	30.4	31.0	28.3	mix of viable and endangered
Algonquian Family	146,635	70	117	30.5	30.9	28.8	mostly viable
Cree	87,555	72	117	29.9	30.2	27.9	viable large
Ojibway	25,885	55	122	34.9	36.2	34.4	viable large
Montagnais-Naskapi	9,070	94	104	25.1	25.2	24.8	viable small
Micmac	7,310	72	111	29.5	29.9	29.2	viable small
Oji – Cree	5,400	80	114	25.7	26.3	26.8	viable small
Attikamek	3,995	97	103	21.8	21.9	21.5	viable small
Blackfoot	4,145	61	135	36.4	39.7	40.6	viable small
Algonquin	2,275	58	119	29.8	30.7	31.4	viable small
Malecite	655	37	148	40.5	44.0	44.8	viable small
Algonquian*	350	40	159	47.2	52.2	46.7	uncertain
Inuktitut Family	27,780	86	109	23.9	23.9	23.3	viable large
Athapaskan Family	20,090	68	117	31.4	32.5	30.0	mostly viable
Dene	9,000	86	107	24.4	24.8	24.1	viable small
South Slave	2,620	55	124	35.6	37.8	38.4	viable small
Dogrib	2,085	72	118	28.3	29.8	30.6	viable small
Carrier	2,190	51	130	37.5	41.4	40.5	viable small
Chipewyan	1,455	44	128	39.4	40.2	40.7	viable small
Athapaskan	1,310	37	129	41.6	44.7	44.2	uncertain
Chilcotin	705	65	130	32.2	37.0	36.9	viable small
Kutchin-Gwich'in (Loucheux)	430	24	114	53.0	53.1	56.8	endangered
North Slave (Hare)	290	60	116	38.3	39.1	39.8	endangered
(Dakota)Siouan Family	4,295	67	111	31.0	31.9	28.0	viable small
Salish Family	3,200	25	132	42.0	48.7	47.2	endangered
Salish	1,850	24	130	43.0	49.7	48.5	endangered
Shuswap	745	25	134	38.7	46.3	42.9	endangered
Thompson	595	31	135	43.1	48.6	48.3	endangered
Tsimshian Family	2,460	31	132	43.2	48.0	49.6	endangered
Gitksan	1,200	39	123	41.4	45.2	45.7	viable small
Nishga	795	23	146	41.8	47.5	57.6	endangered
Tsimshian	465	24	132	50.5	55.9	52.7	endangered
Wakashan Family	1,650	27	118	47.3	51.3	51.1	endangered
Wakashan	1,070	24	129	47.7	53.0	53.2	endangered
Nootka	590	31	99	46.5	48.1	48.4	endangered
Iroquoian Family***	590	13	160	36.4	46.5	52.0	uncertain
Mohawk	350	10	184	36.6	46.1	60.5	uncertain
Iroquoian	235	13	128	35.8	47.0	41.4	uncertain
Haida Family	240	6	144	46.7	50.4	64.6	endangered
Tlingit Family	145	21	128	45.5	49.3	41.6	endangered
Kutenai Family	120	17	200	37.1	52.3	41.2	endangered
Aboriginal languages*	1,405	28	176	43.0	47.0	45.8	endangered

Note: All indicators based on single and multiple responses combined.

* Not identified elsewhere.

** The viability "status" of the individual languages is based on a classification from M. Dale Kinkade's "The Decline of Native Languages in Canada" in *Endangered Languages*, edited by R.H. Robins and E.M. Uhlenbeck., Berg Publishers Limited, 1991.

***Data for the Iroquoian family is not particularly representative due to incomplete enumeration of reserves. Other languages may also be affected by incomplete enumeration.

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 1996.

Average ages and rates of population aging do, however, vary by languages. Not only do viable languages have younger populations, but the average age of these groups rises more slowly than that of endangered groups. For example, the average age of the Inuktitut mother tongue population — young by any standard — increased only slightly from 23 to 24 years between 1981 and 1996. The rise was somewhat higher, but still relatively modest for the Cree, from 26 to 30. In comparison, the average age of the much older Kutenai mother tongue group increased from 44 in 1981 to 52 in 1996; for the Tlingit, from 47 to 58. The pattern, then, repeats: as with language erosion, population aging affects endangered languages more, thus accelerating their slide towards extinction.

Language loss most pronounced during family formation years

Examining the rate at which a specific group of people shifts from one language to another provides a way of

understanding language use and decline in relation to lifestyle changes. Language maintenance seems very much to depend on the stage of life people are going through.

Young children, for example, have not yet had time or reason to shift from their mother tongue to another language and for most of them their mother tongue is, therefore, the same as their home language. As a result, for

Loss of an Aboriginal home language is most pronounced in the working-age population, especially among women.

every 100 children who were under 5 in 1981, 91 spoke their mother tongue at home. However, in 1996, when these children were in their mid- to late teens, only 76 still used their mother tongue as their home language. While this indicates a serious loss in home language usage, the decline does not stop here.

As youth move out of the original family home, marriage, entry into the labour force, and a different, often

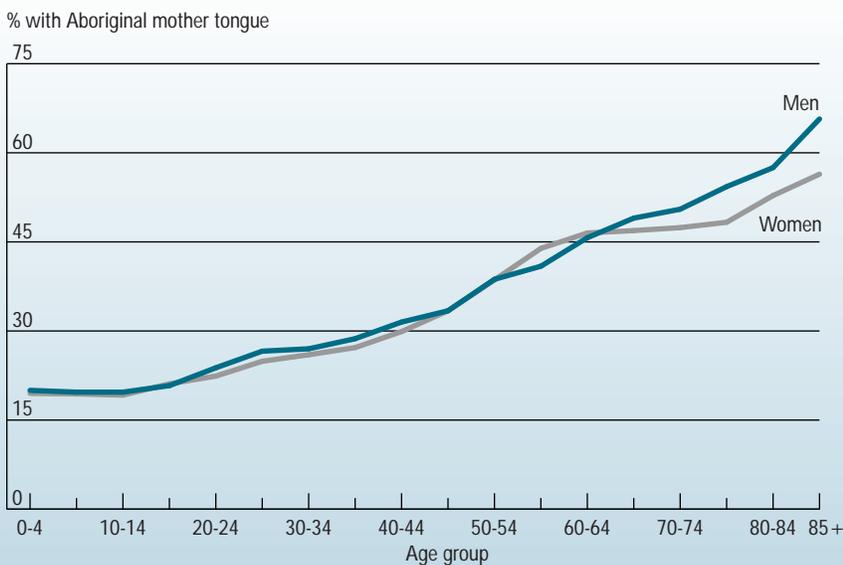
large, urban environment can further accelerate their language decline. Without the support of a closely knit community, and immersed in the language and culture of the dominant society, language erosion becomes difficult to resist. Indeed, the data show that language loss is most pronounced during the labour force years. While this holds for both men and women, it is particularly notable for women. Why this should be so is not clear, but contributing factors may include the fact that women are more likely than men to leave their reserves and move to other locations where the chances of marrying non-Aboriginals are higher. Indeed, the index of continuity declines from 74 for women between the ages of 20 and 24 to 45 by the time these women reach the ages of 35 to 39. Because these are the very years during which women tend to bring up young children, their shift from an Aboriginal to another home language is all the more serious for the transmission of these indigenous languages.

With the older cohorts nearing the end of their working lives and moving into their retirement years, the loss in home language is less pronounced. Their language use still declines, but more slowly than before. For example, language continuity for the cohort aged 50 to 54 in 1981 declines from a ratio of about 64 in 1981 to 61 by 1996. A similarly slow erosion occurs among the older seniors.

Registered Indians account for majority of Aboriginal speakers

Groups that live in remote communities or in settlements with concentrated populations of indigenous speakers appear to find it easier to retain their language. Indeed, two such groups, on-reserve Registered Indians and the Inuit, show the highest indexes of language continuity among all groups: 80 and 85, respectively.⁵ In contrast, non-status Indians and Métis,

CST Older men were most likely to report that their mother tongue is an Aboriginal language



Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 1996.

who tend to live off-reserve, as well as off-reserve Registered Indians, have home language-mother tongue ratios of 58, 50 and 40 respectively, pointing to a more pronounced state of language decline. Clearly, the off-reserve environment poses major threats to Aboriginal languages.

Signs of hope for endangered languages

Despite the grim prospects facing many small languages, there are some signs which give rise to hope. The Kutenai language family, for example, has the

5. However, significant variations exist between Inuit communities depending on location. While the Eastern group of dialects have high indexes of continuity, the Western groups have much lower ones.

smallest mother tongue population, one of the lowest indexes of continuity and some of the oldest populations. However, for every person with a Kutenai mother tongue, there are two people (generally younger) who are able to speak it, suggesting that younger generations may be more likely to learn Kutenai as a second language than as a mother tongue. Similar second-language patterns are showing up for other endangered languages. A growing awareness of Aboriginal cultural identity may be partly responsible for this resurgence in language.⁶

Other positive signs are also apparent. According to the 1991 Aboriginal Peoples' Survey, about 9 in 10 adults would like to relearn an Aboriginal language they once spoke. In addition, the great majority of adults who never

spoke an Aboriginal language reported that they would like to learn one.⁷

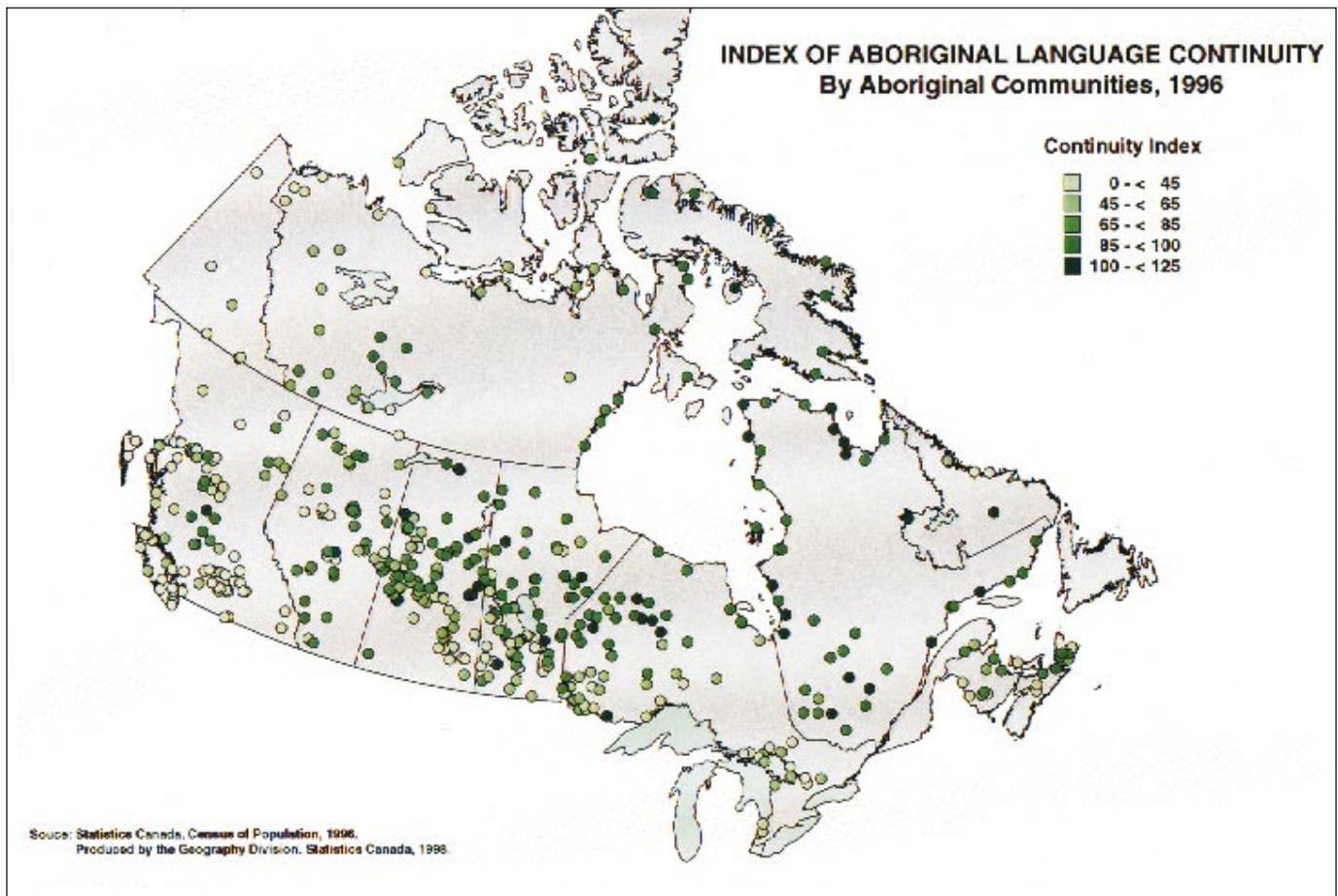
Summary

Canada's Aboriginal languages are among the most endangered in the world.⁸ Significant numbers of languages have either already disappeared or are close to extinction, and among

6. For example, the off-reserve Aboriginal Head Start Program, designed primarily for pre-schoolers, incorporates language as one of its components.

7. Ponting, J. R. 1997. *First Nations in Canada – Perspectives on Opportunity, Empowerment and Self-determination*. Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson.

8. UNESCO. 1996. *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger of Disappearing*. Edited by Stephen A. Wurm. Paris: Unesco Publishing, p. 23.



This article uses data from the 1981 to 1996 censuses as well as the 1991 Aboriginal Peoples Survey (APS). Because of changes in concepts and measures of the Aboriginal population over time, the time-series analysis from the Census is restricted to language-based data only, such that Aboriginal language data are reported for the total population.

The Aboriginal identity population includes those people who reported identifying with at least one Aboriginal group, i.e., North American Indian, Métis or Inuit in 1996. In 1991 and in previous censuses, a person's Aboriginal ethnicity was determined using the ethnic origin question based primarily on ancestry.

To ensure comparability over time, this study controlled for incomplete enumeration of reserves between 1981 and 1996, and recoding of languages in the 1986, 1991 and 1996 censuses to correspond to the 1981 classifications. Prior to 1981, detailed data on individual Aboriginal languages were not available — the only distinctions made were between Indian and Eskimo (Inuit). While the level of detail in terms of individual languages generally increased with each census, some of the smaller languages, coded separately in earlier censuses, were collapsed into broader groupings because of declining numbers.

- **Single response:** occurs when the respondent reports one language only as his or her mother tongue or home language. In this article, time series data (1981-1996) are based on single responses since multiple responses were not available until 1986.
- **Multiple response:** occurs when the respondent reports more than one language that he or she uses equally often as mother tongue or home language. Data for 1996 are based on single and multiple responses combined. Multiple responses account for 10% of mother tongue and 17% of home language responses.

those spoken today, only 3 of some 50 are viable with a large population base. Large or small, viable languages tend to have relatively young speakers, are successfully passed on between generations, and are spoken in isolated or well-organized communities. In contrast, endangered languages are characterized by small population groups, older speakers, and lower rates of language transmission.

Aboriginal elders, teachers and other leaders are well aware of the gravity of

the linguistic situation and are taking steps to preserve indigenous languages. These include such measures as language instruction programs, Aboriginal media programming, and the recording of elders' stories, songs, and accounts of history in the Aboriginal language.⁹ Perhaps as a result, the number of people who can speak and understand an Aboriginal language has been on the rise.

9. Ponting, *op.cit.*, p. 252.

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) has studied Aboriginal language use and retention extensively. Its recommendations aimed at saving these languages from extinction echo some of the steps taken by Aboriginal elders. In addition, RCAP also recommends granting special status to Aboriginal languages and guaranteeing their extended use in the public domain, at least within the confines of Aboriginal communities; providing formal education in the Aboriginal language; and conducting research on these languages. The Commission emphasizes that everyday language use in the home and in the community is critical for intergenerational transmission and for acquiring Aboriginal languages as a mother tongue.



Mary Jane Norris is a senior analyst with Demography Division, Statistics Canada.