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

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.

Athapaskan languages, whose homes particularly Cree and Ojibway) and the widely dispersed Algonquian (par-

tically Cr ee and Ojibway) and the widely dispersed Algonquian (par-

ticularly 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 lan-

guage's survival. Groups located in relatively isolated regions, away from

the dominant culture, face fewer pres-

sures to abandon their language. They
tend to use their own language in

schooling, broadcasting and other com-

munication 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 dis-

persed 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% respec-

tively), 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 compo-

sition. However, because of the small

size of these language groups, the

province accounts for only 7% of peo-

ple 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 sur-

vive. First and foremost, 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 lan-

guages — all boast over 20,000 people

with an Aboriginal mother tongue. In

contrast, endangered languages rarely

have more than a few thousand speak-

ers; often they have only a few hun-

dred. For instance, the two smallest

and weakest language groups, Kutenai

and Tlingit, have mother tongue popu-

lations 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 sec-

ond 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): 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.

DISTRIBUTION OF ABORIGINAL LANGUAGES
By Aboriginal Communities, 1996

Note: Includes communities with minimum large
non-Indian population of 10,000.

Produced by the Geographic Division, Statistics Canada, 1996.
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.

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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.


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.

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.
### Aboriginal Languages with Large Populations are Most Likely to be Viable

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aboriginal Languages</th>
<th>Mother Tongue Populations</th>
<th>Index of Continuity</th>
<th>Index of Ability</th>
<th>Average Age of Population</th>
<th>Home Language</th>
<th>Status of Language**</th>
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Note: All indicators based on single and multiple responses combined.

* Not identified elsewhere.


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

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 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. In contrast, non-status Indians and Métis,
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 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.

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.

**Summary**

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

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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.

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


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. Perhaps as a result, the number of people who can speak and understand an Aboriginal language has been on the rise.


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