RETENTION AND REVIVAL: THE PROSPECTS FOR ABORIGINAL LANGUAGES IN CANADA

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ABSTRACT

Transmitting knowledge of minority languages is often considered essential to the preservation of cultures. In the case of aboriginal peoples, many of their heritage languages have disappeared over time and the prospects for their survival are at best uncertain. Analysts regard Inuktitut, Cree and Ojibway growth owing to birth rates well above the Canadian average and assume investment in language learning. This essay looks at the importance of language as an expression of the evolving identity of Aboriginal peoples. It raises the issue of whether making aboriginal language knowledge an important condition of group identities risks excluding many persons that don't speak these languages. It suggests that a more limited degree of knowledge of aboriginal languages may represent a way of addressing an important symbolic dimension of aboriginal identities.

提要

传承少数民族语言对于文化保护来说是至为根本的。以土著人为例，他们的许多传统语言已经消失，而复兴的前景甚为渺茫。分析家认为因纽特语、克里语、奥吉布瓦语有着潜在的发展前景，因为这几个土著民族的出生率远高于加拿大人，从而有可能为土著青年恢复在语言学习上的投入。本文考察了语言作为土著民族认同变化一种表现方式的重要性，并指出将土著语言作为群体认同的一个重要条件有可能面临着排除那些不说土著语言人的风险。文章认为掌握一定的土著语言可能代表着处理土著认同象征性维度的一种方式。

I. INTRODUCTION

What might substantial growth in the Aboriginal population of Canada imply for its self-definition? Owing to birth rates well above the national average, the Aboriginal population of Canada is quite young, and according to predictions, will increase much faster than the overall Canadian population. Statistics Canada forecasts that there will be some 1,420,000 Aboriginals by the year 2017. This figure represents an annual average growth rate of 1.8% per year for a total of 33.1% from the beginning of the twentieth century, when its population was approximately 976,000. This amounts to more than twice the rate of growth projected for the entire population of Canada (an annual average growth of 0.7%, or 12% for the same sixteen year period). Such significant increases in the numbers of Aboriginals will undoubtedly influence ongoing debates around the principal basis for defining the nature of Canadian Aboriginality.

TABLE 1: Numbers of persons in Canada reporting Aboriginal Identities between 2001 and 2006

	2006	2001	% CHANGE
TOTAL ABORIGINAL IDENTITY POPULATION[4]	1,172,790	976,305	20.1%
NORTH AMERICAN INDIAN SINGLE RESPONSE[5]	698,025	608,850	14.6%
MÉTIS SINGLE RESPONSE	389,780	292,305	33.5%
INUIT SINGLE RESPONSE	50,480	45,070	10.8%
MULTIPLE ABORIGINAL IDENTITY RESPONSES/ ABORIGINAL RESPONSES NOT INCLUDED ELSEWHERE	34,500	30,080	14.7%

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Canada, 2006

Will language become an important part of the evolving identity of Aboriginal peoples? Widely seen as an essential element of culture, in Canada especially, language is regarded as a very important marker of individual identity. However, knowledge of an Aboriginal language is not viewed as central to most expressions of contemporary Aboriginal identities in Canada. Of the total number of persons identifying as Aboriginal in 2006, some one in four reported learning an Aboriginal language as their mother tongue. Therefore, to make language knowledge an important condition in the articulation of Aboriginal identities risks excluding a majority of those regarding themselves as Aboriginal. That which follows examines the state of Aboriginal languages in Canada and the role that they might play in future in the construction of Aboriginal identities.

II. ABORIGINAL IDENTIFICATION

The census defines Aboriginals as persons who reported identifying with at least one Aboriginal group, that is, North American Indian, Métis or Inuit, and/or those who reported being a Treaty Indian or a Registered Indian, as defined by the Indian Act of Canada, and/or those who reported they were members of an Indian band or First Nation. Estimating the size of the Aboriginal population of Canada has not been without its challenges. In the 2006 census, a total of 22 Indian reserves and Indian settlements were incompletely enumerated and thus were not part of the census counts. Below we find the numbers of Aboriginal identifiers for the years 2001 and 2006. As observed, the biggest change is in the number of Metis respondents, which increased by 33% over the five-year period.

Much attention has been directed at the degree to which Aboriginals reside in the urban parts of Canada versus those residing in non-urban areas of Canada. Places of residence can have an important impact on the opportunity for participation in Aboriginal cultures. Such opportunities are more prevalent where the concentration of persons identifying as Aboriginals is greater. This is much more likely to be the case for those Aboriginals residing in First Nations communities.

These numbers represent multiple nations and communities. Given the diversity of groups it embodies, the Aboriginal population might therefore be described as multi-ethnic. The census does not provide information about the salience of Aboriginal identities. It offers few insights into what belonging to Aboriginal communities entails by way of the expression of cultures and traditions. In the remainder of the essay, we examine the relationship between demographics and Aboriginal identity in Canada as defined on the basis of language.

TABLE 2: Numbers of persons in Canada reporting Aboriginal Identities by area of residence, 2006

	TOTAL	ON RESERVE	RURAL	TOTAL URBAN	URBAN NON-CENSUS METROPOLITAN AREA	URBAN CENSUS METROPOLITAN AREA
TOTAL ABORIGINAL IDENTITY POPULATION	1,172,790	308,490	240,825	623,470	257,305	366,165
NORTH AMERICAN INDIAN SINGLE RESPONSE	698,025	300,755	85,210	312,055	123,895	188,160
MÉTIS SINGLE RESPONSE	389,780	4,320	114,905	270,555	109,680	160,870
INUIT SINGLE RESPONSE	50,480	435	31,065	18,980	14,765	4,210
MULTIPLE ABORIGINAL IDENTITY RESPONSES	7,740	160	1,835	5,745	2,165	3,585
ABORIGINAL RESPONSES NOT INCLUDED ELSEWHERE[6]	26,760	2,825	7,810	16,135	6,800	9,335

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Canada, 2006

III. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

As noted earlier, it is widely believed that language is fundamental to the expression of culture. During the 1960s, Canada's Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism maintained that "language is key to cultural development and while language and culture are not synonymous, the vitality of the language is a necessary condition for the complete preservation of a culture."

As much as language is regarded as an important expression of culture, the RCBB acknowledged that it was possible to adopt a new language without experiencing cultural loss. It pointed to a serious misunderstanding in this regard. To illustrate its case, it referred to the preservation of cultural characteristics of several native and ethnic groups and added that some of these groups continue to attribute considerable importance to their culture despite the erosion of their first language. It also referred to Acadians in the Maritimes, many of whom lost the French language but continue to have a strong sense of belonging to Acadian culture. It further alluded to the many English Canadians who continue to feel attached to their Irish, Scottish and Gaelic heritage. However, it suggested that this distinction between language and culture did not apply to Quebec francophones, for whom the two were inextricably linked. It is worth noting that the final report of the RCBB indicated that the examination of Indigenous languages was outside the scope of its mandate (pp. xxii, xxvi). While the government of Canada recognizes the fundamental importance of language to the expression of culture, its legislative commitment is to the preservation and promotion of the English and French languages. The RCBB may have underestimated the importance that persons with languages other than English and French attribute to their heritage or ancestral languages.

In the tables below, we examine the relationship between the strength of belonging to a First Nations community and/or to Aboriginal peoples in Canada and the degree of importance attributed to learning Aboriginal languages. The findings are based on a survey conducted for the project entitled "Voices of the North." This project included a survey of some 900 respondents in the Yukon, Northwest Territories, Nunavut, and Nunavik on behalf of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) over the period April 2006 to March 2007. Some 75% of survey respondents ranked their sense of belonging to the Aboriginal peoples of Canada as very strong (5-7 on a 7-point scale with 7 being extremely strong). Of those who felt it was very important to speak an Aboriginal language, some 82.5% had a very strong sense of belonging to the Aboriginal peoples in Canada, 74% thought it was somewhat important, 68% thought that it was not very important and 52% thought that it was not important at all to be able to speak an Aboriginal language.

Of those who feel that it is very important to speak an Aboriginal language, the majority (those ranking between 5 and 7 on a 7-point scale) have a strong sense or very strong sense of belonging to Canada. Clearly, the more importance respondents attribute to speaking an Aboriginal language, the more likely they are to indicate a very strong sense of belonging to Aboriginal peoples.

TABLE 3: If you had the opportunity to keep, learn, or re-learn your Aboriginal language, how important is it to you to: BE ABLE TO SPEAK YOUR ABORIGINAL LANGUAGE

HOW STRONG IS YOUR SENSE OF BELONGING TO: ABORIGINAL PEOPLES IN CANADA	VERY IMPORTANT	SOMEWHAT IMPORTANT	TOTAL IMPORTANT
1- Not very strong	16.7%	33.3%	50%
2-	20.0%	40.0%	60%
3-	29.7%	27.0%	56.7%
4- Moderately strong	25.6%	34.9%	60.5%
5-	50.0%	32.6%	82.6%
6-	60.9%	23.9%	84.8%
7- Extremely strong	66.7%	33.3%	100%

"Voices of the North". A survey conducted in the Yukon, Northwest Territories, Nunavut, and Nunavik on behalf of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) over the period April 2006 to March 2007.

An examination of the relationship between the importance attributed to knowledge of an Aboriginal language and the sense of belonging to a First Nation, Inuit or Metis community yielded similar findings. Amongst those with a weaker sense of belonging to the community (rating 2 in a 7-point scale), some 12.5% felt it was very important and 37.5% somewhat important to be able to speak an Aboriginal language. Amongst those with a moderate sense of belonging to the community (rating 4 on a 7-point scale), some 27% felt it was very important to speak an Aboriginal language and 39% regarded it as somewhat important. For those with the strongest sense of belonging to the community (7 on a 7-point scale), some 66.3% believed it was very important and 20.9% somewhat important to be able to speak an Aboriginal language.

Similarly, when asked about the opportunity to read or write an Aboriginal language, it was described as important (very and somewhat combined) by some 50% of those reporting a weaker sense of belonging, versus 80% with a very strong sense of belonging to their First Nations community.

IV. THE STATE OF ABORIGINAL LANGUAGES IN CANADA

Over the course of the twentieth century, several Aboriginal languages disappeared. At least ten once-flourishing languages became extinct in the era when every child was forced by school policy to speak either

English or French. The disappearance of these languages has been described as eroding the distinctive world view of Aboriginal peoples and curbing the transmission of their collective heritage. Factors that explain the disintegration of the language transmission among Aboriginal languages include migration to urban areas by Aboriginal peoples, exogamy, the need for English and French as the languages of work, and the legacy of the residential school system. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, there were an estimated 60 Aboriginal languages belonging to 11 Aboriginal language families in use. In the 2001 census, analysts reported that only Cree, Ojibwe and particularly, Inuktitut, were considered most viable, with over 20,000 people identifying them as their Aboriginal mother tongue. As we shall observe, the prospects for Aboriginal languages are considerably better within First Nations communities than they are off reserve, with the situation in Canada's larger urban areas presenting further challenges.

Census reports and other analysis have given rise to very mixed views around the future prospects for Aboriginal languages. Of the 976,300 people that in 2001 identified themselves as Aboriginal, some 235,000 (or 24%) reported that they were able to conduct a conversation in an Aboriginal language. This represents a sharp drop from 29% in 1996 and substantial decline in the use of Aboriginal languages in recent decades. In 2001, just 21% of Aboriginals in Canada had an Aboriginal mother tongue, down from 26% in 1996. This occurred in spite of a considerable increase in the Aboriginal population over that period. Previously considered 'safe', two of the three Aboriginal linguistic groups in Canada (part of the Algonquian language family), - Cree and Ojibway – showed a significant decline from the 2001 population reporting an Aboriginal identity on the basis of mother tongue.

Inuktitut was regarded as the exception as there appears to be more confidence on the part of analysts around the prospects for that language. In 2001, the census reported that some 82% of Inuit knew the language well enough to carry on a conversation. A somewhat smaller percentage of Inuit reported an Inuktitut mother tongue in 2001, as the figure dipped slightly from 78% in 1996 to 77%. However, Statistics Canada does point out that the Inuit language is being used less often in the home than in the past. In 1996, Inuktitut was the language used most often in the home by 68% of Inuit. By 2001, this had declined to 64%.

Age plays an important role in the degree to which Aboriginal languages are first learned, as the under 25 cohort is the least likely to report an Aboriginal mother tongue with under 20% making such a claim. One in four of the 25-44 age group of Aboriginals report an Aboriginal mother tongue, one in three does so in the 45-64 category and finally just under half of the group over the age of 65 does so.

Rapid growth in the youngest cohort of Aboriginals may be fueling some optimism about opportunities for the revival of Aboriginal languages. Indeed, the forecast for Aboriginal languages in 2006 was more positive than it was in 2001. The improved outlook is, in part, a function of a shift away from the emphasis on mother tongue and towards the numbers of persons reporting knowledge of Aboriginal languages. In short, more attention is being directed at those speaking Aboriginal languages as second languages. Hence in 2006, Statistics Canada reported that the share of First Nations people who speak an Aboriginal language held steady compared with 2001, even among the younger generation. It added that the number of First Nations people who spoke their ancestral language has increased for most of the languages with large numbers of speakers. Between 2001 and 2006, the number of First Nations people who spoke Oji-Cree rose by 20%. The number of First Nations speakers increased 12% for Atikamekw, 10% for Blackfoot and Montagnais-Naskapi, and 8% for Dene. The number speaking Cree increased 7%. It suggested that the long term viability of such languages as Cree and Ojibway was better due to a relatively large population base of speakers. An estimated 87,285 could carry on a conversation in Cree, followed by 30,255 who could speak Ojibway, 12,435 who spoke Oji-Cree and 11,080 who spoke Montagnais-Naskapi.

Norris rightly notes that analysis demonstrates that linguistic classifications are an important consideration in assessing the diversity, state and prospects of Aboriginal languages in Canada. Furthermore, while census data do provide a valuable source of demographic and community-level data, it is also the case that the available data can be insufficient, especially for some of the smaller endangered languages and their communities. As such, a more accurate portrayal of Aboriginal languages and their communities must also be supplemented with non-census sources of language information.

V. ON AND OFF RESERVE: THE VARYING CONDITION OF ABORIGINAL LANGUAGES

Generally speaking, Aboriginal languages are spoken and understood more widely in First Nations communities. Just under two-thirds of all persons reporting an Aboriginal mother tongue live on reserve, nearly one in five live in rural areas and the rest live in urban areas with less than one in ten residing in a major city. Any realistic assessment of the condition of Aboriginal languages must take into account the considerable variation in language knowledge between those living on and off reserves. In 2006, about one-third of all Aboriginal peoples lived on reserves, with the remaining 67% in non-reserve areas: 27% in large cities, 21% in smaller cities and 19% in rural areas. According to the most likely

Statistics Canada projection for 2017, the share of the on-reserve population will be 40% while shares of large cities, in smaller cities and rural areas would decline to 25%, 19% and 16% respectively.

TABLE 4: Percentage of Canadians respectively reporting Aboriginal Identity and Aboriginal Mother Tongue by area of residence, 2006

CANADA 2006	ON RESERVE	RURAL	URBAN NON CENSUS AREA	URBAN CENSUS METROPOLITAN AREA
Aboriginal Identity Population	33.0%	19.0%	27.0%	21.0%
Aboriginal Mother Tongue Population	63.2%	19.1%	10.5%	7.0%

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Canada, 2006

The 2001 and 2006 censuses of Canada reported that many of the Aboriginal languages in non-reserve areas were on unsteady ground. In 2006, some 51% of Aboriginals living on reserves reported an ability to carry on a conversation in an Aboriginal language, compared with 12% for those living off reserves.

Amongst the on-reserve population, roughly four-fifths (83%) of First Nations seniors aged 75 and over spoke an Aboriginal language, compared with about one-quarter (24%) of their contemporaries living off reserve. For example, 39% of children aged 14 and under living on reserve spoke an Aboriginal language, up slightly from 36% in 2001. In contrast, the proportion was 6% for First Nations children living off reserve, down slightly from 8% in 2001. As observed, the degree of Aboriginal language transmission in urban areas is virtually nil amongst the youngest cohort.

TABLE 5: Percentage with Aboriginal Identity reporting Aboriginal Mother Tongue in Canada by age groups and area of residence, 2006

% WITH ABORIGINAL IDENTITY REPORTING ABORIGINAL MOTHER TONGUE	ON RESERVE	RURAL	URBAN NON CENSUS AREA	URBAN CENSUS METROPOLITAN AREA
Total - Age groups	43.6%	12.6%	9.2%	6.1%
Under 15 years	33.1%	8.0%	2.5%	1.6%
15 to 24 years	36.2%	10.2%	4.5%	3.3%
25 to 54 years	49.6%	13.7%	12.3%	7.9%
25 to 44 years	47.3%	13.2%	10.3%	6.2%
45 to 54 years	55.4%	14.8%	17.3%	12.5%
55 to 64 years	64.9%	19.0%	23.9%	16.3%
65 years and over	74.0%	25.0%	25.8%	15.8%

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Canada, 2006

VI. ABORIGINAL LANGUAGES AS HOME LANGUAGES

In Canada, language loss is often associated not with the degree to which language is first learned but whether it is still used most frequently in the home. Bougie (2011) points out that daily exposure to an Aboriginal language at home was strongly linked with Aboriginal language knowledge. She calculates that the odds of understanding an Aboriginal language for young, off-reserve First Nations children who were exposed to an Aboriginal language on a daily basis at home were 6.6 times the odds for children who were not. In this regard, one observes yet further erosion in the use of Aboriginal languages in metropolitan areas. In the census metropolitan areas, roughly one-third of those who first learned the language speak it in the home.

TABLE 6: Numbers of persons in Canada reporting Aboriginal Identities and Aboriginal Mother Tongue by area of residence for population age 15-24, 2006

CANADA 15 TO 24 YEARS	ON RESERVE	RURAL	URBAN NON CENSUS AREA	URBAN CENSUS METROPOLITAN AREA
Total population by Aboriginal identity	57,050	40,170	47,900	66,890
Aboriginal mother tongue	20,410	6,500	2,760	1,305
% of persons with an Aboriginal mother tongue within Aboriginal Identities population	35.7%	16.1%	5.7%	1.9%
Aboriginal languages spoken most often at home	15,115	5,270	1,595	475
% Use at home amongst those whose first language is Aboriginal language	**74.0%**	**81.0%**	**57.8%**	**36.4%**

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Canada, 2006

When looking at those languages that are deemed to be more secure, one observes some differences in the regional rates of retention for those Aboriginals residing on reserve amongst those between the ages of 15 and 24. Looking at those whose mother tongue is Cree in the province of Quebec, some 92% report that Cree is the language used most often at home, compared to 82% in Ontario, 67% in Manitoba, 70% in Saskatchewan and 65% in Saskatchewan. In the case of Ojibway in Ontario for the 15-24 population, some 70% report speaking the language in their homes, compared with 53% in Manitoba. For Oji-Cree, some 58% of those between the ages of 15 and 24 that first learned the

language continue to speak it at home, compared with 85% in the province of Manitoba. Inuktitut, the other language whose future prospects are regarded as more secure shows a retention rate of 77% in Nunavut for those between the ages of 15 and 24.

VII. ABORIGINAL LANGUAGE TRANSMISSION ACROSS THE REGIONS OF CANADA

In the relatively few cases where in the urban census metropolitan area an Aboriginal language is the first language, the extent to which it is spoken in homes further diminishes. It is reasonably safe to conclude that the regional differences in Aboriginal language retention are in part related to the degree to which Aboriginal peoples reside in urban areas in the respective provinces and territories.

Of the five provinces with Aboriginal identifiers exceeding 100,000, only in Quebec (41%) and Saskatchewan (47%) is the urban population below 50%. In Manitoba, half of the Aboriginal identifiers live in urban areas while roughly 60% of the Aboriginal group live in urban areas in the provinces of Alberta, British Columbia and Ontario.

In the table below, we consider the differences across the regions of Canada for the year 2006 in terms of the degree to which Aboriginal languages are the first languages learned and the extent to which they are spoken most often at home. As observed below, at approximately 82%, Nunavut has the highest percentage of persons with an Aboriginal mother tongue within the total reporting an Aboriginal identity. The province of Quebec follows with some 37% reporting an Aboriginal mother tongue as a share of the total Aboriginal identity population. Whereas in Saskatchewan and Manitoba, persons reporting an Aboriginal mother tongue represent over one in five of the total Aboriginal identity population, the figure is less than one in ten in Ontario and British Columbia. Because of these cross-regional differences in the transmission of Aboriginal languages, paradoxically, there are far more persons that first learned an Aboriginal language in Quebec than Ontario and British Columbia despite the considerably greater number of Aboriginal identifiers in the latter two provinces. The gap between these provinces widens even further when examining the extent to which Aboriginal languages are used most often at home. Quebec tops all provinces and territories in this regard, with some 88% reporting use of an Aboriginal language at home within the total mother tongue population. In the territory of Nunavut and in most provinces representing Aboriginal identifiers who first learned an Aboriginal language, a majority used it most frequently in their homes. However that was not the case for the Yukon and Northwest Territories and the provinces of New Brunswick, British Columbia and Prince Edward Island. In the case of Alberta there were 49.4% of persons speaking an Aboriginal language most often at home within the mother tongue population.

TABLE 7: Numbers of persons in Canada reporting Aboriginal Identities, Aboriginal Mother Tongue and Aboriginal Languages Spoken at home and for provinces and territories, 2006

	TOTAL ABORIGINAL IDENTITY POPULATION	ABORIGINAL MOTHER TONGUE	%MT	ABORIGINAL LANGUAGE SPOKEN AT HOME	%LSH
CANADA	1,155,800	207,210	18.0%	129,340	62.4%
NUNAVUT	24,650	20,245	82.1%	15,705	77.7%
QUEBEC	106,685	39,425	37.1%	34,605	87.8%
NORTHWEST TERRITORIES	20,375	5,650	27.8%	2,415	42.7%
SASKATCHEWAN	139,385	33,940	24.3%	20,730	61.0%
MANITOBA	172,465	35,595	20.1%	20,925	58.8%
NEW BRUNSWICK	17,300	3,050	17.6%	1,385	45.4%
NOVA SCOTIA	23,705	4,105	17.3%	2,520	61.3%
ALBERTA	185,215	26,580	14.3%	13,115	49.4%
YUKON TERRITORY	7,535	855	11.3%	160	18.7%
ONTARIO	239,740	22,850	9.5%	12,565	55.1%
NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR	23,320	2,185	9.3%	1,665	76.2%
BRITISH COLUMBIA	193,730	12,630	6.5%	3,515	27.9%
PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND	1,685	95	5.6%	20	21.0%

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Canada, 2006

VIII. ABORIGINAL LANGUAGES AS SECOND LANGUAGES

As mentioned above, there has been growing interest in knowledge of Aboriginal languages as second languages. The increase in the numbers of second language speakers is seen as offsetting the decline in their acquisition as first languages. Norris acknowledges that using an Aboriginal language in the home is the ideal means of intergenerational transmission, as it increases the likelihood of its survival (Norris 1998).The progress of Aboriginal languages as second languages is regarded by certain experts as an indicator of language revitalization. Such progress may prevent or at the very least slow the erosion and possible extinction of vulnerable Aboriginal languages. In 2006, more people spoke an Aboriginal language than had an Aboriginal mother tongue (239,600 versus 203,300). It is important to keep in mind, however, that acquiring an Aboriginal language as a second language cannot be considered a substitute for learning it as a first language.

The share of second language speakers of Aboriginal languages was as high as 30% or 40% for some of the languages with very few First Nations speakers, such as Shuswap, which had 1,585 speakers, Tsimshian (590), and Tlingit (150). It was also quite high for Blackfoot (4,760 speakers) and Athapaskan languages not included elsewhere (1,530 speakers). For example, 76,460 First Nations people reported having Cree as a mother tongue in 2006, while 87,285 reported that they could converse in Cree. This means that about 12% of all First Nations people who spoke Cree in 2006 learned it as a second language

IX. CONCLUSION

Galley (2009) regards the fact that Aboriginal people are acquiring their respective Aboriginal language as a second language as a positive development. She sees this trend not only as reason for optimism but also as evidence of an enduring commitment among Aboriginal people to the maintenance of their languages. This commitment may assist in the lobbying of governments throughout Canada to help elevate the status of Aboriginal languages through legislative and policy measures.

Aboriginal leaders have expressed increasing interest in the retention and revival of Aboriginal languages. The 1996 Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) states that: *"It is our vision for Canada to respect and ensure the protection of our languages as evidenced through legislation and long-term sustainable investment… that the present generation recover and strengthen the ability to speak these sacred, living languages and pass them on … […]…as they belong to the original peoples of this country, First Nations languages must be revitalized, protected and promoted as a fundamental element of Canadian heritage." It will be no simple task to meet these ideals given the conditions faced by most Aboriginal languages.*

In July 2007, the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) generated a report which included a series of recommendations aimed at revitalizing Aboriginal languages. Five major goals were envisioned in pursuit of the strategy: (1) increase the number of First Nations people who speak their language by increasing the opportunities to learn their language; (2) increase the opportunities to use First Nations languages by increasing the number of circumstances and situations where First Nations languages can be used; (3) improve the proficiency levels of First Nations citizens in speaking, listening to, reading and writing First Nations languages; (4) increase the rate of which First Nations languages can be enhanced, revitalized and developed so that they can be used in the full range of modern activities; (5) foster among First Nations and Non-First Nations a positive attitude towards, and accurate beliefs and positive values about First Nations languages so that multilingualism becomes a valued part of Canadian society.

Putting that plan into action will likely require substantial resources which the government of Canada seems unwilling to invest. Attaining some competence in communicating in Aboriginal languages needs to be accompanied by more speaking opportunities. Clearly, there is no "one size fits all" approach to redressing the conditions of the multitude of Aboriginal languages in Canada. In the absence of any institutional structures-particularly schools that provide opportunities for instruction in Aboriginal languages- the prospects may be weak. Such institutions exist in Nunavut, with an Inuit-controlled government and a more Inuit-based and Inuit-defined school system than the previously provincially defined education system and programs. Also, the Cree School Board in Northern Quebec, which is the largest First Nations-controlled Board, provides important opportunities for Aboriginal language learning thus explaining in part Quebec's superior rates of language retention relative to other provincial jurisdictions. But gaining language knowledge that is merely aimed at strengthening cultural ties may be insufficient for the purpose of a wholesale revival of vulnerable Aboriginal languages. A minimalist or symbolic knowledge of the language may be sufficient to establish cultural connections. The true test of the language vitality will depend on the socio-economic utility of a given language. To achieve this will require institutional changes beyond the education sector that demand a rethinking of the basis for interaction across First Nations communities.

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