



Disappearing Languages

by
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Imagine the outcry if 50 per cent of the species on the planet were threatened with extinction. The fact is that human languages are disappearing at such a rate that by the end of the century 50 percent could be extinct or only exist on tapes.

“Every language in some sense is an ecosystem of ideas, a watershed of thought, an old growth forest of the mind,” said Wade Davis, a Canadian botanist and filmmaker in an interview this spring. “Cultural diversity has drifted from a polychromatic world to a monochromatic world ... and the great indicator of that is language loss.

“Of the 6,000 languages that exist today, fully half are not being taught to school children ... Literally, half of humanity’s legacy is disappearing in a generation or two.”

In Canada, the situation is worse. “Today, there are almost no child speakers of most First Nations languages in Canada,” said Andrea Bear Nicholas, retired chair of Studies of Aboriginal Cultures of Atlantic Canada at St. Thomas University. “With no child speakers, all but three of the 60 or so original languages in Canada are predicted to become extinct by the end of this century. With them will go the whole body of history, culture and knowledge contained in these languages,” she wrote in Briar Patch (March 1, 2011).

“So closely did language tie Indigenous Peoples to their lands that authorities focused on deliberately destroying First Nations languages as the key to severing ties between the people and their lands,” she said.

The fragile state of Indigenous languages is the result of historical laws and policies designed to rid Canada of distinct Indigenous cultures such as the anti-potlatch laws (1890s to the early 1950s), the residential school system (1870s to the 1990s) and the Sixties Scoop. While these actions did not destroy Indigenous languages, they did prevent many parents and grandparents from passing on language and culture in a natural way to future generations.

The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples recognizes the people’s right to use, develop and transmit their languages. Indigenous Peoples have been drawing attention to the urgent need to preserve First Nations languages for at least 70 years, according to the Assembly of First Nations (AFN).

In December 2016, PM Justin Trudeau announced the development of an Indigenous Languages Act and the AFN is calling for “long-term, sustainable, consistent and appropriate approaches to support First Nations in their efforts to recover, reclaim, revitalize, maintain and normalize First Nations languages.”

“Our languages are central to our ceremonies; our relationships to our lands, the animals, to each other; our understandings of our worlds – including the natural world – our stories and our laws,” stated National Chief Perry Bellegarde.

More than 500 regional chiefs, First Nation chiefs, councillors, Elders, fluent speakers, knowledge keepers, language champions and activists, Indigenous scholars, and linguists are helping to develop legislation for the national act.

Among Indigenous people and environmentalists there are philosophical justifications for why Indigenous languages matter. Luisa Maffi, with a doctorate in linguistic and cognitive anthropology, has found that where Indigenous languages are flourishing, so does the variety of species in a habitat or ecosystem. And the reverse is true as well.

The taxonomies of endangered languages often distinguish hundreds more types of flora and fauna than are known to Western science.

Bear Nicholas is a strong advocate of full language immersion because the dropout rate (or as she calls it, the “push-out rate”) is still unacceptably high across the country. “Within an immersion program there is less need to consciously teach traditional culture, values and beliefs since these aspects are embedded in the languages,” she said.

There are few immersion Indigenous language or even bilingual programs in the country but there is growing urgency and commitment to regain what has been lost.

Learning in Port Hardy

The staff of the Eke Me-Xi Learning Centre on the Tsalquate Reserve near Port Hardy is working with the Gwa’sala-’Nakwaxda’xw Nation to reacquaint high school and adult students with their Quatsino, Kwakiutl, and Gwa’sala-’Nakwaxda’xw nations’ histories, cultures and languages.

The Gwa’sala-’Nakwaxda’xw Nation has hosted the Eke Me-Xi Learning Centre in its community since 1997 and the school is operated by the Vancouver Island North School District in cooperation with the First Nations’ Education Council.

Irene Isaac, the District Principal of Aboriginal Programs, told a local news outlet, “We are at a point now where language revitalization is at the top of our priorities and is vital to overall educational, social and cultural success of our nations.”

Language revitalization was added as a goal to the district’s enhancement agreement signed in June, said Eke Me-Xi Principal Sheila McGrath, a member of Métis Nation BC.

The school functions “more like a family,” she said, “with staff concentrating on developing relationships with students.” There are 3.4 teachers in addition to on-site administration and support staff. “We are fortunate to have several First Nations staff who are able to share their traditional knowledge.” This was particularly helpful last school year when much of the learning was built around harvesting and preserving clams, cedar and salmon.

“The people who have lived on the land since time immemorial before the settlers arrived have complex societal protocols that set out roles and responsibilities for family members,” said McGrath, “and traditional ecological knowledge is embedded in many activities.”

The school has also benefitted from having a volunteer linguist and former vice-principal and special education teacher. Peter Wilson, who is working on his PhD, has modeled teaching strategies and helped develop curriculum. A list compiled from lessons in the past school year contains almost 1,000 Kwak’wala words.

Students experience Kwak’wala and related cultural knowledge across several subject areas. During this year’s clam harvest Kwak’wala words and phrases for tides were integrated into Grade 8 and 9 science studies of tides.

“Elders always remind us of the importance of knowing who you are and where you come from,” McGrath said. “If you lose an Indigenous language, you are in danger of losing an entire worldview.”

A single word in the local language can convey complex and vital information that requires many words in English. McGrath gave the example of the Kwak’wala word *tsawitłaxola* which means *wind is from the southeast and the tide is going in the opposite direction*.

Leah Hubbard, the lead and language teacher from the ‘Namgis Nation, said, “Learning about the accurate history of the land where

you are – that is where the students have found the most meaning and inspiration.”

The First Nations people in this region documented their history orally through the generations and the Gwa’sala-‘Nakwaxda’xw people have endured all the traumas of Indigenous people in this country (systemic racism, introduction of fatal diseases, destruction of food sources, criminalization of cultural practices, economic restrictions and brutal residential school experiences that affected three generations). In addition, the Canadian government forced the community to relocate and destroyed their buildings in 1964.

The eviction was spurred by the government’s demand for administration efficiency. The people were told that if they refused they would lose all federal services. So they took what they could carry. When they returned for their other possessions, the Indian agent had already burned their houses to the ground.

Only five homes were constructed on the Tsalquate reserve for over 200 people and there was no running water or sanitation services. The move was disastrous. The degree of trauma resulted in many deaths.

With great effort and resolve, the community pulled together and, by returning to traditional teachings, began the healing process.

Several community members returned to their ancestral homelands at Ba’as (Blunden Harbour) in 2012, some for the first time. Since then, the community and school have organized several boat trips for students to visit the homelands. The history comes alive.

Earlier this year, students interviewed Elders at Ba’as for

films they were creating and to experience the Kwak’wala language on site.

“It’s different when you’re actually standing in the location,” said McGrath. “You get a sense of what it must have been like to live there. I remember standing on that beach. You could see where the houses used to be. It was mind-blowing to see the thickness of the middens and consider how long it would have taken to build them up that high.

“I cannot imagine how people must have felt being forced to leave such a beautiful place.”

The Gwa’sala-Nakwaxda’xw Nation is in the process of building a Big House and the Elders are thrilled that students are involved in the preparations. “Within the big house, the hereditary chiefs have important roles. It’s all very exciting,” McGrath said.

Finishing touches are being made to the carving shed where the totem poles will be made. Next year’s curriculum will integrate learning about totem poles and Big House protocols.

Eke Me-Xi is a choice school and staff and the Elders Resource Group are finding ways to incorporate the language dialects, traditional knowledge and culture into daily school life. The centre partners with the Band-run elementary school and Band council for many learning opportunities and community building events.

Students prepare school-wide lunches twice a week and family and community members and community agency staff have standing invitations to join students for lunch. Costs are covered by catering contracts that bring in revenue and provide students with training and employment skills.

Even so, attendance for some

students is difficult. They continue to experience the effects of the forced relocation, residential school abuses and inter-generational trauma. Many struggle with mental health issues, homelessness, addictions and lack of food security.

“Our student population has a high percentage of students with special needs,” McGrath said. “We are able to provide a smaller, caring environment that is inclusive for these students.” Support goes well beyond just academic encouragement.

“I feel hopeful about the future. Things are starting to change,” she said. “First Nations are building more capacity ... The languages are not completely lost.” This year, junior students learned over 600 Kwak’wala words and senior students over 800.

As in previous years, students worked with Our World Language film mentors, Elders and staff to create short films, which included their traditional languages. In June, the centre provided a well-attended community film screening and the films will be submitted to film festivals.

The cross-curricular approach and the seamless integration of Indigenous culture and language have led students to comment that sometimes they don’t know if they’re in a science, socials or English course. “Staff members find that very satisfying,” McGrath said.

“The kids don’t always see that they’re going to be the change we need but they are going to shift things over. You have to believe in them so they can believe in themselves.”

An account of Eke Me-Xi Training Centre is featured in Learning, Knowing, Sharing: Celebrating Successes in K-12 Aboriginal Education in BC published by the BCPVPA in 2017.