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Disappearing Languages

Native tongues facing extinction on a global scale; British Columbian languages among those at greatest risk

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Mary John Senior's death in 2004 meant there was one less person left speaking the endangered Carrier language in Prince George. In her long and accomplished life, John wrote *Stony Creek Woman*, co-founded the Yinka Dene Language Institute, and received the Order of Canada and the Queen's Jubilee Medal. (Bill Poser)

Around the world, hundreds of indigenous languages, some as old as 10 thousand years, are dying off at an alarming rate.

In many regions, languages are heading for extinction at the rate of one every 14 days. Some are hanging on by a thread, being spoken by only one or a few people.

A *National Geographic* project called Enduring Voices has identified five global "hotspots" where a large number of languages are in danger of disappearing: the Pacific Northwest, Oklahoma southwest, northern Australia, central and eastern Siberia, and central South America.

The Enduring Voices researchers found that more than 500 of the world's languages may be spoken by fewer than 10 people. The current rapid decline, they say, is without precedent in history.

The threat level in the Pacific Northwest, which includes British Columbia and parts of Washington State, Oregon and Alaska, is rated in the study as being severe. Only northern Australia and a region of South America are facing a more rapid language loss.

Linguists lament that as a language disappears, it takes with it a vast storehouse of irreplaceable knowledge about the natural world, eco-systems, and cultural traditions that have been accrued over thousands of years.

"A host of linguistic structures are also lost," says linguist Gregory Anderson. "It's a collective loss to humanity that's going on here."

Director of the Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages in Oregon, Anderson says the Haida language of B.C.'s Queen Charlotte Islands and Alaska, with only about 50 elderly speakers left, is "absolutely in a desperate situation."

Anderson says the Haida language, which consists of two dialects, is "fascinating" because it appears to be unrelated to any other language in the world. This makes it unique. "When it goes, that's one whole lineage that goes out with it," he says.

British Columbia is home to over 60 percent of Canada's indigenous languages. However, of the 36 languages remaining in the province, 13 are spoken by fewer than 50 people each, none of whom are under the age of 15, according to Bill Poser, an adjunct professor at the University of British Columbia.

"Once children stop routinely learning the language it's gone. Even languages that have thousands of speakers left, if they're all beyond childbearing age then the language is on its death bed," says Poser, a linguist who studies the Carrier language in Prince George, which is also endangered.

While all the native languages in B.C. are in serious decline and three have already become extinct, several other native languages continue to be passed down elsewhere in Canada, such as Cree, Inuktitut, Ojibway, Slave and Dogrib.

Although the reasons indigenous languages are vanishing are many and varied, it is generally agreed that the greatest blow was dealt by colonialism. Many regions where languages are most threatened are located in countries where colonial-era governments punished natives for speaking their own tongue.

Because the dialects formed the territorial boundaries of the different nations and established who owned what land, destroying those dialects was an integral part of the "colonial takeover," says Kevin Annett, author of *Hidden From History: The Canadian Holocaust*.

In the last 500 years, it is estimated that half of the world's languages have become extinct. Researchers say that local languages are now disappearing faster than at any time in history; of the remaining 7,000 languages in the world, at least half are expected to disappear by the end of the century.

However, efforts are being made in many communities around the world to record and preserve their language before the last speakers die. To support such efforts, the Living Tongues Institute provides help at the grassroots level to communities of various sizes.

In British Columbia, First Voices, which provides a selection of web-based tools and services designed to support aboriginal people engaged in language archiving, language teaching and culture revitalization, currently has 26 communities archiving their languages.

One of the tricky and time-consuming parts is writing down a language that has only ever existed in oral form, as is the case for many native languages.

"It was recognized in the relatively recent past that in order to be able to keep a record of these languages they would need to be written down, so various forms of writing systems were devised," says Peter Brand, coordinator of First Voices.

"We cater to all of those and they're all quite unique—every single language that's currently documented at First Voices uses a different writing system of one kind or another."

The Queen Charlottes Haida run the Skidegate Haida Immersion Program, where the elders teach the language and share legends and oral history with the younger generations.

In Alaska, a range of Haida classes is being offered in several Haida communities, and the University of Alaska Southeast offers Haida classes. The University of British Columbia is currently offering courses in Musqueam, Plains Cree and Dakhle.

During his 10 years at Kuper Island Residential School, Duncan resident Delmar Johnny was strapped and had his mouth washed out with soap if he spoke his Coast Salish language of Hul'q'umi'num.

Now, however, along with his children, 61 year-old Johnny is re-learning the language, which he says "really creates meaning" that can't be explained in English.

"I stayed away from anything to do with my language until my later life," he says. "Then I started to realize that I needed my language. I'm an Indian, I need to be that."

One of Johnny's nephews who speaks Hul'qumi'num fluently was taught one-on-one by an elder. He now has the honour of speaking at longhouse functions.

However, while efforts to learn, document and archive languages ensure their survival as "written vehicles of culture," they have no hope of bringing back a language that's on the brink of extinction into common use, says Poser.

Hebrew and Welsh were endangered in the past, but they survived because they had large populations and received state support. State support also allowed a revival of Hawaiian and the Maori dialects of New Zealand. However, neither had been reduced to the point where they were no longer spoken by the children.

To boost a language that has been reduced to a few elderly speakers, Poser says a full immersion program above the pre-school level is necessary, and the only place that's currently happening in British Columbia is at the Chief Atahm School in the Shuswap community in Adams Lake.

The program has been "an outstanding success" in that five classes have so far graduated students speaking fluent Shuswap, and if they continue to use the language outside of school they'll retain it, says Poser.

Even so, it takes much more than that to ensure the survival of a language.

"The problem is that these kids are a minority in their community. The question is then will they stay there and marry each other and bring up the kids in the language. Unfortunately, the odds are not very good that that will happen."

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