

Controversies Around Endangered Indigenous Languages in the Canadian Arctic (Part I)

thearticinstitute.org/controversies-endangered-indigenous-languages-canadian-arctic-part-i

By Doris Friedrich

February 4, 2021



Residential school, Fort Resolution, Northwest Territories. Photo: [Canada. Department of Mines and Technical Surveys. Library and Archives Canada, PA-023095](#)

The state of Indigenous languages in Arctic countries is critical. The International Year of Indigenous Languages (IYIL) in 2019 raised hope to strengthen the appreciation of their importance and their links to identity, culture, and human rights. In a two-part series, I will explore the situation of Indigenous languages in Arctic countries. Instead of providing a comprehensive account of the entirety of Indigenous languages spoken in the Arctic, the aim of these articles is to highlight some issues and experiences.

In Canada, the introduction of the “Indigenous Languages Act” in 2019 reignited discussions on the status and treatment of Indigenous languages and peoples. For this reason, the first article will focus on the example of Canada in order to examine some of the relevant controversies, cases of dispute, and the delicate balance in state support of Indigenous languages. The [second article](#) presents an overview of the state of Indigenous languages, challenges, and initiatives in the framework of the 2019 IYIL in several Arctic countries.

The Arctic is home to approximately 50 Indigenous languages, regulated through a diverse array of regional, national, and international laws. While officially these laws have been aimed at defining, maintaining, and revitalizing Indigenous languages, the issue is more complex, especially considering most Arctic states' colonial past. Apart from Iceland, all Arctic states have Indigenous communities. Depending on which methods are used to classify languages and dialects, there are more than 20 Indigenous languages in the Canadian Arctic.¹⁾ Despite similar challenges in many of the Arctic's regions, Indigenous languages in Canada face unique and complex situations that affect their use, well-being, and development.²⁾

In time for the United Nations International Year of Indigenous Languages in 2019, the Canadian government put forward an Indigenous Languages Act. The Act received mixed reactions, including being critiqued as colonial by some Indigenous groups.³⁾ It also raised questions about the availability and access to funding for language education, including lack of funding, as well as Indigenous rights.

The legal status of the Indigenous languages in Canada's northern territories – Northwest Territories, Yukon, and Nunavut – varies significantly. While the Yukon only recognizes English and French as official languages, the Northwest Territories grants official status to nine Indigenous languages belonging to three different language families: Dene, Inuit, and Cree.⁴⁾ In Nunavut, the goal of several Acts such as the 2008 Official Languages Act (OLA) and the Inuit Language Protection Act is the protection and promotion of Inuktitut, the official language of the territory in addition to English and French.⁵⁾ According to Nymand Larsen and Fondahl, native language retention is considerably higher in Canada's eastern Arctic compared to the western Canadian Arctic and Subarctic.⁶⁾

Number of speakers plummets

According to UNESCO, 75 percent of Canada's Indigenous languages are endangered, with some being only spoken by a handful of elders. And it is a downward trend.⁷⁾ In 2016, 15.6 percent of Indigenous people in Canada affirmed that they could converse in an Indigenous language – a rapid decline from 21 percent in 2006. Furthermore, large disparities exist between distinct Indigenous peoples living within the country: 64 percent of Inuit, 21 percent of First Nations peoples and, far behind, only 2 percent of Métis people respectively confirmed their language proficiency.⁸⁾ Keeping in mind Canada's history of Indigenous peoples' colonization and the widespread strategic curtailment of their languages and cultures, the ongoing loss of speakers reflects larger issues of Indigenous rights and political representation. Today, there are still significant political, social, and economic discriminatory practices in Canada at the government and societal levels.⁹⁾ After all, it was only last year that Canadian Members of Parliament were granted interpretation services for speeches in Indigenous languages in the House of Commons. A multitude of regulations have been aimed at promoting Indigenous languages and redressing the damage caused by the colonization of

the Canadian Arctic. Nevertheless, the trend of decreasing numbers of speakers has not been reversed as of yet. In the following section, I will examine some of the reasons why this might be the case.

Historical background

Indigenous rights, including Indigenous language rights, have to be viewed against the background of a tense relationship between the colonial authorities and Indigenous peoples, in particular attempts to “assimilate” or “civilize” Indigenous peoples in Canada over the last few hundred years. Based on the belief that British culture and society were superior, many initiatives from the 1820s onward aimed at “civilizing” the Indigenous peoples, encouraging them to abandon their traditional lifestyles in favor of a lifestyle rooted in agriculture, sedentarism, and Christianity. The 1857 *Gradual Civilization Act*, for example, offered land and money to those Indigenous individuals willing to adopt a “civilized” lifestyle. Another legislation with serious consequences was the *Indian Act* of 1876, which granted the federal Department of Indian Affairs greater authority, including control over land and resources, as well as the authority to define who was Indigenous. It was also largely concerned with the assimilation or “civilization” of the First Nations. In 1883, the policy focus shifted to Indigenous education and the establishment of a network of residential schools all over Canada, which more than 150,000 Indigenous children attended between 1857 and 1996. These forced children to relinquish their culture, religion, lifestyle, and language. A large percentage of the children who attended them died at the schools, and those who survived often faced physical, sexual, and psychological abuse. As the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada states in its summary of the final report, these schools were created “for the purpose of separating Aboriginal children from their families, in order to minimize and weaken family ties and cultural linkages, and to indoctrinate children into a new culture – the culture of the legally dominant Euro-Christian Canadian society”.¹⁰⁾

By the late 1940s, after many First Nations had participated in both World Wars and the Korean War, the relationship between Indigenous peoples and the authorities saw some progress. After three court cases on land rights ruled in favor of Indigenous peoples, the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development – now Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (AANDC) – announced its new Comprehensive Claims Policy in 1973. This enabled the settlement of land claims through a negotiated process and resulted in 22 comprehensive claims agreements. One of them was the 1993 Nunavut Land Claims Agreement, which was the first with Inuit in Canada and was crucial for the creation of the Territory of Nunavut in 1999.

While residential schools were closed, efforts to assimilate Indigenous children have continued to this day. In the 1960s, the “Sixties Scoop” removed Indigenous children from their families and communities and placed them with non-Indigenous families. In 2017, the current disproportionate number of Indigenous children in the child welfare system was acknowledged as a “humanitarian crisis” by Jane Philpott, Canada’s Indigenous Services

Minister. In Manitoba for instance, out of the 11,000 children in care, 10,000 are Indigenous,¹¹⁾ even though Indigenous residents make up only 18 percent of the province's population¹²⁾.

The 1970s also saw the emergence of new education policies, which integrated elements of the Canadian curriculum with traditional cultures and languages. Supported by special grants, these soon gained popularity while the residential school system was slowly phased out. In 1996, the last residential school in Saskatchewan was closed. Around the same time, in 1995, the government's *Inherent Right Policy* laid the groundwork for negotiating practical arrangements for Indigenous peoples' return to self-government. After the closing of the residential schools system, the deep and lasting negative effects on the children that had attended these schools, as well as on their families, communities, and cultures became increasingly apparent and were spelled out by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. In 1998, the government acknowledged its role in the abuse and in 2007, it concluded the *Common Experience Package*, a compensation package for residential school survivors, which also resulted in the creation of the Indian Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In 2008, the government officially apologized¹³⁾ for the Residential Schools system.¹⁴⁾ Furthermore, while residential schools have closed, efforts to assimilate Indigenous children continue to this day, and have been carried out for decades, including the Sixties Scoop¹⁵⁾ and the current foster care crisis in Canada (for example, 90 percent of children in state care in Manitoba are Indigenous).¹⁶⁾

Reclaim, revitalize, strengthen

In 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) issued 94 calls to action concerning Indigenous rights. This prompted Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to commit the federal government to “fully implement the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, starting with the implementation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples”.¹⁷⁾ Canadian Heritage, the Assembly of First Nations (AFN), Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK), and the Métis National Council (MNC) announced their collaboration on the co-development of Indigenous languages legislation.¹⁸⁾ At the beginning of February 2019, the Minister of Canadian Heritage and Multiculturalism, the Honourable Pablo Rodriguez, introduced Bill C-91, the Indigenous Languages Act, in order to “reclaim, revitalize, strengthen and maintain” the country's over 90 Indigenous languages.

The Act is designed to set up the Office of the Commissioner of Indigenous Languages and “work with provinces, territories, Indigenous representative organizations and Indigenous governments to create effective support for Indigenous languages in Canada through a variety of mechanisms.” In June 2019, the Act received Royal Assent, which turns the bill into law.

Co-Development?

Officially, the Bill was co-developed by the Department of Canadian Heritage and Indigenous Peoples representatives, namely the ITK, the Assembly of First Nations (AFN), and the Métis National Council (MNC). However, despite being listed on the [website](#) of the Co-Development process, ITK clearly distanced itself from the bill. The Maskwacis Cultural College (MCC), a ‘Centre of Excellence in Academics and Cree Indigenous Knowledge’, also stated in a [position paper](#) that “they do not agree with a consultation process on developing an Indigenous language legislation nor do they support the Federal Government of Canada’s plan to legislate the language”.¹⁹⁾ While the AFN and the MNC applauded the introduction of the bill, there has been strong criticism from the ITK and other Indigenous organizations, who have called the Act a colonial symbol.²⁰⁾ The AFN’s approval of the Act might be viewed in light of the criticisms the organization has faced in the recent past, for not putting enough pressure on the federal government²¹⁾, as well as not adequately representing the Indigenous population as a whole. This has led to calls for a complete overhaul of the organization²²⁾, raising the question of whether the people that the AFN officially represents are in favor of Bill C-91.

Replication of colonial policies

Several Inuit organizations, including the ITK, the Inuit Circumpolar Council Canada, Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated and others, issued a [statement](#) at the beginning of February, asserting that, “Inuit participation in and support for this legislative initiative has been contingent on the expectation that any bill would be distinctions-based and include substantive Inuktitut-specific provisions that build on existing rights for Inuktitut.”²³⁾ The ITK considers the bill’s lack of Inuit-specificity as a symbol of its colonial character: “The absence of any Inuit-specific content suggests this bill is yet another legislative initiative developed behind closed doors by a colonial system and then imposed on Inuit,” the organization has stated.²⁴⁾ Nevertheless, they [emphasize](#) the strength of the Inuktitut language: “Eighty four percent of Inuit within the 51 communities that make up Inuit Nunangat²⁵⁾ report the ability to speak our language – Inuktitut – making it the most resilient indigenous language spoken in Canada. Inuktitut has official language status in Nunavut and the Northwest Territories, and is an official language of the Nunatsiavut Government, whose jurisdiction encompasses northern Labrador”.²⁶⁾

Concerns of greater control through the state

The government’s intention of regulating their language reminded the Four Chiefs of Maskwacis of previous attempts to (de-)construct Indigenous identities in Canada. The potential regulations of Indigenous languages that could develop from the bill have repercussions on the core identity of Indigenous peoples, which in the past was often defined by contrasting and disassociating it from a colonizing society.

Carefully distancing itself from any reproduction of colonial processes, the MCC said: “Understanding the implications of imperialistic legislations, policies, and understanding the ways that legislated identities have been constructed for Aboriginal people in Canada are important. The processes and methods can potentially be replicated as it relates to Indigenous languages therefore, we cannot be part of the discourse of replicating colonial classifications and regulations in this form.”²⁷⁾

The MCC further sets Indigenous languages clearly apart from Canada’s official languages of English and French, refusing the same regulations for Indigenous languages, as the regulation by the Government of Canada would risk the Maskwacìs people’s “inherent right to determine our own destiny”.²⁸⁾ They add: “The Treaties (Maskwacìs Nêhiyawêwin Declaration – June 21, 2016 and United Nation Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples) reinforce our language rights. We cannot risk these rights to be further legislated by the Federal Government of Canada. Nêhiyawêwin cannot be advanced and regulated in the same way as the official languages act for French and English in Canada”.²⁹⁾

Inefficacy

Another criticism is based on previous efforts to address Indigenous languages’ disadvantage, which have largely proven ineffective. According to the ITK, “the creation of a national indigenous languages commissioner’s office, which is the centrepiece of the bill, will be little more than a substitute for the Aboriginal Languages Initiative Program³⁰⁾, itself a failed program which has overseen the decline of indigenous languages in Canada in recent decades”.³¹⁾

Nunavut’s former Member of Parliament, Hunter Tootoo, who himself is Inuk, understands the ITK’s criticism and voted against the second reading of Bill (February 20, 2019). During his time as Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) in Nunavut, he was proud of the passage of the Education Act and Inuit Language Protection Act, which promised a fully bilingual education system by 2019. However, such a system is far from being implemented. Already in 2013, a report by the Auditor General of Canada to the Legislative Assembly of Nunavut concluded that the “Government of Nunavut’s Department of Education has not adequately managed most aspects of implementation of the Education Act.” The reasons include a lack of qualified bilingual teachers, a lack of teaching resources and support, low school attendance and human resource capacity issues of the Government of Nunavut. In June 2019, Nunavut’s MLAs considered amending the Act and postponing the schedule to avoid being in breach of their own legislation.³²⁾ As a result, they introduced Bill 25, “An Act to Amend the Education Act and the Inuit Language Protection Act”, which passed the second reading in the Legislative Assembly on June 5, 2019.³³⁾ Among other provisions, Bill 25 extends the deadlines for implementing bilingual education and delays the application of the obligations related to instruction in the Inuit Language.

Insecure funding

The Bill comes two years after the Government of Canada invested \$89.9 million over three years for promoting Indigenous languages and cultures. However, some communities, such as the Maskwacis Cree Tribal Council, question the funding that comes with the bill. One of the Maskwacis Cree Tribal Council's concerns is that the financing required for the federal bureaucratic structures set up by the bill will divert money away from language programs and projects. The ITK agreed and said: "Unlike provincial and territorial languages commissioners, the national indigenous languages commissioner will be a powerless advocacy body, perpetually burdened by costly and onerous reporting duties. It will be controlled by the federal government and serve to consume resources best directed to indigenous peoples ourselves".³⁴⁾

Mainstay of culture and identity

Despite the different conceptions of political representation and what constitutes legal regulations favorable to promoting Indigenous languages, the importance of the languages and their link to the survival of cultures is uncontested. This is why the topic is so hotly debated and of critical importance, not only for Indigenous peoples, but for Canadian society as a whole. During an interview on CBC news, AFN National Chief Perry Bellegarde commented: "Canadians and all parliamentarians must support this bill, because we all understand that language is identity, language is culture, language is life".³⁵⁾

Likewise, Åsa Larsson Blind, former president of the Saami Council, explained in a personal interview the importance of aspects often overlooked when it comes to the languages, in this case the Indigenous Saami languages in the Nordic countries: "A language is so much more than just a means of communication: It's a source of knowledge. Sometimes we simplify what a language is and the true value and meaning of the diversity of languages." Referring to the constant translations necessary between minority and other languages, she recognized that languages carry knowledge and that the "true meaning of words" is not always easy to translate.

To conclude, one can say that even though big advances were made in recognizing, maintaining and promoting Indigenous languages, there is still ample room for improvement. The current debates show the need to emphasize the link between language, culture and identity and therefore the languages' role in a diverse and sustainable society. It would also be beneficial to reinforce the visibility of Indigenous languages' contribution to contemporary challenges, such as the development of inclusive societies based on equality or the fight against climate change, which has a strong impact on the homeland of the Indigenous peoples of the Arctic. More research needs to be done to determine effective structures to ensure Indigenous peoples' inclusion in decision-making, as well as to guarantee their rights. Consistent, reliable, effective and secure funding also remains a crucial challenge to overcome.

References[±]

