

Creating the booklet *Indigenous Languages in Canada*

The creation of the booklet *Indigenous Languages in Canada* was initiated by the Canadian Language Museum (CLM) and brought to fruition through the generous support of the Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies. The CLM undertook this project because we believe that it is very important to raise awareness of the rich diversity of Indigenous languages in Canada.

THE CANADIAN LANGUAGE MUSEUM

The CLM was founded in 2011 with the goal of promoting knowledge about the cultural heritage embedded in all the languages used in Canada: Indigenous languages, official languages, more recent immigrant languages, and signed languages. The museum feels a special responsibility to Canada's Indigenous communities, all of which, big and small, are facing great challenges today in maintaining their languages.

The CLM's exhibit space is on York University's Glendon College campus, in Toronto, but its reach is Canada-wide. Every year the CLM creates a new travelling exhibit, and these exhibits have toured the country from coast to coast: from Victoria to St. John's to Moose Factory on James Bay. The exhibits have been seen by tens of thousands of Canadians in libraries, community centres, small museums, schools, colleges, and universities, at festivals, conferences, and meetings, including gatherings of Indigenous language educators.

The exhibits comprise six or seven double-sided panels, one side English, the other French, with an audio or video component. All of the exhibit content can be seen on our website at language.museum.ca, along with the web exhibit *Messages from the Mosaic*, an introduction to the languages of Canada, and a video, *Two Row Wampum: Preserving Indigenous Languages in Toronto*. The

BY ELAINE GOLD

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titles of the exhibits reveal the range of topics the CLM has explored:

- *Canadian English, Eh!*
- *Le français au Canada : D'un océan à l'autre*
- *Speaking the Inuit Way*
- *Cree: The People's Language*
- *A Tapestry of Voices: Celebrating Canada's Languages*
- *Read Between the Signs: 150 Years of Language in Toronto*
- *Beyond Words: Dictionaries and Indigenous Languages*
- *Sign Languages of Canada: Past, Present and Future*

LEARNING ABOUT INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES

From discussions with visitors to our exhibits, we have learned that Canadians know very little about Indigenous languages. Visitors are amazed to learn that there are more than 60 Indigenous languages in 12 different language families. At the same time, we have encountered enormous interest in learning more about Indigenous languages. We realized that it would be very helpful to have a booklet available that described the different Indigenous languages and language families and pointed out some of the unique characteristics of these languages.

I am very fortunate that linguistics professor Will Oxford, of the University of Manitoba, was willing to participate in this project and share his research and writings about Indigenous languages in Canada. Our goal was to present linguistic information in a format that would be accessible to the general reader. Prof.

Oxford has done an excellent job in highlighting the fascinating variety of languages spoken across the country, explaining linguistic concepts, and introducing important issues of the effects of colonization on these languages. He has brought together research by over 60 scholars to present information about Indigenous languages across the country.

The booklet is divided into six topics:

- approaching the study of Indigenous languages from an informed and respectful perspective;
- the geographical distribution of Indigenous languages in Canada;
- notable structural properties of Indigenous languages;
- the writing systems used for Indigenous languages;
- the effects of contact between Indigenous and non-Indigenous languages; and
- the current vitality of Indigenous languages in Canada, including discussion of language endangerment, maintenance, and revitalization.

We are confident that this booklet will be of interest to a wide range of people in both the Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. We know of no other short publication that provides an introduction to all of the Indigenous languages in Canada. We believe that this knowledge can lead to a better appreciation of the value of policies to improve and protect the status of these languages. In this way, the CLM hopes to contribute to the ongoing processes of language revitalization and reconciliation. 🍁