

Indigenous language policies in Canada in the wake of Bill C-91: Report on a national colloquium at Glendon College, December 2019

Coinciding with the United Nations' Year of Indigenous Languages (2019), the Centre for Research on Language and Culture Contact (CRLCC) at Glendon College hosted a national colloquium on Canada's Indigenous language policies in the wake of Bill C-91 in December 2019.

This colloquium was the second such gathering of Indigenous and Settler scholars and activists. The first, in 2016, was York University's response to the calls to action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission on matters related to the long-ignored subject of Indigenous language rights in Canada. That gathering contributed to the federal government's announcement, in December 2016, of its intention to introduce Canada's first-ever federal legislation in support of Canada's Indigenous languages. Bill C-91, the *Indigenous Languages Act*, became law in June 2019.

The three colloquium program organizers—Amos Key Jr., Vice-Provost, Indigenous Initiatives, Brock University; Maya Chacaby, Anishinaabemowin Instructor, Linguistics and Language Studies, Glendon College; and Ian Martin, Department of English, Glendon College—are deeply indebted to the individual and institutional sponsors of the event: Sylvie Rosienski-Pellerin, director of the CRLCC and Glendon's Organized Research Unit; Prisca Ng, administrative assistant at the CRLCC; Reagan Brown, Research Officer, Glendon College; the Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies; Celia Haig-Brown, Vice-President for Research, York University; the Office of the Glendon Principal; Elaine Gold, director of the Canadian Language Museum; the Indigenous Studies Program of the University of Toronto; and the NORDIK

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EXAMINING THE STATE OF INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE POLICY

The gathering stretched over three days, December 4-6, with about 75 participants, both Indigenous and Settler, from across Canada. There were 20 presentations touching on the theme of the current state of languages and the potential impact of the new legislation on the future of Canada's Indigenous languages.

The opening plenary speaker, Stephen Gagnon, the federal lead representative on Indigenous languages legislation, described the "co-development" process through which the federal lead ministry, Canadian Heritage, worked with national Indigenous organizations and others in drafting Bill C-91.

The second plenary speaker was Aluki Kotierk, president of Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated, the land claim association representing the Inuit of Nunavut. She presented a trenchant critique of both the federal process and the result of the legislation, which, she argued, failed to deal with important Inuit-specific requirements.

The third plenary speaker, Roger Jones, a legal adviser to the Assembly of First Nations (AFN), defended the AFN's support for the process and the result, which they characterized as a first step.

The colloquium participants were the first to hear "breaking news" from the

1980s. A Cabinet document from the years of the Mulroney government's negotiations with the Inuit leadership prior to the creation of Nunavut had recently come to light. The document revealed that the federal government had no intention of responding positively to Inuit language demands in the creation of Canada's new territory with an 80 percent Inuktitut-speaking population. Cries of "shame" rang out in the conference room when this news was announced by Aluki Kotierk. It appears that the new legislation continues a long tradition of the federal government refusing to address Inuit demands for recognition of their language.

The colloquium heard of initiatives supporting the teaching and increased use of Indigenous languages across the country. Joe Karetak and Shirley Tagalik spoke on curriculum developments in Nunavut grounded in Inuit Qaujima-jatuqangit (IQ); Suzanne Gessner reported on initiatives of the First Peoples' Cultural Council of British Columbia, the province where 40 percent of Indigenous languages are found; Joanne Tompkins and her colleagues from the Faculty of Education of St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, Nova Scotia reported on the success of their strong partnership with the Mi'kmaw communities of that province; and the work of Simon Fraser University (Mark Fettes) and the University of British Columbia (Candace Galla and Mark Turin) was celebrated. The work of the University of Alberta's CILLDI (Canadian Indigenous Languages and Literacy Development Institute) was discussed by Heather Blair; and Sean Meades of

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is a member of a historically marginalized community that has not enjoyed full access to such institutions. The linguist sets the agenda for the research and decides what kinds of knowledge are valuable; the speaker provides the data that the linguist needs. The linguist leverages their published research to climb the professional ranks; the speaker is compensated for their time at an hourly rate. The overall community of academic linguists gains an interesting new set of data; the overall Indigenous community gains little of practical value. Does this sound like an equal exchange?

It should be emphasized that not all linguistic research proceeds in this way. In fact, this model of research is much less common than it once was. As Rice (2006) discusses, many linguists now

incorporate an element of *advocacy* in their research, aiming to do work that has clear benefits for the speech community; and the gold standard for linguistic research is now an *empowerment* model in which the community itself plays an active role in setting the research agenda and carrying out the work. Successful examples of this model in Canada include recent dictionaries of East Cree (dictionary.eastcree.org) and Innu (dictionary.innu-aimun.ca) and the “Cayuga: Our Oral Legacy” project (cayugalanguage.ca).

Nevertheless, despite such successful collaborations, there remains a disconnect between many of the goals of the field of linguistics and the needs of speakers of Indigenous languages. Not all linguistic research involving Indigenous

languages has immediately obvious benefits for Indigenous communities. Although this fact is clear, our understanding of its implications continues to evolve along with other aspects of Indigenous–Settler relations in Canada. 🍁

REFERENCES

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Algoma University, Sault Ste. Marie spoke on the factors of both historical language shift and contemporary revitalization in Anishinaabe communities of northern Ontario.

Indigenous language rights lawyer David Leitch, who had spoken at the 2016 colloquium, spoke on the failure of the new legislation to provide any new actionable language rights to Indigenous people; demographer Mary Jane Norris presented her new interactive website on the demographics of Indigen-

ous communities and languages; and Adam Richard presented an online dictionary portal, developed in Mohawk but adaptable to any language.

In all, it was a three-day opportunity to share ideas and initiatives with the common goal of ensuring that Indigenous languages will gain strength—both speakers and opportunities for use—in the future.

Most of the colloquium speakers are also contributors to an upcoming volume (eds. Key Jr., Chacaby & Martin from

McGill-Queen’s University Press). The collection is expected to appear in 2021, in time for the UN Decade of Indigenous Languages, which the United Nations recently declared will start in 2022. News on further developments in the field of Indigenous language policy will be posted on the CRLCC website. 🍁



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