INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES IN CANADA

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This booklet is an introduction to the linguistic study of the Indigenous languages spoken in Canada. The following topics are covered:

- approaching the study of Indigenous languages from an informed and respectful perspective

- the geographical distribution of Indigenous languages in Canada

- some notable structural properties of Indigenous languages

- the writing systems used for Indigenous languages

- the effects of contact between Indigenous and non-Indigenous languages

- the current vitality of Indigenous languages in Canada

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Indigenous Languages in Canada

Author: Will Oxford
Editor: Elaine Gold

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Contents

Preface

This booklet is an introduction to the linguistic study of the Indigenous languages spoken in Canada. The following topics are covered:

- approaching the study of Indigenous languages from an informed and respectful perspective
- the geographical distribution of Indigenous languages in Canada
- some interesting structural properties of the languages
- the writing systems used for Indigenous languages
- contact between Indigenous and non-Indigenous languages
- the present-day status of Indigenous languages in Canada

1 Approaching the study of Indigenous languages

French and English are the most widely-spoken languages across much of Canada today, but it hasn't always been this way. Before the arrival of Europeans, the territory that is now Canada was home to a rich and diverse landscape of Indigenous languages. This linguistic landscape still exists today, although its diversity is under threat. In this section, we place our study of Indigenous languages on a respectful and informed footing by thinking about our terminology and dispelling some potential misconceptions.

1.1 Terms for Indigenous peoples and languages

Speakers of English use various words to refer to Indigenous peoples and languages, including *Indian*, *Native*, *Aboriginal*, and *Indigenous*. Many people in Canada now consider the term *Indian* to be outdated and offensive, and it should be avoided by those outside of Indigenous cultures. Some Indigenous people and groups do still use the term, however, such as the Manitoba Indian Education Association and the Saskatchewan Indian Cultural Centre.

Opinions regarding the terms *Native*, *Aboriginal*, and *Indigenous* vary and have changed over time. The term *Aboriginal* is enshrined in Section 35 of the Canadian Constitution Act (1982), which defines "aboriginal peoples of Canada" as consisting of the "Indian" (i.e. First Nations), Inuit, and Métis peoples. The term *Aboriginal* continues to be used widely today; an example is the name of the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network.

In recent years, however, many people have come to prefer the term *Indigenous*, particularly following the adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007). The use of *Indigenous* emphasizes the connection to the land and is applicable across national borders. The Canadian government recognized this preference in 2015 by changing the name of the department of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development to *Indigenous and Northern Affairs*. We will use the term *Indigenous* in this booklet.

A further consideration involves capitalization: what is the difference between *indigenous* people and *Indigenous* people? You can see the difference most clearly with the word *native*: a *native* person could be anyone who was born in a particular area (e.g. "Sue lives in Calgary but she is native to Toronto")

while a *Native* person is someone who belongs to a particular Indigenous nation. Following this logic, we will capitalize the word *Indigenous* in order to be clear that it refers to a particular group of peoples.

1.2   Names of particular Indigenous languages

Words such as *Aboriginal* and *Indigenous* are cover terms for a diverse group of peoples and languages. The use of such cover terms is sometimes criticized for defining Indigenous peoples in terms of the Europeans who colonized their land. When possible, it is best to use more specific words that recognize particular Indigenous nations. Here, too, there is much variation.

Some of the variation reflects the existence of two kinds of names for ethnolinguistic groups and languages. An **endonym** is what members of a group call themselves or their language. For example, people in Germany, Finland, and Japan refer to their national languages as *Deutsch, Suomi,* and *Nihongo* respectively. These words are endonyms. An **exonym** is a word that some other group uses to refer to a group or language. For example, in English, we refer to the above three languages as *German, Finnish,* and *Japanese*. These words are exonyms.

Many Indigenous languages in Canada have been referred to by English or French exonyms in addition to the endonyms used by the speakers themselves. Some examples are given in Table 1.

Endonym	Exonym
Nuu-chah-nulth	Nootka
St'át'imcets	Lillooet
Nakota	Assiniboine
TłĮchǫ Yatıì	Dogrib
Innu	Montagnais

Table 1. Some endonyms and exonyms for Indigenous languages in Canada

In some cases there is more than one endonym or exonym. An example of multiple endonyms comes from the language known in English as *Cree*, which has a different endonym in each of its dialects: Plains Cree speakers call the language *Nêhiyawêwin*, Woods Cree speakers call it *Nîhithawîwin*, and so on for other dialects. An example of multiple exonyms comes from the dialect

of *Anishinaabemowin* spoken south of Lake Superior, which is known in English as both *Southwestern Ojibwe* and *Chippewa*.

Over time there has been a shift towards an increased use of endonyms. For example, linguistics papers written in the 1980s refer to the *Montagnais* language while papers written in the 2000s refer to the same language as *Innu*. We cannot make a general rule that it is always preferable to use the endonym, however, as many exonyms remain in common use. The best practice is to use whichever words members of the group prefer to use when speaking English or French. In this booklet, languages will be identified using the term that is most common in the current linguistic literature and alternative terms will be given in parentheses (e.g. Tłı̨chǫ Yatı̀ (Dogrib)).

> **The complex origins of exonyms**
>
> The history of exonyms can be quite complicated. The Algonquian peoples of what is now the American Midwest referred to a neighbouring Siouan nation using the exonym *Winnebago* 'people of the fetid waters'. English speakers borrowed this exonym directly. French speakers took the additional step of (mis-)translating it into French, creating the rather unsavoury exonym *les Puants* ('the stinkards'). Both exonyms are completely different from the endonym used by the nation itself, which is *Hoocąk* (or *Ho-Chunk*). Linguists have now switched to using the endonym.

1.3   Avoiding misconceptions about Indigenous languages

Before we look in detail at the Indigenous languages of Canada, there are a few basic facts that we should discuss in order to avoid potential misconceptions.

Indigenous languages are not "primitive". Prior to the 20th century, it was common for Indigenous languages to be characterized as "simple" or "primitive", even by scholars. We now know that this is utterly baseless. Indigenous languages have the same level of complexity and sophistication as all other languages. They are also subject to the same principles of structure and change that apply to languages around the world. If anyone is in doubt about the complexity of Indigenous languages, there is an easy way to convince yourself: go

and try to learn one. Anyone who does so will quickly let go of any notions of "simplicity"!

Indigenous languages are living. There is no denying that many Indigenous languages are in a precarious position. Some languages no longer have any fluent speakers and others are spoken by only a few elderly people. We should not make the mistake, however, of referring to Indigenous languages exclusively in the past tense. Dozens of Indigenous languages continue to be spoken in Canada; some, such as Cree, Inuktitut, and Ojibwe, have many thousands of speakers. While language endangerment is an important topic, it is also important that we do not allow the narrative of language death to overshadow the reality of language life. Indigenous languages continue to play a central and vital role in communities across the country.

Indigenous languages are numerous. A quick online search will reveal many people asking questions such as "What is the Indian word for 'buffalo'?" and "What is the Native word for 'woman'?" Although well-meaning, these questions make the error of lumping all Indigenous peoples together as a single ethnolinguistic group. To see why this doesn't make sense, simply substitute the word *European* for *Indian/Native* in the above questions. There is no Native word for 'woman' in the same way that there is no European word for 'woman': just as Europe contains a huge number of different ethnolinguistic groups, each with their own distinct vocabulary, so too does Indigenous North America.

Indigenous languages are diverse. In addition to being numerous, Indigenous languages are also diverse. In Canada alone, there are eight *completely unrelated* families of Indigenous languages (Campbell 1997; Mithun 1999). Indigenous languages from different families can be as different from each other as English is from Chinese. For example, Plains Cree, spoken in Alberta and Saskatchewan, has only ten distinct consonant sounds, while St'át'imcets (Lillooet), spoken in British Columbia, has 44 distinct consonant sounds.

2 Indigenous language families in Canada

The Indigenous languages in Canada fall into eight distinct language families, plus three additional unclassified languages. The full list of language groups is given in Table 2. For each of the bolded groups in the table, the map in Figure 1 shows the rough geographical distribution at the time of first European contact. Note that although the map shows Canada only, the Canada-US border has little relevance to the distribution of Indigenous peoples and several of the language groups extend across the border.

Table 2 also shows the number of mother-tongue speakers of each language group as reported in the 2016 Canadian census. Linguists generally regard these numbers with skepticism, as it may not be the case that everyone who reports a language as their mother tongue is necessarily a fluent speaker of that language. In some instances linguists who work in Indigenous communities have given much smaller estimates of the true number of fluent speakers. For example, the 2016 census reports 585 speakers of Halkomelem (a Salishan language), but the foreword of a recent dictionary (Galloway 2009) reports only 62 fully fluent first-language speakers. However, the numbers in Table 2 are still useful as a rough indication of the relative size of each family.
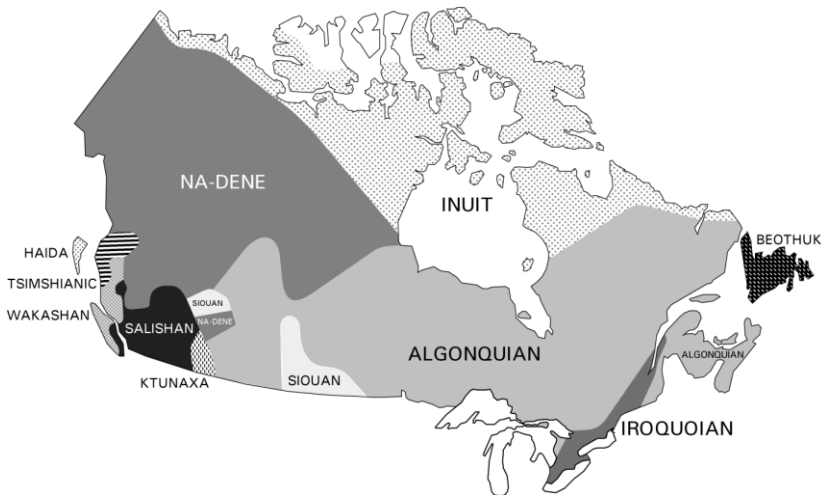
Figure 1. Approximate distribution of language groups at time of first European contact (adapted from Goddard 1999)

Language group		Speakers
Inuit family		37,715
Na-Dene family	Dene family	18,775
	Tlingit language	120
Algonquian family		143,885
Iroquoian family		1,485
Siouan family		4,600
Pacific Northwest area	**Salishan** family	2,865
	Wakashan family	1,065
	Tsimshianic family	1,725
Unclassified languages	**Haida**	130
	Ktunaxa	120
	Beothuk	(extinct)

Table 2. Indigenous language groups and speakers in Canada (2016 census)

No genetic relationships have been established between any of the language families listed in Table 2. The Algonquian and Siouan families, for example, are just as separate from each other as the Indo-European and Finno-Ugric families in Europe are.

Long-distance relationships

The search for genetic relatives of Indigenous languages has led to some surprising proposals. It has been suggested more than once that the Na-Dene languages of North America (e.g. Dëne Sųłiné, spoken in north-western Canada) and the Sino-Tibetan languages of Asia (e.g. Chinese) may have originated from a common ancestor. Very few linguists take this proposal seriously today.

This is not to say, however, that distant genetic relationships are impossible. The following Indigenous language groups (check out their locations in Figure 1) have been proven beyond any doubt to be related to geographically distant languages:

▪ The **Inuit** languages belong to the same family as the Yupik languages of Siberia.

- The **Algonquian** languages belong to the same family as Yurok and Wiyot, which are spoken on the California coast over 1000 miles from the nearest Algonquian language.

- The **Na-Dene** language family, which may appear to be restricted to northern Canada in Figure 1, in fact includes several languages in the Southwestern United States, including Navajo and Apache.

Evidence has also recently been presented to support a relationship between the Na-Dene languages of North America and the Yeniseian languages of central Siberia (Vajda 2010). If proven, this would be by far the most distant genetic relationship established between languages of North America and Asia. The jury is still out on this proposal, but the initial response from linguists has been mostly positive.

The rest of this section gives an introduction to each of the Indigenous language groups in Canada, which are presented in the same order as they are shown in Table 2, roughly from north to south and east to west.

2.1   Inuit language family

The Inuit languages are a chain of closely-related dialects spoken all across the far north of Canada, as well as in Alaska and Greenland. The Inuit dialects in Canada are often referred to as "Inuktitut", but this term is also sometimes used more specifically to denote only the eastern dialects. As an example of the degree to which the Inuit dialects vary, Table 3 shows the pronunciation of the words for 'house' and 'morning' in several dialects.

	Siglitun (NWT)	**Aivilik (Nunavut)**	**N. Baffin (Nunavut)**	**Nunavik (Quebec)**	**Nunatsiavut (Labrador)**
'house'	iglu	iglu	iglu	illu	illuk
'morning'	ublaaq	ublaaq	ullaaq	ullaaq	ullaak

Table 3. Inuit dialect variation (Dorais 2010)

Inuit languages continue to be widely spoken in Canada. The 2016 Canadian census reports 37,715 native speakers of Inuit languages, a number that is

second only to the Algonquian family. In Nunavut, where Inuktitut and Inuinnaqtun are official languages, 65% of the total population reported an Inuit language as their mother tongue in the 2016 census.

Inuit languages have relatively straightforward sound systems. There are three basic vowels, /i a u/, which can be short or long (e.g. /a/ versus /aa/), and around 15 consonants (depending on the dialect). A particularly salient property of Inuit consonant inventories is the contrast between the velar stop /k/ and /q/; /q/ is described as a "uvular stop" and is pronounced further back in the mouth than /k/. This contrast is the only difference between the words *kimmik* 'heel' and *qimmik* 'dog' (Nunatsiavut dialect).

Inuit languages are well-known for being highly **polysynthetic**. This means that a huge amount of information can be packed into a single word. Many complex English sentences can be expressed using a single Inuit word, as in the examples in (1) (Compton 2012).

(1) a. *Nirinnguagasuarumajuq.*
         niri-nngua-gasua-ruma-juq
         eat-pretend-try-want-he/she
         'He/she wants to try to pretend to eat.'

     b. *Igluliutuinnarumajunga.*
         iglu-liu-tuinna-ruma-junga
         house-make-only-want-I
         'I just want to make houses.'

Before we move on to the next language family, we should address a claim that you've probably heard about Inuit languages. It goes something like this: "The Inuit have 100 words for snow." Given the environment in which most Inuit people live, this claim may seem to make sense, but is it actually true? Some linguists have argued that it is not, pointing out that there are in fact as few as two or three distinct roots for 'snow' in many Inuit languages. West Greenlandic, for example, has only *qanik* 'snow in the air' and *aput* 'snow on the ground' (Martin 1986; Pullum 1989). So where did the "100 words" claim come from? It may be due to the rich morphology of Inuit languages, which allows the roots for 'snow' to combine with other morphemes to create a large number of more complex words. However, like the forms in (1) above, these complex words are more comparable to English phrases or sentences than they are to single English words. This means that there's really no meaningful

way to compare the number of words in the two languages. The structures of the languages are simply too different: what counts as a "word" in English is completely unlike what counts as a "word" in Inuit.

2.2 Na-Dene language family

The Na-Dene languages are spoken directly south of the Inuit languages over a very large area of western Canada that spans the Yukon and Northwest Territories and the four western provinces. Within Canada, there are two branches of the Na-Dene family. One branch consists of the large group of Dene (or "Athabaskan") languages. The other branch consists of a single language, Tlingit, which is spoken on the Pacific coast.

Of the seventeen Na-Dene languages in Canada, the most widely spoken is Dëne Sųłiné (Chipewyan), which was reported to have 11,325 speakers in the 2016 census. This makes it the fourth-largest Indigenous language in terms of speakers in Canada, after Cree, Inuktitut, and Ojibwe. Other members of the family with over 1,000 speakers in Canada are Tłı̨chǫ Yatıì (Dogrib), Slavey (Dene Dháh/Sahtúot'ı̨nę Yatı̨́), and Carrier (Dakelh). At the other end of the scale, several of the languages are critically endangered. For example, CBC News reported in 2011 that Tsuut'ina (Sarcee) was spoken by only 50 people, with the youngest fluent speaker being 60 years old.

The Na-Dene languages have complex sound systems. In Tłı̨chǫ Yatıì (Dogrib), for example, there are 16 vowel and 37 consonant sounds. The vowels can be long or short and nasal or oral, so that short /a/, short nasal /ã/, long /aː/, and long nasal /ãː/ are all distinct vowel sounds. The language also distinguishes between low tone (marked by the accent `) and high tone (unmarked). A difference in the tone on the final vowel is the only thing that distinguishes the pairs of words in Table 4.

xàt'**a**	'fly out'	xàt'**à**	'be taken out'
di**ı**	'this'	di**ı̀**	'now'
gots'**ǫ**	'from it'	gots'**ǫ̀**	'toward it'

Table 4. Tone contrasts in Tłı̨chǫ Yatıì (Marinakis 2003)

Na-Dene languages are well-known for adding a large number of prefixes to the verb. One analysis recognizes 24 distinct slots for prefixes! The prolific

use of prefixes is illustrated by the verb form in (2), which is from the Kaska language (O'Donnell 2004). This verb form contains nine prefixes; the root *tan* 'look' is at the very end of the verb.[1]

(2)   *Meganégenhtan.*

me-	ga-	né-	ge-	n-	h-	tan
3.SG.OBJ-	at-	distributed-	3.PL.SUBJ-	mood-	classifier-	look

'They looked at him/them.'

2.3   Algonquian language family

The Algonquian languages are spoken to the south of the Inuit and Na-Dene families. Like these other two families, the Algonquian languages stretch over a broad expanse of Canada: from the edge of the Rocky Mountains all the way to the Atlantic coast (as well as in several parts of the United States). Five Algonquian languages are currently spoken in Canada: Cree, Ojibwe, Mi'gmaq, Blackfoot, and Maliseet-Passamaquoddy. Two additional Algonquian languages, Munsee Delaware and Western Abenaki, have few, if any, native speakers remaining in Canada.

Cree has the largest number of speakers of any Indigenous language in Canada, with over 100,000 speakers reported across six provinces in the 2016 census. Ojibwe has approximately 30,000 speakers in Canada, with additional speakers in the United States. Cree and Ojibwe both consist of several dialects, which are listed in Table 5. Some of these dialects, such as Innu and Oji-Cree, are distinct enough that they are sometimes regarded as separate languages.

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[1] This example, like many subsequent examples in this booklet, contains abbreviations that express the functions of some of the morphemes. Any important abbreviations will be explained as the example is discussed. For reference, here is a key to the abbreviations that appear in the examples: 1 = first person, 2 = second person, 3 = third person, Ø = epenthetic segment, DET = determiner, FACT = factual mood, INSTR = instrumental case, NON3 = non-third-person, NSF = noun suffix, NsS = neuter singular subject, OBJ = object, OBV = obviative, PL = plural, PROX = proximate, PUNC = punctual aspect, SG = singular, SUBJ = subject.

Cree-Innu-Naskapi dialects	Ojibwe dialects
Plains Cree (AB, SK)	Saulteaux (SK, MB)
Woods Cree (SK, MB)	Lac Seul Ojibwe (MB, ON)
Swampy Cree (SK, MB, ON)	Oji-Cree (MB, ON)
Moose Cree (ON)	Southwestern Ojibwe (MB, ON)
Atikamekw (QC)	Central Ojibwe (ON)
East Cree (QC)	Odawa (Ottawa) (ON)
Naskapi (QC, NL)	Eastern Ojibwe (ON)
Innu (Montagnais) (QC, NL)	Algonquin (ON, QU)
	Nipissing (ON, QU)

Table 5. Cree-Innu-Naskapi and Ojibwe dialects (MacKenzie 1980; Rhodes 2006)

Related and unrelated language names

It's easy to get confused by the name of the Cree dialect *Innu*, which sounds very close to *Inuit*. Let's be clear: there is absolutely no connection between these two words! You may be surprised to learn, however, that there *is* a connection between the words *Innu* and *Illinois*. The state Illinois is named after the Illinois nation, who, like the Innu, are an Algonquian people. The words *Innu* and *Illinois* go back to the related Proto-Algonquian words *elenyiwa* and *elenwēwa*, which meant 'ordinary person' and 's/he speaks in an ordinary way' (Costa 2007).

The other Algonquian languages in Canada have fewer speakers, but the numbers are still relatively high: Mi'gmaq has 8,030 speakers in the Maritimes, Blackfoot has 3,250 speakers in Alberta, and Maliseet has approximately 500 speakers in New Brunswick (plus additional speakers of the closely related Passamaquoddy dialect in the United States). Table 6 surveys the words for 'woman' and 'two' in the Algonquian languages of Canada.

	Cree	Ojibwe	Maliseet	Mi'gmaq	Blackfoot
'woman'	iskweːw	ikkwe	skwe-	skwe-	aakííwa
'two'	niːso	niizh	nis	neːs	naat-

Table 6. Algonquian language variation (Oxford 2014; Rhodes & Costa 2003; Frantz 2009)

The sound systems of Algonquian languages are fairly uncomplicated. Plains Cree, for example, has seven vowel sounds and just ten consonant sounds, which is quite small from a crosslinguistic perspective. On the other hand, the word structure is quite complex. For example, there is a set of affixes that are used to express either the subject of a verb (as in *we sleep*) or the possessor of a noun (as in *our horse*). Plains Cree expresses both 'we' and 'our' with the same prefix-suffix combination *ni-…-inân* (Wolfart 1973):

(3) a. *ninipânân*   b. *nitêminân*
     ni- nipâ -**inân**   **ni**- têm   -**inân**
     1- sleep -1.PL   1- horse -1.PL
     'we sleep'   'our horse'

2.4   Iroquoian language family

The Iroquoian languages are spoken around the eastern Great Lakes and along the St. Lawrence River, extending south into the United States. Six Iroquoian languages are currently spoken in Canada: Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga, Oneida, Mohawk, and Tuscarora. The family also includes the Cherokee language spoken in the southeastern United States.

Of the Iroquoian languages spoken in Canada, only Mohawk still has a sizeable number of speakers—1295 in the 2016 census. The other languages are severely endangered. Cayuga, for example, was recently estimated to have just 60 native speakers (Dyck & Kumar 2012).

Like the neighbouring Algonquian languages, Iroquoian languages have relatively straightforward sound systems. Two particularly characteristic properties of Iroquoian sound systems are nasal vowels and the absence of consonants formed with the lips, such as /p/ or /f/.

Iroquoian languages, like the other families we have looked at, have complex word structures. This is illustrated by the Onondaga sentence in (4), which consists of a single word composed of seven morphemes (Barrie & Alboiu 2008).

(4)   *Waʔthyadadyǫ́dyahdę̨ʔ.*
     waʔ- t-   hy-   atat-   yõtya -ht   -ẽʔ
     factual- dualic- 3.dual- reflexive- laugh -cause -punctual
     'They (two people) made each other laugh.'

2.5   Siouan language family

The Siouan language family is centred on the Great Plains, extending over a large area of the central United States and a smaller area of the Canadian prairies. The family has several branches, but the three Siouan languages spoken in Canada all belong to the Dakotan branch: **Nakoda** (Stoney), spoken in Alberta, **Nakota** (Assiniboine), spoken in Saskatchewan, and **Dakota-Lakota** (Sioux), spoken in Saskatchewan and Manitoba.

The Dakota-Lakota language is in fact a chain of three dialects: Lakota (Teton), Western Dakota (Yankton-Yanktonai), and Eastern Dakota (Santee-Sisseton). With approximately 25,000 speakers, Dakota-Lakota is one of the most spoken Indigenous languages in North America. A large majority of the speakers are in the United States, however.

To illustrate the degree of variation among the Siouan languages of Canada, Table 7 shows the words for 'uncle' and 'rabbit' in Nakoda (Stoney), Lakota, and Eastern Dakota.

	Nakoda	Lakota	Dakota
'uncle'	nekší	lekší	dekší
'rabbit'	maštíyą	maštį́ča	maštíŋća

Table 7. Siouan language variation (Rankin et al. 2015)

A well-known grammatical property of Siouan languages is the distinction between "active" and "stative" subjects. You can see this difference in the pair of Lakota sentences in (5) (Woolford 2008). Both sentences have the same subject 'I', which is expressed by a prefix on the verb. Notice, however, that there are two different versions of this prefix: *wa-* in (5a) and *ma-* in (5b). How do speakers of Lakota choose between these two different ways of saying 'I'? The choice depends on the meaning of the verb. The *wa-* version of 'I' is used when the verb expresses an action, as in (5a), while the *ma-* version of 'I' is used when the verb expresses a state, as in (5b).

(5)   a.   *Wapsiča.*   b.   *Maxwa.*
        wa-   psiča   **ma-**   xwa
        1.active- jump   **1.stative-** be.sleepy
        'I jumped.'   'I am sleepy.'

2.6   Pacific Northwest language area

The area of North America with the greatest diversity of Indigenous languages is the Pacific coast. From Alaska south to California, the Pacific coast is home to over 30 distinct families of Indigenous languages. The manifestation of this diversity in Canada is that British Columbia contains a disproportionately large number of different Indigenous language families, as you can clearly see if you look back at the map in Figure 1. In fact, over half of all the Indigenous languages in Canada are located in BC.

This section describes three language families located along the Pacific coast: the Salishan, Wakashan, and Tsimshianic families, whose members in Canada are listed in Table 8. These families are sometimes grouped together as part of a larger "Pacific Northwest" language area. The Pacific Northwest languages are not a family in genetic terms—they do not share a common ancestor—but they have nevertheless ended up with many similar features due to long-term contact, bilingualism, and borrowing (Thomason 2000).

Salishan family	Wakashan family	Tsimshianic family
Nuxalk (Bella Coola)	Haisla	Sm'algyax
Comox-Sliammon	Heiltsuk-Oowekyala	(Coast Tsimshian)
Halkomelem	Kwa'kwala (Kwakiutl)	Sgüüx̣s
SENĆOŦEN (Saanich)	Nuu-chah-nulth (Nootka)	(Southern Tsimshian)
Sháshíshálhem (Sechelt)	Ditidaht (Nitinaht)	Gitksan
Sḵwx̱wú7mesh (Squamish)		Nisga'a
Stʼátʼimcets (Lillooet)		
Nłeʔkepmxcin (Thompson)		
Secwepemctsín (Shuswap)		
Nsyilxcen (Okanagan)		

Table 8. Pacific Northwest languages

The large number of languages is, unfortunately, not paralleled by a large number of mother-tongue speakers. In Canada, the 2016 census records 2,865 speakers of Salishan languages, 1,065 speakers of Wakashan languages, and 1,725 speakers of Tsimshianic languages. For many of the languages, the only remaining fluent native speakers are a small number of elderly people.

Pacific Northwest languages are renowned for the complexity of their sound systems. The languages typically have quite large sets of consonants.

St'át'imcets, for example, has 44 distinct consonant sounds. Syllable structure is also complex: large consonant clusters are permitted, to the extent that some words contain no vowels at all. Table 9 gives some examples of vowelless words in Nuxalk (Bella Coola).

qstx	'pull it off'	sps	'northeast wind'
c'ktc	'I got there'	xscc'	'I'm not fat'
q'psttx	'taste it'	qs	'pull'
sq'wx	'jump'	ɬxʷtɬcxʷ	'you spat on me'

Table 9. Vowelless words in Nuxalk (Gibson 1995)

2.7   Unclassified languages

A **language isolate** is a language that has no known relatives. In addition to the language families discussed above, the Indigenous languages of Canada also include the isolates Haida and Ktunaxa. **Haida** is spoken natively by fewer than 75 people on Haida Gwaii, formerly known as the Queen Charlotte Islands, off the coast of British Columbia. It was once thought that Haida is part of the Na-Dene language family, but this has been disproven. **Ktunaxa (Kutenai)** is spoken natively by fewer than 100 people in the Rocky Mountains of southeastern British Columbia. Although Ktunaxa shares some features with both its Salishan and Algonquian neighbours, no genetic relationship has been established (Dryer 2007).

A third unclassified language, **Beothuk**, was originally spoken on the island of Newfoundland. The last speaker of Beothuk died in 1829 and the language is so poorly documented that we cannot determine which family it belonged to. The best guess is that it was an Algonquian language, but due to the poor records, we are unlikely to ever know for sure (Goddard 1979). As an example of the poor documentation of Beothuk, consider that the records contain two forms meaning 'one', *gathet* and *yazeek*, each written by a different English speaker. Goddard (1979) has suggested that these are actually two bad attempts at writing the exact same Beothuk word!

3   Grammatical properties of Indigenous languages

The diversity of Indigenous languages in Canada makes it impossible to describe all the languages with the same broad brush. With respect to their sound systems, the languages run the gamut from highly complex (Pacific Northwest, Na-Dene) to relatively simple (Inuit, Algonquian, Iroquoian). Grammatically, the languages do share a tendency to have quite rich word structures, but the details are completely different in each family.

This section gives some examples of the interesting grammatical properties that you would encounter if you were to study an Indigenous language of Canada. Remember that none of these properties are found in *all* of the languages. The point here is simply to raise your awareness of what's out there. If your linguistic background is confined mostly to European languages, these properties may surprise you. Some of them have been surprising to linguists as well, and have helped to refine our understanding of what's possible in human language.

3.1   Animacy

You may know that nouns in French belong to two classes, or "genders": masculine nouns appear with the article *le* (e.g. *le garçon* 'the boy') and feminine nouns appear with the article *la* (e.g. *la fille* 'the girl'). Like French, the Algonquian languages also divide nouns into two classes. However, the basis of the division is different: what matters is whether or not the noun denotes a living thing. This distinction is called **animacy** and the two classes of nouns are known as animate and inanimate (Goddard 2002).

Animate and inanimate nouns in Algonquian languages take different plural suffixes. In Nishnaabemwin (a dialect of Ojibwe), for example, animate nouns like *gaazhgens* 'cat' take the plural suffix *-ag* (*gaazhgens-**ag*** 'cats') while inanimate nouns like *doopwin* 'table' take the plural suffix *-an* (*doopwin-**an*** 'tables'). More examples of animate and inanimate nouns are given in Table 10.

Animate nouns	Inanimate nouns
nini 'man'	bkitehgan 'hammer'
mnidoo 'spirit'	naagan 'dish'
aamoo 'bee'	kidwin 'word'
mtig 'tree'	mtigoons 'stick'

Table 10. Animate and inanimate nouns in Nishnaabemwin (Valentine 2001)

What counts as animate?

An intriguing aspect of animacy in Algonquian languages is that some non-living objects, such as *dewehgan* 'drum' and *semaa* 'tobacco', are treated as animate by the grammar. The traditional spiritual significance of drums and tobacco may explain why they get to be "honourary" members of the animate class. However, this explanation doesn't extend to another famous exception: raspberries (*mskomin*) are treated as animate while strawberries (*dehmin*) are treated as inanimate. Here there is no obvious cultural explanation for the difference.

3.2   Two versions of 'we'

Most English speakers are probably not aware that the pronoun *we* has two different meanings. In most contexts, this ambiguity goes unnoticed, but it occasionally causes confusion. As an example, imagine that you are having dinner with a friend and discussing the kinds of food you often eat. If your friend were to say the sentence in (6), you might feel slightly confused. Can you see why? What are the two possible meanings here?

(6)   My partner will be in town soon—we should go out for Korean food.

Here's what's potentially confusing. When your friend says *We should go out for Korean food*, are they inviting *you* to go for Korean food, or are they just musing about something that they would do with their partner? The two meanings can be stated more precisely as in (7).

(7)   a.   We, *i.e. you and I*, should go out for Korean food.
       b.   We, *i.e. my partner and I*, should go out for Korean food.

The "you and I" version of *we* in (7a) is known as **inclusive *we***, because the speaker is including the addressee. The "s/he and I" version of *we* in (7b) is known as **exclusive *we***, because the speaker is excluding the addressee (i.e. "me and other people, but not you").

English speakers have to live with the fact that *we* is ambiguous, but some languages have different words for the two meanings. This is the case in several of the Indigenous languages in Canada. In Kwak'wala, for example, the pronoun *əns* means 'inclusive we' while the pronoun *ənu'x̌u* means 'exclusive we' (Tomalin 2011). If your friend were speaking Kwak'wala, the confusion in (6) would not arise: they would say *əns* if they meant to invite you and *ənu'x̌u* if they did not.

3.3   Noun incorporation

Some Indigenous languages display a morphological process known as **noun incorporation**, in which a verb "swallows up" a noun that occurs along with it. Consider the two Mohawk sentences in (8), which both mean 'I bought the bed' (Baker 1996). There's some complicated morphology here that you don't need to worry about—just focus on the noun ***nákt*** 'bed'. What's different about where this noun appears in the two sentences?

(8)   a.   *Wa'-k-**hnínu**-'*   *ne*   *ka-**nákt**-a'.*   b.   *Wa'-ke-**nakt**-a-**hnínu**-'.*
        FACT-I-**buy**-PUNC   DET   NsS-**bed**-NSF   FACT-I-**bed**-Ø-**buy**-PUNC
        'I bought the bed.'   'I bought the bed.'

Here's the difference: in (8a), the noun *nákt* 'bed' is in a separate phrase that follows the verb, much like in English. In (8b), however, the same noun *nákt* 'bed' appears inside the verb itself, sandwiched between the prefix *ke-* 'I' and the root *hnínu* 'buy'. The sentence consists of a single word which literally means 'I bed-bought.' This is an example of noun incorporation: the noun that functions as the object of the verb has been incorporated into the verb.

3.4   Classificatory verbs

In English, we can use the verb *lie* to describe the position of many kinds of entities. We can say, for example, both *There's a rock lying there* and *There's a dog lying there*. When we translate these sentences into a Dene language,

however, there's an important difference. Take a look at the Tsilhqút'ín (Chilcotin) sentences in (9) (Cook 2013). How do they differ?

(9)   a.   *tŝi   ŝeʔan*   b.   *lhin   ŝetin*
          rock   be.there.(3D)   dog   be.there.(animate)
          'There's a rock lying there.'   'There's a dog lying there.'

What we see in (9) is that there are actually two different verbs that mean 'be there'. The verb *ŝeʔan* 'be there' is used with solid three-dimensional object such as rocks, as in (9a), while the verb *ŝetin* 'be there' is used with animate beings such as dogs, as in (9b). These are known as **classificatory verbs**, because the verb doesn't just express the idea of 'being there'—it has the secondary role of classifying the subject noun as a 3D object (*ŝeʔan*) or an animate being (*ŝetin*).

The examples in (9) give you a taste of what classificatory verbs are like, but this only scratches the surface. Tsilhqút'ín actually has *nine* different classificatory verbs that all mean 'be there', as shown in Table 11. Each verb is specialized for use with a particular class of items.

Verb 'be there'	Used with…
-ʔan	solid three-dimensional objects (e.g. rocks)
de- -tan	long solid objects (e.g. boats, trees)
-lh-tan	large containers, filled (e.g. sacks, pails)
-tin	animate beings (e.g. dogs, people)
-tli	wet mushy objects (e.g. wet rags)
-qan	small open containers, filled (e.g. plates)
-lh-chúẑ	fabric-like objects (e.g. shirts)
-dzáy	grain-like aggregates (e.g. sand)
-lah	flexible rope-like objects (e.g. piece of rope)

Table 11. Classificatory verbs in Tsilhqút'ín (Cook 2013)

3.5   Obviation

We normally say that the grammatical category of person has three members: first person (e.g. *I*), second person (e.g. *you*), and third person (e.g. *she, he, it,*

Mary, the child, etc.). It may surprise you to learn that some languages are said to have a fourth person as well!

In the Algonquian languages and Ktunaxa (Kutenai), a sentence can contain only one "true" third person, known as the **proximate** third person. This is normally the person who is the topic of the conversation. Any additional, less topical third persons are marked with a special suffix known as the **obviative,** which indicates that they are less central to the conversation than the proximate third person (i.e. they are a "fourth person"). This system is known as **obviation**.

You can see the obviation system at work in the Oji-Cree sentence in (10) (Oxford, fieldwork). This sentence involves two third persons: Peter (*Piitan*) and David (*Tepit*). The topic of the conversation is Peter, so Peter gets to be the proximate third person. This leaves David to get the lower-status obviative marking, which is indicated by the suffix *-an*.

(10)   *Piitan-**Ø**   owaapamaan   Tepit-**an**.*
         Peter-**PROX**   PROX.sees.OBV   David-**OBV**
         'Peter saw David.'

You may be wondering what the point of obviation is. Why bother distinguishing two kinds of third persons? It's actually extremely useful. Consider the English sentence *Peter saw David when he was driving*. Now answer this question: who was driving? There's really no way to tell. The pronoun *he* could refer to either Peter or David. This makes the sentence ambiguous, and our only option is to try to figure it out from the context.

The Oji-Cree version of this sentence, however, would be completely unambiguous, thanks to obviation. If Peter is proximate and David is obviative, like in (10), then an Oji-Cree speaker has an easy way to indicate who the pronoun *he* refers to: they use the proximate version of *he* if they mean Peter and the obviative version of *he* if they mean David, as indicated in (11).

(11)   a.   Peter-PROX saw **David-OBV** while he-PROX was driving. (= *Peter was driving*)
       b.   Peter-PROX saw **David-OBV** while **he-OBV** was driving. (= ***David** was driving*)

This is one way in which obviation is useful: it gives speakers a tool for keeping track of which third person they're talking about.

3.6   Evidentials

Imagine that you and I have been inside an air-conditioned building all day, and that I say the following sentence to you:

(12) It's hot outside today.

I have stated this sentence as a fact. But if I haven't actually been outside myself, how can I be so sure that it's true? Here are some possible reasons:

- Someone (who I believe) told me it was hot outside.
- I'm guessing it's hot out because the air conditioning is running constantly.
- When I look out the window I see people sweating and fanning themselves.

These reasons involve very different types of *evidence*. The first reason involves hearsay: I am confident that (12) is true because someone who I believe told me so. The second reason involves an inference: the air conditioner would only be running constantly if (12) was true. The third reason involves visual evidence: what I see when I look out the window indicates that (12) is true.

   In English, I can utter the sentence in (12) regardless of what type of evidence I have for it. This is not the case, however, in all languages. Many of the Indigenous languages in Canada have systems of **evidential** morphology, which serves to explicitly indicate the precise nature of the speaker's evidence. Nuu-chah-nulth is one such language. Some of the evidential markers in Nuu-chah-nulth are listed in Table 12. These markers allow a Nuu-chah-nulth speaker to indicate whether their statement is based on something they were told, something they're inferring, something they're seeing, or something they're hearing.

Evidential	Meaning	Example translation
-wa·ʔiš	quotative	'It is said that…'
-matak	inference	'I guess…'
-ckʷi·	past inference	'It must have been the case that…'
-k̓uk	visual inference	'It looks like…'
naʔa:t	auditory evidence	'Based on the sound, it is…'

Table 12. Some Nuu-chah-nulth evidential markers (Waldie 2012)

4 Writing Indigenous languages

Linguists consider written language to be secondary to spoken language for various reasons:

- Spoken language goes back to the beginnings of humanity while writing is a relatively recent invention (c. 3200 BCE).
- Children acquire spoken language from an early age with very little effort while they must be explicitly taught how to write at a later age and with great effort.
- Spoken language is universal to all human societies while only some societies use writing.

Writing is, in essence, just a recording system for language, albeit one that can have great cultural significance. The absence of writing does not make a language deficient in any way. The absence of writing also does not signal an absence of literature: speakers of unwritten languages often have rich traditions of oral literature that are preserved over many generations.

The Indigenous languages in Canada fall into the group of languages that were not traditionally written. Since the arrival of Europeans, however, many writing systems have been developed. This section describes the two main approaches used in these systems: Roman and syllabic.

4.1 Roman writing systems

Most Indigenous languages in Canada are written using systems based on the Roman alphabet. In languages with relatively small numbers of distinct sounds, the Roman alphabet can be used with little modification. Plains Cree, for example, can be written using the set of characters in (13).

(13)   a.   Consonants: *p t c k s h m n w y*
       b.   Vowels: *i a o î ê â ô*

The only special characters here are the vowels with a circumflex accent. This marks a long vowel (e.g. short *a* versus long *â*).

In languages with larger numbers of distinct sounds, however, the Roman alphabet does not furnish enough characters to distinguish all the sounds. The

44 distinct consonants of St'át'imcets (Lillooet), for example, are far too many for the Roman alphabet to handle. The gaps have been filled by adding accents and other similar marks (e.g. *p' ṣ kʷ*) and by borrowing symbols from the International Phonetic Alphabet (e.g. *ɬ ɣ ʔ*).

Similar approaches have been taken in other languages, but the details vary widely. As an example of this variation, Table 13 shows the three different strategies used in St'át'imcets (Lillooet), Sḵwx̱wú7mesh (Squamish), and Labrador Inuttut to distinguish the velar stop [k] and the uvular stop [q]. (By the way, if you're wondering about what looks like the number "7" in Sḵwx̱wú7mesh (Squamish), this symbol represents the glottal stop, IPA [ʔ].)

Language	Velar stop	Uvular stop
St'át'imcets	k	q
Sḵwx̱wú7mesh	k	ḵ
Labrador Inuttut	k	K

Table 13. Distinguishing velar and uvular stops

Spelling standardization

Many Indigenous languages in Canada have more than one writing system, with different speakers or groups using different systems. For some languages there are ongoing efforts to settle on a single shared writing system. This can be a contentious process, however. To understand why, just think about how resistant many English speakers are to changes in spelling (e.g. the extremely negative reaction some people have to abbreviated word forms such as *u* for 'you'). Once you've gone to the trouble of learning how to write your language, it can be difficult to accept other ways of doing it.

4.2 Syllabic writing systems

Instead of the Roman alphabet, some Indigenous languages in Canada are written using a completely different family of writing systems known as Canadian Aboriginal Syllabics. An example of syllabic writing in Moose Cree is given in (14), along with its Roman equivalent.

(14) ᒧᕪ ᐁᐦᐧᑭ ᓂ ᓇᐸᒋᐦᐪᑲᕦ ᑭ ᐃᓕᐉᐃ ᐊᕀᒣᐦᐪᓂᐧᐊᐦᑭₓ

môl' êškwâ ninakacihtân kâ-ililîwi-ayamihtâniwahki.

'I'm not used to the Cree letters yet.' (Ellis 2000)

Canadian Aboriginal Syllabics was developed around 1840 by the English missionary James Evans together with speakers of Cree and Ojibwe (Lewis & Dorais 2003). This new writing system was enthusiastically adopted by speakers of various Indigenous languages. The use of syllabics spread so quickly that some groups were already using syllabic writing by the time the first missionaries arrived! Today syllabic writing is used most commonly by the Cree, Naskapi, Oji-Cree, and Inuit.

How does the system work? There are two basic principles:

- First, most of the characters represent entire syllables rather than single sounds. For example, the character ∨ represents the syllable /pe/.

- Second, all syllables that begin with the same consonant are written using the same symbol, which is rotated to indicate the vowel. All syllables that begin with *p*, for example, are written using the symbol ∨, which is rotated four ways to indicate four different vowels: ∨ /pe/, ∧ /pi/, > /po/, < /pa/. The same goes for all syllables that begin with *n* (ᑐ /ne/, σ /ni/, ᓄ /no/, ᓇ /na/), and so on.

Table 14 shows the set of syllabic characters used in Plains Cree. Some examples of Plains Cree words written in syllabics are given in (17). These words illustrate two additional features of syllabic writing: a dot can be added above a character to show that the vowel is long (e.g. ∧ for short /pi/ versus ∧̇ for long /pi:/) and there is a set of special "final" symbols for extra consonants at the end of a syllable (e.g. ∧ᑊ for /pin/, with the ᑊ symbol representing the /n/).

(15) a. /masinahikan/   b. /nipa:wak/   c. /si:si:pisis/
          'book'   'they sleep'   'duckling'

          ᒪ ᓯ ᓇ ᐦᐃ ᑲᑊ   σ ᐸ̇ ᐊᐧᐠ   ᓯ̇ ᓯ̇ ∧ ᓯᐢ
          ma si na hi kan   ni pa: wak   si: si: pi sis

e	▽	i	△	o	▷	a	◁	FINALS	
pe	∨	pi	∧	po	>	pa	<	p	ˈ
te	∪	ti	∩	to	⊃	ta	⊂	t	⁄
ce	⌐	ci	⌐	co	⌐	ca	⌐	c	⁻
ke	ᑫ	ki	ᑭ	ko	ᑯ	ka	ᑲ	k	ˋ
me	⌐	mi	⌐	mo	⌐	ma	∟	m	ˡ
ne	ᓀ	ni	ᓂ	no	ᓄ	na	ᓇ	n	ˢ
se	�	si	ᒧ	so	ᒨ	sa	ᔕ	s	ᴖ
we	▽·	wi	△·	wo	▷·	wa	◁·	w	○
ye	ᔦ	yi	ᓕ	yo	ᒡ	ya	ᔭ	y	+
he	‖▽	hi	‖△	ho	‖▷	ha	‖◁	h	‖

Table 14. Syllabic characters used in Plains Cree (Ellis 2000)

5 Indigenous languages in contact

For any language, there are normally at least some speakers who interact with speakers of other languages. These situations of **language contact** can have various effects. For example, contact between English and French has led to the borrowing of thousands of French words into English, while contact between English and Welsh has led to a major decrease in the use of Welsh. This section describes some effects of language contact on Indigenous languages in Canada. We will look at contact among Indigenous languages as well as contact between Indigenous and European languages.

5.1 Contact among Indigenous languages

Indigenous languages in what is now Canada have been in contact with one another for millennia. Prior to European colonization, it was common for Indigenous people to speak more than one language for reasons such as trade, intermarriage, and travel (Gardner & Jimmie 1989). The following are some effects of contact among Indigenous languages.

Borrowing of words. As in the case of English and French, there are many examples of words being borrowed between various Indigenous languages.

For example, the word for 'warrior' in some Algonquian languages (e.g. western Ojibwe *ogichidaa*) was borrowed from the Dakota word *akičita* 'warrior' (Goddard 1978).

Borrowing of linguistic features. Borrowing can sometimes extend beyond words to affect the sound system or the grammatical system. For example, some Algonquian languages in New England developed a nasal vowel sound /ã/ (similar to the vowel in French *Jean*). It's probably not a coincidence that the affected languages were spoken adjacent to Iroquoian languages, which are well-known for their nasal vowels (Goddard 1965).

Linguistic areas. In areas where language contact is particularly extensive and sustained over generations, languages from different families can end up sharing many features. This is the case in the Pacific Northwest, where the Salishan and Wakashan languages, and to a lesser extent the Tsimshianic languages and Ktunaxa (Kutenai), share numerous properties such as large consonant inventories (Thomason 2000).

New dialects. Sometimes language contact can lead to the emergence of a new dialect or language. An example is Oji-Cree, a dialect of Ojibwe whose vocabulary, phonology, and morphology show Cree influences. These influences are thought to result from Cree speakers who shifted to speaking Ojibwe, bringing some Cree features along with them (Rhodes 2006).

Lingua francas. A lingua franca is a language that many people learn in order to communicate with other groups (e.g. English today). Various Indigenous lingua francas have existed over time. Before 1650, Huron, an Iroquoian language that is now extinct, was the lingua franca east of the Great Lakes. West of there, the lingua franca was Ojibwe, and farther west, it was Plains Cree (Bakker 1997).

Pidgins. A pidgin is a rudimentary system of spoken communication used between speakers of different languages. A well-known example in Canada is Chinook Jargon, which developed in the Pacific Northwest. It appears to have originated prior to the arrival of Europeans and contains much vocabulary from the Lower Chinook and Nuu-chah-nulth languages. Words from English and French were later incorporated. The use of Chinook Jargon peaked in the 19th century, when it was estimated to have 100,000 speakers from Alaska south to California and inland as far as Montana (Silver & Miller 1997).

Plains Sign Language. Plains Sign Language is an Indigenous sign language used primarily for communication between different linguistic groups

across a huge area of central and western North America (Taylor 1978). Plains Sign Language already existed when the first Europeans arrived and its use peaked in the 19th century. In Canada, Plains Sign Language has been used by speakers of Algonquian, Dene, and Siouan languages as well as Ktunaxa (Kutenai). It is still used today, primarily as part of storytelling.

> **Another context for Plains Sign Language**
>
> Generations of Boy Scouts in America have studied Plains Sign Language. In fact, the Scout salute, in which the right arm is raised and the three middle fingers are extended, was adapted from the Plains Sign Language sign for 'wolf / scout' (Taylor 1978).

5.2 Contact between Indigenous and European languages

The arrival of Europeans created new situations of language contact. We will look at two effects of this contact: borrowing and language mixing.

5.2.1 Borrowing

Indigenous languages have borrowed words from English and French. An example is the Innu word *nashûp* 'soup', which is borrowed from French *la soupe* 'soup'. In many cases, however, speakers of Indigenous languages have avoided borrowing and instead coined new words using the morphology of their own language (Thomason 2010). For example, when Innu speakers needed a word for 'priest', they did not borrow the English or French word. Instead, they coined a new Innu word *kâuâpikuêsht*, which literally means 'the one with a white neck'.

Borrowing has also gone in the other direction. Many English and French words for animals and plants that are indigenous to North America have been borrowed from Indigenous languages (e.g. *raccoon*, from Powhatan *arehkan*, and *pecan*, from Illinois *pakaani* 'nut'). The same goes for many place names (e.g. *Canada*, from Laurentian *kanata* 'village'), some geographical terms (e.g. *muskeg*, from Cree *maskêk* 'swamp'), and words for items from Indigenous cultures (e.g. *moccasin*, from Powhatan *mahkesen* 'shoe'). Table 15 gives more examples of borrowings from Indigenous languages.

English word	Source
caribou	Mi'gmaq *qalipu* 'caribou'
kayak	Inuit *qajaq* 'kayak'
moose	Eastern Abenaki *mos* 'moose'
opossum	Powhatan *apassem* 'opossum'
persimmon	Powhatan *pessimin* 'persimmon'
skunk	Abenaki *segankw* 'skunk'
tepee	Lakota *thípi* 'dwelling'
toboggan	Mi'gmaq tepaqan 'sleigh'
totem	Ojibwe -*doodem* 'clan'
wigwam	Eastern Abenaki *wikewam* 'dwelling'
Manhattan	Munsee *manaháhteenk* 'where wood for bows is gathered'
Saskatchewan	Cree *kisiskâciwani-sîpiy* 'fast-flowing river'
Winnipeg	Cree *wînipêk* 'body of muddy water'

Table 15. Some English words borrowed from Indigenous languages
(Goddard 2010; Rice 2012; *Oxford English Dictionary*)

5.2.2   Language mixing

A prominent example of the mixing of Indigenous and European languages is Michif, a language spoken in some Métis communities in the prairies. Michif was created from a mixture of Cree and French. We can roughly describe the language as consisting of Cree verbs and French nouns, although the details are much more complex (Bakker 1997). Two Michif sentences are shown in (16) (Strader 2014); the bolded words are of French origin and the others are of Cree origin. It should be emphasized that Michif is a full-fledged language of its own, not just an ad-hoc mixture of Cree and French. In fact, there are speakers of Michif who do not speak Cree or French at all.

(16) a. *awnshkow*   **la priyayr**   *kit-ayaw-n*   **apray**   **la mes.**
         sometimes   the prayer   2-have-NON3   after   the mass
         'Sometimes we say prayers after the mass.'

   b. **awn**   **kouleur**   *d-awayhtae-n*   **li portray.**
         in   colour   1-want-NON3   the picture
         'I want the picture in colour.'

A less widely known example of language mixing is Bungee, which developed in the 1800s at the Red River Settlement in what is now Manitoba. Blain (1989) describes Bungee as "a dialect of Scots English with a strong Cree component and vestiges of French and Gaelic." Two examples of Bungee sentences are given in (17) (Blain 1989). In the first sentence, the word for 'upside-down' comes from Cree. The second sentence contains an expletive from Cree and the French word *clé* 'key'. No full-fledged speakers of Bungee remain today.

(17)   a.   The canoe went apichekwani. (= 'The canoe went upside-down.')

       b.   Chistikat, I forgot my clé. (= '[Cree expletive], I forgot my key.')

6   Current status of Indigenous languages

The preceding sections have described the properties and history of Indigenous languages in Canada. In this section we turn to a final important topic: the status of these languages today.

6.1   Language maintenance and language death

Some Indigenous languages in Canada, particularly Cree, Inuktitut, Ojibwe, and Dëne Sųłiné, continue to be spoken by large numbers of people. Many other languages, however, are critically endangered, with only a few elderly speakers. When these speakers are no longer with us, the language will become **extinct.**

> **Extinct or sleeping?**
>
> Linguists consider a language to be extinct when it no longer has fluent native speakers. This does not mean that all traces of the language have disappeared. There may still be people who can passively understand the language or people who are trying to learn to speak it. Fragments of the language may also be preserved in songs or fixed phrases such as greetings. In place of the term "extinct language", Leonard (2008) has suggested that the term "sleeping language" is preferable, as it acknowledges the potential for the language to be revived.

Language death is not a new phenomenon. Laurentian, the Iroquoian language that was the source for the word *Canada*, went extinct by the late 1500s. Nicola, a Dene language once spoken in British Columbia, disappeared by around 1900. In recent decades, however, the pace of language death has skyrocketed. UNESCO recently estimated that 19 of the Indigenous languages in Canada are moribund (i.e. on the verge of extinction) and a further 28 are seriously endangered (i.e. spoken only by a small and declining number of older people) (Wurm 2001).

In fact, even for the languages with large numbers of speakers, there are many communities where the language is no longer being passed on to children. And there are warning signs even in some communities where children do still learn the language. Morris and MacKenzie (2016) recently reported on an Innu community in Quebec in which the language continues to be quite strong: it is used by people of all ages in many different contexts, it is spoken in daycare and in kindergarten, and it is heard on the radio. Nevertheless, even in this community, young children are currently showing much higher aptitude in French than in Innu. This is a worrying sign that the transmission of Innu may have begun to break down.

The looming extinction of many Indigenous languages in Canada is part of a global loss of linguistic diversity. It has been estimated that by the end of this century, 50% of the languages currently spoken around the world may become extinct. In the rest of this section we look at the causes and effects of language death in Canada, as well as efforts to maintain and revitalize Indigenous languages.

6.2 Causes of language death

What makes a language become extinct? The most drastic type of language death occurs when all the speakers of the language die. This took place for Beothuk, the Indigenous language of the island of Newfoundland. After colonization, the Beothuk population declined quickly due to violence, disease, and competition for resources. When the last known Beothuk person died in 1829, the Beothuk language became extinct as well.

The more usual cause of language death, however, is **language shift**. This is when a community shifts to speaking some other language. In Canada, that other language is usually English or French, although there have also been cases in which a community shifts from one Indigenous language to another.

For example, Nicola, the Dene language mentioned in the previous section, went extinct when its speakers shifted to Nłeʔkepmxcin (Thompson), a Salishan language (Wurm, Mühlhausler & Tryon 1996).

Language shift typically takes place when there is a difference in prestige between a community's language and the language of a more powerful group, such as English (Sasse 1992). People may switch to using English in certain domains of interaction, such as in the workplace. This forces anyone who wants to participate in these domains to learn English. The resulting increase in bilingualism can lead to further erosion of the domains in which the community's language is used. This can in turn create negative attitudes towards the usefulness of the language. If this downward spiral continues, the end result can be a shift away from the language even in the home. At this point, the language will no longer be passed on to children.

Language nests

When the only remaining speakers of a language are elderly people, it becomes challenging to pass the language on to children. To address this problem, some communities have adopted what is known as the "language nest" model, in which elderly speakers take part in early childhood daycare programs, bridging the linguistic generation gap.

6.3   Residential schools and language shift

The factors in the previous section are active in language shift all around the world, including in Canada. However, there is another factor particular to Canada whose significance cannot be overstated: the residential school system. Mandated by the government and run by Christian churches, this system was originally intended to assimilate Indigenous children into mainstream Euro-Canadian culture. This goal explicitly included the suppression of Indigenous languages, as expressed by this 1895 quote from the Department of Indian Affairs (Leitch 2006):

> If it were possible to gather in all the Indian children and retain them for a certain period, there would be produced a generation of "English-speaking Indians."

To this end, many of the schools discouraged or even prohibited the use of Indigenous languages. In some schools, students were subjected to corporal punishment simply for speaking their language. Pierrette Benjamin, a survivor of the residential school at La Tuque, Quebec, recalls being forced by the principal to eat soap for speaking her language (Truth and Reconciliation Commission 2015a):

> She told me to swallow it. And she put her hand in front of my mouth, so I was chewing and chewing, and I had to swallow it, so I swallowed it, and then I had to open my mouth to show that I had swallowed it. And at the end, I understood, and she told me, "That's a dirty language, that's the devil that speaks in your mouth, so we had to wash it because it's dirty."

The "success" of residential schools in suppressing Indigenous languages was noted with pride in this 1937 quote from the principal of the Squamish Mission School (Piper 1989):

> Many among the rising generation do not even know their own language. This great change has been wrought through the Squamish Indian School. All honor and praise to its able and devoted teachers.

The residential school system is now widely recognized as a national shame. In 2008, the government of Canada established a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to hear the testimony of thousands of people who were affected by the system. In 2015 the commission issued a set of calls to action that are intended to redress the legacy of residential schools (Truth and Reconciliation Commission 2015b). With respect to language, the commission has called for:

- the recognition that Aboriginal rights include Aboriginal language rights;
- the enactment of an Aboriginal Languages Act;
- the appointment of a federal Aboriginal Languages Commissioner; and
- the creation of university degree programs in Aboriginal languages.

In June 2019, Bill C-19, "An Act Respecting Indigenous Languages", received royal assent. Among other things, this act established the Office of the Commissioner of Indigenous Languages, which is intended to support the maintenance and revitalization of Indigenous languages.

6.4   Language maintenance and revitalization

Efforts are underway across Canada to reverse the decline in use of Indigenous languages. These efforts take many forms, including the establishment of day-cares in which Indigenous languages are spoken, the creation of Indigenous-language immersion programs in schools, the development of specialized vocabulary to enable the languages to be used in more contexts (e.g. medical and legal terms), and the creation of smartphone apps to allow easy access to dictionaries. Linguists can play a supporting role in such initiatives, but the initiatives must be led by the communities themselves and require the support of many stakeholders, including governments and education authorities.
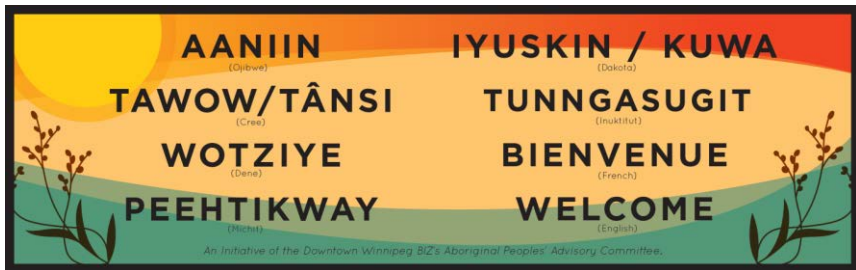
Figure 2. In 2016, businesses in downtown Winnipeg began to display this welcome decal, which includes greetings in Ojibwe, Cree, Dene, Michif, Dakota, and Inuktitut. (Source: Downtown Winnipeg Business Improvement Zone)

The benefits of maintaining and revitalizing Indigenous languages are numerous. To take one example, a recent study conducted in British Columbia (Hallett, Chandler & Lalonde 2007) found that Indigenous communities with high levels of Indigenous language knowledge had very low rates of youth suicide—even lower than the overall provincial average. However, in communities with lower levels of language knowledge, the suicide rate was over six times higher. This stark difference reflects the fact that a community's language is a powerful sign of the strength and persistence of that community's identity and culture.

7   Summary

Indigenous languages in Canada are diverse and numerous. The languages belong to eight different families, each with its own distinct properties, although there is a shared trend towards the use of rich and complex morphology. Some notable grammatical properties of the languages include animacy, the distinction between inclusive and exclusive 'we', noun incorporation, classificatory verbs, obviation, and evidentials. Most of the languages are written using variations of the Roman alphabet, but a unique writing system known as Canadian Aboriginal Syllabics is also in use. Contact between Indigenous and European languages has led to the borrowing of many Indigenous words into English and French as well as the creation of new language varieties such as Michif. Many of the languages are severely endangered today due to a gradual process of language shift that was accelerated by the residential school system. The languages with the largest numbers of speakers at present are Cree, Inuktitut, Ojibwe, and Dëne Sųłiné. Efforts are ongoing to maintain and revitalize these and many other Indigenous languages.

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