



Office of the Commissioner of
**INDIGENOUS
LANGUAGES**

First Nations and Métis Language Gathering

S U M M A R Y R E P O R T

Vancouver, British Columbia | October 16-17, 2024 | Sheraton Vancouver Airport Hotel

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SUMMARY REPORT: FIRST NATIONS AND MÉTIS LANGUAGE GATHERING

On October 16 and 17, 2024, the Office of the Commissioner of Indigenous Languages (the Commission) hosted a language gathering on traditional, ancestral, and unceded $x^w m \theta k^w \dot{a} y \dot{a} m$ (Musqueam) territory (Richmond, British Columbia) to continue the dialogue with First Nations and Métis peoples on their language revitalization efforts. The language gathering hosted speakers, champions, Elders, youth, researchers, grassroots advocates, frontline workers, teachers, and community members, all of whom shared their experiences in reclaiming, revitalizing, maintaining and strengthening of their languages.



APPROACH

Honouring, uplifting, and celebrating the continued language revitalization efforts of First Nations and Métis peoples was at the core of this gathering. The panels, keynotes, presentations, and focused breakout groups were designed with this approach in mind, all of which produced important feedback for the Commission regarding the participant's current needs, challenges, and opportunities.

The objective of the gathering was to create a forum for Indigenous language champions to candidly share their perspectives. Offering a space rooted in trust and reciprocity was integral to facilitating such discussions.

Each day of the gathering was opened with prayers and teachings, tobacco protocols were observed, and cultural supports were readily available throughout the event to ground discussions.

OPENING THE LANGUAGE GATHERING

The gathering commenced with an evening celebration and was opened in a good way by Elder Larry Grant, who shared teachings about $x^w m \theta k^w \dot{a} y \dot{a} m$ (Musqueam) territory as well as the importance of language and culture. The showcasing of the Snow video highlighted the critical role youth play in language revitalization and offered a glimpse into the inextricable link between languages and our ancestors.

The screening of videos centering the perspectives and voices of youth were interwoven throughout the gathering, in order to reaffirm their role in the language revitalization journey. Words of welcome were then shared by Vice President Melanie Allard of Métis Nation of British Columbia, who reiterated the importance of upholding language workers and those at the forefront of language revitalization.

Commissioner Ignace's evening keynote shared his personal journey of fighting for Indigenous languages and becoming the first Commissioner of Indigenous Languages in Canada. He also shared the mandate and key activities of the Commission. The evening closed with an incredible performance by George Leach, who brought participants together through the powerful energy of his voice and message.

GROUNDING DISCUSSIONS

The second day of the gathering was opened by the screening of the Our Languages, Our Voices video, which centres the importance and essence of Indigenous languages. Commissioner Ignace then offered brief remarks about the objectives of the gathering.

Directors Joan Greyeyes and Georgina Liberty set the tone for the day's discussions by sharing their own respective language journeys, highlighting their roles and initiatives as Directors at the Commission in addition to situating the intent and spirit of the language gatherings: to hear directly from Indigenous Peoples across the country and to support their language promotion, preservation and revitalization efforts.



FOCUSED DISCUSSIONS

Using the keynote as a foundation, focus group discussions were facilitated to hear directly from participants about their needs, challenges, and most promising practices. The following key themes emerged from discussions:

- Culture and language are inextricably linked;
- There is a consistent need for sustainable, long-term funding for language programs;
- Dedicated time, space and resources are required for language learning, which also accommodates different ways of learning;
- There is an acute need for teachers who can transmit languages to new speakers;
- Traditional and inter-generational approaches and transmission of learning needs to be centered in all work;
- There is a need for community learning curricula development, which is based on multi-faceted modes of learning;
- Institutions often hold educators back and there is an over-politicization of language programming;
- Learning institutions (e.g. schools) need to be funded more, to reiterate the reality that Indigenous languages belong in schools and should be taught there;
- Immersive and interactive language learning instills belonging and pride in our people;
- Prioritizing mental, spiritual and physical well-being fosters learning and growth;
- Cultivating other immersive channels (e.g. music and media) foster different outlets for language learning;
- Silent/reluctant speakers need additional support and Elders must be centered in immersion learning; and
- Language learning and teaching should be encouraged as a viable career option and be seen as part of the economic model.





ADEQUACY OF FUNDING

One of the core themes of the gathering were the keynote, and subsequent breakout groups, on the adequacy of funding. Dr. Daniel Brant outlined the current state of Indigenous languages in Canada as well as issues related to funding for language programming and initiatives. His work assesses models of success and identifies metrics important for effective languages propagation.

The aim of Dr. Brant's research on the topic is to acquire reliable data that supports the need for long-term, adequate and sustainable funding for Indigenous languages. Using this methodology as the baseline, his research positions immersion programs as the most successful models of language propagation, noting that there is a trend of increased involvement from post-secondary institutions.

The research also highlights, however, that the number of first language speakers is declining rapidly and the veracity of second language speakers is questionable. Furthermore, language programs often struggle for financial support, and this is the case all over the country; most of the time, efforts and resources are focused on keeping programs alive.

Dr. Brant also noted that in urban settings, where approximately 80% of Indigenous Peoples live, language programming is virtually non-existent. To address this gap, school boards can take a stronger position to support Indigenous languages through the development and provision of immersive curricula and structural supports.

The research also indicates that financial support for Indigenous languages is increasingly shrinking, and agencies often fund initiatives for specific deliverables and timelines. Dr. Brant noted that the forecasted federal funding for Indigenous languages is set to decline over the coming years. For example, \$118 million was provided for Indigenous languages in 2023-24, in comparison to \$52 million in 2024-25. Conversely, consistent, long-term structural and financial support is provided for official languages.

YOUTH PERSPECTIVES ON INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES

The youth panel shed light on the current needs, perspectives, and challenges experienced by young people in their language revitalization, preservation, and learning journeys. Panelists underscored the need for long-term and sustainable funding for Elders and knowledge keepers, who are the lifeline of language transmission.

Panelists also shared that those who teach languages must be empowered and uplifted, so that they are properly valued and honoured. This means that Elders who share cultural and language teachings must be equally valued as someone who has a PhD degree. The role of Elders in language transmission is an integral one; there is joy in the inter-generational transmission of languages, it creates a stronger sense of community and kinship. Listening and learning to Elders ensures that young people regularly hear their languages in addition to helping with retention and pronunciation.

The youth spoke about the need for full language immersion settings, in schools and at home, so that young people are fully exposed to their languages. Master-Apprentice programs can aid in the implementation of fully immersive programming, which can also be supplemented with language media resources through radio, television, social media and other channels.



ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES

A keynote by Ross Pambrun on the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in support of languages emphasized that Indigenous Peoples and communities must be part of all processes associated with planning, use and dissemination of AI-generated resources.

The presentation began with the technical history and stages of development related to AI, which helped situate the current context of AI technology. It is evident that AI is developing at a rapid pace and its potential use in support of Indigenous languages is a critical conversation that is taking place across the country.

Ross highlighted the need for greater transparency when it comes to the use of AI, so that Indigenous languages are not defined by the use of AI, but rather are able to leverage it as an important tool in revitalization and preservation efforts. As such, ownership of knowledge and data by Indigenous Peoples and communities is essential to the use of AI in support of language revitalization.



PROMISING PRACTICES: FIRST PEOPLES' CULTURAL COUNCIL

A presentation by Suzanne Gessner and Thea Harris of the First Peoples' Cultural Council (FPCC) provided insights into promising language revitalization and preservation programming.

The language programs delivered by FPCC serves 36 languages and more than 95 dialects, which constitute over half of the Indigenous languages in Canada. Their language revitalization planning program aims to develop comprehensive, long-term plans for revitalization, which capture shared community visions and mobilize them around languages.

FPCC's language technology program builds the capacity of documenting, digitizing and sharing language resources that are community owned and retained. The program also focuses on the development of digital tools and applications to promote language learning and retention.

The Reclaiming My Language program delivered by FPCC is designed to support silent speakers using Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and incorporates immersion within mentorship and professional internships. In further support of immersion practices, the FPCC also champions Mentor-Apprentice programs and initiatives to empower youth speakers.

Building infrastructure and capacity for language learners is an integral component of FPCC programming. The Pathways: Open Strategy Program creates accessible language opportunities for all ages in addition to producing language documentation resources and materials.

The presentation also highlighted new practices in FPCC's language programming, all of which aim to support community-led languages initiatives. The organization is transitioning to plan-based, multi-year grants which will facilitate long-term strategies. This translates to a new model of funding: one application process for all language programs, so there is less logistical burden on applicants. FPCC is also delivering regional training workshops to communities, which provides training for multiple initiatives at the same time.



This is supplemented with online learning series, which provide hands-on practice knowledge presented by leaders from various communities and nations.

The steady decrease in funding, despite the supports enabled by the Indigenous Languages Act, was underscored in the presentation as a continuous barrier in the development and delivery of programming.



ADVANCING INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES

A keynote by Dr. Lorna Williams on strategic planning to advance Indigenous languages underscored the urgency of the current situation: immediate emergency measures are required to protect every single Indigenous language.

Dr. Williams reminded us that strategic planning must incorporate the history of our languages, because our memory is an extremely useful tool that needs to be cared for, fostered and nurtured. She noted the multilingualism is not a foreign concept to Indigenous Peoples and, in fact, across different nations we shared relatives, cultures and languages. It is because our languages are based in shared history and in storytelling traditions that we still have our way of knowing, of relating to each other, as well as connection to our ancestors, to our coming generations and to the spirit world.

As such, frameworks and paradigms related to strategic planning for our languages must assess the following questions:

- Where do we want to go?
- Why do we want to go there?
- What do we want and need to do to get there?
- What is the terrain and how long will it take to get there?
- What is coming?
- Who will stay and who will be the helpers?
- Where are we now? What are the stories, songs and signs?
- What do we need to know?
- Who will we meet on our way and how will they be involved?
- Where will we start?
- How will we know when we get there?

The keynote ended on a hopeful note with Dr. Williams stating that despite the urgency attached to the state of our languages, Indigenous Peoples have always been resourceful; we have had to find solutions in very short periods of time and that ability is a powerful one.



MOVING FORWARD: RECLAIMING, REVITALIZING, MAINTAINING AND STRENGTHENING INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES

The language gathering in xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam) territory is part of ongoing efforts by the Commission to centre the experiences of Indigenous Peoples and communities in the language revitalization and preservation spheres. The insights shared by participants in this gathering, and in future ones, will continue to help build momentum as we move forward and forge new paths. With these endeavours, the goal of the Commission is to amplify the voices of Indigenous Peoples and uplift the language warriors at the forefront of our fight for our languages.



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