

# The Alberta Language Initiative and the Implications for Indigenous Languages

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Language is the essence of our being, of who we are. It's the defense against assimilation. If we lose our language, then we've truly lost. (Frank Weaselhead, Blackfoot Elder, The Canadian Indigenous Languages and Literacy Development Institute, Edmonton, July 14, 2004)

In October 2003 the Standing Policy Committee for Learning and Employment and the Cabinet of the Government of Alberta approved the implementation of the following learning policy direction:

Beginning with the 2006-2007 school year, second language instruction will become a required component of the grade 4 curriculum. A grade per year will be added until grade 9, resulting in a fully implemented six-year compulsory language program in place for Alberta students in 2011-2012.

This in itself is interesting language policy direction; however, for Indigenous people in Alberta and their languages it brings a number of concerns. What will this requirement mean for Indigenous languages, language instructors, and language teachers? Who will ensure that their needs are planned for? What will this policy directive mean for Indigenous children? Will it be sufficient to support their Indigenous language development? Will it affect the revitalization of the Indigenous languages of Alberta? What else needs to be done?

## *Loss Context of Indigenous Languages*

It is important to situate language policy directives in the context of the languages that will be affected, in this case the Indigenous languages of Alberta. The specific languages in Alberta include Cree, Dene Sutine, Dene Tha, Dene Za, Kainai, Siksika, Pikuni (Blackfoot), Nakota (Stony), Saulteaux, and Michif. These languages are currently undergoing severe obsolescence and are at risk of disappearing. The severity of this situation should not in any way be downplayed. Languages are believed to embody the intellectual wealth of the people who speak them, and as the late Hale (1992) suggested, losing any of them is like dropping a bomb on the Louvre. Crawford (1999), a highly respected scholar in the field of language policy, noted,

language death seldom occurs in communities of wealth and privilege, but rather to the dispossessed and disempowered. Indigenous people are one of the most dispossessed and disempowered of all contemporary groups, so it is little wonder, then, that much of their

linguistic and cultural heritage has already been extinguished, or is currently facing extinction. (p. 2)

It is important to remember in all of these kinds of deliberations that few of the endangered Indigenous languages in Alberta, as in most of Canada, are spoken by children at home; it is, therefore, reasonable to expect that these languages could be close to extinction within a generation (Government of Canada, 2002). According to Fishman's (1991) Graded Intergenerational Disruptive Scale (GIDS) for Threatened Languages, Stages 1-8, the Indigenous languages of Alberta would be at Stages 6, 7, and 8, and keeping these languages alive requires serious efforts. His scale "gives a guide to how far a minority language is threatened and disrupted. The higher the number on the scale the more a language is threatened" (Baker, 1993, p. 57). The stages are as follows.

Stage 8: Stage 8 is the social isolation of the few remaining speakers of the minority language. The language must be recorded for later possible reconstruction. Stage 8 is the most difficult stage for retrieval. It is necessary to start with ideological clarification, reestablish linguistic norms, and use linguists' expertise, code implementation, commitment, and effort to create a movement. This seems to reflect the case of numerous communities in Alberta with only a few speakers left, and a great deal of effort will need to go into a language retrieval.

Stage 7: In Stage 7 the minority language is used by the older and not the younger generation. The elderly linguistic community must be taken advantage of and linguistic interactions with the younger generation drastically increased. Special events alone will not do. There is a need to link into ongoing normal, daily family socialization patterns. This seems to be the case in several communities as well where pockets of linguistic resources are available to draw on; and if the community through comprehensive goals clarification decides that language retrieval is important, an effort of intergenerational language transmission will need to be considered.

Stage 6: In Stage 6 the minority language is passed on from generation to generation and used in the community. In these communities the bulk of language socialization takes place through face-to-face interaction early in life, and little else has been done to develop a wider range of contexts for language and literacy development. If nothing is done, it is little more than bidding time until it slips to Stage 7. This may be the case in a few far-north, isolated communities where the language is still spoken by children, but this is changing quickly. In these communities it is essential that the long-term goals be clarified and comprehensive language planning initiated. Support is needed for the family and community intergenerational continuity through engineering a plan that focuses on family, neighborhood, and community building. These communities need to develop a plan that draws on community strengths and both conserves the existing linguistic resources and works toward extending them.

In our view the remaining five stages are not found in Alberta. At these stages community members across generations are fluent in the mother tongue, and in each stage literacy increases in the minority language. At these stages the languages are used for public, political, and private purposes with a range of broadcasting and printed media in the Indigenous language.

### *Language Policy and Planning Framework*

Language policy and policy development are essential for significant advancement in language development in almost any context. However, policy alone is not sufficient. Planning is needed to ensure that the goals of the policy are realistic, need to be fulfilled, are operational, and actually take place. Language planning is fundamental to all aspects of the retention and revitalizing of Canadian Indigenous languages.

In order to explain the language-planning processes necessary for Indigenous languages in Alberta and the nature of this article we follow the format laid out by Ruiz (1994) in his paper *Language Planning and Considerations in Native American Communities*. This framework has been used in policy and planning for minority languages internationally (Fishman, 1991, 1994; Haugen, 1985; Ruiz, 1990, 1994) and in other parts of Canada (Blair, 1997); it is a comprehensive way consider the many essential factors in language planning and policy development. This model is organized in the following areas: status planning, corpus planning, implementation, and evaluation. Table 1 shows the language-planning processes necessary for obsolescing languages.

In planning for the status of a language, it is essential to consider the current role of the language, its status in the community, and the role that community members would like to see for their language. Then it is

*Table 1*  
*Language Planning Processes*

| <i>Status Planning</i><br><i>"Matters of nation"</i>  | <i>Corpus Planning</i><br><i>"Matters of language"</i>  |
|---|---|
| 1. Policy formulation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sociolinguistic assessment</li> <li>• Needs assessment</li> <li>• Articulation of policy</li> <li>• Long-/short-term goals</li> </ul>  | 2. Codification <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Orthography</li> <li>• Grammatication</li> <li>• Lexication</li> </ul>                                 |
|   | 3. Elaboration <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lexical elaboration</li> <li>• Sociolinguistic extension</li> <li>• Technological adaptation</li> </ul> |
| 4. Implementation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Short-term planning</li> <li>• Long-term planning</li> <li>• Prioritization</li> <li>• Leadership planning</li> <li>• Teacher development</li> <li>• Resource development</li> </ul> |   |
| 5. Evaluation   |   |

(adapted from Ruiz, 1990).

important to find as many ways as possible to elevate the status of the language in the eyes of speakers, nonspeakers, and outsiders.

Planning for the corpus of a language is less philosophical and more technical. The corpus is the body of the language. When a language obsolesces, it becomes weaker, similar to a human body whose muscles are deteriorating. The codification of a language, for example, is a part of corpus planning and will depend on the circumstances surrounding it and the state of health of the language. It could include such things as standardizing the language, clarifying the existing syntax, or writing a dictionary. Codification includes anything that needs to be done to record and code these languages, which in turn will contribute to making the information available to more speakers, learners, and teachers.

Elaboration is another part of the corpus side of language planning and one that is crucial in the case of language retention and revitalization. All languages change and grow, and elaboration is a process that helps a language to do this. If the Aboriginal language, for example, is going to be used as the language of instruction in schools, then it will need to be elaborated for academic terminology. Words for new technologies and some academic concepts will need to be invented to be able to teach using the language.

The implementation of a language plan is key to the success of a policy. In this stage the status and corpus planning are brought together and the groundwork is done to carry through with the goals articulated during the status-planning component. Implementation depends to a great extent on human resources and expertise to carry out the goals of the policy; this is the component in which substantial human resource development is essential.

At the evaluation stage a language plan can be adjusted, redefined, and clarified and new plans made if necessary. It is an ongoing process. Established policies need to be revisited and rethought. As the language changes, so should the policy to support and promote it.

#### *Response to the Alberta Languages Initiative*

Over recent years various initiatives have been undertaken to support Aboriginal languages such as curriculum projects undertaken by Alberta Learning, school divisions, and tribal organizations. For example, *The Common Curriculum Framework for Aboriginal Language and Culture Programs* (Western Canadian Protocol for Collaboration in Basic Education, 2000) was developed to address curriculum needs interprovincially. In 2004 the Cree Language and Culture Nine-Year Program (grades 4-12) was developed. These are important initiatives; however, all may be for naught unless a coordinated effort is made to address language revitalization through policy and planning. Included in this is the dire need for professional and recognized standing for the formal training of professionals and consequently a certification process for both Indigenous language

instructors and teachers. It will also mean that a great deal of time and effort will need to be put into linguistic work to build the corpus of each of these languages back up to a healthy, active state.

Given the language loss in Alberta, the dire need for action to be taken and this 2003 language directive to be included on the provincial agenda, an ad hoc group working in this field decided that it would be a good idea to bring together as many stakeholders in the province as possible to put the needs and issues on the table. It was felt that it was important to begin to discuss how to work together toward ensuring a sufficient supply of teachers, instructors, and resources for this language initiative. Although it was informally recognized that this initiative was only a small part of what had to be done in the bigger picture of language revitalization, it was important to capitalize on it at this time and be part of the process from the beginning. Some were concerned that once again Indigenous people might be left out of provincial government initiatives. Some of the preliminary concerns of the ad hoc group were as follows.

- In the provincial jurisdiction the Alberta Teachers Certification Board determines certification standards for teachers in provincial schools, whereas band schools make their own decisions in this regard. Will criteria be common or separate?
- A distinction is made between instructors and certified teachers: What will this mean?
- Agreement is limited on credit transferability between college and university programs: How will this be addressed?
- One instructor training diploma program exists in the province (i.e., Maskwachees Cultural College, Cree Language Instructor Program), and several other colleges are currently exploring Indigenous languages instructor programs.

The following questions also arose.

- Given the distinction between instructors and certified teachers, what should Indigenous language instructor preparation programs and teacher education programs include?
- Which institutions will offer which courses in an Indigenous language instructor training and teacher education training?
- What components are needed for a quality program that encompasses all Indigenous language groups?
- Will all Indigenous languages in Alberta be offered support?

In order to gain a wider representation of ideas and perspectives, the ad hoc group organized a one-day symposium on this topic and recorded discussions and comments. This article is based on the findings of this group. Approximately 150 Elders, Indigenous language teachers, instructors, language advocates, tribal representatives, and college representatives participated in this daylong symposium. Participants came from Alberta and British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Northwest Territories,

and Nunavut. The Indigenous languages represented were from four of the 11 language families in Canada: Athapaskan, Algonkian, Siouian, and Inuktitut.

The CILLDI Elders (i.e., those who are associated with the Canadian Indigenous Languages and Literacy Development Institute) who participated with us on that day deserve special recognition: Myron Pas-kemin, Sweetgrass First Nations, SK; Veronica Morin, Enoch First Nation, AB; Alfred Saddleback, Samson First Nation, AB; Kenneth Saddleback, Samson First Nation, AB; Florida Thunder, Sweetgrass First Nation, SK; Frank Weaselhead, Blood First Nation, AB; Marjorie Reynolds, English River First Nations, SK; John Janvier, Cold Lake First Nation, AB; Angela Jones, Alexis First Nation, AB; Christina Painted Stone, Alexis First Nation, AB; and Helena Meyers, Stone First Nation, BC. An integral part of the planning process was to include Elders as cultural informants, leaders, historians, advisors, and spiritual guides. Thus traditional protocols were followed, and representatives of the Indigenous languages present were asked for their suggestions.

#### *What Symposium Participants Had to Say*

During this symposium the participants took part in large-group presentations, discussions, and small-group forums in which their comments were collected and reported back to the large group. The following suggestions that they made address issues across all areas of the language planning model discussed above.

#### *Status Planning*

- Involve community leaders in the discussions on which language will be offered in each provincial school district. Conduct discussions with Indigenous education authorities.
- Develop an Indigenous language instructor certificate.
- Postsecondary institutions need to recognize Elders as adjunct professors or to give them honorary degrees.
- Establish liaison between provincial and band schools for the promotion of languages.
- Learn to be (Indigenous) language advocates to do our own footwork in the communities. We need to work to increase the value and status of our languages in our communities and in Alberta.

#### *Corpus Planning*

It must be recognized that planning and policy development is different for Indigenous languages than for other languages in Alberta. All the other languages supported by the Alberta Language Initiative have a substantial corpus of linguistic resources. The following suggestions represent corpus issues that arose from the symposium discussions.

- Include Elders in teaching languages—they are our walking dictionaries and grammar books.
- Offer workshops and classes on how to write our languages and support writers-in-residence in local communities.
- Establish Web-based resource development and fund local Web development.
- Tape-record talk in many contexts and establish a clearinghouse of digitized resources.

### *Implementation*

- Take a cultural approach to teaching by consulting Elders and content experts and by developing and reviving teaching philosophies based on our own Indigenous languages and cultures as a foundation.
- Recognize equivalencies for instructor certification (e.g., Elders—language speakers and keepers of our bundles).
- Establish Indigenous language instructor programs and Indigenous language teacher programs. Team up colleges, including tribal colleges, and universities to develop and coordinate Indigenous certification and teacher preparation.
- Share resources between provincial and First Nations schools. This idea may be extrapolated to include the provinces, federal government departments, and Metis communities.
- Provide ongoing language-learning opportunities and funding for teachers, summer immersion, exchanges, cultural camps; and the Canadian Indigenous Languages and Literacy Institute.

### *Evaluation*

- Provide support for the evaluation of local and provincial schools and communities to help them to achieve their goals.
- Clarify the kind of accountability that will be required for schools or school boards to show that the money has actually been spent on language learning in a way that relates to what the community wants.
- Establish an Advisory Committee province-wide to ensure that this initiative reaches the First Nations communities.

### *Where Do We Go From Here?*

The Indigenous people in Alberta, as in the rest of western Canada, are interested in preserving and promoting their languages. At this time the Alberta Languages Initiative is important for Indigenous languages in making learning a second language mandatory by 2006. It is, however, critical that the issues identified by the Aboriginal people of this province be addressed. The promotion of Indigenous languages and literacies and the elevation of their status are central to the success of any policy initia-

tive. Recognition of the unique need of these languages in the area of building the corpus and building resources built on this is essential. The kind of corpus work needed to have the resources, literature, grammars, books and Web material for this language initiative is immense, and nothing has been done toward necessary background research. The preparation of instructors and teachers will be key to the successful implementation of this policy and needs to be looked at in a careful and integrated manner (Blair, Paskemin, & Laderoute, 2003).

Although recognizing the existence of some benefits for Indigenous people in this policy initiative, some people think it may be too little too late. Grades 4-12 as a core subject with a few hours a week will not be enough to keep these languages alive given the current state of these languages. Given the success of immersion programs for full language and literacy development in other Indigenous minority contexts such as New Zealand and Hawaii, it seems that a more comprehensive look is needed at what will work for these languages to be truly preserved. The kind of curriculum development and teacher preparation required for this is not being addressed by this policy initiative.

Language planning for dying languages is a complex state of affairs, and we need a more comprehensive investigation into the needs and potential solutions.

It is our view that it is one thing to outline such an initiative, but another entirely to fund fully what it will take to implement it. We wonder what planning has been done to ensure that the various colleges, universities, and other postsecondary institutions that currently prepare teachers and instructors work together on this and a coordinated effort is being made to collaborate on teacher training and certification and ensure credit transferability between institutions.

The Alberta Language Initiative is a beginning, but there is a dire need for support from national, provincial, local, band, and school governments in order to realize fully the preservation and development of all Indigenous languages in Alberta.

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