

# British Columbia Indian Languages: A Crisis of Silence

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One hundred and fifty years ago there were some thirty Indian languages in British Columbia — each of them a rich repository of the history of the land and its people. Today all but two or three of the languages are still spoken. The survival of these languages is a tremendous statement of the cultural resilience of the Indian people in the face of repression, neglect, and misguided paternalism. For most of the languages, however, the immediate future is bleak. New events and changing circumstances combine to pose a more insidious threat to native language survival than ever existed previously.

Of the languages still in existence, the majority are spoken by fewer than 500 people, and in most of these the youngest native speakers are more than forty years old.<sup>1</sup> The forty-year age mark is an especially telling and tragic one, for it indicates that there are no people of child-bearing age who can perpetuate the language in the only fully effective way — by raising children from infancy in the language.

Eight of the languages are spoken today by 500 or more people: Carrier, 2,000-3,000; Nishga, 2,000; Chilcotin, 1,500-1,700; Babine, 1,100-1,500; Kwak'wala, the language of the Kwagiutl, 1,000; Coast Tsimshian, 800; Halkomelem, the language of the mainland Coast Salish, 500; and Shuswap, 500. In only three of the languages, however — Carrier, Chilcotin and Babine — are children in any numbers learning the native language from infancy. The present is plainly a time of crisis for the maintenance, let alone the revival, of Indian languages in British Columbia.

The question "Why maintain the languages?" might well be asked. For Indian people the answer is obviously one of individual self-identity and cultural continuity. To point to this answer is not to suggest that Indian people will cease to be Indians should their language disappear, but it is to indicate that language is the crucial component of culture.

<sup>1</sup> These and the following data are from those compiled by Robert D. Levine, Associate Curator of Linguistics, Provincial Museum of British Columbia.

Language is the one unique thing that a people possesses. They have made that language and that language has made them.

But what of those of us who are not Indian? Here, I believe, there are two answers. First, those of us who have come in the last two centuries to make this part of the world our home have an obligation to assist the aboriginal inhabitants to maintain those aspects of their culture that they wish to maintain. Secondly, we have not fully accepted this part of the world for what it is until we accept the fact that its human history began not two centuries ago but many millenniums ago. By ignoring the existing inhabitants and, in many cases, by attaching new names from our culture to things and places, our Euro-Canadian ancestors sought to make the land their own. The new arrivals either ignored or were contemptuous of the existing history of the people and the land. For us today the Indian languages, with their rich oral history, can provide part of the definition of the land in which we live and are now coming to appreciate as something more than a warehouse of exploitable natural resources.

One recent summer a non-Indian backpacker, an avid outdoorsman and defender of the natural environment, sat on the shore of Chilko Lake recalling the expeditions he had made into that area. He was able to attach to every mountain he could see a name from some government map. And yet, he knew nothing of the centuries of history that surrounded him. A person sitting on that same beach but steeped in the Chilcotin history might have looked back to a day long ago. On that lake moved a hastily fashioned raft loaded with Kwagiutl raiders who had travelled up Bute Inlet into the land of the Chilcotins. From a place on one of the mountains a Chilcotin man observed the trespassers and called up a great storm to deal with them. Helpless as the clumsy raft broke up beneath them, the Kwagiutl fell into the waters and disappeared.

In the days of creation there was a Chilcotin hero named Lhindsch'osh. People who know the Chilcotin language tell the story of how he was turned to stone. Now, when I drive out past Bull Canyon in the Chilcotin I can stop at this rock and feel the sense of awe that comes only with being in the company of antiquity.

These two examples are brief references to the wealth of oral tradition that is carried in the Indian languages. Many Indian people will say that these stories have not been, and cannot be, adequately translated. Many of the translations of Indian stories and histories have been attempts at a written, literal expression of traditional Indian oral expression. When these translations are read in the cultural context of present-day British Columbia they often lack much of the original. Good translation requires

the communication of thoughts and ideas, not just between individuals but also between cultures. It requires that the original communicative function be carried out in vastly different cultural contexts. The translation of literature is an important area of scholarly work, but the development of acceptable translations of British Columbia Indian oral literature has been almost totally ignored. We live in a land filled with gargantuan landscapes, but we have little or no knowledge of the epic stories that have grown out of this land.

British Columbia Indian languages are of great academic interest to linguists. Many come from American and European universities, and from elsewhere in Canada, to study the languages. While several faculty members and various graduate students from British Columbia universities are devoting themselves to the languages, the effort being mounted falls far short of that which is needed. At times what begins as purely academic research comes to provide important practical benefit to Indians wishing to maintain their language. In the Williams Lake area, for example, A. H. Kuipers of the University of Leiden has come annually over the last twenty years to study the Shuswap language. Mae Dixon, a Shuswap elder who worked with Kuipers in the early years, subsequently played a major role in establishing the contemporary Shuswap language program, while her niece, Phylis Chelsea, became the first teacher of the language in the schools. A number of Kuipers' Dutch students now work with other Indian languages in the province. Eung-Do Cook, of the University of Calgary, has played a similar motivating role over the last ten years in relation to the Chilcotin language.

Much academic research remains to be done. The whole area of sociolinguistics is of particular interest because of the changing function of Indian languages. The relation between language of the work place and of the home requires study. For example, when I was a commercial fisherman in the 1960s, I noticed that Kwak'wala was used in work on the seine boats more than it was in the homes of the Kwagiutl fishermen. Similarly, the question should be addressed as to whether a core group of persons who speak only the one language is necessary for the maintenance of that language. Today almost all those who speak Indian languages also speak English, and all Indians who in the future learn to speak their native language will also learn English. Today in the Chilcotin there appears to be a correlation between the decline of unilingual Chilcotin speakers and the emergence of Chilcotin children who are unilingual English speakers. The question of whether bilingual Indian parents will be able to raise bilingual children thus requires attention. To

the best of my knowledge, however, almost no work is being done in British Columbia on the functions of Indian language in a contemporary setting.

It is the school system rather than the family which is looked to by Indian communities today as they seek to regain or maintain their language. Here there is both paradox and historical justification, for it was the school system — in the form of Christian residential schools — which was the most significant factor in the decline of the Indian languages. These schools pursued the stated goals of Christianizing and assimilating Indian children by removing them from the influences of family and language. Virtually every Indian family in the province has a parent or grandparent who can tell of being strapped for speaking their own language, whether in or out of the classroom, in a residential school. Many of those parents chose not to teach their children the Indian language in order to save them from punishment at school. Today the generation which was the first not to learn their own language have children and even grandchildren in school and the full weight of the residential school repression is being realized.

The Chilcotin are something of an exception in British Columbia. The Chilcotin were more resistant than most to Euro-Canadian influence. For forty years they withstood the efforts of the Hudson's Bay Company to establish itself in their territory. In the so-called "Chilcotin Uprising" they repelled Waddington, who was one of the early speculator/promoters (and whose name is today given to the mountain which dominates the western Chilcotin country). Until the 1940s, they allowed few of their children to be taken away to residential schools. In consequence, today more than 90 percent of the Chilcotin people still speak Chilcotin. Among the Shuswap, in contrast, from the turn of the century virtually all the children were taken to school. Today only a minority of Shuswap speak their language and those who do are generally past child-bearing age. Most of the speakers live in the northern Shuswap bands, in the vicinity of Williams Lake.

Some responsibility for rectifying past linguistic losses has been recognized by the provincial Ministry of Education and by local school authorities. The latter include school districts under provincial authority, schools operated by the federal Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, and schools operated by individual Indian bands. In October 1979 the Ministry issued its "Policy Statement on Indian Education," which applies to all children of Indian ancestry — status, non-status and Metis — and which enunciates the following policy regarding language:

The Ministry supports the preservation of native languages through the use of the public schools to teach these languages and, where a native language is the language of dominance for a significant group of native children in a school or school district, the Ministry supports the development and implementation of bilingual-bicultural programs, thereby allowing a student to become proficient in two languages and two cultures.

Similar support is given by the federal government through DIAND schools, and, of course, Indian bands provide support through the schools which they operate. In a matter of a few decades there has been an easing of the former policy of eliminating Indian languages and culture in this province. The danger that now exists is that Indian parents and communities, as well as the non-Indians, involved in language programs may assume that school programs are by themselves capable of maintaining or reviving a language.

A typical pattern may be identified once an Indian community or a local school authority has decided that a need exists for an Indian language program. First, an academic linguist comes to the community and works with a fluent speaker of the language to develop a practical alphabet. Second, the academic leaves and the local speaker becomes the school's language teacher, using the alphabet sheet as the prime teaching device. Third, such a basis for language teaching is in time seen as inadequate and as a result a linguist is brought back to assist in the development of additional teaching materials. Often these new materials present the language as a series of phonemic and grammatical structures whose contrast with English is emphasized in the subsequent teaching process. Fourth, in what may be seen as the final stage, persons who are actually specialists in the teaching of second languages become involved in a comprehensive and continuing development of curriculum and teaching materials. It is at this stage that those involved may be tempted to conclude that the language is effectively being saved or revived.

The Cariboo-Chilcotin School District is to some extent representative of the districts which have substantial Indian populations. In the early seventies, as a result of the concern of Indian parents and such leading individuals as Phylis Chelsea, the school board established a District Indian Education Committee consisting of one school board member and representatives (they were in fact the concerned parents — for the most part women) from each Indian Band. Following the committee's recommendation, the board appointed a Co-ordinator of Indian Education to be responsible for development of native programs. Subsequently the different needs of the Shuswap and Chilcotin peoples led to the for-

mation of separate Indian language committees — the Shuswap Language Committee, formed in the mid-seventies, and the Chilcotin Language Committee, which is becoming active at the present time. Each language committee is composed of Indian language workers from the Chilcotin or Shuswap bands.

The Shuswap Language Committee advises in the development and implementation of the language program for Shuswap children, and provides the basis for community direction of the program. The program is exceptional in having obtained the simultaneous participation of those with the necessary linguistic background and those knowledgeable in the appropriate approaches for second language learning.<sup>2</sup> During the decade a number of Shuswap language teachers have worked in the schools, but the absence of fluent Shuswap speakers among those who are apt to take professional teacher training presents a continuing problem. In the elementary grades Shuswap instruction is usually given for from 100 to 120 minutes a week. In the secondary grades courses consist of about 100 hours of teaching a year. The Shuswap students presently in grade 11 or 12 may have received 800 to 900 hours of language instruction, and there are now students in these grades who have taken language instruction each year since their primary schooling. Such students have a very good familiarity with the Shuswap language. If the language being learned were Italian or Cantonese the students would be ready to spend time in Italy or China, where the language is in daily use, in order to develop fluency based on the theory and vocabulary provided in the school program. But there is no community in the world today where Shuswap is in daily use.

As in all Indian language revival programs, a high level of frustration is experienced by committee members, teachers, and the young people wanting to learn the language. The following poem by Myrtle Johnson, a young Shuswap woman, provides stimulation to all of us to continue to strive for language revival.

### WE JUST LAUGH AT OURSELVES

by Myrtle Johnson

We just laugh at ourselves  
 When we try to speak our own Language.  
 That's why we didn't learn.

<sup>2</sup> Currently the linguists are Jay Powell and Vickie Jensen of the University of British Columbia, and the second language specialist is Joy Wilde.

The old people were serious  
and know what they had to say.  
We just laugh at ourselves.

The Language that we can't  
speak is gone because we  
didn't really know how to speak it.  
We thought the words were funny.  
Only the old Indian people  
understand what they were saying  
because it was a part of the culture.  
The Language was always there  
and they can always  
speak it when they want to.  
We just laugh at ourselves.

Since it wasn't spoken, then  
things began to change.  
We didn't see our Language  
very useful, 'cause anyway  
the Whiteman has shown us  
English.  
It seems like something new.  
We tried it, so we can  
Understand them better.

But the old Indian people  
drop their heads in sadness,  
to see something of  
real value to us — gone.  
It was gone.  
They did not believe in the  
Whiteman.  
They know that the language  
cannot be placed back  
with the Whiteman's way of  
English.  
They only seen the Whiteman's  
letter in the language.  
But there was no Indian voice.  
We laugh at that Whiteman's  
voice on ourself.  
That has replaced our lost  
Indian Language.

[The Chilcotin language program is distinctly different from the Shu-swap program. Most Chilcotin children are fluent in their language and so the goal of the program is to have the children attain literacy in the

language. This goal is a much more practical and feasible one than having non-speakers gain fluency. For this reason the program is much more rewarding for teachers and students. Moreover, the young Chilcotins taking professional teaching training, as in NITEP,<sup>3</sup> are fluent speakers. Yet the Chilcotin language is not maintaining itself. Recently, for example, five children began kindergarten in one of the Chilcotin communities. When the teacher spoke to them in Chilcotin one answered in Chilcotin, the other four in English. That the Chilcotin could be resistant in earlier times to Euro-Canadian influences is irrelevant today as new housing, paved roads, local TV transmitters, international tourism, and exploitation of mineral and forest resources change the people and their land. New housing might be thought irrelevant to language preservation. But old housing, crowded and without amenities, kept the older people in close contact with the young, and the lack of TV and electric light meant that winter evenings would be devoted to storytelling by the elders. One of the most committed young Chilcotin language teachers of today, for example, was raised with seventeen brothers and sisters by a unilingual mother in one small house without electricity.

Since no one would advocate a return to the old conditions, survival of the Chilcotin language will require determination on the part of the Chilcotin people as well as linguistic research along the lines referred to earlier. At present the Chilcotin determination remains strong. The following essay, written in November 1979, by Maria Myers, a Chilcotin language teacher from Stoney Reserve, provides both a plea to Chilcotin parents and an example of the language in literal use.

?Esqax nenqayni ?ijegwedel?anx ?eguh gunzun jid gwadanišed.  
 children | Indian | they learn it | that | it is good | I think of it  
 I think it is good for the children to learn about Chilcotin.

Lha jid gunzun jid midugh ghudli guyah gants'iz ?egun  
 not | it is good | whiteman | we'll be | for nothing | that way  
 We can't be good at being white, if we turn that way it wouldn't

naghulghelh xa?ataghet'inlh. Nendidah nenqayni nexwinlh?in  
 we'll turn | we'll try | anything | Indian | it is keeping us  
 be really us. If we lose all that is keeping us Indian,

?eyi gats'i bideghidiny ?ink'ed midugh ?etijel'in tex detaghelts'ilh  
 that | all | we lose it | if | whiteman | they're poor | among | we'll live  
 I think we will be living among the poor white people.

<sup>3</sup> The Native Indian Teacher Education Program, conducted through the UBC Faculty of Education.



yenešen. ?Eguh hanh jid deni ts'uli. Lha nexwidagultsen.  
 I think | that way | person | one'll be | not | it is good for us  
 One shouldn't live that way. It is not good for us.

Midugh gan gubech'ih deni ghudli jeyeneghižin, k'asel  
 whiteman | their way | person | we'll be | they thought | almost |  
 The whiteman thought we would live their way, they almost

?ajegunlagh hajint'ih. Shunk'ah belhdan gajeyenižen sajint'i.  
 they succeeded | they are | still | some | they think it | they must be  
 succeeded. There must be some who still think it.

Lha gajenilhan nexwejut'in hilah gant'ih hajet'in. Gubech'ih deni  
 not | all of them | they like us | it is | even though | they do | their way | person  
 They do it even though if most of them don't like us. If we live

težidli ?eguh ?aghal naxwejeneyud sughet'i. Sek'i ?elhanx  
 we'll be | then | easily | they order us | it would be | cow | around |  
 their way then they would easily order us around. It wouldn't be

nats'enyud lha gwets'en ?elhxa?eyuw h gulah sagughet'i.  
 one herds it | not | toward | different from each other | it would be  
 any different from herding around cattle.

Gagunlhnaž nenqayni ch'ih yatalhtig yenešen a?  
 always | Indian way | you (pl.) are going to talk | you (pl.) think  
 Do you think you'll always talk Chilcotin?

Nenqayni belhdan yedanx gusiqi midugh dzanh ch'ih yajelhtig  
 Indian | some | already | their children | white | only | way | they talk  
 I see some Indian parent's children already talking only in

gubenis'insh. ?Eguh ?aghal ?esgul ?ijegwedetal?anx belh ?egun  
 I see them | then | easily | school | they'll learn | with | there |  
 English. They think their children will easily learn and

jiz jedetanish jeyenižen. Nawh ch'ih yajelhtig ?eguh yedanx  
 in | they'll be smart | they think | two | ways | they talk | already  
 be smart in School. They already know more than whites

midugh ch'a gwelan ?egwijižen hajint'ih. Gubini nawh jid  
 whitemen | than | lots | they know it | they are | their mind | two |  
 by speaking in two ways. Their mind works

?anat'in.\* ?Adex gubesiqi ch'idajenizan jaded gubelh  
 it works | later | their children | they grow up | themselves | with them  
 two ways. Their children will be mad at them when they (children)

ts'aghentach'ox hagunt'ih. ?Ena lha?alhad guban belh jaghenilch'osh  
 one'll be mad | it will be | Shuswap | several | their mother | with | they get mad  
 grow up. Several Shuswaps say they get mad at

\* bilingual

jedenish. Nenduw h gajedenish, "Hunlht'aqa lha ch'ih yasestig  
 they say | this | they say it | why | not | (my) way | I talk |  
 their mothers. They say this, "Why didn't you make me talk

sinlhtsil any?" Lha ?ena hidlih gan xun chuh nexwesiqi gajedetanih  
 you make me | not | Shuswap | we are | but | us | too | our children | they'll say it  
 my way?" I assume our children will also say the same things

gunežilid. Lha ch'ih yats'elhtig lha nenqayni  
 I assume | not | way | one talks | not | Indian  
 even though we are not Shuswaps. If one doesn't talk in one's

ch'ih xadanits'ésdžed ts'elish. Lha nendid ninlin  
 way | one thinks about themselves | one becomes | not | what | you are  
 language one comes to think they are not Indian. You don't know

?egwinižen.  
 you know  
 what you are.

If the Chilcotin language and the other Indian languages are to survive, the Indian people and those working with them must know much more about the changing social roles of language in industrial societies. There must be a way for the Indian people to have access to and to take part in developing information about the maintenance of aboriginal languages in the contemporary world. Despite the very real attempts by some individuals in British Columbia's universities and by the foreign linguists, as well as the active support of Indian languages by the Provincial Museum, only a small part of the necessary research is underway. One promising innovation would be an independent Institute of Native Languages at the provincial level. Such an institute could dedicate itself primarily and energetically to aiding the Indian people in all aspects of language maintenance and revival — and to the salvaging of elements of those languages which cannot now be maintained or revived.<sup>4</sup>

British Columbia is a province rich in resources, not the least of which are the many Indian languages. Now that the initial frontier philosophy of gross exploitation is being replaced by a deeper appreciation, is it too much to anticipate a greater sensitivity to the languages of this land? Are

<sup>4</sup> Such an institute has been established in Alaska. In 1980 and again in 1982 a bill to establish a "Native Indian Language Institute for British Columbia" was introduced in the British Columbia Legislature by Gordon Hanson. Hanson said in presenting his bill that "there is a crisis in terms of the retention of something that is a non-renewable cultural treasure of this province" (NDP Caucus press release, 3 June 1982). Since Hanson is an opposition member, the bill was not proceeded with.

there many among us, whether Chilcotin or not, who believe that a mountain named Ts'il<sup>2</sup>us, after an epic hero, is not diminished in being renamed Tatlow after a politician? The oral history that relates this mountain to others in the coast range is an irreplaceable resource — as are all the histories contained in Indian languages. Formal recognition of the crisis of British Columbia Indian languages, along with appropriate responses to the crisis, can do much to ensure for present and future generations an understanding and appreciation of this land.