

The Importance of Protecting and Revitalising Indigenous Languages in Canada

People use languages to communicate with others, but a language is not only a means of communication. Because a language has been enriched by absorbing its speakers' knowledge of survival and emotion for a long time, it became what reflects its speakers' cultures, traditions, customs and the whole history inclusively. Also, it is what determines the identity of people who speak it. Furthermore, from a language, people can learn the connection of their ancestors and surroundings, and how they survived. Forfeiture of a language means losing the people's identity itself because it is the connection to their own heritages. It also leads to disintegration of the community. In Canada, throughout most of the 19th century to 20th century, the Canadian government had an Aboriginal assimilation policy epitomised by the residential schools that had a massive impact on First Nations people, and the impact still remains as a source of many serious issues in Indigenous Canadian societies; one of the issues is that Indigenous languages are at risk of disappearing. The assimilation policy had demolished Indigenous languages and some of them were actually lost. Indigenous people have been struggling to establish their identities and connection to their own community. Preservation of these endangered languages is to be urgent, and the Canadian government must comprehensively support the activities by First Nations to retrieve them. The Canadian government must enact an Aboriginal Languages Act to restore honour of Indigenous people, support them to establish their community, and maintain the diversity of the language and culture in Canada.

Restoring Honour of Indigenous People by Revitalising Aboriginal Languages

Preserving and revitalising endangered Indigenous languages directly means restoring the honour of Indigenous people which have been destroyed by the Canadian government's

assimilation policy. In residential schools, Aboriginal students were taught that their own languages were savage and their culture was inferior; however, in fact, there is no superior or inferior culture or language. Each culture has its unique aspects, and language is an encyclopedia that has all knowledge of its speakers. Even if the meaning of the word is lost, it may be possible to formally perform traditional events, but the skeletal tradition in which the word is snarled is just a shell and meaningless. Loss of the language that has supported the inheritance of tradition and culture is the complete elimination of the Indigenous people's honour. Indigenous culture is now used as a tourism resource in Canada. Souvenir shops sell Indigenous art, and the Indigenous totem pole has become a major tourist destination. While using Indigenous culture as a source of funding for tourism, the government of Canada seems to be less active in rebuilding the Indigenous languages which are the foundation of the culture. McIvor¹ (2019) indicated that, "currently there is no federal plan or infrastructure to support the continuation or development of Indigenous languages" (p. 15). Without continuous efforts not only from inside of Indigenous communities but also outside of it to revitalise Indigenous languages, dominant languages, which are English and French in Canada, would easily drive the Aboriginal languages to the edge of extinction. Despite the fact many Indigenous communities have been putting efforts such as immersion programmes in schools to restore their languages, the number of fluent speakers is not growing much due to lack of opportunities to use the Indigenous languages outside of the schools. It is obvious that active support by the Canadian government has a significant role. Using Aboriginal art as an exhibition for tourists or applying Indigenous words to the name of a place is equivalent to exploiting of Indigenous people, just as the assimilation policies and Indigenous labour exploitation in the past. The

Canadian government should be engaging more actively and supporting Indigenous language education in schools.

Support Indigenous People to Establish Their Community

Supporting Indigenous acts to revitalise their languages is also closely related to helping them to recreate their communities. The word “identity” means who the person is, and identity is established by what background they have including what language the person speaks. A language is also deeply ingrained in a community and what forms it; a language builds a sense of solidarity among the people and strengthens community cohesion. After Indigenous people in Canada lost their languages due to the residential school system, residential school survivors have been struggling to reconnect to their own First Nations’ community because of their loss of identity. Although the boarding school system is already abolished, the issues derived from it have been negatively impacting Indigenous people and their communities. Residential school survivors have trauma because of neglect and abuse at residential schools and it is hurting the survivors' children as well. Comprehensive community-based support is needed to resolve this issue, and to that end, it is essential to regain their lost identity and rebuild the Indigenous community, including the revival of language. Peterson (2018) described that, “Experiential learning was built into daily family life. And that’s how traditions are passed on, that’s how things are passed on.” as well as “Teaching and learning took place while different generations involved in traditional activities” (p. 34). It is clear ensuring Indigenous people have access to activities to interact with each other across generations at the community level will be necessary and the Canadian government is responsible for revitalising endangered Indigenous languages because the

residential school survivors have been eager to pass down their Aboriginal languages and culture to posterity (Fontaine, 2017).

The Significance of Linguistic and Cultural Diversity

If people think of language as just a communication tool, it is actually more efficient to have only one language. It would have been easy to communicate with each other if only one language was spoken in this world. No matter where people go, they would not be worried about the language barrier and this seems useful; however, is such a world wealthy? Canada is often described as a multicultural country. Canadians emphasise that a lot of different cultures are co-existing in the nation, yet Indigenous cultures have been underappreciated. When a language is lost, its culture-specific knowledge and its own worldview will be forgotten. Language has a role as a communication tool, and it also plays a role of a basis for knowledge, thoughts and emotions. People recognize the world by language, make various thoughts, and exercise their emotions and sensibilities, which means that languages as the basis of knowledge, thoughts and emotions should be diverse. When people learn words of a different language, it stimulates intellectual curiosity and leads to the accumulation of knowledge. Such a world is a prosperous world, and for this purpose the Indigenous languages should also be preserved. Indigenous languages are particularly closely related to nature. Mi'kmaq, one of the First Nations in Canada, incorporates outdoor education into their Indigenous language immersion programme; "Outdoor education is needed; the educators agree that the purpose of learning the language is because it is useful in saying the words describing mother earth." (Julian, 2016, p. 153). It is profitable not only for Indigenous society but also other

communities in Canada because restoring Indigenous languages may be an important clue for those in modern society that values coexistence and protection with nature.

Each individual has a unique heritage and they should be able to be proud of it. First Nations cultures, which once were disregarded by European settlers, now need to be thrived again because multiculturalism and diversity is what people value in Canada. Diversity can enrich the nation in many ways. The government of Canada needs to address the ongoing issues related to Indigenous societies including the revitalisation of their languages. By accomplishing this, Canada could truly claim that the country values fairness, diversity and equity.

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