United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

Canadian Commission for UNESCO

Sustaining preservation: Innovative practices and avenues for action in the transmission of Indigenous languages in Canada

Prepared for the Canadian Commission for UNESCO
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Ottawa, Canada, September 2020

To cite this article:

TERRAZA, Jimena; TIPI, Sükran and DAVELUY Michelle, “Sustaining preservation: Innovative practices and avenues for action in the transmission of Indigenous languages in Canada”, Canadian Commission for UNESCO, Ottawa, Canada, September 2020.

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Canadian Commission for UNESCO.

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Introduction

The 3rd Symposium on Indigenous Languages[i] took stock of training opportunities and current training and professional development needs for educators, teachers and transmitters of Indigenous languages. The symposium brought together stakeholders from different backgrounds for discussions between Indigenous community representatives and academic researchers. All were asked to think about possible solutions to the challenges of sustaining the transmission of Indigenous languages and supporting the next generation.

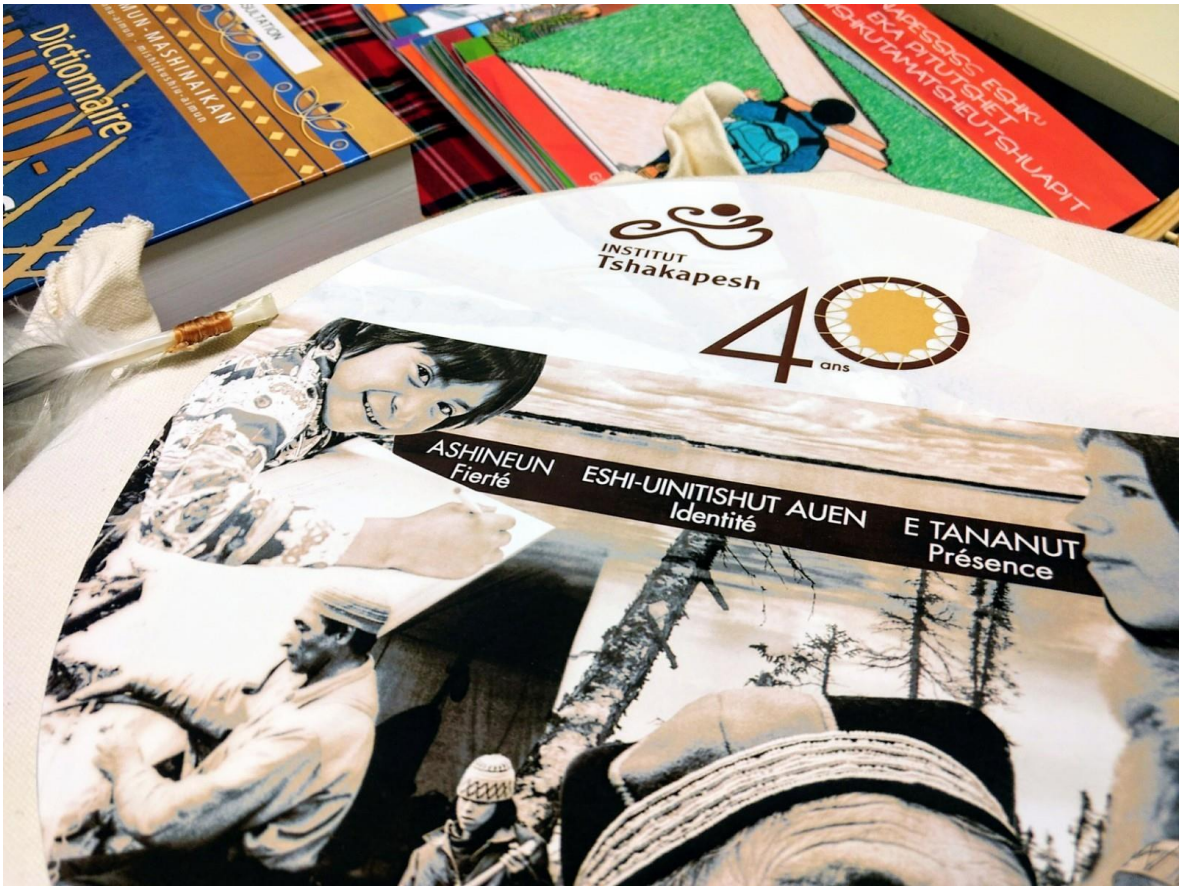
Preparing new generations to transmit and teach Indigenous languages—the theme chosen for the third edition of the Symposium on Indigenous Languages (held during the UN International Year of Indigenous Languages in 2019)—highlighted a fundamental issue. At the national level, the Department of Canadian Heritage, the Assembly of First Nations, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami and the Métis Nation participated in formulating national legislation on First Nations, Inuit and Métis languages. This led to Bill C-91, which was adopted by the House of Commons on May 9, 2019. It is worth noting the groups recognized in the Canadian Constitution (First Nations, Inuit and Métis) are referred to in the law using the single term "Aboriginal." However, the symposium focused on issues affecting the languages of the First Nations living in Quebec,[ii] particularly the Innu, Atikamekw, Mi'kmaq and Cree languages. It was also attended by guest specialists from the host Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg First Nation. For UNESCO, the definition of an Indigenous language is broad and non-restrictive, as described in the self-identification criteria of Indigenous peoples in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the Action plan for organizing the 2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages. From this standpoint, it is possible to speak about both the languages of Indigenous peoples, as part of Indigenous cultural heritage, and Indigenous languages as such. A conclusion of the symposium is that not all Indigenous languages are destined to become extinct in the immediate future, even though Indigenous communities continue to suffer from the effects of colonialism. In light of various initiatives, it has become clear that the successor generation is taking shape and may already be well positioned to pursue initiatives that support the use of Indigenous languages in daily life.

Nonetheless, the time and energy spent to ensure that Indigenous languages survive may seem enormous, particularly when the available funding is insufficient or negotiated piecemeal on a project-by-project basis with different funding bodies, which often change from one project to the next. The risk that Indigenous people may become burned out as

a result of their efforts to preserve their languages is rarely taken into account. This issue cannot be ignored in the context of a difficult history, during which many Indigenous people suffered severe trauma due to suppression and mistreatment on account of their mother languages. There are many examples of the benefits associated with learning, re-learning and using one's language in terms of well-being, including intergenerational communication, the transmission of knowledge and the ongoing practice of other activities specific to the peoples or nations.[iii]

The theme of the 2019 edition of the Symposium on Indigenous Languages refers to a problem that was discussed at the previous symposium held at UQAC (Université du Québec à Chicoutimi) and is shared by many Indigenous nations and communities across North America (see the discussions at the 2019 International Indigenous Language Conference, Heliset Tłe Sḱál / Let the Languages Live[iv]). The need for training in teaching and transmitting Indigenous languages and the lack of concrete measures, initiatives and programs for training the next generation in this sector were clearly identified by Indigenous language and education institutions (including Tshakapesh) and by people involved in teaching Innu and Atikamekw.

The solutions for the future of Indigenous languages presented at the end of this document aim to promote successful initiatives and enhance ongoing initiatives that need improvement. Indigenous languages need to be supported not only when they are under threat, but also when their situation is improving, since they continue to face pressure from the colonial official languages.



Innu language teaching materials/Institut Tshakapesh
Photo by Şükran Tipi

I. Exemplary programs, tools and initiatives[v]

Indigenous languages are currently learned and studied both in schools and in communities by a wide variety of students, including children and Indigenous and non-Indigenous adults. Indigenous languages are studied as either the first language (L1), as in the case of Innu, Atikamekw or Cree, or as a second language (L2), as in the case of Abenaki and, to some extent, Mohawk. The co-existence of various learning contexts is reflected in various types of learners and various teaching settings. This variety of contexts means training qualified human resources to meet the growing demand for Indigenous language courses. While Indigenous language learning entered the schools in the 1970s (in the wake of the movement that led to the document titled *Indian Control of Indian Education* (National Indian Brotherhood/Assembly of First Nations, 1972)), structured or accredited Indigenous language courses are now increasingly accessible to Indigenous residents in urban centres, bearing in mind that the transmission of Indigenous languages has already been taking place for decades in urban centres in less formal settings aimed at

cultural preservation. These new structured courses are primarily for Indigenous persons seeking to re-appropriate their language and, secondly, for non-Indigenous people who want to learn more about this intangible heritage.

At the urban Indigenous community level, the Saguenay Friendship Centre is training the next generation within its own institution, in particular by focusing on continuous training in language transmission. Since 2018, it has drawn on the example of Indigenous-led institutions such as Tshakapesh and the First Nations Education Council (FNEC) in implementing measures for future language transmitters; these measures include a wage scale that recognizes language skills and hourly remuneration rates for Elders, culture-keepers and young language transmitters. The challenge here will be to train competent language facilitators to master the standard spelling for written Indigenous languages (especially Innu and Atikamekw) in contexts where the spelling is applicable, while remaining sensitive to the local dialects spoken in the communities of the Indigenous families who frequent the friendship centre.

In a spirit of self-determination, many First Nations have assumed sole ownership of the transmission and teaching of their Indigenous languages. Representing her community's educational program at the symposium, Marsha Vicaire of the Listuguj Education Directorate described existing programs ranging from early-age transmission activities alongside an immersion program for primary and secondary students up to immersion courses at different levels for adult speakers of the Mi'kmaq language. In order to strengthen the expertise of trainers and teachers and exchange good practices, the Listuguj First Nation, located in Quebec, collaborates with experienced and qualified Mi'kmaq language keepers from the Mi'kmaq Nation in Nova Scotia.

Innu communities that are members of Tshakapesh have shown their wish to take control of revitalizing the Innu language following a joint consultation among the Innu communities of Quebec and Labrador.[vi] The action plan underpinning their language planning approach envisages efforts at three levels: developing the status of the Innu language (status planning); acquiring and learning the language; and developing the corpus of the language (corpus planning). Implicitly dependent on these three levels, the transmission of the Innu language is facing major challenges, particularly in encouraging children to learn and use the language outside school.

It is important to mention that all the initiatives and projects presented at the symposium use educational material designed for teaching and transmitting by the linguistic and educational services of the Indigenous communities concerned, such as Tshakapesh and

Atikamekw Linguistic Services. This pedagogical material[vii] for teaching and learning Indigenous languages is supplemented by various digital tools developed thanks to one-off grants—a situation that raises the challenge of technological obsolescence in the medium and long terms. Marie Odile Junker of Carleton University and her team of Atikamekw, Anishinaabe, Cree and Innu speakers, who work collaboratively with a view to training the next generation, have produced apps, digital platforms and web tools designed primarily to improve the first-language (L1) literacy of the Indigenous language speakers concerned. Since 2018, they have also supported the learning of these languages as second (L2) languages: Alonguian Linguistic Atlas, Exercices en ligne pour la langue crie, an Innu dictionary, an Innu verb conjugation tool and an Algonquian terminological forum.

Several programs at Quebec universities specifically focus on the transmission of Indigenous languages, such as the programs at the Centre des Premières Nations Nikanite de l'Université du Québec à Chicoutimi, the undergraduate microprogram in teaching an Algonquian language at the Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières (UQTR) and the Indigenous Language and Literacy Education certificate at McGill University for Algonquin, Cree, Inuit, Mi'kmaq, and Kanienkehaka (Mohawk) students.[viii] These post-secondary programs are mainly for people working in schools (at the pre-school, primary and secondary levels), whereas the new college-level program available at the Kiuna Institution since 2018—the Diploma (DEC) in First Nations Arts, Literature and Communication (First Nations Languages option)—is for students who want to take one of the previously-mentioned university programs in preparation for both teaching and other occupations related to Indigenous language, such as translation or improving literacy in Indigenous communities. While these programs represent an important step in training resource people for teaching and transmitting Indigenous languages, the major and increasingly urgent challenge for all institutions is the recruitment of trainers to teach in these programs. Jordan Lachler, Director of the University of Alberta's Indigenous Languages and Literacy Development Institute (CILLDI) in Edmonton, pointed out that this situation is also applicable to other contexts for Indigenous peoples. On the one hand, resource people with increasingly in-demand skills are already over-extended in their home communities and, on the other hand, Quebec post-secondary educational institutions working to recruit these resource people, who generally do not have a typical academic background and the requisite degrees, run into administrative roadblocks such as the Teaching Qualification Requirements (TQRs) necessary for obtaining the status of lecturer. For UQAC's Centre des Premières Nations Nikanite, the considerable challenge

of addressing the shortage of lecturers with appropriate knowledge and relevant experience has resulted in an ongoing call for applications in order to constitute a pool of available and qualified resources. As mentioned by UQTR Professor Sylvie Ouellet, this institutional rigidity is increasingly felt at a time when many First Nations in Quebec, such as the Atikamekw since the 2000s, have been facing a shortage of trained teachers in their mother tongues and thus depend on existing university programs for teaching and transmitting Indigenous languages.

II. Possible solutions for the future transmission of Indigenous languages

1. Returning to a territorial base for Indigenous languages

During the symposium, many participants argued that the transmission of Indigenous languages needs to be based on the land. It is therefore crucial to fund intergenerational projects, particularly in urban settings where cultural outings, language immersion camps and other activities involve travel by participants to their ancestral territories. At the Kiuna Institution, for example, students insist on learning the "language of the woods," as used by the Elders, but this language cannot be taught in a classroom—it must be learned in context on ancestral land. Apart from the "language of the woods," it is important to realize that schools cannot—and must not—be the only means of ensuring the transmission of Indigenous languages, as pointed out by Rebecca Martinez (Martinez 2000) in reference to a tendency to overestimate the importance of the education system in language transmission. Indeed, this is an interesting way forward for nation-states that have imposed compulsory education for all. However, this is not always the priority approach for transmitting Indigenous languages. In the example evoked by Martinez, language transmission occurs through the practice of activities that could be described as traditional activities that facilitate the emergence of a standard of individual leadership for collective well-being. Individuals are brought up with the understanding that they have a role to play in the community. To do so, they need to know and speak the language. Indigenous people learn their languages during ceremonies and other cultural activities and contexts that are conducive to learning how to speak in public—a skill that is expected to be used by all community members in due course. In both Quebec and Canada as a whole, spiritual activities are most often considered a private matter, an individual right. It is therefore important to promote the transmission and teaching of Indigenous languages on ancestral lands by giving schools the necessary latitude to bring together these cultural dimensions.

2. Local evaluation of skills

Knowledge of an Indigenous language does not always come with a university degree, and this knowledge must be recognized by academic institutions at all levels. Local and regional institutions (for example, the Conseil de la Nation Atikamekw), as well as cultural and educational institutes (for example, Tshakapesh) and Indigenous school boards, should be able to make recommendations on staff hiring and evaluation criteria.

Education ministries should offer more flexibility to colleges and universities in hiring language teachers and speakers in a way that prioritizes knowledge of a language over the degree or accreditation a candidate may hold. In order to avoid working in isolation, more collaboration is desirable between post-secondary institutions and Indigenous cultural institutes.

3. Towards mainstreaming the use of Indigenous languages

In the language planning paradigm, "mainstreaming" refers to the appropriation by speakers of their own language and the universal acceptance of the use of the language as a matter of course. To create a dynamic conducive to mainstreaming, it is necessary to go beyond tolerating other languages, and to determine together whether the difference constitutes an issue for the interests of the respective groups. Mainstreaming inverts the stakes in risk analysis. Do Indigenous languages threaten the other languages recognized by the state? If so, how and why? Perhaps it is because the resources to support languages are limited, and the greater the number of people associated with a language, the greater their claim on available resources should count.

Mainstreaming occurs at various levels: first, by increasing the number of opportunities to use Indigenous languages in private and public life—not only in academic institutions and public services in general but also in business and private life. This multiplication of opportunities needs to be accompanied by a change in discourse.

As mentioned by Katharine Turvey (Canadian Commission for UNESCO) at the symposium, this change of discourse about Indigenous languages must take place so that successes stimulate both medium- and long-term efforts. The Canadian Commission for UNESCO, as an independent institution addressing the Action plan for organizing the 2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages, aims to raise the awareness of all levels of government and civil society about the importance of Indigenous languages and the shared responsibility to contribute to implementing the *United Nations Declaration on the*

Rights of Indigenous Peoples.[ix]

However, in order for Indigenous peoples to be able to exercise their right to use their languages in various contexts, they must re-appropriate them. Although some First Nations, including the Atikamekw, have expert speakers of all ages, this situation is unfortunately an exception. In many cases, re-appropriating a language involves re-learning it either as a first language (or mother tongue)[x] or as a second language. In every case, the goal is to develop fluency and ease in using the language, as stated by Chief Perry Bellegarde at the opening of the *Heliset tłe sḱál/Let the Languages Live* conference: "We want fluency." To achieve fluency, investments need to be made in programs that have been proven effective such as language nests, immersion programs, master-apprentice programs, language camps and so on (Hinton and Hale 2001). Although the use of Indigenous languages as the language of instruction is generally an effective way of keeping an Indigenous language alive in the school system (e.g. the Karonhianónhnha Tsi Ionterihwaienstáhkhwa school system in Kahnawake), it is not generally a guaranteed means of revitalizing or preserving an Indigenous language. Despite the existence of many immersion programs, the Kahnawake community has adopted a five-year language development plan so that the traditional language (*kanien'keha*) can be re-established as the community language. Similarly, Louis-Jacques Dorais (Dorais 1996; cited in Hot and Terraza 2011: 222) pointed out in the 1990s, in reference to Inuit programs that use Inuktitut as the language of instruction: "However, there is room for improvement in the system because once children have completed their immersion years, they do not study the Inuit language enough. This imbalance runs counter to stable bilingualism because the more the children continue their academic education the more their oral and written language skills in Inuktitut suffer."

4. Expanding our outlook on various ways of re-appropriating a language

The current situation—as illustrated by statistics presented at the symposium by Statistics Canada—is that an increasing number of Indigenous people are learning their language as a second language. This means that their dominant language (in the sense of the term used by second-language-acquisition experts) is no longer their Indigenous language but rather English or French. In such circumstances, the mother tongue will remain the Indigenous language, but the language in which the person expresses themselves spontaneously and easily is a colonial language. This implies that to re-appropriate their mother tongue, an Indigenous person will need to learn it using second-language methods.

In order to better address this demand from second-language learners, we must improve our knowledge of methods that are appropriate and that take into account the particular structures of Indigenous languages. For example, in most language centres (e.g. Université de Montréal, UQAM, etc.) and even in Quebec's ministerial programs, the framework used is the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, which specifies a number of language skill levels. Based on its expertise in teaching 13 languages, the team at the Université de Montréal's language centre suggests that four 45-hour courses are needed to reach the first skill level (level A1) in the Innu language, whereas only one such course is sufficient to learn English or Spanish. Needless to say, the learning framework itself needs to adjust to the reality of Indigenous languages in terms of their cultural, spiritual, historical and other content.

Adequate, recurring and systematic funding is clearly necessary in order to develop our knowledge of teaching and learning Indigenous languages (as L1 or L2). However, this needs to be done while strengthening existing initiatives in both Indigenous communities and urban centres. In fact, urban community centres, such as Native Montreal, go beyond language teaching in that they also foster a sense of belonging to a linguistic group. This social process is an essential backdrop that allows Indigenous languages to find the space they need to flourish—and the same goes for the people who speak them. Formally learning one's language and using it with confidence in a safe space are practices that complement each other.

Conclusion

Given the ideas and solutions brought together in this document, several main directions can be identified for decision-makers at various levels of political governance. As pointed out by Marco Bacon, the co-organizer of the Symposium on Indigenous Languages and head of UQAC relations with First Nations, it is crucial to work on mobilizing political leaders by keeping them informed of current issues in the teaching and transmitting of Indigenous languages. Their demonstrated openness needs to be transformed into action, notably by inviting them to learn how the milieu actually functions in order to adapt funding cycles to the local operating calendars of band councils and regional Indigenous institutions.[xi] The ultimate medium- and long-term objective should be to implement regularly recurring funding initiatives and programs whose eligibility and selection criteria address the needs identified by Indigenous peoples, since they are the leading actors in sustaining their languages.

Many Indigenous specialists are calling for a new approach to Indigenous languages, which have generally been considered in terms of categories ranked in order of extinction, from probable to imminent. New approaches turn the focus towards the language users and their communities. As noted by Indigenous researcher Wesley Y. Leonard, “the peoples and their languages are intertwined, sometimes even the same” (Leonard 2017). This observation echoes the central demand of the specialists and practitioners at the third Symposium on Indigenous Languages: to consider the basis of Indigenous languages in the land and to return to communities and regional institutions the full right to manage the teaching and transmission of Indigenous languages and dialects, in order to maximize language skills.

It is highly likely that language sustainability is fostered when it is offered in locally appropriate frameworks, contexts and circumstances, as described in the first principle of the action plan for the International Year of Indigenous Languages: ‘’Centrality of indigenous peoples (“Nothing for us without us”), according to the principle of self-determination and the potential to develop, revitalize and transmit to future generations the languages that reflect the insights and values of indigenous peoples, as well as their knowledge systems and cultures.’’ (IYIL Action Plan: 5)

All stakeholders are therefore invited to take into account the diversity of situations and categories of people who are re-appropriating Indigenous languages in order to recognize all the efforts being made to use Indigenous languages in various contexts. Consequently, any coherent approach that contains relevant support measures for Indigenous languages must include the urban context—where learning and re-learning Indigenous languages are, above all, means of fostering community identity and cohesion, as well as achieving measurable language skills.

In conclusion, it is important to remember that learning an Indigenous language, including in a second-language context, remains a fundamental right, as stated not only in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, but also in the Preamble to Quebec’s *Charter of the French Language*, which recognizes the right of First Nations and Inuit in Quebec to preserve and develop their languages and cultures.

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[i] Organized by Jimena Terraza (Kiuna Institution) and Marco Bacon (Centre des Premières Nations Nikanite de l'Université du Québec à Chicoutimi) on May 29 and 30, 2019 as part of the 87th Convention of the ACFAS (Association francophone pour le savoir) at UQO (Université du Québec en Outaouais) on the theme: *Sustaining the transmission and teaching of Indigenous languages: Preparing the next generation*, in partnership with the Quebec Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEESQ), and the Canadian Commission for UNESCO, and in collaboration with the UNESCO Chair in First Peoples' Cultural Transmission and the CIÉRA-UQO (an inter-university centre for studying and researching Indigenous languages).

[ii] Although the Quebec provincial government's measures relating to the second line of action of its *Plan d'action gouvernemental pour le développement social et culturel des Premières Nations et des Inuits* (2017-2022) (Government of Quebec 2017) concerns the promotion of Indigenous languages and demonstrates the government's wish for more inclusion of these languages in public space, the need to train Indigenous resource people to better transmit their languages is not correspondingly spelled out in its plan.

[iii] While there is a definite link between the ability to express oneself in one's mother tongue and a strong feeling of well-being, some specialists argue that greater cultural continuity (including, for example, traditional language knowledge) could even have a positive impact on the general state of health of certain Indigenous groups.

[iv] This international conference, held in Victoria, BC on June 24-26, 2019, was co-organized by the First Peoples' Cultural Foundation (FPCF) and the First Peoples' Cultural Council (FPCC), in partnership with the Canadian Commission for UNESCO.

[v] This section does not contain an exhaustive list, but rather highlights certain programs, tools and initiatives deemed relevant for the transmission and teaching of Indigenous languages, primarily by and for Indigenous peoples in Quebec.

[vi] *Discussions on the future of the Innu language* were held with the Innu communities of Quebec and Labrador in Sept-Îles on September 11 and 12, 2018.

[vii] Other First Nations have also developed their own instructional material to some extent. In these cases, exemplary existing initiatives should be showcased in terms of their full scope and accessibility for learners in a wide variety of contexts and situations, as mentioned in the introduction to this text.

[viii] For the past few decades, certain programs in Quebec universities have offered structured courses on studying various Indigenous languages.

[ix] With respect to language rights, articles 13 and 14, in particular, mention the rights of Indigenous peoples to use, develop, transmit and teach their own languages.

[x] Mother tongue is understood here as the first language learned. Although the mother tongue sometimes remains an individual's dominant language throughout their life, it is replaced in certain cases by a majority language, which then becomes their dominant language.

[xi] For example, at Mashteuiatsh on August 28, 2019, Stacy Bossum, the advisor on heritage, culture and language, criticized the fact that the funding for revitalizing Indigenous languages had clearly diminished, and argued in favour of long-term funding programs instead of relying on one-off grants: https://www.lequotidien.com/actualites/langues-autochtones-un-financement-qui-diminue-48a8006645a1dd85813ba825f384091b