



Language Diversity in B.C.

What is language diversity?

There are roughly 6,000 to 7,000 languages spoken in the world today. Language diversity is directly connected to cultural and ecological diversity. Indigenous people recognize an essential connection between language and land. Regions with varied geography and high ecological diversity also have high language diversity.

B.C. is unique in Canada for its Indigenous language diversity. In 2007 B.C. was recognized by *National Geographic* as a language hot spot. There are 7 Indigenous language families and 34 languages in B.C., representing 60% of the First Nations languages in Canada.

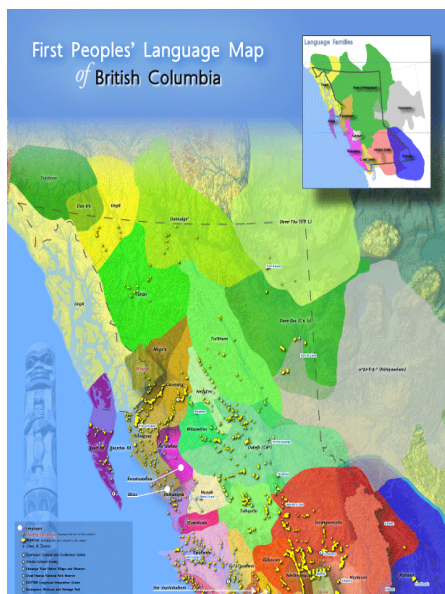
Why is language diversity important?

The Index of Linguistic Diversity indicates an alarming decline in the world's language diversity over the past 35 years.¹ The decrease in the number of first language speakers of Indigenous languages shows that many languages are no longer being passed on to future generations.

Language diversity in B.C. is under threat because the process of language transmission in First Nations communities was forcibly interrupted by colonization and residential schools. This is concerning because language is more than just a means of communication.

“Language is one of the most tangible symbols of culture and group identity. It is not only a means of communication, but a link which connects people with their past and grounds their social, emotional and spiritual vitality. . . .When these languages vanish, they take with them unique ways of looking at the world, explaining the unknown and making sense of life.”

- Canada's First Peoples website (2007)



First Peoples' Language Map of B.C.

LANGUAGE FAMILIES

A language family is a group of languages that are related through descent from a common “ancestor” language. There are 7 language families that make up First Nations languages in B.C.

1. Algonquian
2. Dene or Na-Dene (Athabaskan-Eyak-Tlingit)
3. Ktunaxa (language isolate)
4. Salishan
5. Tsimshianic
6. Wakashan
7. Xaad Kil/Xaayda Kil (language isolate)

¹Harmon, D. & Loh, J. (2010). The Index of Linguistic Diversity: A new quantitative measure of trends in the status of the world's languages. *Language Documentation & Conservation*, 4, 97-151.

Language is essential to identity and transmits values, spiritual and traditional practices, and history across generations.

First Nations languages are part of Canada's unique cultural heritage, but more importantly, they are the rightful heritage of First Nations people. Language, culture and identity form an inseparable bond that directly affects the health and well-being of a people. Knowing and being able to speak one's heritage language is a human right.

Language diversity allows us to see the world through more than one lens. Indigenous languages have linguistic structures and systems that are different from other languages. They provide insights into the different ways that humans think, interact and use language.

How can we support language diversity?

The high diversity of First Nations languages in B.C. presents challenges for language revitalization because of limited funding and resources. It is important that we work together and share tools and resources across all languages.

Community policies are needed to protect First Nations languages within homes, communities and schools. Each community must take control of its own language advocacy and establish its language as an official language within the community. Collaboration among communities, despite language and/or dialect differences, will help share resources and information.

Language diversity is sometimes mistakenly seen as a barrier to human communication, but diversity offers multiple ways of being in the world and can provide unique and creative solutions to world issues. Language diversity is a strength to be celebrated and protected.

KEY TERMS

- **Language hotspot:** a geographical region with a high level of linguistic diversity.
- **Language shift:** occurs when people shift from speaking their heritage language to another language, resulting in fewer speakers of the heritage language.
- **Linguistic diversity:** a range of variations in human languages.
- **Mother tongue:** an individual's first language or languages learned at birth.
- **Language dialect:** one or more varieties of a language that can vary in pronunciation, word and sentence structure, and meaning.



Our Living Languages exhibit at the Royal BC Museum

WHERE CAN I LEARN MORE?

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