

# Module 1

## Introduction

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## Course objectives

In this module, the complex issues around the revival of northern cultures and languages will be introduced, and you will be prepared to think about how these issues apply in your home community. We will begin by discussing some basic principles of critical thinking and

research ethics that will help you develop your academic skills. Next, we seek to explain what is meant by those much-used terms “identity,” “culture” and “self-determination.” We will consider how those terms apply to indigenous and non-indigenous peoples in the North. We will then move to a more specific discussion of indigenous languages; why they are threatened, and why it is so important to keep them alive. Finally, we will examine various ways in which people and governments are trying to revitalize indigenous languages and to what extent these approaches have been successful.

Upon completion of this module, you should be able to:

1. identify where indigenous groups live in the North and describe the criteria that distinguish indigenous minorities from a majority group;
2. hone your critical thinking and gain knowledge of ethics in research;
3. explain what “culture,” “identity” and “self-determination” means;
4. identify threats to the survival of indigenous languages in the North and describe strategies by authorities, and indigenous people themselves, to keep endangered languages alive.

## Introduction

The circumpolar world around the North Pole stretches from Alaska to the Russian Far East, crossing different oceans, and is inhabited by indigenous populations that were colonized by more numerous southern populations.<sup>1</sup> Although this region is inhabited by a variety of peoples with diverse cultures, they share many similarities; thanks to their traditional ways, combining unique culture and survival skills developed over centuries they managed to live successfully under harsh conditions on territories that were not suitable for extensive or intensive agriculture. These territories were, however, coveted by outsiders for their natural resources. Initially for fur and whale blubber, and more recently for oil, gas and the establishment of hydroelectric power stations. Aboriginal communities gradually lost control,

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<sup>1</sup> The Special Rapporteur of the UN Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, J.M. Cobo, marked out the main characteristics of indigenous peoples: living on traditional territories, distinct ethnic identity and culture, presence of their own social institutions and legal system, and a non-dominant group of society (Cobo 1986).

not only over their territories, but also over their justice systems, educational systems and other forms of public management.

Northern indigenous populations were colonized by southerners and left as minorities within their own homelands. A minority group can be defined as a social group with different national or cultural traditions from the majority population - who hold most of the social power in a society. One of the main characteristics of a minority group, according to Feagin (1984), is that the dominant group disapproves the cultural traits of the minority group. The style of life, language, culture and origin of the minority group can differ from that of the majority and members of minority groups could therefore be prone to different treatment in the societies in which they live. This treatment – also called discrimination for instance in terms of limited access to the decision making process, unequal treatment or other social disadvantages – may be seen as a result of the individual's perceived membership of such a minority group, regardless of the individual's personal achievement. The impact such developments have on indigenous populations and their traditional livelihood, is devastating, with social problems and loss of minority languages as inevitable result. The situation for indigenous populations in the Arctic, however, seems to have gradually improved: some indigenous groups are for instance now recognized as minority groups by the authorities of the states in which they live and have the right to communicate with these authorities in their indigenous languages but much still needs to be done in order to protect the mother tongue of indigenous populations.

Whereas colonization and assimilation were the main topics of CS 321, this course seeks to shed light on cultural self-determination of the indigenous peoples of the North, and discusses the changes in expressions of cultural identity in three regions: Greenland and Northern Europe, the Russian Arctic, and North America. Cultural self-determination, identity and culture are terms that will be discussed in detail in this first module which can be regarded as an introduction to explain the theoretical background – that subsequently will be applied in the following modules where the different regional case studies will be addressed. Before we describe the theoretical background of this course, however, we briefly address some issues in relation to critical thinking and identify some ethical issues that need to be taken into account when we conduct research.

## Critical thinking and research ethics

This section is intended to discuss some of the major issues in critical thinking and briefly address some basic ethical aspects that are considered to be important when we do research. The objective is to critically evaluate information in order to make scientific decisions, and to understand the impact of social researchers on people from different cultures rather than presenting each aspect of critical thinking and research ethics. Students who are interested in these fields are advised to consult Hughes and Lavery (2008). Parts of this section are borrowed from Michel Bouchard/Sander Goes (2014) “Introduction”. Module 1 of Circumpolar Studies 321, page 3-4.

Science is not only based on analytical or logical thinking. While analytical thinking, for instance, focuses attention on how to deconstruct a problem in several parts, critical thinking is regarded as a more self-reflective and self-correcting approach, helping us to examine theories, facts and opinions in a more purposeful, and responsible manner. Thinking critically can help – not only to discover hidden strategies and distinguishing facts from values – but also to strengthen your own arguments. For instance: how did you work out your ideas? What have you learned from this course? Such techniques also help you to recognize the reliability or unreliability of sources: who is making these judgements? Someone argues that her approach is good, but for whom? Cunningham (2004:13) identifies several basic steps in relation to critical thinking. Though there is some overlap between the issues identified in each step, Cunningham successfully addresses some of the most essential questions that you will find useful during your study, and perhaps later on during your professional career.

1. Identify and evaluate premises and conclusions: are the claims being made supported by evidence, and if so, what kind of evidence? What sort of conclusions could we ourselves draw based on this evidence? Remember that although a particular claim might be correct, the conclusions drawn from those claims may not be correct.
2. Recognize and clarify uncertainties, vagueness and contradictions. Is there one or more explanation for the terms being used?
3. Distinguish between facts and values.
4. Recognize assumptions. Is there any hidden agenda behind the claims being made? Does the person or organisation in question have a political or personal interest in this issue?

5. Distinguish source reliability or unreliability. For example, what qualifies the expert on a particular issue? Is the information he or she presents true? Where did he or she get that information?
6. Recognize and understand conceptual frameworks. What are the general beliefs and values of a particular individual or organization and how do these beliefs and values affect the claims these individuals or organizations make?

Ethical concerns are important for students at various levels and deserve our attention continuously. Ethics is known as the study of morals and ethical concerns and is seen as an integral part of our research process. Our objective is not only to establish trustworthy knowledge but also to do our research well; be sure we follow some generally established ethical principles in terms of how we use, assess and treat our sources when we conduct our fieldwork in the North. But how do we take into account such ethical concerns? How do we use, assess and treat our informants and what is our relationship with informants? These questions are just a few examples of many ethical concerns that we need to think of when we are dealing with informants, both indigenous and non-indigenous.

## **Identity and culture in the North**

### *Identity*

Identity is essentially the answer to the question ‘Who are you?’ Each person has an individual identity and identifies him or herself with various groups, places of birth, profession, cultural group etc. Identity is a flexible thing that can change and develop over a certain period of time, but can we speak of a common northern identity? What makes someone a northerner? These are some of the questions that will be addressed in this section.

Identity has been a particularly important issue for Aboriginal peoples across the circumpolar north. This is so because their identity in many cases has been changed or undermined by processes of colonialism and assimilation, indigenous peoples have been displaced from their homeland and in many cases lost their ancestral language and traditional way of life. Another challenge to First People’s identity has been that their identity was seen as negative by colonialists. These negative attitudes have sometimes been internalized, leading to a negative self-identity. The impact of such developments is irreversible although these changes have led

indigenous peoples to think deeply about their own group identities and what makes them unique.

The identity and culture of inhabitants of the North may vary widely. The term aboriginal identity, for instance, can be understood and defined in different ways by different people:

We will always see ourselves as part of nature. Whether we use outboard motors or plywood for our cabins does not make us any less Indian... We are Indians just like our fathers and grandfathers, and just like our children and grandchildren will be (Richard Nerysoo, Fort McPherson, as cited in Brody 1987:180).

Some would argue that an aboriginal person in North America is someone who is a descendant of the peoples who lived in the Americas prior to 1492, whereas others claim that those who consider themselves to be aboriginal people should be regarded as such. Yet others argue that an aboriginal person needs to grow up in an aboriginal community and live a traditional lifestyle in order to be identified as aboriginal; thus opening up the possibility for non-natives to be included in this definition. In other cases, people define Aboriginal identity in more rigid terms – so that someone who does not live a traditional lifestyle is not seen as “really indigenous.” As more and more non-indigenous people are influenced by aboriginal cultures and adopt their ways mixed cultures are created. The various definitions and understandings among identifications contradict each other and could lead to identity crises among people who are insecure about their own identity. Questions regarding Aboriginal identity have, for instance, led to public debates over who will receive money from funds designated for Aboriginal people.

### *Culture*

“Culture” is a word that people use in many different ways. Broadly, culture is something that is shared by a group of peoples and into which people are socialized within the group rather than it being an inborn trait. For the purposes of this course, we can think of culture as having three levels. First, culture includes the ways that people know, believe, feel, and think. Some refer to the first level as “ways of knowing,” “epistemology,” or “belief systems.” For example, various attitudes about what constitutes a good life, what family means, or what is considered to be important. Dogsledding, for instance, may have cultural importance in northern culture – even in places where it is not widely practiced. Such attitudes – we can describe them as cultural differences – can vary widely from one group to another and are

often not immediately obvious, leading in some cases to profound cultural clashes. Second, culture includes people's behaviour, including everyday actions, such as joking or cooking, and special behaviours, for instance at a wedding. Finally, culture is also the material product that people make, such as food, clothes, storage vessels and cooking pots, or buildings (sometimes referred to as material culture).

Many people when they think about culture, focus mainly on material culture. For example, if you should go to a multicultural festival, you will see many people displaying their material culture, in the form of costumes, food, or artwork. However, a primary focus on material culture can lead to many misperceptions. Some argue that indigenous cultures in the North are dying because the majority of indigenous people wear clothes, build houses or watch movies that are the same as those worn, built, or watched by people from more southern societies. In order to get a true impression of a group's culture, we must look beyond this material layer and focus more on the first and second layers of culture. In fact, the first layer – how a group knows, thinks, feels, and believes – is the essential basis for all other aspects of culture. Material culture or particular behaviours – or in some cases lack of them – cannot maintain a culture without the first base level. For a long time, however, studies of indigenous cultures were almost exclusively focused on behaviour and material culture.

Another common misperception about culture is that “culture” only means “traditional culture,” that is, that it only means aspects of culture inherited from long ago and not from the not-so-recent past. When people discuss traditional livelihoods of the North, for instance, they might include dogsledding but not snowmobiling. The problem with this way of thinking about culture is that like identity, culture is and always has been flexible, changing and developing over time, without concealing cultural elements from the past. As Hugh Brody writes about Inuit culture, “All people live in both the past and the present” (Brody 1987:175). So, even though culture changes, groups of people often see themselves in terms of their connection to the past. In the following sections we briefly discuss the importance of Aboriginal people having a positive self-identity. In order to maintain a strong group identity, it is essential that the group maintain a strong and yet flexible culture – at all three levels.

### *The revitalization of Aboriginal culture(s)*

Aboriginal cultures in the North have been challenged since the arrival of colonization by rapid changes in lifestyle and the introduction of new powerful cultural forces from the South

– new systems of government, other languages, popular culture, and so on. There are many cases where, within their lifetime, people have gone from living a traditional life on the land – as their ancestors lived for centuries – to living in a sedentary world of mass media, high technology, and globalization. Such fast-paced cultural changes, many of which have been imposed on the indigenous populations without respect for their traditional livelihood, have sent shock waves through communities, disrupting the identity and self-esteem of people. In response to such challenges, indigenous people in the North have developed plans and programs to revitalize, protect, and maintain their culture and, hence, their identity. Cultural programs vary widely and address different levels of culture. Some deal with the material level. This would include, for instance, a program that teaches young people how to prepare traditional foods or make traditional clothing. Other programs seek to maintain or revive Aboriginal cultural behaviours. For instance, there are programs that seek to keep alive or bring back to life indigenous ways of healing, enacting justice, using the land, educating children, raising families, telling stories, or practicing religion. These kinds of programs often have an important political component, as Aboriginal communities seek control of their own justice system, educational system, land, and so on. However, the deepest level of Aboriginal culture – the ways that a people know, think, and believe – is probably the most important to maintain since, as explained earlier, without this deeper layer, external symbols of culture mean little. Yet this deep element of culture is also often the most difficult to transmit through “cultural programs”. People best learn this element of culture in day-to-day life – through family, school, media (books, television, internet etc.) or through long-term contact with other people, such as family, co-workers or friends. Nevertheless, through conscious cultural revitalization programs, children may learn their culture through locally produced curriculum in school, or families may consciously decide to conduct traditional activities together. More cultural awareness in one area of life has an effect in other areas such as health and well-being. For example, several studies of Aboriginal people who have been incarcerated have shown that Aboriginal spiritual and cultural programs in the prison have made inmates more likely to have higher self-esteem, stay sober, and rehabilitate (Waldram 1994:213).

Because culture is such a complex grouping of things, behaviours, and thoughts, it is not possible in this short module to deal with all the many aspects of cultural programs. Instead, we will focus on language, a key aspect of culture. The second part of this module, therefore, provides some examples of such projects from different regions across the North. Before



outlining the importance of indigenous languages and their revitalization, we first seek to answer the question whether there is a common northern identity and culture.

*Is there an indigenous northern identity and culture?*

Compared to the First Peoples, non-Aboriginal people are relative newcomers to the North, and the identity, culture, and impact of these newcomers on traditional livelihood has varied widely. As an example, consider the case of Labrador in North America. The indigenous population of Labrador now consists of Inuit on the coast and Innu in the interior. European settlers have been fishing the coast of Labrador since the 1500s and contact between them and the Inuit from Labrador occurred earlier than between people of European descent and the Innu living more inland. Most of these European fishers spent their summers on the Labrador coast and then returned to Europe or to Newfoundland for the winter. As early as in the 1700s, however, some outsiders began to settle on the Labrador coast. They often married Inuit women and adapted to the indigenous patterns of land use, fishing and trapping, moving with the seasons, and developing a close and sustainable relationship to the land. Their descendants still live in the area, now calling themselves Inuit Metis or Labrador Metis. Their communities are a distinctive blend of European and Inuit culture. Hugh Brody writes, “Labrador is remarkable for the way settler families have lived alongside Inuit for some 150 years. They constitute the only group of Europeans to make lives for themselves in North America more on the terms of an indigenous population than as representatives of a colonial enterprise” (Brody 2000:316).

In contrast, in the interior of Labrador, non-indigenous people have arrived only since the 1960s, with the development of Labrador City/Wabush, an iron mining town, and Churchill Falls, a hydroelectric-development town – both of which were built rapidly by the government and large corporations. The population of these towns is drawn largely from outside Labrador; people moved to these towns because of the availability of high-paying jobs. The inhabitants of these types of towns often retain their primary loyalties to their place of origin and plan to return there when they have saved up enough to retire. In this way, Labrador City/Wabush and Churchill Falls are part of a more global pattern that exists across northern North America, Northern Russia and to a lesser extent, Northern Europe. Many non-indigenous people in the North are there primarily because of jobs – this includes not only company-town workers, but also government officials, teachers, doctors, nurses, and

policemen. Their transience can make it more difficult to maintain social cohesion and stability in the North (Coates and Powell 1989:16-17).

There is, however, an encouraging trend: many families have now been in the North for decades and there is a second generation of workers, many of whom were born in these towns. In addition, more and more families are choosing to stay in the North after retirement. Among these families, there is an increasing sense of attachment and pride in the indigenous populations of the North and some of them even think of themselves as indigenous peoples. They have begun to create locally inspired art and music and developed lifestyles and hobbies that are uniquely northern – often spending a great deal of time on the land, hunting, fishing, snowmobiling, and boating. Hence, among these non-indigenous residents we can see the beginnings of another unique mixed culture.

This example illustrates the diversity of non-Aboriginal people in the North. The contemporary inhabitants of the North – or their ancestors – moved northwards for a wide variety of reasons – among them: employment, curiosity, interest in northern culture or landscape, desire to help in the North, desire to escape certain aspects of the South. As already mentioned, many eventually leave. But others stay and develop close ties to the land and to the peoples of the North. Furthermore, more and more non-indigenous people are being educated in and deeply influenced by Aboriginal cultures as Aboriginal people take greater control of northern schools, media, and government with, again, the resulting creation of new mixed cultures and identities.

The examples discussed above demonstrate the complexities involved in trying to define a northerner. Besides, we earlier concluded that various definitions contradict each other. The question of who or what is a northerner is therefore not easy to answer, nor whether there is a common northern identity. The challenge for all inhabitants of the north is rather to foster a group identity that maintain social cohesion and stability and allow them to continue to exist as unique peoples rather than creating one common northern identity. A key to such an identity lies in cultural and/or political self-determination.

### *Self-determination*

Self-determination can be defined most generally as the idea that human beings, individually and collectively are equally entitled to be in control of their own destinies. Where the political

identity of a people provides the basis for a quest for greater political autonomy, either within a nation-state or completely independent of it, we are observing a movement towards political self-determination. The term has gained international legal significance, being included in the two United Nations international human rights covenants – the 1966 *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*; and the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (1966) – as well as in the *Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples* (1960). The International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA), an independent and non-profit organization based in Denmark, describes self-determination as:

the right to *participate* in the democratic process of governance and to influence one's future – politically, socially and culturally. Self-determination embodies the right for all peoples to determine their own economic, social and cultural development. (accessed February 18<sup>th</sup> 2014 from <http://www.iwgia.org/sw228.asp>).

Thus, political self-determination may lead to greater autonomy and greater autonomy in turn to the creation of local decision-making and administration. While governments and indigenous groups around the world may will disagree regarding the kinds and shares of responsibilities, the basic principle – that groups will manage (some of) their public affairs – is generally accepted. When greater autonomy leads to decentralization of the decision-making process we speak of self-government. Self-government is a form of self-determination. However, it is important to understand the difference between *self-government* and *self-determination*; the two are not simply interchangeable. While self-government implies autonomy in the political and legal spheres, self-determination is broader, encompassing cultural and social spheres. Self-governance in the North generally entails the adoption by indigenous peoples of European political and legal norms. While this kind of institutionalization is important, it is the preservation of a peoples' culture and traditions that truly determines their degree of autonomy from larger societies.

Indigenous people generally organize themselves in an attempt to secure the survival of their culture. The benefits of these often globally operating organizations are not only that they provide an international forum where Sami or Inuit people living in different nation-states can meet each other to discuss aboriginal rights in working groups, but also to learn from other indigenous populations facing similar threats. International aboriginal organizations link the

strategies and communication campaigns of various aboriginal groups together and, as such, are better equipped to protect their traditional ways of life and to gain recognition of their cultures, and within that essential aspect languages.

## **Indigenous languages in the North: How is language connected to identity and culture?**

This section discusses the link between language and the first level of culture as described in the previous section. The importance of languages for traditional livelihood is emphasized and we also seek to illustrate how aboriginal languages are threatened and, not last or least, what can be done – and what has been done – to prevent them from extinction.

Language affects the way people think and the way people understand the world they live in. The vocabulary of indigenous peoples languages often reflects the features of their natural surroundings and traditional activities. The Sami language, for instance, has many different words for ‘snow.’ Of all the things that humans create as part of their cultures, language is the most important. In fact, language is so fundamental to our lives that we often do not consciously notice it. As Robert Bunge writes, “Language is not just another thing we do as humans – it is *the* thing we do. It is a total environment: we live in language as a fish lives in water” (Bunge 1987:13). When we do think about language, however, we can see that it is essential to group identity. It is the way that a people in a group connect to one another and make sense of their shared world. It is the means through which we learn about our group’s culture and pass it on. Conversely, one of the ways that people identify “outsiders” is through whether or not a person speaks the local language.

But languages are more than vessels for carrying culture. In fact, languages shape and are shaped by culture. The words, structures, and grammatical rules of a language are developed in response to an environment, way of life, and way of thinking. The Sami language, for example – with dialects spoken in the Northern part of Europe and Northwest Russia – has a rich terminology in relation to the weather, terrain and husbandry.<sup>2</sup> The large number of

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<sup>2</sup> Sami, the language spoken in present-day Sápmi (the region traditionally inhabited by the Sami people) is actually not one language but at least three: East Sami, (spoken in the Kola Peninsula in Northwestern Russia); Central Sami (spoken in Finland, Norway and Sweden); and South Sami (mainly spoken in Sweden and

specific words is useful to – for example – describe or explain the route and terrain in detail. If the name of a valley ends in *-riehppi*, it refers to an inaccessible part of the valley where reindeer must return the same way through which they came in. The broad vocabulary regarding different words for snow is another example. The terminology used to describe natural conditions reflects the detailed knowledge of the land and animals that is necessary to survive as a hunter in the Arctic. The Cree language, spoken in Northern America, provides another example. In their language all things are categorized as animate and inanimate (or living and non-living); this categorization affects how verbs are conjugated. However, this division does not follow the kinds of rules that we follow in, for example, English. In English, a “rock” is non-living – an “it” – but in Cree “asini” (rock) is animate. This part of Cree grammar expresses the traditional Cree view that many non-human things have a spiritual life. In addition to such matters of vocabulary and grammar, languages are deeply connected to a community’s traditional stories and ceremonies. Community members learn to tell stories or take part in ceremonies in patterned ways that are passed on from generation to generation, carrying with them important values and knowledge.

When a language is lost in everyday life, the stories and ceremonies will often not make the leap to the new language and a community loses distinctive forms of knowledge, ways of thinking, and ways of living. Words that describe traditional Aboriginal activities may be lost with the Aboriginal language; and with the loss of the ability to talk about it, the activity, too, may disappear. Certain stories may cease to be told or people may cease to perform certain rituals. Thomas Correll recalls one way that Inuit parents in Unalakleet teach their children Inuktitut place names through oral tradition:

I heard children playing what I thought was a “tongue-twister” game. They were in contest with one another to see who could repeat a set of terms faster and with fewer errors than anyone else. When I asked them to slow the text, I was surprised to discover that they were merely lists of place names. I thought that odd until I noticed that the names were always in a sequence that correlated to the actual or perceived relations of those places in nature. I took my discovery to my informants and they confirmed that this was an old practice they employed to teach the children about the land. Each “tongue-twister” was a sequence that depicted anapkuut: a river, a stretch of coast, a sequence of hills, etc. (Correll 1976:78).

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Norway). These three languages can in turn be divided into several dialects: North Sami and Lulesami, mainly spoken in Sweden and Norway, Kildin Sami spoken in Russia and Skolt Sami and Inari Sami, spoken in Finland.

If the children were to cease to speak Inuktitut, they would stop telling these tongue twisters and would thus very likely lose part of their knowledge of their homeland. But the most devastating effect of language shift or loss is perhaps that community members may lose the ability to talk to one another. There are examples of indigenous families where English or Russian speaking children are unable to speak with their grandparents – or even parents – when they visited their relatives during the summer months. This break in the generations, with grandchildren unable to learn from the knowledge of their grandparents, has far-reaching effects within a culture.

Hence, language is inextricably tied to the first level of culture discussed earlier – how a people knows, believes, thinks, and feels. Language is a key part of what gives a people their identity. Leda Jules, Kaska-interpreter, describes why it is important to listen and record indigenous language and narratives because “That’s the only way we pass down our traditions, our laws. That’s how we know we are people...It’s very important for young people to know their ways and that we are a little different from the other groups. They should be proud of who they are” (Moore in Freeman 2000:199).

#### *Why are Aboriginal languages threatened?*

We took some kids out camping. When we told them to get firewood, they cut down live trees instead of dead ones. They did not understand the word for dry wood.... Some of our children are learning French in school. Others learn English. Maybe that is good. If they want to talk to each other, they will have to continue speaking Inuktitut (Peter Morgan, George River, as cited in Brody 1987:158).

When we consider the importance of language to culture and identity, we can understand why many people are worried about the retention of language by the indigenous people in the circumpolar North. To lose an original language is losing more than just words and there is no doubt that indigenous languages are in grave danger because colonizing governments have often regarded the indigenous languages as an inconvenience in dealing with the people. The assimilation processes, where the formal school system was effectively used to weaken the influence of indigenous languages as their first language, resulted in a situation where the survival of many indigenous languages is endangered, as older generations pass away and the number of fluent speakers has been shrinking steadily.

The younger generation Evenki people living in Northern Siberia, for instance, lost most of the knowledge of their native Evenki language because they were separated from their parents and forced to remain up to nine months a year in a boarding school, while their parents traveled with the reindeer in large orbits around the settlement. The children became more used to the Russian language since most of the time they were in contact with Russian-speaking workers who worked and lived in the villages. Moreover, the Evenki language was taught only as a special subject and often in a dialect that did not correspond to with the way families actually spoke at home (Anderson in Freeman 2000:65). Another example can be found in the Canadian Arctic where according to the 1991 census of the more than a million people who claimed Aboriginal ancestry only 138,105 reported using an Aboriginal language in their homes (Indian and Northern Affairs 1996:2.2). Furthermore, the Chukotka Autonomous District in the Russian Far East reports that the Sirenik language is a dead language whereas UNESCO has put the Chukchi language on the red list of endangered languages and the Aleut language of Alaska is expected to be extinct by the year 2055 (Corbett and Swibold in Freeman 2000:12). In 1979 the Yupik language – mainly spoken in the western and south-central part of Alaska – was one of only a handful of Alaska native languages expected to survive into the twenty-first century, with 14,000 fluent speakers out of a total population of 17,000 (Fienup-Riordan in Freeman 2000:262). However, in addition to demographic changes, language is currently also threatened by cuts in state for funding projects that seek to create and improve bilingual and bicultural programs throughout the region.

Although, the situation of Aboriginal languages varies greatly from community to community, many Aboriginal languages are on the verge of disappearing, with only a few precious elders who still remember how to speak them. The Naukan Yupik language spoken on the Chukotka peninsula, for instance, has only 510 mother-tongue speakers (2010 census) whereas Kalaallisut, the main dialect of the Greenlandic language on the other hand, has more than 57,000 first-language speakers.<sup>3</sup> Of the 53 Aboriginal languages that are still used in Canada, linguists predict that only Cree, Ojibway, and Inuktitut will still be spoken in the next century. But even within these relatively strong language communities, there is reason for concern.

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<sup>3</sup> Ethnologue: Languages of the world. Retrieved March 3<sup>rd</sup> 2014 from: <http://www.ethnologue.com/language>.

How has this happened? Aboriginal languages have been battered by a variety of forces. Colonial school systems long forbade Aboriginal children to speak their first language, and Aboriginal languages were ridiculed or seen as primitive. Meanwhile, English, Russian or Scandinavian languages have become the language of power in terms of education, employment and popular culture across the circumpolar North. As a result, many indigenous people have willingly left their ancestral language behind in search of access to this power. In times of strict assimilation policy, it was even shameful to speak a native language, because it was an indication of indigenous identity representing a culture considered to be “backward” compared to the majority culture. Other reasons for language loss include foster homes, residential schools, intermarriage between Aboriginal and with non-Aboriginal people, migration to non-Aboriginal towns and cities, non-indigenous speaking workplaces, and the ever-increasing presence of a global popular culture.

*How can we keep Aboriginal languages strong?*

The decision whether to maintain or revitalize an Aboriginal language and how to do so also rests with the community to whom the language belongs – not only with educators, government officials, or linguists from the outside. While much can be learned from looking at what other communities have done or not done, community members need to decide on their own what their language goals are and how they can best meet those goals.

We concluded earlier that language is interwoven with culture, politics and education. A community cannot address language issues without considering and working with these other factors. Many people speak of keeping Aboriginal languages alive, but what does it mean for a language to live? Languages can be used in many areas of life – at home, at school, at work, in reading materials, in the mass media. The more areas a language is used in, the more likely it is to thrive and survive. A language that is only learned in a classroom, for instance, has a limited life. People refer to the effort to strengthen Aboriginal languages by a variety of terms, including reverse language shift, language revitalization, language maintenance, and language preservation. Consider the following four levels of language revitalization.

*Level 1: The family*

For a language to survive, it must be used by children. However, Aboriginal children in Canada, for instance, are 42% less likely to speak an Aboriginal language than an Aboriginal



person over 55 (Indian and Northern Affairs 1996: 2.2). Too often the languages are not being passed on. This means that language revitalization programs should ideally start with the family, at home, with parents and/or grandparents speaking to young children in their indigenous language. Without this intergenerational transmission, no amount of schooling or legislation will keep a language in use. Of course, home use is only possible if the parents and grandparents themselves speak the language. In many communities, while the older people may know the language, younger parents do not. A key factor in encouraging children to use the language is therefore that the parents themselves learn it. In other cases, parents may know the language, but may feel shame about using it (often because of negative experiences in their own childhoods), or they may think that the Aboriginal language will be a disadvantage for their children. Furthermore, even families that wish to encourage use of the language may find that this goal becomes lost in day-to-day business or family life. In such cases, families may find it useful to set aside particular times to use the language, such as weekends or summer vacations. Another important tactic for families may be restricting children's access to mainstream-language television and offering alternative forms of entertainment in the Aboriginal language.

#### *Level 2: Children's school programs*

If children do not learn Aboriginal languages at home, schools are the next means level for revitalizing a language. Even if children do speak the language, if they do not use it outside the home, their language skills will be limited. Classes that teach the Aboriginal language should be taught as early as possible to make sure that immersion programs have the greatest potential to teach fluency. However, until recently, school systems in Canada, Russia and Northern Europe only allowed children to learn non-indigenous languages. While educators still realize that it is important for Aboriginal children to learn these mainstream languages, there has been an increasing recognition that the youth benefit in many ways from also being schooled in their people's original language. Today, many children living in the circumpolar North have – with varying degrees of success – the opportunity to participate in a program where part of the lessons, or the first years of schooling such as with the Iñupiaq-speaking people in Alaska, are given in the indigenous language.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Attempts to teach the Aleut language to younger generations through the formal school system have not been successful so far (Corbett and Swibold in Freeman 2000:13). Teaching Kalaallisut – a language spoken by the Kalaallit people in Greenland – simultaneously with Danish at schools provoked a strong reaction because many younger Greenlanders felt their language and culture were being taken away without their consent (Caulfield in Freeman 2000:175).

Studies have shown that many children who speak an indigenous language such as Sami, Yupik and Inuit at home, undergo a process known as “subtractive bilingualism” when they enter school in the mainstream language. Some argue that instead of becoming proficient in two languages, children tend to gradually lose proficiency in their home language, often at the same time as they struggle with the school language with the result that the child’s overall language development may be impeded. However, a study of subtractive bilingualism and how it can be prevented carried out in Nunavik (in northern Quebec), provided different results. The study found that Inuit children who were schooled in Inuktitut for the first three years of school showed better development of their Inuktitut language skills than students schooled in their second language (English or French). More specifically, while the children attending school in English or French maintained their ability to carry on everyday conversations in Inuktitut, they did not learn to read Inuktitut, to expand their Inuktitut vocabulary, or to discuss complete ideas in their home language. Also, importantly, Inuit children educated in Inuktitut experienced a greater rise in personal self-esteem over their first years of school than the children schooled in their second language. Conversely, the children schooled in English and French were more likely to lose collective self-esteem; that is, they showed more positive attitudes towards non-Inuit children than towards Inuit children (Wright et al. 2000). Clearly, immersion programs in Aboriginal language during the early years of school are good, not only for the survival and development of the language, but for a child’s development of a positive self-identity. Another example can be found in Sweden where the Parliament declared Sami as a national minority language in 2000 and Sami were given the right to study their mother tongue both at compulsory school and upper secondary school (under the condition that the child in question uses the language on a daily basis with at least one parent or guardian).

Despite these benefits, however, communities cannot instantaneously implement Aboriginal language programs. As an example, consider the work of the Cree School Board on the east coast of James and Hudson Bays. The school board has implemented a successful program where children are taught in Cree (with English and French as subjects) from kindergarten to Grade 3. From the Cree School Board case, we can learn some lessons. First, such programs should be under local control – that is, the Cree School Board’s programs were not successful

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until communities asked for them (Burnaby et al. 1998:68). Second, to teach Aboriginal languages in schools requires well-trained teachers who know the language; it also requires good educational materials in the languages. Sufficient material resources such as books and newspapers remain a challenge even when an increasing number of schools, colleges and universities are teaching indigenous languages.

### *Level 3: Adult education programs*

Language programs for children and youth can make a great difference to a language's survival, but what about adults? There are many Aboriginal adults who either do not know their ancestral language or, if they do know it to a certain degree, are not as comfortable with it as they are with Russian, Norwegian or any other non-native mother tongue. It is more difficult for an adult to become fluent in a new language than it is for a child, but it is certainly possible. Post-secondary classes, community-organized lessons, language camps, or individual tutoring are all possible methods for an adult to learn a language. However, as with children, it requires commitment and spending significant time with a fluent language speaker or many hours of study. Of course, most adults have many duties and cannot afford the time it takes to completely master a new language. While this is an important effort, these adults will always be second-language speakers of their ancestral language. Even with a large number of second-language speakers, without first-language speakers, a language is still in grave danger (Indian and Northern Affairs 1996:2.2). However, adults who are comfortable with their Aboriginal language have the opportunity to play an important role in community initiatives, acting as a teacher to children and adults, creating language-learning materials, recording fluent speakers, or simply using their language with their friends and family in daily life.

### *Level 4: Higher education, Government, Work, and Mass Media*

Once a community has ensured that intergenerational transmission of the language and appropriate education programs are working, then it is time to begin to bring Aboriginal languages into more public spheres: secondary education, the workplace, mass media, and the government. As long as non-indigenous languages dominate the public space – the space of jobs, success, fame, entertainment, prestige – there will be a temptation to leave Aboriginal languages behind in search of public success.

Many universities across the circumpolar North – and far beyond that – provide study programs or courses where today's students can study indigenous language and culture.

Besides educational institutions and indigenous peoples themselves, governments at all levels also play a role in promoting Aboriginal languages. One possible step is to declare Aboriginal languages to be official languages, as for instance the Swedish parliament did, or the Norwegian Parliament in 1990, giving the Sami population in both states the opportunity to require that governmental services are offered in the Sami language and to use Sami in connection with pre-school education as explained earlier, and elderly care.

Mass media in the North (television, movies, radio, and internet) is dominated by mass-marketed “Hollywood culture” from the South. The appeal of these fantasy images has sometimes led northern people to be dissatisfied with their own lives and surroundings. In order to maintain a positive self-identity, especially among northern youth, it is important that they see their own language and culture represented as cool, fun, and successful in the mass media. Many communities across the Arctic made efforts to use native languages in the broadcast media such as locally controlled radio stations. The creation of the Greenlandic Broadcasting Corporation, Oddasat (a Sami news program) and local radio programs in the Chukchi language are just a few out of many examples that seek to meet the needs of a native audience and to promote the use of native languages. These programs do not only include news but also entertainment and some cases even showing a full-length feature movie, partly or fully, in an Aboriginal language (with non-indigenous subtitles), such as: *Atanarjuat* (2001), *The Kautokeino rebellion* (2008) and *Ofelaš* (1987).

#### *Level 5: Writing in Aboriginal Languages*

Aboriginal languages are traditionally oral languages and a written version of these languages did not exist prior to European contact. In the contemporary world, however, Aboriginal people want and need access to written materials – everything from telephone bills to cookbooks and novels. Producing written materials in Aboriginal language is, in some cases, essential for Aboriginal language speakers to comprehend. In other cases, it is part of an effort to revive or preserve a language, by providing materials for schools and other educational programs.

One area where there is broadly speaking a need for translation into Aboriginal languages is in the dissemination of government information on essential issues, such as health care (health information may be especially essential to elders, many of whom are unilingual in Aboriginal languages). Sometimes local governments have been more responsive than distant federal

governments: the Nunavut government, for instance, routinely translates all of its materials into Inuktitut. It has even developed a “Living Dictionary” project, gradually devising new Inuktitut words for contemporary government needs. Interestingly, even multinational businesses are beginning to see the need for translating into Aboriginal languages; Microsoft developed an Inuktitut version of Windows and Wikipedia is providing information online in several indigenous languages (such as Northern Sami and Sakha). In addition, there are many locally produced newspapers in indigenous languages, such as Avvir and Krayny Sever. Such local efforts ensure that written Aboriginal languages do not just become the realms of dry government pamphlets and school textbooks. Fortunately, Aboriginal communities have not waited for distant governments or businesses to provide written materials.

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