

VANISHING WORDS

In an age of globalization, the demise of Indigenous languages is raising alarms and fuelling preservation efforts.

Half of the languages spoken around the world could disappear by the middle of this century, linguists warn. And many in Canada are on the endangered list.

Preserving dozens of Aboriginal languages in this country has gained the urgency Indigenous peoples have felt from Australia and New Zealand to Taiwan.

“Someone could say you’re not a people any more because you don’t have a language,” reflects Amos Key Jr., Director of the First Nations Language Department at the Woodland Cultural Centre near Brantford, Ontario. “I don’t want to hear that in my lifetime.”

Just 24 percent of people identified as Aboriginal in Canada can converse in their native language, according to the 2001 census. As three Aboriginal languages—Cree, Ojibway and Inuktitut—represent the bulk of those speakers, many native tongues are today known only to a handful of elders.

Of the 60 to 70 historical Aboriginal languages in Canada, about 10 have already been lost, a dozen are considered on the verge of extinction and the same number are endangered.

Key, a member of the Six Nations of the Grand River Territory in southwestern Ontario, says that when he was in grade school, “it was forbidden to teach an Aboriginal language.”

The scientific community has warned that such historical assimilation campaigns—combined with



Starting young: The challenge is to find a context in which language learning is successful.

declining Indigenous populations, increased mobility, economic pressures, as well as exposure to television and other communications technologies—could lead to the loss of half of the world’s 6,000 to 7,000 languages by 2050. With such a decline, they warn, will come the demise of local knowledge, mentalities, creativity and heritage, as well as specialized information such as unique survival skills and traditional medicines.

In 2002, the Canadian government committed \$160 million over 10 years to the preservation of Aboriginal languages and culture. That step is vital, Aboriginal leaders believe.

“Canada needs to realize that this loss isn’t only for us. It will be a loss for Canada as well,” says Ron Ignace, head of the Task Force on Aboriginal Languages and Cultures, which is to make policy recommendations to the federal Heritage Minister.

Chief until last year of the Skeetchestn First Nation, near Kamloops, British Columbia, Ignace notes that Canada’s support for Indigenous languages will be examined internationally. His wife, Marianne Boelscher Ignace, an associate professor of anthropology and

First Nations studies at Simon Fraser University, is also part of that global discussion.

“The plight of Indigenous languages...has become an international syndrome,” she observes. For example, she says, the Maori language became an official language in New Zealand some 20 years ago through a grassroots movement of Maoris realizing their children weren’t using it any more.

Part of the New Zealand approach has been the creation of “language nests” that teach the Maori tongue to very young children in child-care settings.

While the main Aboriginal organizations in Canada—the Assembly of First Nations, the Métis National Council and Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami—have developed similar school immersion programs, there are many challenges. One is the diversity of Aboriginal languages. Another is that while elders may speak the mother tongue and youngsters can be taught to, their parents in the middle generation often do not know the language, creating a critical gap in usage. Significant rates of intermarriage with non-Aboriginal partners also complicate the task.