



Helping preserve the “soul” of a culture

By Becky Lockhart

Three hundred years ago Victoria didn't just look different—it sounded different. Without the constant clamour of expansion, industry, vehicles and boisterous centres of activity, waves crashing on shores and the calls of wildlife would have been more audible. And wherever a conversation between the first inhabitants of this region was taking place, the sound of Northern Straits Salish language would have filled the air.

Back then 23 different Salish languages permeated the Pacific Northwest, and were spoken throughout coastal and interior BC and Washington.

But as English-speaking settlements grew in dominance, the number of Salish language speakers declined. Today, many of these languages are endangered with few or no speakers left. First Nations elders are often the only ones who speak their community's language.

“I think there's no question that when you lose a language you lose a culture,” says Dr. Ewa Czaykowska-Higgins, a UVic linguistics professor who has been studying Salish languages for 20 years. “You lose the soul of a culture because people express themselves in language,” she says, adding that language is crucially important to a person's sense of self.

Czaykowska-Higgins' work on the Salish languages focuses largely on Nxa'amxcin, also known as Moses-Columbia Salish, which is spoken in the interior of Washington State. Czaykowska-Higgins conducts interviews with elders in the area who still speak the language and tapes the conversations. She has spent the last several years studying the lin-

púlkwən I folded it
qáck older brother (of a man)
sqáltk meat
qása? uncle (mother's brother)
qáxa? aunt (mother's sister)
qácp shrink, shrivel
sqəláw beaver; money
qált fresh (meat, salmon)
sqəltmíxw man
qənúxw throat
qənnáqs alone, by oneself
qəxmín, qxmín antler, horn
qí?xw stink, odor
qi?xw núnən I smelled it



guistic properties of the language's sounds.

The key is figuring out the way sounds are organized in the language, and the general patterns for how these sounds fit together and are pronounced. Because the Salish languages share so many similarities, Czaykowska-Higgins says work on an individual language has the potential to gain insight into all of the Salish languages in both Canada and the US.

Early in her studies Czaykowska-Higgins realized that because she was working with a language that might not survive, in addition to doing research that was purely scholarly, she could also do work that would involve preservation. “When you're working on native languages of any kind in a community, if those languages are endangered in some way, then a linguist has the potential to make a real contribution to the preservation of the language and the community, if

that's what the community wishes.”

At the moment, Czaykowska-Higgins is completing work on a dictionary based on two decades of her research on Nxa'amxcin. She plans to put it on the Web so the community and linguists alike can access it.

But studying languages can also have universal applications for human kind in general, says Czaykowska-Higgins. “Because language is produced in the mind, the more that we understand about the properties of individual languages, and the differences and similarities among languages, the more we will understand about how the mind works.”



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What makes the Salish languages unique? Among other things, they have a number of very complicated, interesting sounds, including some pronounced in the back of the throat. They also have long and complex clusters of consonants. English does not have consonant clusters like these and the sounds generally come from the front of the mouth.

Salish languages are spoken in a vast area that encompasses coastal BC and Washington State, including Vancouver Island, the Gulf and the San Juan Islands, and the interior of BC as far north as the Southern Cariboo region. They're also spoken in most of the northern interior of Washington, Idaho, into Montana, and in a pocket on the Oregon coast.

In the southern part of Vancouver Island, at least three variations of Northern Straits Salish are: Sooke in the Sooke basin, SENĆOŦEN (or Saanich) on the Saanich peninsula, and Songhees around Victoria.

SENĆOŦEN (Saanich-Northern Straits Salish) is an example of a language that, as a result of the community's desire to preserve its language, is being taught to the younger generations of First Nations.

Czaykowska-Higgins' work is supported by research grants from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), and her projects have involved collaborative work with colleagues as well as the training of students. She has supervised six graduate students whose work was also supported by SSHRC.

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To hear what one dialect of Salish sounds like, you can listen to phrases in Klallam at: www.ling.unt.edu/~montler/Klallam/Phrases/

Interested in how linguists study languages? For problems to solve that provide insight into the process, take part in the Linguistics Olympics: darkwing.uoregon.edu/~tpayne/lingolymp/

If you go to the grammars or fun and games sections of www.yourdictionary.com you can learn individual languages. For more information on languages, www.lmp.ucla.edu is a good site.

For articles on linguistics by major scholars: www.lsadc.org/web2/flfdr.htm

For more information about the UVic linguistics department, or Czaykowska-Higgins: web.uvic.ca/ling

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