

UVic knowl**EDGE**

Gems of language

By Kristi Skebo

What does the scientific study of language have to do with land claims and diamond mines? For UVic linguist Dr. Leslie Saxon, they are closely related. Saxon's work supports the Dogrib people, indigenous people of the Northwest Territories, in perpetuating their language and the traditional cultural knowledge of the land embodied in it. Such knowledge plays an essential role in a people's identity—personally, culturally, and also politically.

On August 25, 2003, the Federal and Northwest Territorial governments signed an historic land claim agreement recognizing Dogrib ownership of 39,000 square kilometres of land between Great Bear and Great Slave lakes. The agreement also grants the Dogrib control over development of the land's resources, which include Canada's only known diamond mines.

The Dogrib number about 4,000. "It's not the low number of people speaking a language that makes it endangered, however," says Saxon. "To ensure its survival, any language needs to be passed down, from parent to child."

This is where Saxon and her graduate students come in. They study the sounds and syntax of the Dogrib language, the way in which words are put together in order to convey meaning. Collaborating with the Dogrib Community Services Board, Saxon and associates in Rae-Edzo, NWT and at UVic have developed a Dogrib dictionary, school curricula and parenting programs that encourage parents to teach their children Dogrib before teaching them English. "These are essential steps in encouraging use of the language between generations," says Saxon.

As a consultant, Saxon has also been studying Dogrib place names, contributing to the traditional knowledge research carried out by the Dogrib tribal government. "It's important culturally for the Dogrib people to know and understand the land and the names of places

traditionally used by their ancestors," she explains. "The land is a part of who they are.

"Historically, by knowing the names of different places, the Dogribs knew where to hunt and trap, where to camp or what route to travel. The elders hold this knowledge of the land, the places and the significance of each place name, and it's important to them to share as much of that understanding as possible with younger generations," says Saxon. Working with the Dogrib Treaty 11 Council, Saxon and her collaborators have studied how the names of the different places were structurally formed. "Each name is descriptive of the area it represents. The name tells a story, reminding people of an important historical event or legend."

In order to pass this knowledge on, younger generations need to know the language. "The elders are monolingual, all of the stories they tell about places and their names are in Dogrib," says Saxon. "If the younger generation cannot

communicate with their elders, this knowledge, the very essence of Dogrib life, will be lost."

"I'm reminded of the words of the Dogrib elder, leader, and educator Elizabeth Mackenzie, who said that by maintaining two cultures and two languages, her people will be strong, like two people." In her work with the Dogrib people, Saxon is helping to ensure that they and their culture will still be around, long after all the diamonds have been mined.

This article was written by Kristi Skebo, a student in the Faculty of Graduate Studies, as a participant in the UVic SPARK program (Students Promoting Awareness of Research Knowledge), supported by the Vice-President Academic and Provost and the Vice-President Research.



Saxon inspects a map showing Dogrib place names

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Mining the meaning of Dogrib place names

?ek'atì ("Fat Lake")

This is the Dogrib name for what is officially called Lac de Gras, a translation into French of the meaning of the Dogrib word. Its name calls to mind fat caribou moving through the area on their annual migrations, which marks the place as important for survival.

Weyùts'atlaa ("Where Someone Went Inside It")

The name of this mountain at the north end of Marian Lake evokes the story of a couple who escape from the woman's jealous husband but who must remain forever locked inside the rocky hill of this name.

Dogrib travel stories

In a new research project funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the Dogrib Community Services Board, Saxon is working with Rosa Mantla and Philip Rabesca, two members of the Dogrib community, to produce a collection of Dogrib travel stories in both Dogrib and English. The editorial team will consult Dogrib elders for recommendations regarding the contents of the book and an accompanying CD.

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