INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE REVITALIZATION

Supporting Indigenous language revitalization efforts across Canada

BY TARA SHARPE

ÁSW. KÉNI. KŁO,E.L. Seal, seagull, camas—this is the English translation for these three words in SENĆOTEN, the language of the WSÁNEĆ peoples whose traditional territory includes what’s now known as the Saanich Peninsula. SENĆOTEN and Lkwungen, which is the language of the Songhees and Esquimalt peoples, have been spoken here long before the first Norse seafarers arrived on the east coast.

A new guide by UVic researcher Onowa McIvor invites everyone to embark on an Indigenous language learning journey. “The most powerful act of reconciliation that anybody could do in terms of Indigenous languages is to learn the Indigenous language of the land they are on,” says McIvor, whose maternal family is maskêkowak (Swampy Cree) from Northern Manitoba (Norway House and Cross Lake Cree Nations), with Scottish-Canadian settler ancestry on her paternal side.

“The essence of our work is supporting Indigenous communities who are working really hard to reclaim, revive and maintain their languages,” adds McIvor. “But there’s also a part of our project that is about raising the profile of Indigenous languages for all Canadians. That’s what this new guide is all about.”

McIvor compiled the guide, together with a UVic graduate student, for the Canadian Commission on UNESCO. Launched last month on the 11th anniversary of the signing of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, it outlines how anyone can support Indigenous languages in their community. Download the guide at bit.ly/uvic-language-guide.

McIvor points to the vital need for language learners to hear the words spoken. “These languages hold different sounds than English. You’ll hear people say, ‘WAH-SAH-NICK’ [rather than ‘WHA-SAH-NICH’ for WSÁNEĆ] because they’re reading it in English. When using Roman orthography—the alphabet we know as A, B, C—people try to pronounce it in English.”

The area now called British Columbia is less than 10 per cent of the total land mass of Canada, yet is home to approximately 60 per cent of all Indigenous languages in this country.

McIvor says with Indigenous language revitalization, we have to start somewhere. One way can be with landmarks. “You can learn how to say the name of the territory or the name of the mountain that is close by,” suggests McIvor.

For example, the original name for Mount Newton is LÁU,WELNEW—the high point of refuge for the WSÁNEĆ peoples during the time of the “great flood.”

“If you learn a greeting and a response, now you’ve had a conversation,” adds McIvor. “And that’s the start of something, isn’t it?”

NETOLNEW is another SENĆOTEN word. It translates as “one mind, one people” or “doing things as one” and is the name of the six-year $2.5M research project (netolnew.ca) being led by McIvor with Skwxwú7mesh First Nation linguist Peter Jacobs who joined UVic in 2012 and is now at SFU. It is the first national project of its kind in Canada focused on Indigenous language revitalization.

McIvor and Jacobs are collaborating with nine Indigenous-led partner organizations to further strengthen the revitalization of Indigenous languages across Canada.

In an earlier project, they conducted the first-ever study of a popular adult language learning method. The focus on adult language learners is a unique and ongoing feature of the NETOLNEW project.

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