

CLA Statement on Aboriginal Language Rights, May 2004

The Canadian Linguistic Association (CLA), which was founded in 1955, has as its aim the promotion of the study of languages and linguistics in Canada. The CLA's membership of over 300 people from institutions across Canada includes many of the leading experts on Aboriginal/First Nations languages in Canada. In this statement, the CLA addresses some of the issues surrounding Aboriginal/First Nations languages of Canada, and advocates for the protection, maintenance, and revival of Aboriginal/First Nations languages.

Aboriginal/First Nations peoples and their native languages predate the formation of Canada, and therefore all Canadians have a responsibility to actively support Aboriginal/First Nations peoples' efforts in the maintenance and revitalization of their ancestral languages. In addition these languages, most of which are not spoken anywhere else in the world, are great intellectual and spiritual treasures of humanity.

In the words of the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) 1992:

"The Aboriginal Languages were given by the Creator as an integral part of life.

Embodied in Aboriginal languages is our unique relationship to the Creator, our attitudes, beliefs, values, and the fundamental notion of what is truth. Aboriginal language is an asset to one's own education, formal and informal. Aboriginal language contributes to greater pride in the history and culture of the community; greater involvement and interest of parents in the education of their children, and greater respect for Elders. Language is the principal means by which culture is accumulated, shared and transmitted from generation to generation. The key to identity and retention of culture is one's ancestral language."

Many past and present members of the CLA have devoted their professional lives to record and document Aboriginal/First Nations languages in consultation with Aboriginal/First Nations communities. This type of research has contributed significantly to i) the development of pedagogical materials for Aboriginal/First Nations communities as well as to ii) our understanding of human language.

Most, if not all, Aboriginal/First Nations languages are currently critically endangered. This is a direct result of deliberate government policy in the previous centuries. These policies were partly based on the uninformed biases of the day, which advocated that these languages were "inferior and lacking expressive power' compared to the dominant European languages. Linguists have shown that Aboriginal/First Nations languages are equally developed systems of communication with equally rich structures and expressive power. Therefore, linguists have a special obligation to speak out against such uninformed biases, which are unfortunately still cited in the mainstream media.

The CLA strongly recommends that the government and the people of Canada support Aboriginal/First Nations peoples' language rights.

The CLA urges that at a minimum, Aboriginal/First Nations peoples should be guaranteed the following:

- A. The means to maintain or revitalize their Aboriginal/First Nations languages and, should they so desire, to pass them on to their children (for example by making Aboriginal/First Nations languages part of the core school curriculum).
- B. That legislation be enacted to recognize and protect Aboriginal/First Nations languages, not as artefacts of a distant past but as essential parts of contemporary vibrant cultures.
- C. That stable, long-term funding be provided to all Aboriginal/First Nations peoples to maintain or revitalize their native languages (much like the Nunavut-Canada agreements, the North West Territories-Canada agreements and Yukon-Canada agreements on Native languages).