Catalogue no. 75-006-X
ISSN 2291-0840

Insights on Canadian Society

Results from the 2016 Census: Aboriginal languages and the role of second-language acquisition

by Thomas Anderson

Release date: December 7, 2018

Statistics Canada Statistique Canada

Canada

How to obtain more information

For information about this product or the wide range of services and data available from Statistics Canada, visit our website, www.statcan.gc.ca.

You can also contact us by

email at STATCAN.infostats-infostats.STATCAN@canada.ca

telephone, from Monday to Friday, 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., at the following numbers:

- Statistical Information Service 1-800-263-1136
- National telecommunications device for the hearing impaired 1-800-363-7629
- Fax line 1-514-283-9350

Depository Services Program

- Inquiries line 1-800-635-7943
- Fax line 1-800-565-7757

Standards of service to the public

Statistics Canada is committed to serving its clients in a prompt, reliable and courteous manner. To this end, Statistics Canada has developed standards of service that its employees observe. To obtain a copy of these service standards, please contact Statistics Canada toll-free at 1-800-263-1136. The service standards are also published on www.statcan.gc.ca under "Contact us" > "Standards of service to the public."

Note of appreciation

Canada owes the success of its statistical system to a long-standing partnership between Statistics Canada, the citizens of Canada, its businesses, governments and other institutions. Accurate and timely statistical information could not be produced without their continued co-operation and goodwill.

Published by authority of the Minister responsible for Statistics Canada

An HTML version is also available.

Cette publication est aussi disponible en français.

Results from the 2016 Census: Aboriginal languages and the role of second-language acquisition

by Thomas Anderson

Today, *Insights on Canadian Society* is releasing a study based on 2016 Census data. This study uses census data on Aboriginal languages.

Overview of the study

Using data from the 2016 Census, this study examines the extent to which Aboriginal languages are spoken in Canada, and whether the number of Aboriginal-language speakers rose in past decades. The study also examines the factors that are related to Aboriginal language use and retention.

- In 2016, 263,840 Canadians reported that they could speak an Aboriginal language. From 1996 to 2016, the total number of people who could speak an Aboriginal language well enough to conduct a conversation rose by 8%.
- First Nations people accounted for 79% of all Aboriginal-language speakers, Inuit for 16%, and Métis for 4%. By comparison, the proportions of the entire population with an Aboriginal identity were First Nations at 58%, Métis at 35% and Inuit at 4%.
- Second-language acquisition plays an important role in the transmission of Aboriginal languages. The proportion of Aboriginal-language speakers who acquired it as a second language increased from 18% in 1996 to 26% in 2016.
- Among those whose mother tongue was an Aboriginal language, 90% spoke it at least on a regular basis at home. Among those who spoke an Aboriginal language as a second language, 73% spoke it at home. Both figures increased between 2006 and 2016.
- The extent to which Aboriginal languages are spoken depends on a number of personal, family and geographical factors. For instance, families where at least one parent had an Aboriginal language as their mother tongue were more likely to have children who could speak an Aboriginal language.

Introduction

Much of Canadian society has been constructed on the capacity to speak either English or French in public life.[1] In 2016, over 99% of those who were employed in the previous year reported that they used English or French at least on a regular basis in the workplace. This reality may present some challenges for many Aboriginal-language speakers to participate in the larger culture, academia or the labour force.

According to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, centuries of colonial history have had a profoundly negative impact on the use and transmission of Aboriginal languages in Canada.[2] The abuses of the residential and federal industrial school system have been well-documented by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, including their negative effects on the transmission of Aboriginal languages.[3] Assimilationist policies that have weakened Aboriginal-language use in the past have had an impact on the promotion of Aboriginal languages.[4,5]

Literature surrounding the long-term survival of Aboriginal languages has noted the particular challenges that arise when language speakers of two or more groups come into sustained contact with one another.[6] In rare cases, this contact can facilitate the creation of an entirely new language—such as the creation of Michif from Cree and French.[7] In others, the smaller language can be pushed out, even to the point of extinction.[8]

And yet, despite the obstacles of history and the pressures of the contemporary world, Aboriginal languages have endured.

Over the past two decades, the share of the Aboriginal population[9] with the ability to speak an Aboriginal language has declined. In 1996, 29% of Aboriginal people were able to speak an Aboriginal language well enough to conduct a conversation. In 2006, just over 22% of the Aboriginal population could speak an Aboriginal language. By 2016, this figure had dropped to 16%.

Simply viewing the decreasing share of speakers within the Aboriginal population may overstate the total decline. As past research has demonstrated, the Aboriginal population is growing rapidly, in large part due to an increased likelihood of self-identification.[10] This change means that many people who previously did not identify with the Aboriginal population now do. Much of this growth has occurred in large cities where Aboriginal languages are less commonly spoken.

Examining the number of people who can speak an Aboriginal language, rather than the share of speakers, presents these details from a different vantage point. For example, in the 2016 Census, 263,840 people could speak an Aboriginal language well enough to conduct a conversation. Over a 20-year period, from 1996 to 2016, the total number of people who were able to speak an Aboriginal language went up by 8%.

In recent years, learning a second-language[11] has often been cited as contributing to the number of people who can speak an Aboriginal language.[12] Efforts and calls to support Aboriginal languages have become increasingly common.[13,14] Nevertheless, the question remains: can learning these as second languages revitalize languages that have declined?

This paper examines two different groups of Aboriginal-language speakers[15]—those who acquired their language as their mother tongue and those who learned it as a second language—and examines the increase in second-language learners. It also considers how the increase in second-language acquisition among Aboriginal-language speakers could impact the future and vitality of Aboriginal languages in Canada.

Second-language acquisition on the rise

The 2016 Census of Population provided data on close to 70 Aboriginal languages, which can be divided into 12 distinct language families.[16] Almost all Aboriginal-language speakers[17] were part of the Aboriginal identity[18] population (99%). First Nations people made up 79% of all Aboriginal-language speakers, followed by Inuit at 16%, and Métis at 4%.[19] The proportions of the entire population with an Aboriginal identity (1,673,785 people) were First Nations at 58%, Métis at 35% and Inuit at 4%.

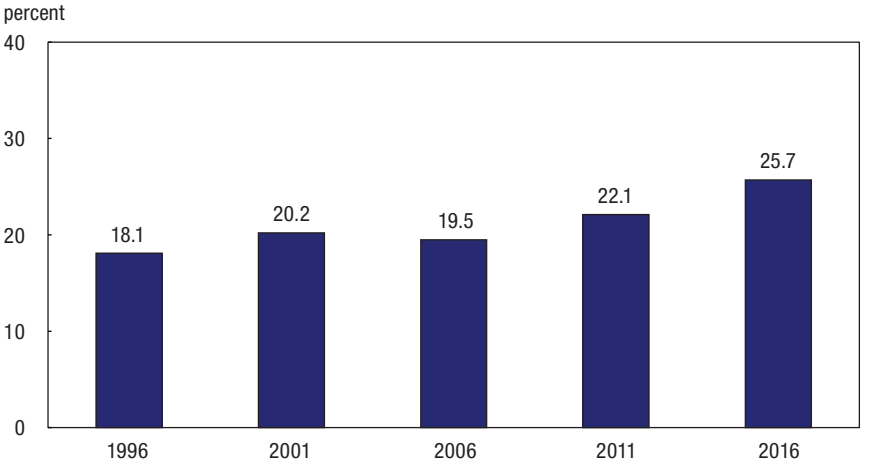
A mother tongue is defined as the first language learned in childhood that a person still understands. Of the three Aboriginal groups, Inuit Aboriginal-language speakers were the most likely to have acquired that language as their mother tongue. Of the more than 41,000 Inuit who could speak an Aboriginal language, 88% acquired it as their mother tongue. First Nations Aboriginal-language speakers were the next most likely to have acquired that language as their mother tongue at 73%, followed by Métis at 58%.

As was stated earlier, the total number of people who could speak an Aboriginal language well enough to conduct a conversation rose by 8% from 1996 to 2016. However, the number of people with an Aboriginal language as their mother tongue declined by 1% over the 20-year period from 1996 to 2016. This difference shows that the growth in Aboriginal-language speakers is mostly due to second-language acquisition.

Among those who could speak an Aboriginal language, the share who learned it as a second language increased over the 20-year period from 1996 to 2016 (Chart 1). In 2016, one-quarter of all Aboriginal-language speakers learned it as a second language.[20]

This change reflects both the increase in the Aboriginal second-language population and the decrease in the Aboriginal language mother-tongue population: the net increase from 1996 to 2016 in the total number of people who could speak an Aboriginal language was due to an increase in the number of second-language learners.

Chart 1
Proportion of Aboriginal-language speakers who acquired an Aboriginal language as a second language, Canada, 1996 to 2016



Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 1996, 2001, 2006, 2011 and 2016; National Household Survey, 2011.

Those who acquired an Aboriginal language as a second language are younger than those who acquired it as their mother tongue

Among those who reported an Aboriginal identity, a similar proportion of women (16%) and men (15%) were able to speak an Aboriginal language. Among them, 25% of both Aboriginal women and men learned it as a second language.

There were significant differences in the age distribution between those who learned their language as their mother tongue and those who learned it later in life (Chart 2). The average age of people who had acquired an Aboriginal language as their mother tongue was 37.1 years, compared with 30.8 years for those who had learned it as a second language.

The fact that the age of those who learned an Aboriginal language as a second language was so much lower than those who learned it as their mother tongue suggests a number of things. First, it could reflect the language dynamics at home of many First Nations, Métis and Inuit children: despite not learning their Aboriginal language first, these children still learn it from parents or grandparents who are living with them. Another factor is that many children learned their Aboriginal language at school, in daycare or during other early childhood programs.[21] This would suggest that programs that encourage Aboriginal languages in these settings are having a positive effect.

Those in the second-language group less likely to speak it at home than those in the mother-tongue group

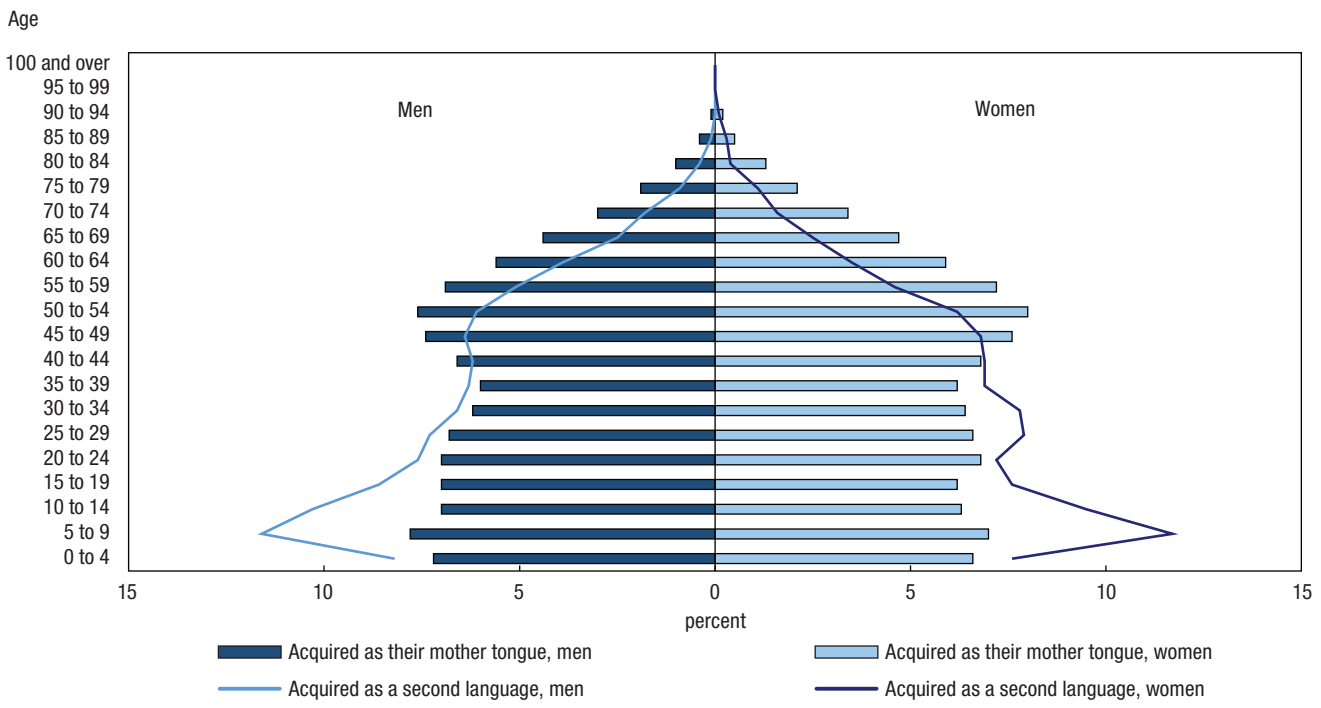
The practice of speaking one's language at home has often been considered in linguistic research.[22] Home language use measures one aspect of language vitality: the degree to which a population uses its language in everyday life, indicating the health of a language in a way that simply considering the number of people who speak it does not.

The majority of second-language learners spoke their Aboriginal language at home, either as the language they used most often or on a regular basis (Table 1). Of this group, 73% spoke an Aboriginal language at least regularly at home. The prevalence was, however, higher, at 90%, for those who acquired an Aboriginal language as their mother tongue.

The difference was even greater for those who spoke an Aboriginal language most often at home. Of those who learned an Aboriginal language as a second language, 18% spoke it most often at home compared with 63% of those who had learned it as their mother tongue.

Yet, while those in the second-language acquisition group were less likely to speak their Aboriginal language at home, Aboriginal language use at home increased for both those who acquired their

Chart 2
Age pyramid for those who learned an Aboriginal language as their mother tongue and those who acquired it as a second language, Aboriginal-language speakers, Canada, 2016



Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2016.

Table 1
Aboriginal language spoken at home by type of acquisition, Aboriginal-language speakers, Canada, 2016

	Able to speak an Aboriginal language		Acquired Aboriginal language as their mother tongue		Acquired Aboriginal language as a second language	
	number	percent	number	percent	number	percent
Total	**263,840**	**100.0**	**195,660**	**100.0**	**68,180**	**100.0**
Aboriginal language spoken at least regularly at home	224,990	85.3	175,445	89.7	49,545	72.7
Aboriginal language spoken most often at home	135,945	51.5	123,885	63.3	12,060	17.7
Aboriginal language spoken regularly (secondary use) at home[1]	89,055	33.8	51,565	26.4	37,490	55.0

1. This category excludes individuals who reported speaking one Aboriginal language most often at home and speaking another Aboriginal language regularly at home. These individuals are included only in the category "Aboriginal language spoken most often at home."

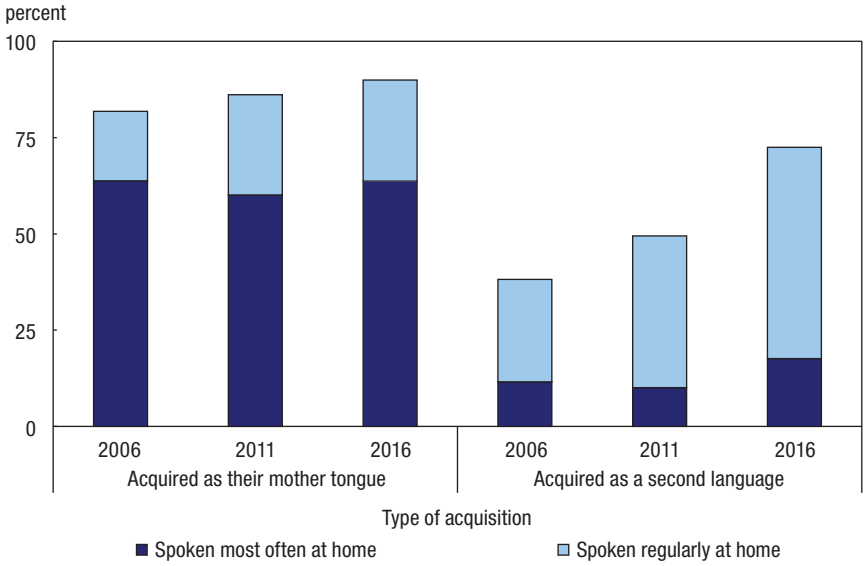
Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2016.

language as their mother tongue and those who acquired it as a second language (Chart 3).

In 2006, the share of those who spoke their Aboriginal language at home at least regularly was 38%. By 2016, 73% of those in the second-language group spoke their Aboriginal language at home. Among those in the Aboriginal language mother-tongue group, 8 in 10 spoke their Aboriginal language at home at least regularly in 2006. This figure was almost 9 in 10 in 2016.[23]

Within the Aboriginal language mother-tongue group, the increase was driven by those who reported speaking their language regularly at home, but not most often, and was largely found for five Aboriginal languages: Cree languages,[24] Ojibway, Oji-Cree, Dene and Inuktitut made up just under 80% of the difference in those who spoke their Aboriginal language regularly at home from 2006 to 2016.[25]

Chart 3
Proportion of Aboriginal-language speakers who spoke an Aboriginal language at home, by type of acquisition, Canada, 2006 to 2016



Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2006 and 2016; National Household Survey, 2011.

Within the second-language group, there was an increase in both in the number who spoke their language most often at home and those who spoke it regularly. Less than 70% of the difference in those who spoke their language most often at home and close to 70% of the difference in those who spoke it regularly at home comprised Blackfoot, Cree languages, Ojibway, Salish languages and Inuktitut.

Transmission of Aboriginal languages greater within families where at least one parent has an Aboriginal language as their mother tongue

It is also important to assess the extent to which Aboriginal languages are transmitted from parent to child.

Among census families[26] living in private households with at least one parent and at least one child,[27] there were 47,705 families where at least one parent could speak an Aboriginal language. Within this group, it was more common for children to speak an Aboriginal language if the parent(s) learned their language as their mother tongue than if they learned it as a second language.

Among families where at least one parent had an Aboriginal language as their mother tongue, 66% were home to a child who could speak an Aboriginal language (Table 2). This suggests that the language was successfully transmitted from parent to child.[28] Among families where no parent had an Aboriginal language as their mother tongue but at least one parent had an Aboriginal language as a second language, 49% had a child who could speak an Aboriginal language.

Within opposite-sex couple families,[29] those where both the mother and father had an Aboriginal language as their mother tongue were the most likely (78%) to be home to a child who could speak an Aboriginal language. In families where one parent had an Aboriginal language as their mother tongue and the other spoke an Aboriginal language as a second language, 68% had a child in the home who could speak an Aboriginal language. This rate was higher in families where it was the mother who had the Aboriginal language as her mother tongue (72%) than in families where the father had the Aboriginal language as his mother tongue (65%). This falls in line with past research that has cited women as having a profound impact on the health of Aboriginal languages.[30]

The majority (65%) of families where both the mother and father spoke an Aboriginal language as a second language had at least one child who could also speak it. Families where only one parent could speak an Aboriginal language were significantly less likely to be home to a child who was an Aboriginal-language speaker (19%); this discrepancy held true regardless of whether or not the speaking parent learned their language as their mother tongue (18%) or as a second language (20%). This suggests that the transmission of Aboriginal languages is influenced more by each parent's ability to speak an Aboriginal language than by their type of acquisition.

Within lone-parent families, 70% of those where the parent had learned their Aboriginal language as their mother tongue were home to a child who could speak the language, which was higher than the 56% for those where the parent had learned it as a second language; the rates were roughly the same for male and female lone-parent families.

Table 2
Type of parental Aboriginal-language acquisition by children with knowledge of an Aboriginal language, census families in private households with at least one parent and at least one child aged 0 to 17, Canada, 2016

	Aboriginal-language acquisition					
	Total		At least one child could speak an Aboriginal language		No child could speak an Aboriginal language	
	number	percent	number	percent	number	percent
Total	**3,862,870**	**100.0**	**31,135**	**0.8**	**3,831,740**	**99.2**
At least one parent acquired an Aboriginal language as their mother tongue	35,550	100.0	23,515	66.1	12,035	33.9
No parent has an Aboriginal mother tongue, but at least one parent learned an Aboriginal language as a second language	12,155	100.0	5,900	48.5	6,255	51.5
No parent in the census family could speak an Aboriginal language	3,815,165	100.0	1,715	0.0	3,813,445	100.0

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2016.

Inverse relationship between language continuity and the rate of second-language acquisition

The mother tongue continuity rate, in this paper, refers to the share of people with an Aboriginal language as their mother tongue who speak that language at home at least on a regular basis. The continuity rate can be seen as a measure of language retention among those who have an Aboriginal language as a mother tongue. The rate of second-language acquisition, on the other hand, refers to the share of speakers who learned their Aboriginal language as a second language.

Contrasting these two indicators for various Aboriginal languages reveals that an inverse relationship exists between language continuity and the rate of second-language acquisition (Chart 4). Languages with high levels of continuity, such as Atikamekw (96%), Inuktitut (97%) and Dene (91%), tend to have significantly lower rates of second-language acquisition (6%, 12% and 14%, respectively).

Conversely, Aboriginal languages with lower levels of continuity—for example, Sarsi (18%) and Tlingit (27%)—tend to have higher rates of second-language acquisition (83% and 73%, respectively).

Aboriginal languages more likely to be learned as a mother tongue in smaller, linguistically concentrated communities

Previous research has found that people with an Aboriginal language as their mother tongue were more likely to speak it at home if they lived in an area with a high concentration of other Aboriginal language mother-tongue speakers.[31]

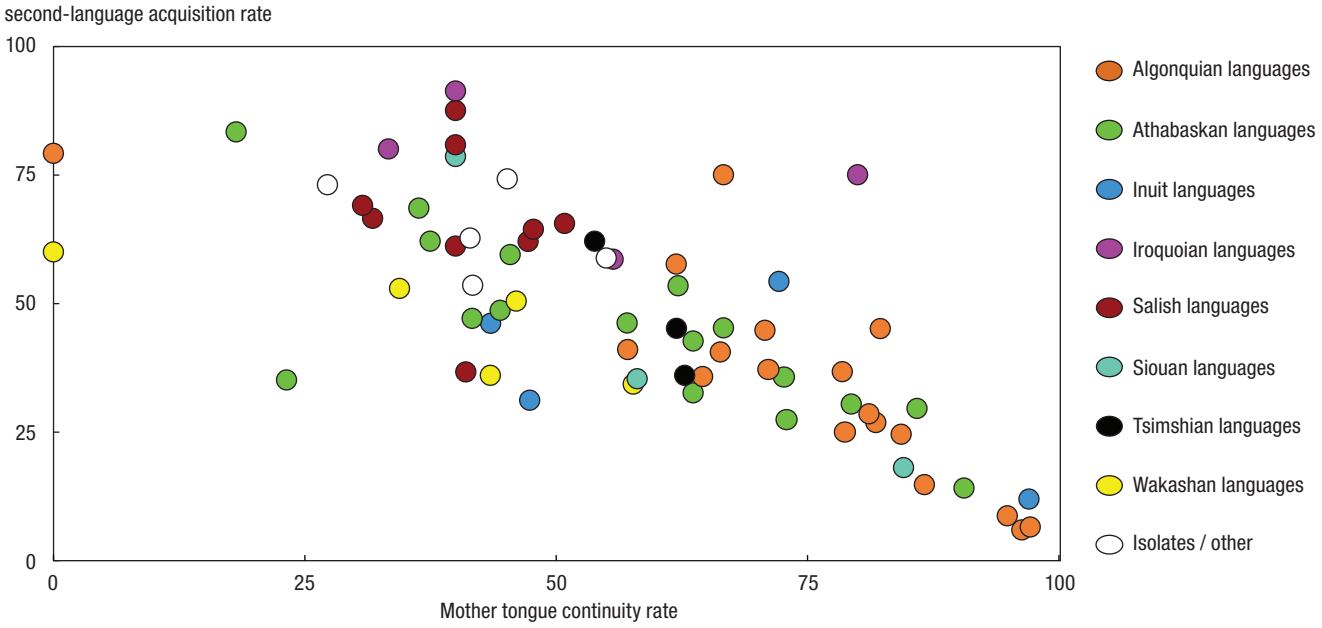
Aboriginal languages with a large proportion of people who learned it as their mother tongue are often found in small, sometimes rural areas with a high geographic concentration of speakers. For example, in 2016, Atikamekw was spoken by 6,640 people in Canada, 6% of whom learned it as a second language—meaning that the majority of them learned it as their mother tongue. About 78% of all Atikamekw speakers lived on-reserve in three census subdivisions (CSDs)[32] in north-central Quebec. Within these communities, 98% of the population could speak Atikamekw well enough to conduct a conversation.

Similarly, Naskapi was spoken by 1,465 people in 2016; 94% of them learned it as their mother tongue, while the rest learned it as a second language. Of the Naskapi-speaking population, 83% lived on-reserve in two CSDs in 2016—one in Eastern Quebec and the other in Labrador. Within these combined communities, Naskapi was spoken by 79% of the population.

Inuktitut is, perhaps, the most prominent example of this relationship between small communities with high Aboriginal-language concentration and the bulk of speakers learning the language as their mother tongue. The majority of those who could speak Inuktitut learned it as their mother tongue; 12% learned it as a second language.

In 2016, the majority (94%) of the Inuktitut-speaking population lived in either Nunavut or Nunavik. The population in these regions lives in a number of small communities that are accessible by air or water only. The largest municipality—Iqaluit—had a population of 7,590 people in 2016. Within Nunavut and Nunavik combined, 78% of the population could speak Inuktitut.

Chart 4
Rate of second-language acquisition by mother tongue continuity rate, Aboriginal languages, Canada, 2016



Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2016.

On the other hand, many languages with a greater share of second-language learners were less likely to be found in places with high concentrations of speakers. For example, 83% of those who could speak Sarsi (Sarcee) learned it as a second language; while 60% of all Sarsi speakers lived in the Calgary census subdivision, they made up only a small fraction of the 1.2 million people who lived there.

Squamish and Straits are two languages within the Salish language family, spoken predominately in British Columbia. Each of these languages had a population base that was mainly comprised of second-language learners.

Of the population who could speak Squamish, 68% lived on-reserve in two small communities under the administration of the Squamish Nation. However, these CSDs are located within the Greater Vancouver area; in these CSDs, the share of the population who could speak Squamish was less than 6%.

Of those who could speak Straits, 71% lived on-reserve in one of two CSDs.[33] Similar to Squamish, these CSDs are located within a large metropolitan area—in Victoria, British Columbia. This area is predominately English-speaking: 99% of the population could speak English and 73% of the population could only speak English. In 2016, 0.2% of the population in Victoria could speak an Aboriginal language. Within the two specific communities, 10% of people could speak Straits.

These examples suggest that it is not only the immediate community that matters for language acquisition, but the surrounding region as well. Aboriginal-language speakers who learned their language as their mother tongue often resided farther away from large metropolitan areas than those who learned it as a second language.

Conclusion

The number of people who have acquired an Aboriginal language as a second language is on the rise, while the number with an Aboriginal language as their mother tongue has fallen. However, regardless of the type of acquisition, for Aboriginal languages in Canada to not only continue to exist but also to thrive, past research suggests that it is necessary that these languages be transmitted to children and be used in everyday life.[34]

On this matter, however, there is conflicting evidence. On one hand, the use of Aboriginal languages at home is lower for those who acquired them as a second language. Aboriginal languages with high rates of second-language acquisition also tend to be those with lower levels of mother tongue continuity.

On the other hand, the proportion of those who speak an Aboriginal language at home is increasing. This is true for both people who acquired the language as their mother tongue and those who learned it as a second language.

The factors that are related to Aboriginal language use and retention can be grouped at the personal, family and community levels. First, at the personal level, the age structure of the population who learned an Aboriginal language as a second language is significantly younger than that of those who learned an Aboriginal language as their mother tongue. While the Census of Population does not account for factors such as the perceived importance of speaking an Aboriginal language, future research using other data sources, like the 2017 Aboriginal Peoples Survey, could examine this.

Second, for most people, family is the primary environment in which language is learned and spoken. Families where at least one parent had an Aboriginal language as their mother tongue are more likely to be home to children who can speak an Aboriginal language. Within two-parent families, the likelihood of language transmission for those where both parents could speak an Aboriginal language was significantly greater than in families where only one parent could speak an Aboriginal language. This seems to suggest that what matters most for Aboriginal-language transmission is being surrounded by other Aboriginal-language speakers.

Finally, community—in the sense of both people and place—is central to language maintenance. Language is a communal affair—for a language to live it must be shared. Aboriginal languages with high rates of continuity tend to be found in small, often isolated areas with a high concentration of speakers. Aboriginal languages with a small number of speakers who are widely dispersed, however, face particular challenges, as are those located within English- and French-dominant communities.

Thomas Anderson *is an analyst with the Social and Aboriginal Statistics Division at Statistics Canada.*

Data sources, methods and definitions

Data sources

Data in this article are from the 2016 Census of Population, as well as the 1996, 2001 and 2006 Census and the 2011 National Household Survey (NHS). Further information on the census can be found in the Guide to the Census of Population, 2016. Additional information on census data quality and comparability for Aboriginal peoples can be found in the Aboriginal Peoples Reference Guide, Census of Population, 2016.

Methods

Growth rates were conducted using an adjusted base to control for differences in incompletely enumerated reserves from one cycle to another. However, point estimates—unless otherwise specified—were compared without adjusting for incomplete enumeration. For more information on comparing census data from one cycle to another see the Aboriginal Peoples Reference Guide, Census of Population, 2016.

When comparing data on Aboriginal peoples from the 2016 Census of Population to previous cycles, several factors should be taken into account. They include differences in methodology, changes to the wording and format of Aboriginal questions, legislative changes and differences in the list of incompletely enumerated reserves.

Along with these factors, some people, for a variety of reasons, report their Aboriginal identity differently from one data collection period to another. This is particularly true of differences in survey methodology between the 2011 NHS and the 2016 Census. The NHS estimates are derived from a voluntary survey and are therefore subject to potentially higher non-response error than those derived from the 2016 Census long form.

Random rounding and percentage distributions: To ensure the confidentiality of responses collected for the 2016 Census, a random rounding process is used to alter the values reported in individual cells. As a result, when these data are summed or grouped, the total value may not match the sum of the individual values since the total and subtotals are independently rounded. Similarly, percentage distributions, which are calculated on rounded data, may not necessarily add up to 100%.

Because of random rounding, counts and percentages may vary slightly between different census products such as the analytical documents, highlight tables and data tables.

A note on the language variables: Some Indian reserves and settlements did not participate in the 2016 Census as enumeration was either not permitted or it was interrupted before completion. As a result, some estimates in this document may be underestimated, especially for languages spoken by First Nations people. For example, several reserves with a high number of speakers of Iroquoian languages did not participate in the 2016 Census of Population.

Definitions

Aboriginal-language speakers: This refers to those who reported being able to speak an Aboriginal language well enough to conduct a conversation. It is based on the knowledge of an Aboriginal language variable.

Type of acquisition: This variable refers to how Aboriginal-language speakers learned the language they speak, whether as their mother tongue or as a second language.

> **Acquired as a mother tongue:** This group is comprised of those who reported an Aboriginal language as their mother tongue (Question 9 of the 2016 Census) and who could still speak that same language well enough to conduct a conversation (Question 16).
>
> **Acquired as a second language:** This group is comprised of those who could speak an Aboriginal language, but who did not report that same language on the question about mother tongue.

Home Language – This variable is made up of two concepts from the Census questionnaire. The first is Language spoken most often at home and the second is other language(s) spoken regularly at home.

> **Language spoken most often at home** – This refers to the language the person speaks most often at home at the time of data collection. A person can report more than one language as "spoken most often at home" if the languages are spoken equally often.
>
> **Other language(s) spoken regularly at home** – This refers to the languages, if any, that the person speaks at home on a regular basis at the time of data collection, other than the language or languages he or she speaks most often at home.

Rate of second-language acquisition: This refers to the share of people who learned a given Aboriginal language as a second language, divided by the total number of speakers of that Aboriginal language.

Mother tongue continuity rate: This refers to the share of people with an Aboriginal language as their mother tongue who speak that language at home, at least on a regular basis.

Adjusted base: This variable permits the adjustment of estimates to account for incompletely enumerated Indian reserves and Indian settlements from one census to another. For example, if a reserve or settlement was incompletely enumerated for the 2006 or 2016 Census, it should be excluded from the tabulations for both years when comparisons between the two are made. As a result, the estimates in adjusted tables used for historical comparison may differ from those based on unadjusted data. For more information on incompletely enumerated Indian reserves and Indian settlements, please refer to Appendix 1.2 of the *Guide to the Census of Population, 2016*.

Supplementary information

Table A1

Detailed knowledge of an Aboriginal language by type of acquisition, population who could speak an Aboriginal language and mother tongue continuity rate, Canada, 2016

	Knowledge of an Aboriginal language					
		Acquired as a mother tongue		Acquired as a second language		
	Population who could speak the language	number	percent	number	percent	Mother tongue continuity rate
Aboriginal languages	263,840	195,660	74.2	68,180	25.8	83.6
Algonquian languages	177,570	131,330	74.0	46,240	26.0	82.9
Blackfoot	5,645	3,100	54.9	2,545	45.1	82.3
Cree-Montagnais languages	116,580	89,555	76.8	27,030	23.2	85.4
Atikamekw	6,640	6,250	94.1	395	5.9	96.3
Montagnais (Innu)	11,445	10,445	91.3	995	8.7	94.9
Naskapi	1,465	1,370	93.5	95	6.5	97.2
Cree languages	97,420	71,850	73.8	25,565	26.2	83.0
Moose Cree	195	110	56.4	80	41.0	57.1
Northern East Cree	545	350	64.2	200	36.7	78.5
Plains Cree	5,900	3,265	55.3	2,640	44.7	70.8
Southern East Cree	40	10	25.0	30	75.0	66.7
Swampy Cree	2,350	1,510	64.3	840	35.7	64.6
Woods Cree	2,665	2,000	75.0	665	25.0	78.7
Cree, n.o.s.	86,115	64,970	75.4	21,140	24.5	84.3
Eastern Algonquian languages	9,765	6,755	69.2	3,005	30.8	80.2
Malecite	755	320	42.4	435	57.6	62.0
Mi'kmaq	9,025	6,455	71.5	2,575	28.5	81.1
Ojibway-Potawatomi languages	46,685	32,755	70.2	13,925	29.8	77.0
Algonquin	2,480	1,475	59.5	1,005	40.5	66.3
Ojibway	28,580	17,980	62.9	10,605	37.1	71.1
Oji-Cree	15,605	13,310	85.3	2,300	14.7	86.7
Ottawa (Odawa)	205	150	73.2	55	26.8	81.8
Algonquian languages, n.i.e.	120	25	20.8	95	79.2	0.0
Athabaskan languages	23,655	17,695	74.8	5,960	25.2	81.7
Northern Athabaskan languages	23,575	17,650	74.9	5,920	25.1	81.8
Babine (Wetsuwet'en)	210	115	54.8	95	45.2	66.7
Beaver	340	200	58.8	145	42.6	63.6
Carrier	2,100	1,130	53.8	970	46.2	57.1
Chilcotin	1,150	740	64.3	410	35.7	72.7
Dene	13,060	11,220	85.9	1,840	14.1	90.6
Dogrib (Tlicho)	2,370	1,675	70.7	700	29.5	85.9
Gwich'in	360	185	51.4	175	48.6	44.4
Sarsi (Sarcee)	150	25	16.7	125	83.3	18.2
Sekani	185	75	40.5	110	59.5	45.5
Slavey-Hare languages	2,810	1,985	70.6	830	29.5	74.3
North Slavey (Hare)	1,005	735	73.1	275	27.4	73.0
South Slavey	1,365	955	70.0	415	30.4	79.4
Slavey, n.o.s.	675	460	68.1	220	32.6	63.6
Tahltan languages	630	260	41.3	375	59.5	54.2
Kaska (Nahani)	365	170	46.6	195	53.4	62.2
Tahltan	270	85	31.5	185	68.5	36.4
Tutchone languages	420	230	54.8	195	46.4	26.4
Northern Tutchone	285	180	63.2	100	35.1	23.2
Southern Tutchone	145	50	34.5	90	62.1	37.5
Athabaskan languages, n.i.e.	85	40	47.1	40	47.1	41.7

Table A1

Detailed knowledge of an Aboriginal language by type of acquisition, population who could speak an Aboriginal language and mother tongue continuity rate, Canada, 2016

	Knowledge of an Aboriginal language					
		Acquired as a mother tongue		Acquired as a second language		
	Population who could speak the language	number	percent	number	percent	Mother tongue continuity rate
Haida	465	125	26.9	345	74.2	45.2
Inuit languages	42,980	36,975	86.0	6,005	14.0	95.5
Inuinnaqtun	1,335	615	46.1	725	54.3	72.2
Inuktitut	40,620	35,755	88.0	4,860	12.0	97.0
Inuvialuktun	650	355	54.6	300	46.2	43.5
Inuit languages, n.i.e.	465	325	69.9	145	31.2	47.4
Iroquoian languages	2,795	1,085	38.8	1,715	61.4	55.6
Cayuga	125	25	20.0	100	80.0	33.3
Mohawk	2,415	1,005	41.6	1,415	58.6	55.7
Oneida	180	45	25.0	135	75.0	80.0
Iroquoian languages, n.i.e.	115	10	8.7	105	91.3	40.0
Kutenai	170	75	44.1	100	58.8	55.0
Michif	1,205	560	46.5	645	53.5	41.7
Salish languages	5,750	2,000	34.8	3,745	65.1	42.1
Comox	180	75	41.7	110	61.1	40.0
Halkomelem	1,060	355	33.5	705	66.5	31.8
Lillooet	790	295	37.3	490	62.0	47.2
Okanagan	815	295	36.2	525	64.4	47.8
Shuswap (Secwepemctsin)	1,305	450	34.5	855	65.5	50.9
Squamish	280	40	14.3	245	87.5	40.0
Straits	365	65	17.8	295	80.8	40.0
Thompson (Ntlakapamux)	450	280	62.2	165	36.7	41.0
Salish languages, n.i.e.	565	175	31.0	390	69.0	30.8
Siouan languages	5,430	4,085	75.2	1,345	24.8	77.0
Dakota	1,755	1,140	65.0	620	35.3	58.1
Stoney	3,680	3,015	81.9	665	18.1	84.6
Siouan languages, n.i.e.	140	35	25.0	110	78.6	40.0
Tlingit	260	70	26.9	190	73.1	27.3
Tsimshian languages	2,735	1,420	51.9	1,305	47.7	60.1
Gitxsan (Gitksan)	1,305	830	63.6	470	36.0	62.8
Nisga'a	1,055	400	37.9	655	62.1	53.8
Tsimshian	410	225	54.9	185	45.1	62.0
Wakashan languages	1,490	760	51.0	725	48.7	41.5
Haisla	175	115	65.7	60	34.3	57.7
Heiltsuk	125	80	64.0	45	36.0	43.5
Kwakiutl (Kwak'wala)	605	290	47.9	320	52.9	34.4
Nuu-chah-nulth (Nootka)	565	275	48.7	285	50.4	46.1
Wakashan languages, n.i.e.	25	10	40.0	15	60.0	0.0
Aboriginal languages, n.o.s.	670	245	36.6	420	62.7	41.5

n.i.e.: not included elsewhere

n.o.s.: not otherwise specified

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2016.

Notes

1. See the *Official Languages Act* (R.S.C., 1985, c. 31 (4th Supp.)).
2. See Dussault and Erasmus (1996).
3. See Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015).
4. See Battiste (1998).
5. See Dussault and Erasmus (1996).
6. See Burnaby (1996).
7. It is worth noting, however, that Michif did not simply emanate from a simple mixing of two languages. Its birth is intrinsically tied to the historical emergence of the Métis Nation. See Bakker (1997).
8. See Crystal (2000, p. 88). According to this literature, the meeting of two languages does not necessitate a negative confrontation, but avoiding this requires the existence of a "bilingual ethos" within the broader culture.
9. While the term Indigenous has seen increased use in Canada to refer to First Nations people, Métis and Inuit collectively, the 2016 Census asked respondents whether they identified as an Aboriginal person. As a result, the term Aboriginal is used throughout the text of this report.
10. See Caron Malenfant et al. (2014). The number of people who reported an Aboriginal identity increased from 799,005 in 1996 to 1,673,785 in 2016.
11. In this paper, a second language is one that the speaker understands well enough to conduct a conversation, but which is not the first language they learned in childhood. Hence, the second language could in fact be the third or fourth language learned by an individual.
12. See Norris (2007).
13. See Norris (2018).
14. See Kirkness (2002).
15. Aboriginal-language speakers are defined based on the knowledge of non-official languages variable, which refers to whether the person can conduct a conversation in a language other than English or French. For more information, see the section on knowledge of non-official languages in the 2016 Census Dictionary.
16. See O'Donnell and Anderson (2017).
17. In this paper, "speakers" refers to those who can speak a language well enough to conduct a conversation.
18. Aboriginal identity refers to whether the person identified with the Aboriginal peoples of Canada. This includes those who are First Nations (North American Indian), Métis or Inuk (Inuit); Registered or Treaty Indians (that is, registered under the *Indian Act* of Canada); and a member of a First Nation or Indian band.
19. The remaining portion was made up of those who identified with more than one Aboriginal group, those who were defined as having an Aboriginal identity that was not included elsewhere, and those who were not part of the Aboriginal identity population.
20. For a complete list of Aboriginal languages spoken in Canada by their type of acquisition, see table A1 in the *Supplementary information* section.
21. For a discussion on efforts to revitalize Aboriginal language use, including in schools, see Norris (2018).
22. Past research has used the concept of "continuity" to assess the number of speakers who continue to use their Aboriginal mother tongue most often at home (see Norris, 2007). For the purposes of this paper, the mother tongue continuity rate refers to the share of people with an Aboriginal language as their mother tongue who speak that language at home either "most often" or "regularly."
23. While much of this study compares information over the 20-year period, from 1996 to 2016, the home language question was changed after the 1996 Census to include other languages spoken regularly at home—not just the language that was spoken most often. Because of this, this section compares data over a 10-year period.
24. Cree languages include the following categories: Cree not otherwise specified (which refers to responses of "Cree"), Plains Cree, Woods Cree, Swampy Cree, Northern East Cree, Moose Cree and Southern East Cree.
25. Since language classifications often change from one Census to another, counts of specific Aboriginal languages over time should be interpreted with caution.
26. For a complete definition of what constitutes a census family, see the section on census family in the 2016 Census Dictionary.
27. In this case, "child" refers to biological children, stepchildren and adopted children aged 0 to 17 who have never been married.

28. In some cases, the Aboriginal language may not have been transmitted from parent to child but from another caregiver or in another environment (e.g., school). In cases such as step-parentage and adoption, the parental mother tongue could be a different Aboriginal language than that of the child.
29. Families with same-sex parents were also considered within the analytical research. However, the total number of same-sex unions with a parent who could speak an Aboriginal language was too small to draw any reliable conclusions.
30. See Norris (2009).
31. See Langlois and Turner (2014).
32. Census subdivision (CSD) is the general term for municipalities (as determined by provincial and territorial legislation) and areas treated as municipal equivalents for statistical purposes (e.g., Indian reserves, Indian settlements and unorganized territories). Municipal status is defined by laws in effect in each province and territory in Canada. For more information, see the section on knowledge of non-official languages in the 2016 Census Dictionary.
33. The two CSDs are East Saanich 2 and South Saanich 1.
34. See Norris (2004).

References

Bakker, Peter. 2017. *A Language of Our Own: The Genesis of Michif, the Mixed Cree–French Language of the Canadian Métis*. Oxford Studies in Anthropological Linguistics. New York: Oxford University Press, Inc.

Battiste, Marie. 1998. "Enabling the autumn seed: Toward a decolonized approach to Aboriginal knowledge, language and education." *Canadian Journal of Native Education*. Vol. 22, no. 1. p. 16–27.

Burnaby, Barbara. 1996. "Aboriginal language maintenance, development, and enhancement: A review of literature." *Stabilizing Indigenous Languages*. Gina Cantoni (ed.). p. 21–36.

Caron Malenfant, Éric, Simon Coulombe, Eric Guimond, Chantal Grondin and André Lebel. 2014. "Ethnic mobility of Aboriginal Peoples in Canada between the 2001 and 2006 censuses." *Population: English Edition*. January–March. Vol. 69, no. 1. p. 29–53.

Crystal, David. 2000. *Language Death*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.

Dussault, René and Georges Erasmus. 1996. *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*. Ottawa: Canada Communication Group Publishing.

Kirkness, Verna J. 2002. "The preservation and use of our languages: Respecting the natural order of the Creator." Proceedings of the Seventh Annual Conference on Stabilizing Indigenous Languages, Toronto, May 11 to 14, 2000. *Indigenous Languages Across the Community*. Barbara Burnaby and Jon Reyhner (eds.). Northern Arizona University, Flagstaff, Arizona: Center for Excellence in Education. p. 17–23.

Langlois, Stéphanie and Annie Turner. 2014. *Aboriginal Languages and Selected Vitality Indicators in 2011*. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 89-655-X – No. 001. Ottawa.

Norris, Mary Jane. 2018. "The state of Indigenous languages in Canada: Trends and prospects in language retention, revitalization and revival." *Canadian Diversity*. Spring. Vol. 15, no. 1. p. 22–31.

Norris, Mary Jane. 2009. "The role of First Nations women in language continuity and transition." *Restoring the Balance: First Nations Women, Community, and Culture*. Gail Guthrie Valaskakis, Madeleine Dion Stout and Eric Guimond (eds.). Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press. p. 313–353.

Norris, Mary Jane. 2007. "Aboriginal languages in Canada: Emerging trends and perspectives on second language acquisition." *Canadian Social Trends*. May. No. 83. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 11-008-X.

Norris, Mary Jane. 2004. "From generation to generation: Survival and maintenance of Canada's Aboriginal languages, within families, communities and cities." *TESL Canada Journal*. Spring. Vol. 21, no. 2. p. 1–16.

O'Donnell, Vivian and Thomas Anderson. 2017. "The Aboriginal languages of First Nations people, Métis and Inuit." *Census in Brief*. October. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 98-200-X.

Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. 2015. Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future: Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. Winnipeg: Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada.