THE USAGE OF INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES AS A TOOL FOR MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT WITH NORTHERN INDIGENOUS GOVERNMENTS AND COMMUNITIES

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Canadian Northern Corridor (CNC) program integrates formal academic research and a strategy of engagement with potentially impacted communities (Fellows et al. 2020). Finding common ground among Indigenous peoples, governments and industry on engagement and consultation practices is imperative to the future of resource development and the Canadian economy, and ultimately to the reconciliation of the relationships between Indigenous Peoples and Canada (Boyd and Lorefice 2018). In this paper, we focus on language, stressing that languages are more than just tools. Rather, all communicative systems also hold both individual and cultural identities, histories and memory, and encode knowledge in specific ways.

This article investigates how Indigenous languages can contribute to meaningful engagement particularly within the context of the CNC concept; our recommendations also work toward strengthening existing Indigenous policy initiatives in Canada, uplifting Indigenous worldviews, and potentially supporting the reconciliation process. We draw upon primarily Indigenous scholars in explaining the reasons why using Indigenous languages matters for fostering meaningful engagement during research, consultation, and community engagement activities and address methods by which they can be implemented. After examining some past/ongoing attempts at this incorporation, we identify in our policy recommendations five different ways that the entire process of community engagement can align with the usage of Indigenous languages.

'Meaningful engagement' involves (our italics) " [...] *good faith* on the part of both parties [...] *two-way dialogue* [...] substantive responses to information request (including *translation* in some contexts), *openness to accommodation* and mitigation measures, a *view to accommodation* of conflicting interests, *demonstrable integration* of Indigenous communities' concerns [...]" (Wright 2020, 29). Overall, meaningful engagement challenges the hegemony of Euro-Western approaches to science, research and communication, and permit and support Indigenous languages and perspectives as equals. Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies are much different, especially because they do not position language as a separate concept from nature and land, and overall stress a reciprocal and interdependent relationship with the earth (Tully 2018, Reed et al. 2022).

Over seventy diverse Indigenous languages belonging to twelve different language families were spoken in Canada in 2016, but only by about 0.6 per cent of the population (Statistics Canada 2017). Notably, within the proposed CNC region we find the Cree dialects, Ojibwe dialects, multiple Athapaskan languages and Inuktut, which have some of the highest speaker numbers among Indigenous languages in Canada. The loss of Indigenous linguistic diversity in Canada is connected to the assimilatory policies and actions toward Indigenous cultures as a whole; in particular, cultural genocide and linguicide were spurred on through the educational system, especially that of residential schools, which removed children from their home communities and subjected them to traumas that led to cultural and linguistic stigma. Loss of language led to gaps in cultural transmission, and so many beliefs related to land (and entwined spirituality) were lost, diminished or submerged over time. Due to the Eurocentric focus in research that devalues Indigenous knowledges, nuanced relationships that Indigenous community members still have with the environment tend to be overlooked in environmental impact assessments and other reports.

Many Indigenous communities are actively engaged in language revitalization processes, which vary according to the needs and desires of the specific communities, and the number of second-language speakers of Indigenous languages has been rising for some time (Norris 2007). Focusing on language to foster meaningful engagement can also support the kinds of learning processes and revitalization projects already underway in these communities. Examples of how language goals are tied to processes of reconciliation (e.g., the Calls to Action from the Truth and Reconciliation committee) as well as other frameworks (e.g., those proposed by the United Nations) are also discussed; it is crucial to discover as many approaches as possible to elevate the status of the languages from the perspectives of speakers, nonspeakers and outsiders, and this can be to some extent achieved through creating resources for literacy in the language (Davis 2017).

We identify four key reasons why language matters to meaningful engagement: land and language are connected, language helps preserve the integrity of Indigenous knowledge, language can help foster trust and possibly reconciliation, and language can help subvert power imbalances. Firstly, we highlight the land-language connection and how this is ideologically conceptualized in many Indigenous cultures (Ferguson and Weaselboy 2020); language is linked to land as an "integrated cultural resource" (Perley 2011) that also constitutes a spiritual relationship in which humans have a responsibility to steward land as well as associated knowledge — which is intertwined with Indigenous languages. Numerous studies reveal how land and language stewardship work together synergistically (Schreyer 2008, 2011, 2016; see also Fettes 2019 for an overview), and foster "sustainable relations" between land and language (Ferguson and Weaselboy 2020). Closely connected is the second critical point — languages, even closely related ones — do not exist purely of one-to-one, easily substituted correspondences. The language we use to talk about the land matters. Different languages bring into focus — or even bring into existence — different kinds of realities, philosophies, behaviours and perceptions (Harre et al. 1999; see Armstrong 2018 re: the Syilx concept of *tmixw*). This matters significantly when attempting to consult and gather data on Indigenous knowledges (e.g., Traditional Ecological Knowledge, or TEK).

Our third reason concerns the creation of trust within the engagement process. Fellows (2017) notes that the foundation of trust is often related to the acceptance of one another's knowledge claims; however, she also argues that trust-building without shared belief is possible through acknowledging pluralist realism (no one method or frame can help us understand everything about the world). We suggest that Indigenous languages should be learned by outside researchers as much as possible, both to allow a deeper understanding of knowledge and also as a gesture of respect. 'Speaking the same language' doesn't automatically create trust, but the act of researchers and consultants using an Indigenous language indexes greater respect and willingness to accommodate the other, and perhaps furthers processes of reconciliation (Little Bear 2000). Language usage can be encouraged within the consultation project by using Indigenous research methodologies and Indigenous theoretical frames such as a Two Roads Approach (L'Hommecourt et al. 2022) or a Two-Eyed Seeing approach, which support a mutual understanding between Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants (Van Bewer et al. 2021). Finally, the use of Indigenous languages in research and consulting is an attempt to shift a long-held hegemony of colonial languages — and the hegemony of monolingualism as the norm — being used in data gathering, reporting and the dissemination of results. Having multiple 'common languages' requires challenging the ideology of monolingualism — that only one language should be used to communicate at a time (and that one language is sufficient); the usage of Indigenous languages could potentially intervene in power relations between governmental representatives and Indigenous communities by providing space for distinct worldviews and reality perceptions.

Following these reasons, we present two case studies (the use of the concepts of Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit, or IQ in Nunavut governance and industry; and the concept of Î-kanatak Askiy, a Cree term, by the National Energy board) that highlight attempts to incorporate Indigenous linguistic concepts into policy. We reveal how the incorporation of Indigenous languages as concepts been proposed and incorporated (or not) into environmental policy at the federal level in ways relevant to the proposed CNC concept. While these examples show some shortcomings, we suggest upon how they reveal three positive implications for meaningful engagement via language: a) the use of a local Indigenous language indexes and supports the adoption of a localized approach in engagement; b) Indigenous terms bring different worldviews and realities, understanding of which provides opportunities for reconciliation, and such terms index the difference between Indigenous and Eurocentric values, governance and legal traditions; c) language use in all stages of the community engagement process can support of existing efforts for language revitalization and reconciliation. On these points, we then provide connections to the 94 Calls to Action by the Truth and Reconciliation Committee (2015) as well as to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP (2007).

We have argued that meaningful engagement in the CNC context must involve *acknowledging that language matters*, on multiple levels. Meaningful engagement means not assuming English and/or French should be the languages of engagement simply due to their political and social dominance or their enshrinement as federal official languages. Community members should have the choice to use their Indigenous languages if they deem it appropriate. Receiving information in the Indigenous language of the community — through translation, as Wright (2020) clarifies — allows for people to communicate

nuances and meanings about culturally and environmentally relevant topics that may not be present or easily expressed in English or French. Using Indigenous languages wherever possible in the consulting process (and deemed appropriate by Indigenous community members, of course) can help shed light on worldview in ways that might be otherwise missed; language use helps fully accommodate and integrate Indigenous knowledges into the consultation process. As Indigenous knowledge may become "lost in translation," stressing the importance of outside researchers and consultants learning as much of an Indigenous language as possible fosters a deeper understanding and appreciation of pluralistic realism (Fellows 2017).