

## LEARNING ABOUT LANGUAGES WITH THE CANADIAN LANGUAGE MUSEUM

Le Musée canadien des langues crée des expositions pour faire connaître au public le riche patrimoine linguistique du Canada : plus de 60 langues autochtones, les langues officielles que sont le français et l'anglais, et des centaines de langues apportées par les immigrants du monde entier. Pour créer ces expositions, les conservateurs doivent relever le défi de rendre les expositions sur les langues intéressantes et accessibles, tant pour ceux qui parlent la langue décrite que pour ceux qui ne la connaissent pas. Cet article se concentre sur trois expositions itinérantes : *Cree: The People's Language*; *Speaking the Inuit Way*, and *A Tapestry of Voices: Celebrating Canada's Languages*. Il décrit les sujets abordés et les techniques utilisées pour simplifier des questions linguistiques complexes et faire participer des publics d'âges et de milieux différents.

### ● Elaine Gold | Canadian Language Museum



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Canada has a rich linguistic heritage, with over 60 Indigenous languages, the official languages of French and English, hundreds of languages brought by immigrants from around the world as well as half a dozen Sign Languages. The Canadian Language Museum (CLM) was founded in 2011 by a group of Canadian linguists to promote an appreciation of this diverse heritage in the broad general public. The Museum has an exhibit space on the Glendon campus of York University in Toronto and reaches a national audience through its travelling exhibit program and its online resources.

The CLM curators grapple with the challenge of making exhibits about languages interesting and accessible, both to those who speak the language described and to those who have no familiarity with it at all. How do you engage visitors with a language that they might know nothing about? How do you expand knowledge they already have and challenge and revise their preconceptions? How do we introduce complex linguistic concepts and terminology in an accessible way? In

this article I describe some of the techniques we have used in developing our museum materials.

The Canadian Language Museum has created eight bilingual (English/French) travelling exhibits about Canada's languages and language issues. These have travelled across Canada, to libraries, community centres, small museums, universities, colleges and schools in both large urban centres and small isolated communities. In this way we have reached out to a very broad audience varying greatly in age, and cultural, educational and linguistic background. The exhibit content is designed to be interesting and accessible to high school age viewers and older. With guidance elementary school children have enjoyed the exhibits and accompanying activities.

This article discusses the content of three of our exhibits: *A Tapestry of Voices: Celebrating Canada's Languages*; *Cree: The People's Language* and *Speaking the Inuit Way*. The latter two focus, respectively, on the largest and second largest Indige-

nous language in Canada. While there is growing awareness of and appreciation for Indigenous culture in the wide Canadian public, there is very little knowledge about the Indigenous languages themselves. The exhibits are relatively small – 6 or 7 collapsible banner-stands – and so we are faced with the challenge of what information to include and how to make it engaging. This format, while a necessity in the Museum’s early days when we had no exhibit space and limited funding, has turned out to be a great advantage. Each exhibit packs into two small shipping bins that are easily transported by car, truck, train, boat and plane. The set-up is simple and the individual banner-stands can be arranged to adapt to a wide variety of spaces.

We work closely on each exhibit with students in the graduating year of the Master of Museum Studies program at the University of Toronto. For exhibits with Indigenous content, we also consult with native speakers of those languages.

*Speaking the Inuit Way* was the CLM’s first exhibit to focus on a single Indigenous language (image 1). We wanted to include basic information about the number of speakers, where they live in Canada and what the different dialects are. We have found that maps are extremely useful for conveying a great deal of information with a minimal amount of text; they are also very popular with visitors. Our map shows the Inuit names for the different regions where they live. While most Canadians are familiar with the Inuit territory *Nunavut*, they are less familiar with the names *Nunatsiavut* and *Nunavik*, regions in Labrador and Arctic Quebec, respectively. Labelling these regions also gave us the opportunity to illustrate the morphological structure of these Inuit words. We built on the viewers’ familiarity with the word *Nunavut* to introduce this morphological breakdown.

*nuna-vut*  
land-our  
'our land'

*nuna-tsia-vut*  
land-beautiful-our  
'our beautiful land'

*nuna-vik*  
land-most impressive  
'great land'

We also explained the way that the Inuit language forms plurals, again building on words that viewers were likely to be familiar with. By showing the link between the singular word *inuk* 'person' and its plural *inuit* 'people', we could lead viewers to predict that the plural of the familiar word *kayak* would be *kayait*.

We have found that visitors of all ages are interested in learning about the syllabic writing system. One of the exhibit panels presents the syllabic alphabet chart, and we engage viewers with a simple quiz below it. Viewers are asked to match a word written in syllabics with its counterpart in the Roman alphabet. Again, we based this quiz on vocabulary that might be familiar to the viewer: *iglu* (igloo), *nanuq* (polar bear), and *inuit* (people).

We supplement this panel with a handout that visitors can take away to practice writing with the syllabic system. At the bottom of the handout, readers are asked to write their own names with the syllabic system. This seemingly innocent request can pose challenges for many visitors because the Inuit language does not allow initial consonant clusters and has a much smaller array of sounds than English or French: for example, there is no [b] or [d]. For these reasons, writing a name like *Brandon* with syllabics is very challenging. This exercise helps introduce visitors to the concept that each language has its own array of sounds and its own allowable syllable structures. The syllabic alphabet song, sung by Saila Michael, can be accessed through this QR code:



Image 1

Centre for Indigenous Studies, University of Toronto

## How do you engage visitors with a language that they might know nothing about?

There is a widespread myth that the Inuit have hundreds of words for snow. We felt that we had to address and dispel this myth, and also explain how it might have arisen. This was very challenging within the panel's 250-word limit. We wanted to bring out three main points: that there are a limited number of snow-related roots in Inuit languages; that counting words is not straightforward in any language and especially in a polysynthetic language; and that even English and French have a variety of snow related words and can create more through compounding.

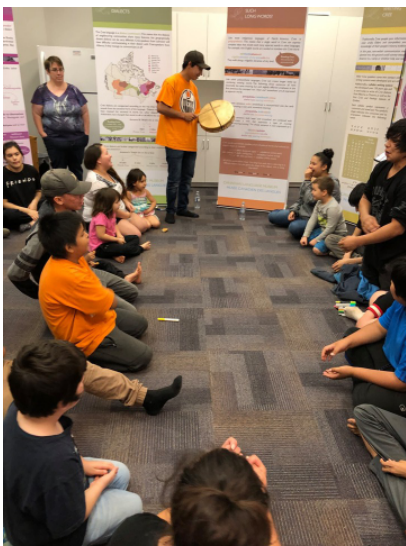


Image 2

Ft. Vermilion Community Library, Alberta

The exhibit presents the 11 snow-related roots that we found in a dictionary of the Aivilingmuitaq dialect. We explain that the myth of hundreds of words of snow might have arisen because polysynthetic languages like Inuktitut can create an infinite number of very long words based on a limited number of roots. To illustrate this, we asked our Inuit consultant to give us the longest word she could think of containing a root for snow. She came up with this wonderful word, based on the root *puka*:

*puka-ksiaq-siu-riaqtu-qati-gi-maiq-tara*

granular snow -good -look for -go  
to do -companion -have as -not  
want to -transitive I-him/her

'I don't want to go get nice  
granular snow with him anymore'

We printed each morpheme in a different colour to clearly show the structure of this complex word. Our non-indigenous viewers are very intrigued with these long complex words and are a bit shocked to learn that the Inuit don't have hundreds of words for snow.

We believe that it is important to emphasize that Indigenous languages are living languages that are adapting to modern life and creating words for contemporary technology. The final panel of the Inuit exhibit presents efforts that are being made to maintain and extend the language. To illustrate new coinages, we included the words for computer *qarasaujaq* 'something that works like a brain' and helicopter *qulimiguulik* 'that which has something going through the space above itself'.

With every exhibit we face the challenge of how to include audio in an accessible and secure manner. For this exhibit we printed a QR code on a panel to access the syllabic alphabet song and include a CD with Inuit dialogues and songs with the exhibit.

We built on our experience with the Inuit exhibit in creating the exhibit *Cree: The People's Language* (image 2). We used a map to illustrate where the Cree dialects are spoken across the country. While many audience members have some awareness that there are different Indigenous languages in Canada, most have no idea that there are different language families across the country. Cree is part of the Algonquian language family, the largest Indigenous language family in Canada, and we created a language tree to illustrate Cree's sister languages. A Facebook post with the image of this language family tree has had over 95,000 views. [https://www.facebook.com/clm.mcl/posts/2572612532828123?comment\\_id=2579046635518046&reply\\_comment\\_id=2588046024618107&notif\\_id=1574784875600315&notif\\_t=feed\\_comment&ref=notif](https://www.facebook.com/clm.mcl/posts/2572612532828123?comment_id=2579046635518046&reply_comment_id=2588046024618107&notif_id=1574784875600315&notif_t=feed_comment&ref=notif)

Most Indigenous languages in Canada are known by names misheard or coined by the early explorers and settlers, rather than by the names used by the speakers themselves. We felt it was important to explain that the name 'Cree' is not used by speakers themselves, and presented the names that are used for the different varieties. For example, the Plains Cree refer to themselves as *nêhiyawak* and their language as *nêhiyawêwin*.

It can be complex to explain how languages change over time, but we were able to create a simple illustration of a language change that has influenced

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many Cree dialects. Speakers of Cree often refer to their own dialects as the *Y* dialect or the *N* dialect. We explain that these different dialect names are based on the contemporary pronunciation of the ancestral [r]. We illustrated this with the word meaning *he/she is fast*, which would have been *kiripiw* in ancestral Cree and shows up as *kiyipiw* in Plains Cree and *kinipiw* in Swampy Cree.

As with the Inuit exhibit, we felt it was important to explain that Cree is a polysynthetic language. We used different colours to clearly illustrate the morphological structure of this word:

*ošê-tâwahk-aham-wak*

ridgelike -elevation of dry land  
-walk -they

‘they walk along a ridge-like  
elevation of dry land’

Two other ways that Cree differs grammatically from English and French is in its use of classifiers and its animacy noun classes. Classifiers are used with Cree verbs to indicate an object’s shape or material. We used a simple quiz to help explain the concept. Viewers are asked to guess the shape of the object being described in three different words that all mean ‘it is long’: *kinwâskwan*, *kinwâpêkan*, *kinwêkan*. From the information provided, they should be able to figure out that the first word refers to something long and rigid, the second to something string-like, and the third to something flat and thin.

We find that visitors are particularly intrigued by the Cree animacy system. Most of our visitors are familiar to some extent with the noun classes in Romance languages: all nouns are categorized as either masculine and feminine, and these grammatical categories affect the verbs, adjectives, and pronouns associated with the nouns. English speakers are certainly aware of gendered pronouns, and there has been a great deal of discussion recently about non-binary pronouns. Our visitors are surprised to learn that there are languages that use the same pronouns for all people, regardless of gender.

Cree also divides all nouns into two categories, but these are *animate* and *inanimate* rather than *masculine* and *feminine*.

This means that all people are included in the animate class and all have the same grammatical expression; a person’s gender does not affect the grammar of a Cree sentence. There is simply no issue around gendered pronouns as there is in English or French. We do point out that while all human beings are in the animate class, it is not always predictable which class other nouns fall into. For example, a raspberry (*ayôskan*) is animate, but a blueberry (*iyinimin*) is inanimate; Ice (*miskwamiy*) is animate, but water (*nipiy*) is inanimate.

Like the Inuit language, Cree uses a syllabic writing system, and we devoted a panel to a description of the Cree system. This writing system is less than 200 years old, and this gave us an opportunity to introduce a discussion of what it means to have an oral rather than a written language tradition.

We again used the exhibit’s final panel to talk about the future: Cree as a living language, the challenges it faces as it moves into the future and the efforts being made to preserve it. We included the example of eight different words that have been created in different Cree dialects for the word *telephone*. This allowed us to introduce a discussion of the challenges of standardizing vocabulary and spelling that many Indigenous languages face.

The audio for this exhibit is provided by five small push-button speakers set out on a listening station that resembles an oversized music stand (image 3). Visitors can listen to phrases in eight dialects from across the country as well as stories and songs. We have found that push-button speakers are very popular with visitors, and that audio presented this way is more frequently accessed than audio provided on a tablet or through QR codes.

## How do we introduce complex linguistic concepts and terminology in an accessible way?

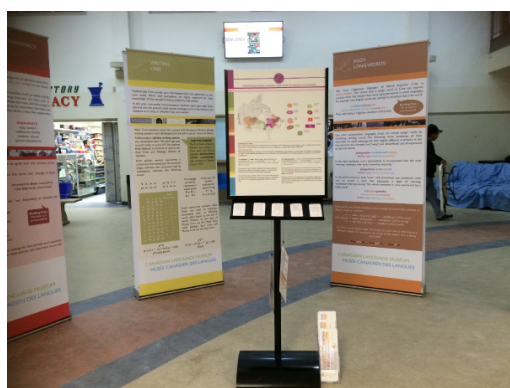


Image 3

Moose Factory Community Centre, Ontario





**Image 4**

Markham Village Library, Ontario

We wanted to have an exhibit that would provide a general introduction to all the languages of Canada and to central language issues. This travelling exhibit is *A Tapestry of Voices: Celebrating Canada's Languages* (image 4). We used this exhibit to present issues that are common across languages – whether they are Indigenous languages, official languages, or the languages of more recent immigrants. The challenge again was to present such concepts as language status, bilingualism, language endangerment and language maintenance in an engaging way.

Once again, we found that a map was very effective in illustrating the widely different language profiles across the country. The map shows the top three mother tongues in each province and territory. These are very revealing about the settlement history and population of each province. For example, the top three languages in New Brunswick are English, French and Mi'gmaq, while the top three in British Columbia are English, Chinese languages and Punjabi.

We employed a variety of images to present linguistic information in this exhibit. A colourful spiral of circles illustrates the relative sizes of the Indigenous language families in Canada, from 144,000 mother tongue speakers for the Algonquian languages to 75 for Haida. A bar graph was used to present the relative sizes of the 20 immigrant mother tongues with more than 100,000 speakers. The legal status of English and of French has been a central and divisive issue throughout Canada's history; we used a sinuous timeline to illustrate 500 years of events leading up to recent language acts.

A particularly powerful image is that of a series of houses of decreasing size that we used to illustrate the languages spoken at home in Canada. The largest house represents monolingual English households and the next largest, monolingual French households. What is a surprise to many viewers is that the third largest house shows households that have two home languages: English and a language other than French. Bilingualism in Canada is usually discussed with respect to the official languages, English and French; this image clearly communicates the large role of immigrant languages in Canadian bilingualism.

The final panel of this exhibit discusses language loss, language maintenance, and second language learning. We wanted to emphasize that these are concerns shared across languages, be it an official language in a minority situation, an immigrant language, or an Indigenous language. We felt it was integral to discuss the role played by Canada's residential school system in the repression of Indigenous languages across the country. An understanding of the precarious status of most of Canada's Indigenous languages leads to an appreciation of the pressing need for language maintenance policies and accessibility to second language learning resources.

I believe that Canada's policies that promote official bilingualism and support multiculturalism have created an openness in the Canadian public to learning about other cultures and languages. Over the past decades, Canadians have been involved in a process of Reconciliation with Indigenous peoples. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Report of 2015 contains several Calls to Action concerning the maintenance and revitalization of Indigenous languages and this has heightened interest in these languages. Our exhibits have been extremely well received wherever they have been displayed, whether in small Indigenous communities, like Moose Factory, Ontario, or in large multicultural centres like Vancouver or Toronto. The exhibit content is also available on our website along with many other resources, including videos, blog postings on a range of language topics, and a downloadable booklet about Indigenous languages in Canada ([www.languagemuseum.ca](http://www.languagemuseum.ca)). The Canadian Language Museum continues to work to promote an interest in and respect for all of the languages in Canada.

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