

Population pyramids and the survival of aboriginal languages in Canada: comparing 1901 with 2001.

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Theoretical Focus

Language is often a vital component of ethnic identity and it is of some concern that numerous languages spoken by aboriginal peoples are in danger of dying out. There are also more general concerns based on the value of preserving cultural diversity in an increasingly globalized world. This study focuses on Aboriginal languages in Canada and their potential for survival. In the 100 year span, there have been many factors that have contributed to the advancement and loss of Aboriginal languages, some of which we have identified in a literature review (Goddard, 1996, Norris, 1998, Robinson, 1985).

Topic to be Studied

We examine Aboriginal languages, specifically how they have changed between the years of 1901 and 2001. There is a very extensive list of Aboriginal languages so this paper focuses on the 2001-categorized mother tongue groupings of: Dog Rib, MicMac, Ojibwa, Inuktitut, Cree and Blackfoot. In order to illustrate the changes between 1901 and 2001, graphs in the form of population pyramids have been created showcasing the number of respondents identified with the specific mother tongue in the appropriate year. In addition to illustrating the changes between the years of 1901 and 2001, this paper offers predictions on the future language maintenance of the various mother tongues, specifically examining the characteristics of the age-sex population pyramids for the census years in question.

Data and Research Methods

Microdata were obtained from a 5% sample of dwellings from the 1901 Census of Canada (Baskerville and Sager, 2007). Aggregated data from the 2001 20% sample Census were obtained from tables made available by Statistics Canada under the Data Liberation Initiative. Distributions were obtained using the Survey Documentation and Analysis (SDA) and Beyond 2020 packages. Results were summarized in Microsoft Excel spreadsheets.

Preliminary Findings

There are differences in the 1901 and 2001 data. The 1901 census data are from a 5 percent sample of dwellings, so some sub-sample sizes are relatively small. Sub-sample sizes are generally larger for the 2001 census data. In both cases we are mindful of possible problems that could arise from under-enumeration of aboriginal peoples in the Census.

We focused on six language groups. Comparison of these six mother tongue groupings is interesting, as the side by side graph analysis clearly illustrates the differences between 1901 and 2001 as well as between different language groupings. For the cases of Dog Rib, M'ikmaq, and Cree, the graphs illustrate somewhat similar results. In these cases comparison of the 1901 and 2001 data illustrates how these language groups are well placed for survival.

The more pessimistic findings concern the Aboriginal language groupings of Ojibwa and Blackfoot. In 1901 the Ojibwa and Blackfoot mother tongue populations could reasonably be described by population pyramids typical of hunter-gatherer societies but one hundred years later these populations had relatively fewer youth and relatively more elderly persons speaking those Aboriginal languages. In

the absence of a cultural shift or a successful policy intervention our analysis predicts the extinction of these languages within a few decades.

Some language groups display noticeable variation by gender. A possible explanation for the data is that females are more likely to lose fluency in their mother tongue due to their life experiences. Norris, 1998: 14) suggests that women are more likely to leave their reserves and move to other locations where their chances of meeting a non-native is high.

For the 1901 mother tongue of "Eskimo" (the descriptive term used by the Census at that time) , the lack of data made predictions on the languages future viability difficult. Few people were enumerated with "Eskimo" as the mother tongue in 1901. This may be due to incomplete enumeration of the Inuit population at that time. The 2001 data on Inuktitut as a mother tongue clearly show large proportions of children and youth which in turn will have a positive impact on language maintenance and retention in the future.

Further research

We plan to extend these analyses so as to include the 1881 Census of Canada as well as recent Censuses such as those of 1981 and 1991.

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