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Introduction (en)

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Décennie internationale des langues autochtones 2022-2032 :
réflexion sur les moyens à mettre en oeuvre afin de préserver, de
revitaliser et de promouvoir les langues autochtones
International Decade of the World's Indigenous Languages
2022-2032: Reflecting on Ways to Preserve, Revitalize and Promote
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Introduction (en)

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The International Decade of Indigenous Languages 2022–2032 was declared by the United Nations General Assembly on December 18, 2019, and officially launched by UNESCO on December 13, 2022. The objective of this initiative is to “draw attention to the critical loss of indigenous languages and the urgent need to preserve, revitalize and promote indigenous languages” (Rights of Indigenous peoples, para. 24). In a report published in 2016, the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues was already reporting that 40% of the world’s languages, estimated at 6,700, were in danger of disappearing. The majority of these languages are Indigenous. In its resolution of December 2019, the United Nations General Assembly emphasized that “despite the continuing efforts, there is an urgent need to preserve, promote and revitalize (...) indigenous languages” (Rights of Indigenous peoples, preamble) and highlighted the need to “take urgent steps at the national and international levels” (para. 24).

The use of one’s own language: A fundamental right of Indigenous peoples

People’s ability and freedom to use the language of their choice “is essential for human dignity, peaceful co-existence, reciprocal action, and for the general wellbeing and sustainable development of society at large” (UNESCO, 2021, p. 5). As for Indigenous languages, they “represent peoples’ identities, cultures and complex systems of knowledge developed and accumulated over thousands of years” (UNESCO, 2021, p. 5); they are therefore “fundamental markers of indigenous peoples distinctiveness and cohesiveness as peoples.” (Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, 2012, p. 9)

The disappearance of Indigenous languages thus directly undermines the individual and collective rights of members of Indigenous communities and Indigenous peoples. Indeed, “when peoples’ freedom to use their language is not guaranteed, this limits their freedom of thought, freedom of opinion and expression, including artistic expression, as well as their access to education, health and information, justice, decent employment, their participation in cultural life” (UNESCO, 2021, pp. 5–6).

Adopted in 2007, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples recognizes the right of Indigenous peoples to revitalize, use, develop and transmit their language to future generations (art. 13). It also recognizes their right to establish and control their own education systems and institutions in which education is provided in their own language (art. 14) and to establish their own media in their own language (art. 16). However, despite the adoption of this Declaration, the efforts made by many governments, civil organizations and Indigenous peoples still seem largely insufficient to ensure the survival of many Indigenous languages, and many questions remain as to the means that must be deployed to respect, protect and implement the rights set out in the 2007 Declaration.

Indigenous language loss: A threat to cultural diversity and the common heritage of humanity

The loss of a language is not only an attack on the collective identity and dignity of Indigenous peoples (Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous peoples, 2012, p. 9, 11), but also represents an impoverishment of the heritage of humanity. In fact, there is a close link between linguistic diversity and cultural diversity, which is recognized in Article 1 of the 2001 UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity as constituting “the common heritage of humanity” to be

“affirmed for the benefit of present and future generations.” Failure to protect a language is therefore also an attack on the integrity of this heritage whose protection is the responsibility of each and every one of us. Despite this recognition, the international community has been slow to adopt an international legal instrument to protect linguistic diversity. And no such instrument is specifically dedicated to Indigenous languages.

There are nevertheless a number of legal instruments, albeit not dedicated to language, which set out principles or commitments encouraging states to act in favour of linguistic diversity. In the cultural sector, the 2001 Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity states that “multilingualism (...) including in digital form, and the possibility for all cultures to have access to the means of expression and dissemination are the guarantees of cultural diversity” (art. 6). This interdependent relationship between the plurality of languages and “the manifold ways in which the cultures of groups and societies find expression” is also recognized by the 2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (art. 4.1), the Parties emphasizing in the preamble to this treaty “that linguistic diversity is a fundamental element of cultural diversity” (para. 15). A few references to Indigenous peoples also appear in the statement of commitments resulting from this Convention. However, it must be said that, to date, very few Parties have explicitly addressed issues relating to Indigenous languages in their implementation of the 2005 Convention (Mariage & Guèvremont, 2022).

Other international legal instruments can influence the actions of States to protect linguistic diversity or, more specifically, preserve Indigenous languages. It is in the fields of education and in categorical or universal fundamental rights instruments aimed at minorities—notably linguistic—that the most relevant language preservation provisions are to be found. Instruments in the field of education that contain provisions designed to protect the rights of children, particularly minority and Indigenous children, are obviously relevant given the role that education can play in the preservation and transmission of a language. In this regard, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) stipulates that the education of the child shall be directed to the development of respect for “his or her own cultural identity, language and values” (art. 29 para. 1c.). The Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention (No. 169) adopted by the International Labour Organization (ILO) the same year also affirms that, “children belonging to the peoples concerned shall, wherever practicable, be taught to read and write in their own indigenous language or in the language most commonly used by the group to which they belong.” When this is not practicable, “the competent authorities shall undertake consultations with these peoples with a view to the adoption of measures to achieve this objective” (art. 28).

With regard to more general provisions on the right to use one’s own language, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights or ICCPR (1966) provides that, in States in which linguistic minorities exist, “persons belonging to such minorities shall not be denied the right (...) to use their own language” (art. 27). In its general recommendation No. 23 on minorities, the Human Rights Committee clarifies that this right implies positive obligations for the State, by specifying that “[a]lthough the rights protected under Article 27 are individual rights, they depend in turn on the ability of the minority group to maintain its culture, language or religion.” Consequently, “positive measures by States may also be necessary to protect the identity of a minority and the rights of its members to enjoy and develop their (...) language (...) in community with the other members of the group.” (para. 6.2). The Convention on the Rights of the Child provides, in terms similar to article 27 of the ICCPR, that “a child belonging to such a minority or who is indigenous shall not be denied the right, in community with other members of his or her group (...) to use his or her own language” (art. 30). Although aimed specifically at minorities, the right “to use their own language, in private and in public, freely and without interference or any form of discrimination” is also provided for in the Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities (art. 2), whereas article 4. 2 encourages

States to take measures “to create favourable conditions to enable persons belonging to minorities to express their characteristics and to develop (...) their language.”

It should also be noted that, according to the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the right to take part in cultural life depends to some extent on the implementation of language rights. Indeed, in its General comment No. 21 on the right of everyone to take part in cultural life (art. 15(1)(a) of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights), the Committee affirms that participation, one of the three main components of the right to take part in cultural life, includes the right—alone, in association with others or as part of a community—“to express oneself in the language of one’s choice” (para. 15(a)). Access, another main component, covers the right—alone, in association with others or as a community—“to follow a way of life associated with the use of cultural goods and resources such as (...) language” (para. 15 (b)). These provisions, and the observations of the two Committees that specify their interpretation, thus make it possible to identify a collective dimension to the language rights set out as individual rights, relevant in the context of the preservation of Indigenous languages strongly linked to the identity of Indigenous peoples, but also to make the preservation of Indigenous languages an indispensable condition for the exercise of other rights, notably the right to participate in cultural life.

What about the promotion of Indigenous languages in the digital environment?

The impact of digital technologies on linguistic diversity cannot be overlooked, particularly generative artificial intelligence systems that use large language models to create content (texts, images, videos, etc.) from large quantities of data. On the one hand, these systems are formidable tools, for example for generating and translating text and other content into multiple languages, which could promote the preservation and transmission of Indigenous languages; on the other hand, languages that are under-represented in the data used to build these models risk being excluded from the advances generated by AI, which is the case for very many Indigenous languages (UNESCO, 2024, p. 6). Moreover, these systems involve risks in terms of cultural assimilation, since they can lead to the simplification of some languages, for example by erasing certain linguistic traits (unique concepts, idioms, and grammatical structures in particular) that reflect identities, histories, values, world views and traditional knowledge. Lastly, the sovereignty of Indigenous peoples over the data that concerns them—which includes data relating to their languages—is another important issue of the digital age, inseparable from the strategies to be put in place to promote the decolonization of information (Gentelet & Bahary-Dionne, 2021, p. 199). Several of these risks and challenges are addressed in the Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence adopted by UNESCO Member States in 2021.

For instance, “Member States are encouraged to incorporate AI systems, where appropriate, in the preservation, enrichment, understanding, promotion, management and accessibility of tangible, documentary and intangible cultural heritage, including endangered languages as well as indigenous languages and knowledges” (para. 94). The Recommendation also refers to “[o]nline courses and digital resources of AI ethics education [that] should be developed in local languages, including indigenous languages” (para. 106). And, most importantly, the Recommendation draws the attention of States to data governance issues, which require “in the case of Indigenous Peoples, respect for the self-governance of their data” (para. 47). The implementation of this Recommendation on the Ethics of AI would therefore appear to be of the utmost importance, given that public policies are slow to address these issues; but the adoption of this text is still too recent to measure its concrete impacts to date.

Will the Global Digital Compact annexed to The Pact for the Future adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in September 2024 be able to accelerate the adoption of such policies? Although it proposes the ethical governance of technology, the Digital Compact does not explicitly address Indigenous languages. It does, however, contain a few references to linguistic diversity. For instance, the cooperation that will be stimulated by the Compact should promote “digital accessibility for all and support linguistic and cultural diversity in the digital space” (principle 8(g)). Furthermore, in order to “enhance international governance of artificial intelligence for the benefit of humanity” (objective 5), the States intend to “govern artificial intelligence in the public interest and ensure that the application of artificial intelligence fosters diverse cultures and languages” (para. 53). Moreover, the Declaration on Future Generations, also annexed to The Pact for the Future, sets out the commitment of States to “[h]onour, promote and preserve cultural diversity and cultural heritage, as well as languages, knowledge systems and traditions” (para. 15), and urges them to “[r]ecognize, respect, promote and protect the rights of Indigenous Peoples, their territories, lands and ecosystems, while safeguarding their traditions, spiritual beliefs and ancestral knowledge” (para. 16).

Canada, and the Canadian provinces, must therefore deploy the means necessary to respect all their international commitments, many of which now concern Indigenous peoples and their languages and, more generally, linguistic diversity, including in the digital environment.

But beyond the leverage that legal instruments and political initiatives on the international stage can provide for Indigenous languages in favour of cultural and linguistic diversity, it is clear that the preservation, revitalization and promotion of these languages rely to a large extent on the adoption and implementation of appropriate policies and measures at the national level.

The alarming situation of Indigenous languages in Canada and the urgent need for action

In Canada, the 2021 census reveals a particularly critical situation: It shows that the number of Indigenous people who can speak an Indigenous language has fallen by 4.3% compared to the previous census in 2016, the first decline since comparable data began to be recorded in 1991 (Statistics Canada, 2023). The decline in the number of Indigenous language speakers reflects a steady decline in the number of Indigenous people who claim an Indigenous language as their mother tongue (Statistics Canada, 2023). Clearly, attempts to eradicate Indigenous languages and cultures, particularly through the residential school system in place from 1830 to 1996 (Motard & Lainé, 2017), still pose a threat to the survival of these languages today.

In the recent past, however, some legislative advances have been made. Passed in 2019, the Indigenous Languages Act aims to “support and promote the use of Indigenous languages”, to “support the efforts of Indigenous peoples to reclaim, revitalize, maintain and strengthen Indigenous languages” and to “establish measures to facilitate the provision of adequate, sustainable and long-term funding” in this regard (s. 5(a) (b) and (d)). Bill C-13, An Act to amend the Official Languages Act, tabled in Parliament on March 1, 2022 and adopted in June 2023, recognizes “the importance (...) of reclaiming, revitalizing and strengthening Indigenous languages.” However, these legislative measures have been criticized. In the case of the Indigenous Languages Act, for example, the Inuk Tapiriit Kanatami believes that the Inuit were not consulted, and criticizes the fact that the Act contains no clauses specific to the Inuit (Grignon-Francke, 2019). Others consider that these initiatives fail to take into account certain threats that have a direct effect on Indigenous languages, in particular the disappearance of territory or the impossibility of accessing it (Motard & Lainé, 2017).

It remains to be seen to what extent the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act, adopted in June 2021, which calls on the Canadian government to implement the 2007 Declaration, will have a positive impact on the protection of Indigenous languages. It will also be important to closely monitor the implementation of Canada's National Action Plan for the International Decade of the World's Indigenous Languages (2022–2032), the launch of which was announced by the Minister of Canadian Heritage, Pascale St-Onge, on June 20, 2024 (Canadian Heritage, 2024). Lastly, attention must be paid to Indigenous language legislation adopted by the provinces and territories, for example the Inuit Language Protection Act (2008) or, more generally, any language legislation likely to produce positive or negative effects on the protection of Indigenous languages. For example, Quebec's Bill 96 aimed at reforming Bill 101, tabled in May 2021 and adopted in 2022, did not provide any special status for Indigenous languages (Lévesque, 2021), a shortcoming that could accelerate the assimilation of Indigenous peoples according to some First Nations representatives (Carabin, 2022).

Protecting Indigenous languages: Much more than just a language policy issue

The preservation, revitalization and promotion of Indigenous languages cannot, however, be achieved solely through the implementation of language policies. Initiatives must also be taken in other areas. An example of a highly relevant field is that of cultural policies, which can have a decisive impact on language preservation and transmission. The Online Streaming Act, adopted on April 27, 2023, which modernizes the 1991 Broadcasting Act, now sets out guidelines to ensure that the Canadian broadcasting system offers programming in Indigenous languages that reflects Indigenous cultures, and supports the production and broadcasting of programs in Indigenous languages. Stemming from this revised legislation, Broadcasting Regulatory Policy CRTC 2024-121, The Path Forward – Supporting Canadian and Indigenous content through base contributions, published on June 4, 2024, requires online streaming services to contribute 5% of their revenues to various funds supporting the creation of Canadian content, of which 0.5% is earmarked for the Indigenous Screen Office fund. These new measures could have a positive impact on the creation, production and dissemination of content in Indigenous languages within the Canadian cultural ecosystem.

A word of caution is warranted, however, because at the same time, Indigenous communities in Canada are often subject to cultural instrumentalization designed to compensate for the underrepresentation of people from Indigenous communities in the various spheres of civil society. The initiatives emphasize the use of cultural elements such as Indigenous languages, giving the public the false impression that these languages are being preserved, when in fact the vast majority of Indigenous languages remain in danger of extinction. The speakers of these languages do not benefit from initiatives to help support, protect and transmit their languages, but the cultural production and dissemination sector projects an image of vitality that in no way supports urgent needs aimed at safeguarding languages. In this sense, the instrumentalization of Indigenous languages in the cultural sector for aesthetic purposes—if not combined with a structure that ensures the vitality of Indigenous languages, in the territories that gave birth to them—contributes to public misinformation and helps to create the opposite effect of what would be appropriate to convey, i.e., the urgency to act to protect Indigenous languages. Discernment is therefore needed to identify whether measures are genuinely beneficial to the preservation of Indigenous languages, and to ensure that they are not merely symbolic gestures, but rather are used concretely and produce observable, tangible results.

An overview of the contributions to this special issue dedicated to Indigenous languages

This special issue brings together six texts on Indigenous languages: five articles and one contribution to the Perspectives section. Although each text explores specific themes, they all share a common thread: the inseparable link between Indigenous language, culture and identity. They also show that, when respected and valued, the linguistic diversity of a society becomes a source of intercultural dialogue rather than a cause of tension or conflict. This dialogue, however, requires recognizing and valuing the people who carry, preserve and transmit these languages: first and foremost the speakers, but also other key actors, such as teachers, professors and interpreters. As the contents of this special issue also reflect, even trade negotiators have a role to play in preserving Indigenous languages, whenever the agreements they negotiate present a risk of interference with respect for the recognized rights of Indigenous peoples.

In this issue, Indigenous languages are explored through themes as diverse as knowledge, education, justice and trade. It also includes a personal account by an author of language transmission within her own family. The following paragraphs present each contribution in greater detail.

In the first article, **Jimena Terraza** reflects on the importance of minority and minoritized languages for cultural diversity and knowledge. She explores linguistic relativity and the way in which languages influence thought, stressing the need to preserve this diversity in order to better understand the cognitive capacities of human beings.

Orane Caryn, who authors the second article, explores the opportunities and challenges of bilingual intercultural education in Nunavut and the Peruvian Andes. She sheds light on how this type of bilingual education can contribute to the revitalization of Indigenous languages, in this case Inuktitut and Quechua, while highlighting the difficulties faced by teachers in these distinct contexts.

The third article in this issue, by **Shelley Tulloch, Lorena Fontaine and Heather Souter**, looks at the role of universities in the revitalization of Indigenous languages, with particular attention given to the training of language teachers. The authors examine the needs and challenges faced by teaching staff. They also identify a number of good practices that provide effective support for those involved in teaching, while creating positive impacts for language revitalization.

In the fourth article, **Pascale Laneuville, Allie Miot-Bureneau, Isabelle Martineau and Caroline Hervé** discuss the crucial role of interpreters—whom they also describe as cultural mediators—at the Itinerant Court of Nunavik, a territory where the Inuktitut language is still widely spoken by the Inuit. The authors analyze the linguistic and ontological challenges of interpreting, and question the concept of justice in the Inuit context, highlighting the cultural and linguistic issues underlying the legal cases brought before this itinerant court.

In the fifth and final article, **Charlotte Tessier** examines the application of the 2005 UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions in trade agreements concluded following the adoption of this treaty. The author lists and analyzes several categories of cultural clauses incorporated into these agreements, allowing signatory States to restrict trade in certain goods or services in order to preserve Indigenous languages.

Finally, in the Perspectives section, **Kawtar Lahkim** examines the obstacles to language transmission in two families belonging to distinct Amazigh communities, the Toulalyine and the Souassa. In particular, the author examines the effects of mixedness, modernity and uprootedness.

She highlights how certain internal factors, in addition to state dynamics, can accelerate the decline of languages spoken within these communities.

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