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Chair

The Honourable Larry Bagnell

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● (1100)

[*English*]

The Chair (Hon. Larry Bagnell (Yukon, Lib.)): Good morning. Welcome to the 97th meeting of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs. This morning, we pursue our study of the use of indigenous languages in the proceedings of the House of Commons. We are pleased to be joined by officials from two government departments. These aren't the ones that provide translation; these are other ones that have an interest in this.

Our witnesses are, from the Department of Canadian Heritage, Hubert Lussier, Assistant Deputy Minister, Citizenship, Heritage and Regions; and William Fizet, Director General, Citizen Participation. We also have, from Statistics Canada, Jean-Pierre Corbeil, Assistant Director, Social and Aboriginal Statistics Division; Pamela Best, Assistant Director, Social and Aboriginal Statistics Division; and Vivian O'Donnell, Analyst, Social and Aboriginal Statistics Division.

Thank you for being here.

I'll now turn the floor over to Mr. Fizet for his open statement, to be followed by Mr. Corbeil.

[*Translation*]

Mr. William Fizet (Director General, Citizen Participation, Department of Canadian Heritage): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

Thank you for allowing us to be here to provide information on indigenous languages in Canada as part of your study of the interpretation of indigenous languages in the House of Commons.

I would like first to acknowledge that we are on traditional Algonquin territory and that the language traditionally spoken in this territory is referred to as Algonquin or Maniwaki Algonquin.

My name is William Fizet. I'm the Director General of the Citizenship Participation Branch, and within that branch we have the aboriginal peoples' program.

[*Translation*]

Budget 2017 allocated $19.5 million to the aboriginal languages initiative annually until 2019-20, which is three times more than previous allocations. In 2017-18, it supported 203 projects, which implemented participatory activities and developed resources in indigenous languages. Seventy-three languages or dialects received support from ALI in that year.

The Government of Canada recognizes that languages are an essential element of culture. Thus, indigenous languages are an essential element of indigenous culture. Indigenous people have used and continue to use their languages to describe the world they live in, to make sense of it, and to teach their cultures and values to their children.

[*English*]

Indigenous people were prevented from using and transmitting their languages through policies like that of the residential schools. Indigenous languages need support to be revitalized. To use them in the public domain, in the House of Commons, would have a great symbolic value.

The discussion about the usage of indigenous languages in our institutions needs to be held alongside a discussion on vitality of languages and the important revitalization efforts made by the indigenous communities themselves. The vitality of indigenous languages is assessed through a series of factors, including the proportion of speakers to the total population and average age of mother tongue speakers. Right now, not all indigenous people are able to speak their language. Moreover, the way languages and dialects are counted is complicated.

Let me share some overarching general information from Statistics Canada on this matter. Census 2016 revealed that approximately 1.6 million people reported an indigenous identity. A little more than one in six, which is approximately 260,000, reported being able to conduct a conversation in an indigenous language. A little more than 210,000 people reported having an indigenous language as their mother tongue. In 2016, the average age of mother tongue speakers had increased to 36.7 years. In 2011, the average age was 35 years old. When compared to the 1981 data, it shows an increase of more than nine years. However, there are exceptions, and those can be found with mother tongues of Inuktitut, which is an Inuit language, Atikamekw, and Naskapi, where the average approximate age is 26 years.

● (1105)

[*Translation*]

We see overall declining trends in percentages reporting an aboriginal mother tongue or language knowledge, and increasing average ages of mother-tongue speakers and the data indicate similar patterns and trends for males and females. The various indigenous languages spoken in Canada are reflective of the richness of indigenous cultures in Canada.

We know that linguists generally identify 11 indigenous language families that cross international borders, however, there is no definitive list of indigenous languages and dialects spoken in Canada, and we learn more about the languages every year.

Census 2016 revealed that the indigenous languages with more than 10,000 mother tongue speakers are Cree languages, Inuktitut, Ojibway, Oji-Cree, Dene and Innu.

[*English*]

One other main source of information about indigenous languages is UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. UNESCO maintains a list of 90 indigenous languages for Canada. This list was first established in 2008 by Canadian researcher Mary Jane Norris, who used data from previous censuses and a review of literature to establish the nomenclature. The list is updated regularly and now contains 2011 census data; it will continue to be updated as additional information becomes available.

Languages on the list are linked to the community with the largest number of speakers. Thus the list does not illustrate the actual dispersion of speakers in any given province or territory.

UNESCO's list includes the classification of languages based on their level of endangerment. The scale is based on the level of use of a language across generations. In the UNESCO scale, there are levels of endangerment for languages. For example, a language is deemed "vulnerable" if it is used by some children and in all domains such as school, home, work, and ceremonies. A language is "critically endangered" if it is used only by some of the great-grandparental generation. Other levels are "definitely endangered" and "severely endangered". All indigenous languages in Canada are deemed "endangered". Some languages are secondarily surviving such as Huron-Wendat, meaning that they have been brought back, while some are dormant and could potentially be revived. Others, we have to be frank, have become extinct.

For the 2016 census, StatsCan reported on 70 indigenous languages. The analysis shows that indigenous people who shared their information have reported more than 70 indigenous languages. StatsCan includes only the languages meeting the threshold of 45 speakers in the information released. The new list of 70 languages represents an increase from the 60 reported in the 2011 National Household Survey.

An important difference between the StatsCan data and the UNESCO list is found in the classifications of languages of the north. Census 2016 identifies four Inuit languages or dialects, while the UNESCO list identifies eight languages or dialects. Also, StatsCan refers to Algonquin as the language spoke in this traditional territory, while UNESCO uses the name Maniwaki Algonquin.

Canadian Heritage is currently supporting research with Mary Jane Norris to further our knowledge and classification of indigenous languages in Canada. I should note, however, that the complexity of the matter is such that there is not a definitive number of indigenous languages or any consensus in their classification. The update that we're embarking on will ensure that the 2016 data is used to understand the health and trends of indigenous languages. This work will also increase the information available on the various names used to identify indigenous languages.

These languages are currently identified by names that can have various linguistic origins such as the actual indigenous language, different indigenous languages, French, or English. Ultimately, however, communities have the knowledge and the final say to validate that information.

Lastly, we have to consider the writing systems used for various indigenous languages. Among others, the Roman alphabet and the syllabic system are used to write indigenous languages. Graphic symbols are taken from the International Phonetic Alphabet and blocks have been created in 1999 and 2009 to add characters. They're referred to as the Unicode Block "Unified Canadian Aboriginal Syllabics" and the Unicode Block "Unified Canadian Aboriginal Syllabics Extended".

Standardization of systems is ongoing and this may lead to considering how IT elements might need to be adjusted to complement the work you're doing.

I'll now turn to the levels of endangerment for the 90 languages that UNESCO speaks to. There are 23 vulnerable and unsafe languages. There are five languages that are "definitely endangered". There are 27 "severely endangered" languages, and there are 35 languages that UNESCO considers to be "critically endangered". This last category means the language is used mostly by the great-grandparental generation and up. On average, the age of indigenous speakers has been increasing.

● (1110)

[*Translation*]

Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

Just to clarify, or further refine, your opening, the land we're on, is that on the Anishinaabe branch of the Algonquins?

Mr. William Fizet: Here?

Yes.

The Chair: Monsieur Corbeil.

Mr. Jean-Pierre Corbeil (Assistant Director, Social and Aboriginal Statistics Division, Statistics Canada): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

[*Translation*]

I would like first to thank the members of the committee for inviting Statistics Canada to appear before the committee to contribute to its study on the use of indigenous languages in proceedings of the House of Commons.

My presentation will cover three main topics. I will begin by presenting some general statistics on the very wide diversity of indigenous languages spoken in Canada, their number and distribution across the country, as well as the language variables available in the census that can be used to inform us of the status of the indigenous languages in this country. I will subsequently present general historical trends on spoken indigenous languages and their relative vitality. I will conclude with key factors and indicators of the vitality and long-term viability of indigenous languages in Canada.

Indigenous languages spoken in Canada are of great importance to first nations people, Métis and Inuit. More than 70 indigenous languages were reported in the 2016 Census. The vast majority of these languages are unique to Canada and, as with most indigenous languages globally, they are not spoken anywhere else in the world. This is just one of the many reasons that the preservation and revitalization of their languages is of great importance.

The Census of Population provides several measures of the use and knowledge of indigenous languages. The number of individuals with an indigenous language as their mother tongue is counted, as is the language spoken most often or on a regular basis at home, the language used at work, and the language in which they can conduct a conversation.

[*English*]

In 2016 the overall national response rate for the census was 97.4%. Statistics Canada works with indigenous organizations and communities on an ongoing basis to improve participation in surveys and the census. As in previous years, census staff conducted door-to-door enumeration of households in reserve communities as well as in remote and northern communities. The census questionnaires were made available in 11 indigenous languages: Atikamekw, Denesuline, Dogrib, Inuktitut, Montagnais, northern Quebec Cree, Oji-Cree, Ojibwa, Plains Cree, and Swampy Cree.

Overall, the coverage and participation in the 2016 census was excellent. Although 14 out of the 984 census subdivisions classified as reserves were incompletely enumerated in 2016, which could affect counts for some specific languages, the proportion of such incompletely enumerated census subdivisions has systematically decreased over time.

The census, with its expansive reach across the country, remains one of the most comprehensive sources of information about indigenous languages in Canada. As stated, more than 70 languages were reported. In 2016, as shown in the tables provided to the committee, about 213,000 reported an indigenous language as their mother tongue—that is, the first language learned at home in childhood and still understood. Nearly 264,000 people reported that they were able to conduct a conversation in one of the 70 aboriginal languages. This is to say that there are 24% more speakers of an indigenous language than people who have an indigenous language as their mother tongue. This is an indication of the importance of the acquisition of these languages as a second language.

● (1115)

[*Translation*]

Of the 70 indigenous languages spoken, 36 languages had at least 500 speakers. The Cree languages, which are spoken primarily in Saskatchewan, Alberta, Manitoba, and Quebec, accounted for just under 100,000 speakers, or 37% of all speakers of an indigenous language in Canada.

Inuktitut, the second most common indigenous language, is mainly spoken in Nunavut and Nunavik and had slightly less than 41,000 speakers.

Ojibway and Oji-Cree, spoken primarily in Ontario and Manitoba, accounted for 28,000 and 15,600 speakers, respectively, while the approximately 13,000 Dene speakers were mainly in Saskatchewan and Alberta.

Four other Algonquian languages—Montagnais, Mi'kmaq, Atikamekw, and Blackfoot—grouped together had nearly 33,000 speakers.

Considering that almost 9 in 10 of all speakers of an indigenous language in the country spoke one of these nine languages or groups of languages, this means that many other indigenous languages have very few speakers

As a result, these are generally considered by several specialists as threatened or destined to an uncertain future. The average age of these indigenous language populations varies considerably from one group to the other. For example, the average age of the population with Inuktitut as a mother tongue was 27 in 2016 compared with 61 for the population with Michif as a mother tongue.

The language profiles of first nations people, Métis and Inuit vary considerably. In 2016, two out of three Inuit stated they could speak an Inuit language well enough to conduct a conversation, predominantly Inuktitut. Among first nations people, more than 21% said they spoke an indigenous language, whereas among the Metis, less than 2% stated they were able to do the same.

Among the 73% of Inuit living in the Inuit Nunangat, 84% could speak an Inuit language, while this was true for 11% of those residents outside the Inuit Nunangat. Similarly, 45% of first nations with registered Indian status, who lived on a reserve, could speak an indigenous language, compared with just over 13% of those living off-reserve.

The place of residence, concentration, and proportion of members of a community on its territory are among the factors influencing the propensity to know and use an indigenous language.

[*English*]

The census allows us to look at change over time. Between 1996 and 2016, the population reporting the ability to conduct a conversation in an indigenous language increased from 234,000 people to nearly 264,000, an increase of 12.8%. However, it is important to note that the indigenous population increased at a much faster pace. The pace of growth of the indigenous-language-speaking population is not keeping pace with the growth of the indigenous population overall.

The story of long-term viability is different for every language. For example, in 2016 the number of people who could speak either Cree, Ojibwe, or Oji-Cree was roughly the same as it was 20 years earlier, that is, over 125,000. On the other hand, the number of Dene speakers grew by almost 15% over the 20-year period.

The census shows that the number of people who can speak an Inuit language has increased. In 1996 there were just over 30,000 people in Canada who could speak Inuktitut. By 2016 this number had risen by 34%, with more than 2,000 others who were available to speak other Inuit languages such as Inuinnaqtun or Inuvialuktun.

Not all indigenous languages fared well over this period. Languages with smaller and older populations are particularly vulnerable. The number of people who could speak one of the Wakashan languages, such as Haisla or Heiltsuk, declined by almost 25%. Similarity, the number of people who could speak Carrier went down by 27% over the 20-year period.

Past events have severely affected the vitality of indigenous languages in Canada. For example, the residential school system under which generations of indigenous children were not permitted to speak their mother tongue had enormous impacts upon intergenerational transmission of indigenous languages.

Unlike other language groups in Canada, people speaking in an indigenous language cannot rely on new immigrants to maintain or increase their population of speakers. Passing on the language from parents to children is critical for all indigenous languages to survive. High fertility rates and strong intergenerational language transmission thus contribute to a young and vibrant language community.

Moreover, although learning an indigenous language, at home in childhood, as a primary language is a crucial element of the long-term viability of indigenous languages, second-language learning can be an important part of language revitalization. Efforts to preserve and revitalize indigenous languages through second-language learning are under way across the country. These efforts include incorporating indigenous language instruction in classrooms, creating standard orthographies, and developing language immersion programs.

● (1120)

This explains why, particularly among youth, the population able to conduct a conversation in an indigenous language is larger than the population with indigenous language as a mother tongue. Considering revitalization efforts is particularly important in light of the results of the 2012 Aboriginal Peoples Survey. In this survey we learned that 59% of first nations living off reserve and 37% of Métis reported that it is very important or somewhat important to speak or understand an indigenous language. Among Inuit, the proportion reached 81%.

Let me conclude by saying that numerous studies on indigenous languages point to a number of key factors that have an impact on the vitality and future of these languages. Although the numbers of speakers of indigenous languages could be considered precariously small, the domains in which these languages are spoken play a key role. For instance, the use of indigenous languages at home, at school, during social and cultural events, and throughout community life has a strong impact on their vitality and long-term viability.

The vitality of a given indigenous language also depends on the presence of a critical mass of speakers within the community, the presence of a network of social relations using the language, and the intergenerational transmission of a language from parents to children, as a mother tongue or as a second language. Studies have also shown that the vitality of indigenous languages also depends on the strong identity of their speakers and on whether there is an internal or external recognition of the language as distinct and unique within society. This recognition can therefore confer status and prestige through a language.

In conclusion, allow me to say that Statistics Canada recognizes the importance of engaging first nations people, Métis, and Inuit throughout all stages of the data life cycle, in understanding data needs and gaps, determining content, and ensuring relevance of the analysis and statistical products that we deliver. The high quality of the language and other data we gather would not be possible without their participation in the census and other surveys. Our measures of indigenous languages and other characteristics of the indigenous population of Canada have evolved and will continue to evolve over time as we work with communities and organizations to improve the way data are collected, in a way that is respectful of their rights to self-determination.

Thank you, and it is with pleasure that my colleagues Vivian O'Donnell, Pamela Best, and I will answer your questions.

The Chair: Everyone has this report from Stats Canada. It was emailed to you.

Thank you very much. There's some very good information for our committee. It's very helpful.

Mr. Graham.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham (Laurentides—Labelle, Lib.): Mr. Fizet, in your comments you mentioned extinct languages, but you neither enumerated nor elaborated. Can you enumerate or elaborate on extinct languages in the country?

Mr. William Fizet: In terms of those languages that are extinct that—

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I mean those we've lost. Do we have any way of quantifying them or qualifying them?

Mr. William Fizet: I'll have to get back to you, because they know, but we don't have a list of them here with us. We can get back to you on that.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: That's fair.

For all of you, within your departments, what, if any, indigenous languages are used and what discussions have there been around using them in some way or somehow in the departments? Are there any?

● (1125)

Mr. William Fizet: Within our particular—

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I mean Stats Canada or Heritage.

Mr. William Fizet: I'll let Stats Canada go ahead.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: It's for anybody. Is there any use of any indigenous languages anywhere in government, basically?

Mr. Hubert Lussier (Assistant Deputy Minister, Citizenship, Heritage and Regions, Department of Canadian Heritage): I can start by answering some of that. I know there have been some initiatives at ESDC. For instance, they have offered certain services in Quebec in Cree, because they happen to have an employee who volunteered to provide these services in the area of responsibility of ESDC in northern Quebec. These are the types of initiatives that exist at this point.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I see.

Go ahead.

Ms. Pamela Best (Assistant Director, Social and Aboriginal Statistics Division, Statistics Canada): At Statistics Canada when we are conducting our surveys, we do make the survey questionnaires available in different languages. The Aboriginal Peoples Survey was also translated into Inuktitut and Inuinnaqtun, as was a Nunavut Government Employee Survey.

When required, we also have guides and interpreters to be able to translate our questionnaires into the languages for the census and the Aboriginal Peoples Survey.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Do we keep any kind of a database or have any kind of stats on how many translators are available for what languages in this country, or any kind of database on who is available to teach them so we can expand these languages and help save them?

Mr. Jean-Pierre Corbeil: We could certainly provide you with that information. We can gather the information.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Is that not something you keep as a matter of course?

Mr. Hubert Lussier: It would be the translation bureau that would have the most accurate data on that kind of information.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: If someone says they want to learn a language that's near extinction, who would they go to to bring it back, for example?

Mr. Hubert Lussier: The translation bureau would be the source for professional interpreters. As William described, we have some information on certain types of programs that exist across the country. That is not systematically offered in the form you seem to be looking for.

Mr. William Fizet: I would also like to point out that, for the programs we administer, it is the communities that determine the gaps they have and what they need in terms of language learning, language revitalization, and the promotion of language. Communities are the ones that are actually telling us what they need, and those are the types of projects that are actually supported.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Mr. Corbeil, you talked a bit about languages that have been brought back or helped through the use of at-home learning, child learning, and so forth. In the case of my own family, my wife and I speak six languages between us, but we only have one language in common, so that's the language my daughter speaks. What challenges are there in reintroducing or building a language when you don't have both parents who speak it natively? How do we get there?

Mr. Jean-Pierre Corbeil: We know fairly well, from our statistics and our studies, that it's always a challenge when we have mixed marriages, because when the language is spoken at home usually it is the language that will be transmitted to children. As we mentioned, because there are many indigenous people who do not speak an indigenous language and they would like their children to learn it as a second language, it's often an issue because the first language transmitted was not an indigenous language, but often English or French. It's certainly a challenge, but we can see over time that those who are not using their language at home are usually more of an aging population, so the average age of the population is higher, so it's a big issue. It also depends on the place of residence. If you live in a place where there's a high concentration of speakers of a language, this will have an influence on the likelihood that the language will be transmitted.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: A critical mass.

Mr. Jean-Pierre Corbeil: A critical mass, that's right.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: You mentioned that Dene, for example, has an increase of 15% over 20 years. I think you said an increase of 34% over the same period.... What can we credit that success to, and what lessons can we learn from it for others?

Ms. Vivian O'Donnell (Analyst, Social and Aboriginal Statistics Division, Statistics Canada): We need to understand that growth within the context of the population growth as a whole. The Inuit population is growing quickly. A lot of that growth is because they have high fertility rates. We see the aboriginal population, as a whole, growing substantially over time. However, not all that growth is necessarily because of high fertility. It's because of people who are newly identifying as indigenous on the census.

Therefore, when you're looking specifically at Inuktitut, I think you could credit the growth of the number of speakers to high fertility. Most Inuit live in Inuit Nunangat, which would be Inuit homeland, where the language is more common and would be easier to maintain. Dene, I believe, would be similar in the sense that the speakers are concentrated in communities where there is a high number of speakers.

● (1130)

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Fair enough. If we were to find ways of bringing these languages into the House, as we are discussing in the study, could you help us understand how that helps languages themselves, for the record?

Mr. Jean-Pierre Corbeil: As I mentioned, there are many factors that can have an influence on the vitality of those languages. All specialists mentioned that speaking a language at home is certainly a critical domain, but as we know, it's not only speaking a language at home, but also it involves social networks. It involves visibility, status, and prestige.

When a language is spoken in the public domains, in the administration for instance—when you look at Inuktitut you know that those using Inuktitut at work do so mostly in government agencies for the administration, for the delivery of services. This certainly has an impact on the future and vitality of these languages; so not only being spoken at home but being visible in the public domain will certainly have an impact on the status and use of these languages.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Reid.

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Kingston, CPC): Thank you to all our witnesses. Those were very interesting presentations.

I wanted to ask some additional questions about the strength of the languages and the measures you're using for determining those strengths.

In the information we were provided, you list off several columns: ability to conduct a conversation, mother tongue, language spoken most often at home, and other language spoken regularly at home, which implies the secondary use of the relevant indigenous language not as the primary source of conversation or means of conversation, but as another way of conducting some speech that takes place in a private environment. I assume that "mother tongue" refers to a mother tongue that is still understood, right?

Mr. Jean-Pierre Corbeil: Yes.

Mr. William Fizet: Yes.

Mr. Scott Reid: I wrote a book on language policy back in the 1990s. That's it there. One of the measures that I used to try to determine the vitality of the language within a language community was to look at the ratio between mother tongue and language spoken most often in the home. The lower the proportion of people who are using it in the home, the weaker the situation for the language. I looked at the numbers you've provided on some of the larger language groups. I see that number contradicting another number you've provided. In the case of the Innu language, I see there are 10,710 individuals who have this as their mother tongue, and about 90%, so 9,500 individuals, use it primarily in the home. I looked at Ojibway and I see that of the 20,470 who have it as their mother tongue, only 9,005, or 43%, use it in the home. That implies a very significant rate of decline in a single generation. Yet when we look at the ability to conduct a conversation, we see something very different. We see that for Innu, only 9% of total speakers are those for whom it's not a mother tongue, and that figure for Ojibway is 20%.

I'm just wondering what the dynamic is there. That's something I've never experienced in looking at official language communities, which is the source of what I was looking at in my book.

Mr. Jean-Pierre Corbeil: They're very relevant comments.

We use a term called "continuity index" when we look at the number of people speaking a language most often at home versus those having this language as their mother tongue. You're absolutely right, there's an enormous difference between language groups. You mentioned, for instance, Ojibway. In fact, what it means is that 44% of people having Ojibway as their mother tongue speak it most often at home. This index is 44. When you look at Cree, it's 62%. This means, obviously, there is a big difference, because, as we usually say, the language that is spoken most often at home is usually the one that will be transmitted. Many children will speak this language on a regular basis, although it's not the predominant language spoken at home. This can have an influence because in many cases these children learn the indigenous language at school, but it's not necessarily the main language at home. The dynamic can become very complex. It also, obviously, depends on whether we're within a mixed-marriage household or both partners or husband and wife, for instance, will speak—

● (1135)

Mr. Scott Reid: When you say mother tongue, you allow for people who have two mother tongues?

Mr. Jean-Pierre Corbeil: Absolutely.

Mr. Scott Reid: Those are people who would be included in that?

Mr. Jean-Pierre Corbeil: Absolutely, so the minute an indigenous language is reported, whether it's "Cree and English", because we know there are many multiple responses for indigenous people.... We see there is enormous variation, but what is very interesting is that when we look at the acquisition index, that is the number of people speaking a language who are able to conduct a conversation versus those who have it as their mother tongue, it can be surprisingly important versus the mother tongue. You just talked about Ojibway. We know the continuity index is 44, but when you look at the acquisition index, it's 1.4, so it really means that we have 40% more people learning this language as a second language versus those having it as their mother tongue.

The dynamic is very complex, there are many factors that can have an influence, but, clearly, it differs a great deal between languages.

Mr. Scott Reid: Thank you.

One of the things I did when I was looking at official languages communities in minority situations was to look at the age structure of speakers, but I broke it down a bit differently. I didn't simply work out the average age of the speaker. I apologize for the fact that I have to show a picture from this book. At the bottom here, you can see this is a robust francophone community in Quebec. What you're seeing is an age tree where children of all ages, adults as well, tend to retain a high percentage of using that language.

When you look at francophone communities in western Canada, you see something very different. It's primarily people in the highest age range, over age 65, and those who are under age five who are unilingual speakers. What that allowed me to do was determine whether it's only small children who only talk with their mom, and very old people who only are in a home environment who have the use of the language.

Do you track that sort of thing for indigenous languages?

Mr. Jean-Pierre Corbeil: Absolutely, you're right. We did it for official languages in minority communities. We even compared the age pyramid or age structure between 1971 and 2016, and it changed completely, because, over time, the population is aging, and the language is not being transmitted fully to their children, mostly because of the fact that there are mixed couples, exogamy. It's exactly what's happening with the indigenous community. In some cases, young children will learn the language as mother tongue, but in many other communities, they won't learn it. If you look at the age structure of the mother tongue, because the language is not being transmitted through generations, and if you track this over time, you will see the pyramid change dramatically and sometimes completely reverse.

Mr. Scott Reid: I know I'm out of time, but I just want to say, if you have that information available in a form that doesn't require a vast amount of additional work but could be simply transmitted, would you be able to pass to our clerk as much as you are able for as many languages as possible?

Mr. Jean-Pierre Corbeil: Absolutely. It just depends on whether you want that for the overall indigenous languages all together or for specific languages. We could certainly provide that information.

Mr. Scott Reid: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Mr. Saganash.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Romeo Saganash (Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to thank the witnesses for their presentations.

I have some questions for Mr. Fizet and Mr. Corbeil.

Mr. Corbeil, when the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples was being negotiated in Geneva, one of my colleagues from Alberta and I sometimes spoke Cree so the members of the Canadian delegation could not understand us. It was very effective.

You mentioned Oji-Cree, Swampy Cree, Northern Quebec Cree, and Plains Cree. Who determines those categories?

● (1140)

Mr. Jean-Pierre Corbeil: At one time, only Cree was included in the census. The census enumerated fewer languages than it does now. Further to consultations, we decided that, as long as there are variations of a language, we will prompt census respondents to specify which language. By asking respondents to specify the language, we became aware of the growth of these various dialects.

Mr. Romeo Saganash: Okay.

I have a question and I think it is an important one. Do your statistics show a link between the survival of a language and entering into a treaty such as the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement?

Mr. Jean-Pierre Corbeil: The statistics do not indicate such a link, but we can certainly form hypotheses. Moreover, we have done that with respect of official language minorities, for example, for which there is official recognition and a structure in place.

We conduct surveys about perceptions. The importance of speaking a language is often associated with that language being recognized in treaties and laws. Yet we cannot directly measure that relationship using Statistics Canada data sources.

Mr. Romeo Saganash: It might be helpful to do that at some point, since the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement recognizes that the Cree school board has the right to teach Cree in the first years of school. So I think that would be an important statistic.

Mr. Fizet, in your presentation you said that the use of indigenous languages in the public sphere, in the House of Commons, for instance, would have great symbolic value. In your opinion, should indigenous languages be recognized as official languages of Canada?

Mr. William Fizet: Allowing young indigenous persons to hear their language spoken in the Parliament of Canada, a country they are part of, is the direction we are going in. As to official languages, we cannot answer that question right now. As you know, a bill is being developed, in cooperation with indigenous groups. I think that idea will have to be developed with the indigenous peoples and not just with someone who represents them.

To answer your question, the whole population should have the opportunity to have their say on that. When I say the whole population, I mean indigenous and non-indigenous communities.

Mr. Romeo Saganash: As a senior official, do you personally think that would be important?

Mr. William Fizet: Let's say we are about to tackle that.

Mr. Hubert Lussier: If I may, Mr. Fizet and I have many opinions, but we do not think we are required to share them. We are here to provide facts or factual elements to help you in your work. I think it would be inappropriate for us as public servants to express our opinions.

Mr. Romeo Saganash: What is your role then in developing this act on indigenous languages?

Mr. Hubert Lussier: My team includes a small team led by a federal government official, as part of the current dialogue with the three national organizations representing the three main indigenous groups in Canada, that is, the first nations, Inuit, and Métis. The purpose of the dialogue is to develop this act which, as the prime minister announced, will be developed jointly. That is what Mr. Fizet is referring to.

So our role is to develop the principles that will inform the future act, further to dialogue with the three groups represented.

● (1145)

Mr. Romeo Saganash: What are the broad principles you are currently suggesting to the government?

Mr. Hubert Lussier: It would be a bit premature to disclose the status of discussions because we have to conduct them entirely jointly with the three partners in question. What I can say is that the Department of Canadian Heritage has thus far begun technical consultations with international experts on indigenous languages, education, learning, and transmission. This summer, once we have agreed on the topics to be included in the consultations, we will consult the communities, in partnership with the three indigenous groups, and we will go into much greater depth. These consultations will include not only experts, but the communities as well.

Mr. Romeo Saganash: To use Mr. Fizet's term, it will be more than symbolic, or at least I hope so.

Mr. Hubert Lussier: That is certainly our intention.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now we have Ms. Tassi.

Ms. Filomena Tassi (Hamilton West—Ancaster—Dundas, Lib.): Thank you, each of you, for being here this morning, and for your testimony and presentations.

The first couple of questions I have relate to the vitality of the language. We have heard testimony with respect to the number of dialects and how they lead to, potentially, a result where the vitality is lessened. I would just like your comments and advice with respect to how we would deal with that as a government, and I hope they're going to be based on fact and not opinion. Is there action we can take to ensure that languages are preserved?

Dialects are important, people have the right, but at the same time if they become so fragmented, the language is lost. Is there a way to bring people together who are speaking different dialects? Do you think that's useful? Will it ultimately lead to the vitality of language?

Mr. Hubert Lussier: To answer your question, I'll refer to some things that William said.

We are, in our financial support, very responsive to what comes from communities. Therefore, we haven't dictated to communities what they should apply for, for funding. On the other hand, we know that certain things are very useful, like focusing on language nests. These are initiatives where fluent speakers provide an environment where very young children can grow and learn—in a kind of child care milieu—the language that will become, if not their mother tongue, at least a very early second language.

Another thing we see more and more, and we think are useful initiatives, are indigenous communities developing language plans that provide for a whole community working together. Having initiatives that are not isolated, but made aware of connecting with each other at the band council, at the school level, at the child care level, and at the cultural level. These language plans provide the type of environment that Jean-Pierre and William were talking about, that is propitious to the preservation and transmittal of their language.

Ms. Filomena Tassi: Mr. Corbeil, do you have anything to add?

Mr. Jean-Pierre Corbeil: We talk about school. We know that when we think about the future of communities, the fact that children know or are able to speak the language is a very strong indicator of the future and vitality of long-term viability of these languages.

We have seen many times—even among French official-language minority communities—that when there is a school, there is an environment of community centres and associations that are propitious to the transmission and use of these languages. Certainly it helps for a stronger creation of communities. I can't say more than that.

● (1150)

Ms. Filomena Tassi: Following the question that Mr. Graham asked with respect to the impact of having translation in the House of Commons, is there anything more specific that you can offer? This goes beyond recognizing a right. I'm looking at the impact it can have. Do you have data that shows the impact that it can and would have on communities if it was spoken in the House?

We don't delude ourselves in believing everybody is watching us. We know that our audiences are slim. Is there evidence that shows that making that step will result in greater preservation and greater vitality of the languages?

Mr. Hubert Lussier: On this, Jean-Pierre and colleagues have something more intelligent than what I have to say. I'll try.

Every model we've used and worked with about the vitality of language—and the best ones we have are the ones that Jean-Pierre was talking about that have to do with minority language as an official language—involve an element of public use and public recognition in democratic institutions. It's difficult to say whether it counts for 5% or 25% of the vitality, but it is recognized.

Ms. Filomena Tassi: It counts for something, yes.

The Chair: Ms. O'Donnell, do you want to comment on that?

Ms. Vivian O'Donnell: We don't have a survey question that asks if there was simultaneous translation, so I can't say directly.

We do measure exposure to indigenous languages on the Aboriginal Peoples Survey, which reaches off-reserve first nations people, Métis, and Inuit. It asks: How often are you exposed to an indigenous language at home, and outside the home? In previous versions it was, “Are services available at school, in the community?”, and things like that.

I'm trying to think of research that's been done using that content. The one that comes to mind looks at children's exposure to indigenous language and positive outcomes in education. That's getting to—

Ms. Filomena Tassi: That's helpful. That's good.

Mr. William Fizet: One area that could perhaps inform would be the New Zealand situation with the Maori. I don't have that data, but I think that could be a good example of a really good, yet complicated question.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Nater.

Mr. John Nater (Perth—Wellington, CPC): Thank you again to our witnesses for the very informative discussion so far.

I want to start with a couple of more specific questions on most of the data that was provided by Statistics Canada. I see some very small numbers among them. The one that jumped out was Southern East Cree, which has 40 people with the ability to conduct a conversation.

I'm curious. Do you have data that goes a little more deeply into the geographic distribution? For example, 40 people seems like one extended family, potentially. Is that an interpretation, a very small familial group?

Mr. Jean-Pierre Corbeil: Yes. Of course, we could provide that kind of information, but we always have to be careful because when we look at the Cree language families overall, we know for the most part they are concentrated. We find 28% in Saskatchewan, 24% in Alberta, and 22% in Manitoba. They could be dispersed. It depends whether these 40 people are all located in the same small area. We would have to double-check and look at this because then it creates a problem trying to understand more detailed information.

Ms. Vivian O'Donnell: I want to add as well that there is a Cree NOS there. That means Cree "not otherwise specified". That's someone writing just Cree on the questionnaire.

As we had mentioned, on the electronic questionnaire they would have been prompted to be more specific, and that's why we get better detail like Swampy Cree or Moose Cree.

While it says Southern East Cree is 40, it may well be larger than that because we have 86,000 people sitting in that other category.

● (1155)

Mr. John Nater: That's very good.

Beyond that, certainly one of the challenges we're going to hear from the translation bureau in the weeks to come, and the union representing them as well, is the ability of qualified professionals. Again, knowing that you can't get into extensive details in a census, do you have a sense of the educational background of the users of specific languages, what level of education they may have, and where that potential pool of translators may be?

Mr. Jean-Pierre Corbeil: Absolutely. Again, the challenge is whether you want to focus specifically on very small groups; then it becomes a problem. For larger groups, yes, we have the information sometimes on the main level, the major field of study. We have where they work, types of industry, and occupation. Yes, we can certainly make this data available.

Mr. John Nater: Thank you.

Quickly, to Mr. Fizet and Mr. Lussier, in the conclusion of your opening comments you talked a little about standardization of systems and some general solidifying of some of the languages, looking forward to some of the technological advances.

We all use Google Translate from time to time. Is there a similar program in place that would do that, not for oral communication, but for written communication, some kind of service being provided from the IT side?

Mr. William Fizet: A number of groups in the media sector are very interested in this. Google is working with the First Peoples' Cultural Council in B.C. As you know, B.C. has the majority of indigenous languages. Apple is also doing work. In our program, we support applications being driven by indigenous people who have determined that to get their kids or the younger generation, that's what's going to be attractive.

So there are. The reason we wanted to put that in is the interpretation possibilities you're studying I think are going to be for a range of age groups. Like any other youthful group, indigenous youth are hooked, although there are certain cases...because of the remoteness difficulties.

If you have interpretation services, or however you want to see it, make sure there's that technological piece because you are probably going to get a buy-in.

To answer your question, yes. There's a great interest from a number.... Just from our program, we can speak of quite a few.

Mr. John Nater: That's good. So there are some partnerships going on as well, beyond internal to government, but externally.

Mr. William Fizet: Oh, yes. Some of these big groups are very interested because that technology can actually, in some cases, circumvent difficulties in trying to get some interpretation because, again, of the remoteness or the lack of language interlocutors.

Mr. John Nater: That would be useful, potentially down the road, English and French to the indigenous languages—

Mr. William Fizet: Yes, and some right now are going directly from indigenous to English or French, or even indigenous to indigenous.

Mr. John Nater: That's great. Thank you.

The Chair: I will give an example of what happens in my riding. My kids are six and nine, and they go to a school, Whitehorse Elementary, where maybe 10% are aboriginal, but they take Southern Tutchone lessons. Everyone in the school takes them every week. It's my daughter's favourite course. We've also just recently funded the Champagne and Aishihik First Nations in a mixed community, to have a day care that has total immersion in the Southern Tutchone language. Whether you're English or French, you'll only be speaking Southern Tutchone in that day care. That'll be an interesting experiment.

I have one last question. Do you know of any comparison to languages outside Canada? Are there any words similar to languages in Asia? I think the Navajo are very close to the Athabascan Dene language. Are you aware of any words in Canadian aboriginal languages that are found in languages somewhere else in the world?

Mr. Hubert Lussier: I think the only example that comes to mind is the commonality of Inuit speakers of Canada and Greenland, Alaska, and Russia. Other than that, I don't think there is.

A voice: Northern Quebec.

The Chair: Thank you very much. This has been very helpful and very interesting.

● (1200)

Mr. Blake Richards (Banff—Airdrie, CPC): Before we break, I just have a couple of really quick housekeeping items.

The Chair: Yes. Okay.

Mr. Blake Richards: The first one is that we got a brief from the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba. I wonder if we could communicate with them to thank them for their brief but also to ask them if they could give us some more information about how they handle the use of the French language in their proceedings. It wasn't really something that was addressed in that.

The Chair: Sure. Let's do that.

Mr. Blake Richards: The second thing was if we could see if our analyst could look for uses of Inuktitut in the Senate proceedings, and then whether there was any indication of the type of interpretation used.

The Chair: Sure. No problem.

Mr. Blake Richards: Thanks.

The Chair: Okay, thank you.

Thank you very much for coming.

We're just going to suspend for a bit to get on video conference with our next witnesses.

● _____ (Pause) _____

●

● (1205)

The Chair: Welcome back to the 97th meeting of the committee, as we continue our study on the use of indigenous languages in proceedings of the House of Commons.

We're joined by Cheryle Herman, Dene Language Revitalization Coach. She is appearing by video conference from Saskatoon. Thank you very much for making yourself available today. You can make an opening statement and then some of the committee members will have some questions.

Ms. Cheryle Herman (Dene Language Revitilization Coach, As an Individual): Thank you.

[*Witness speaks in Dene*]

[*English*]

My name is Cheryle Herman. I am from Clearwater River Dene Nation located near La Loche, Saskatchewan. I am a fluent speaker of the Denesuline language. I am here as an ambassador of indigenous languages, to share my own and other individuals' thoughts on the importance of using our indigenous languages in House of Commons proceedings.

To use indigenous languages in the House of Commons would be an acknowledgement of the original inhabitants of the land and it would mean that the government honours and respects this fact. It would also demonstrate that the government is working toward righting historical injustices and toward a more inclusive and collaborative relationship.

Indigenous languages encompass who we are as indigenous people. Communication in our languages is sacred. Without our languages and our cultures, we are no longer indigenous. Our language defines who we are and where we come from, and is therefore essential to our survival as a nation.

Language connects us to the spiritual ground. The intent of all communication is embedded with strength, clarity, and purpose when spoken in our mother tongue.

Language impacts the daily lives of members of all races, creeds, and regions of the world. Language helps express our feelings, desires, and queries to the world around us. Words, gestures, and tone are utilized in union to portray a broad spectrum of emotion.

The unique and diverse methods that human beings can use to communicate through written and spoken language are a large part of what allows us to harness our innate ability to form lasting bonds with one another. They also separate humankind from the rest of the animal kingdom.

Additionally, the ability to communicate in multiple languages is becoming more and more important in the increasingly integrated global business community. Communicating directly with new clients and companies in their native language is one of the first steps to forming a lasting, stable international business relationship.

The strength and value of verbal agreements in our languages leads to stronger, respectful, and honourable relationships. Being able to do this automatically puts any multilingual person miles ahead of his or her peers in the competition for jobs in high-prestige positions.

Language is such a key aspect to setting up children for success in their future professional endeavours. The government can be a part of their successful future by using indigenous languages in the House of Commons. This may help our indigenous children pursue a future as a leader for their people, or for all of Canada, with confidence, knowing they can speak their indigenous language in the House of Commons.

Although indigenous languages are currently not recognized as official languages in this country, it is important that we value those languages just as we do English and French. In doing so, we affirm the significance of the people who use those languages as forms of communication.

Our languages are still very much alive and are the only form of communication for some of our elders. Therefore, when proceedings are conducted in French and English without any translation for indigenous people, those people do not receive the information that may be of relevance to them and to their government.

We need to continue to advocate to speak our indigenous languages in our places of business in order for them to thrive.

● (1210)

I would like to share some additional points to ponder in consideration of our plight to maintain our indigenous languages. One, indigenous languages create more positive attitudes and less prejudice toward people who are different. Two, analytical skills improve when one speaks an indigenous language. Three, business skills plus indigenous language skills make employees more valuable in the marketplace. Four, dealing with another culture enables people to gain a more profound understanding of their own culture. Five, creativity is increased with the study of indigenous languages. Six, skills like problem-solving and dealing with abstract concepts are increased. Seven, speaking an indigenous language enhances one's opportunities in government, business, medicine, law, technology, military, industry, marketing, etc. Eight, a second language improves skills and grades. Nine, it provides a competitive edge in career choices when one is able to communicate in a second language. Ten, it enhances listening skills and memory. Eleven, one participates more effectively and responsibly in a multicultural world if one knows another language. Twelve, marketable skills in the global economy are improved if you master another language. Thirteen, it offers a sense of the past culturally and linguistically. Fourteen, it teaches and encourages respect for other peoples. It fosters an understanding of the interrelation of language and human nature. Fifteen, indigenous languages expand one's view of the world, liberalize one's experiences, and make one more flexible and tolerant. Sixteen, indigenous languages expand one's world view and limit the barriers between people. Barriers cause distrust and fear. Seventeen, indigenous language study leads to an appreciation of cultural diversity. Eighteen, as immigration increases, we need to prepare for changes in Canadian society. Nineteen, one is at a distinct advantage in the global market if one is as bilingual as possible. Twenty, indigenous languages open the door to art, music, dance, fashion, cuisine, film, philosophy, science, and so forth. Twenty-one, indigenous language study is simply part of a very basic liberal education. To educate is to lead out, to lead out of confinement, narrowness, and darkness.

In addition to the previously mentioned points, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples also acknowledges the importance of indigenous languages in places of business. Article 13 states:

> 1. Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons.
>
> States shall take effective measures to ensure that this right is protected and also to ensure that indigenous peoples can understand and be understood in political, legal and administrative proceedings, where necessary through the provision of interpretation or by other appropriate means.

Lastly, we need to bring light to the TRC calls to action and ensure that the calls to action are being implemented. I would like to review two calls to action that speak directly to indigenous languages.

Call to action 13 states, “We call upon the federal government to acknowledge that Aboriginal rights include Aboriginal language rights.”

Call to action 14 states, “We call upon the federal government to enact an Aboriginal Languages Act that incorporates the following principles: (i) Aboriginal languages are a fundamental and valued element of Canadian culture and society, and there is an urgency to preserve them.”

Recognition of indigenous languages and support for indigenous language programs stand alongside land rights, health, justice, education, housing, employment, and other services as part of the overall process of pursuing social justice and reconciliation.

In conclusion, I would like to share a quote from Dr. Graham McKay:

> One might go so far as to say that without recognition of the Indigenous people and their languages, many other programs will be less effective, because this lack of recognition will show that the underlying attitudes of the dominant society have not changed significantly.

Thank you, *mahsi cho* for your time and consideration on this very important matter.

● (1215)

The Chair: Thank you very much, *mahsi cho*. That was a great outline of the importance of indigenous languages for our committee.

We're just going to have very open questions. We'll start with Mr. Saganash.

Mr. Romeo Saganash: What an honour. I'm starting to like this committee. Thank you.

Cheryle, thank you for that presentation. That was pretty thorough and succinct at the same time.

I don't know if you listened to the earlier panel, but we had some officials from the heritage department, as well as StatsCan. One of the questions I asked them you referred to, in a way, in your presentation; that is, whether we should recognize indigenous peoples' languages as official languages in this country. I know you referred to article 13 of the UN declaration, of course, but also Truth and Reconciliation Commission call to action 14.

I've been attending Assembly of First Nations chiefs' meetings over the last 30 years, and I have never seen a standing ovation such as the one that the current Prime Minister got when he announced the aboriginal languages act that they would enact. Everyone in the room was thrilled about that. I was thrilled about that too. I even stood up to applaud the Prime Minister.

In my view, the way that call to action 14 is written does not necessarily go in that direction. It says that the act must contain the following principles, the first one being “Aboriginal languages are a fundamental and valued element of Canadian culture and society”. What is your opinion on whether we should recognize aboriginal languages as official languages in this country?

● (1220)

Ms. Cheryle Herman: I think it would be going further in terms of preserving indigenous languages and maintaining indigenous languages and cultures.

I recently visited Northwest Territories, and they are a long way ahead of us in the work that they're doing to maintain their languages there. They're mandating things for curriculum and for language used in the places of business. As I stated in my opening remarks, some of our elders don't speak English or French, so when these proceedings happen in these two languages only, our elders are missing out on whatever is going on in terms of government.

Mr. Romeo Saganash: I might have other questions later, but I'll let others have the opportunity.

Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Mr. Reid.

Mr. Scott Reid: Open sessions involve the chair's favourites getting to ask the questions, so it's going to be a rough ride for Mr. Graham.

I want to ask about translation. One of the members of Parliament who has come before this committee talking about the value that having translation would serve is a member of the Dene nation and a Dene speaker. One of the problems that occurred to my mind as she was giving her remarks to us was that we don't have ready availability here to translation services in the Dene language. This is a problem for all aboriginal languages, but it's less of a problem for some and more of a problem for others.

I believe it's a more resolvable problem, for example, for Inuktitut for a number of reasons, one of which is that there's a direct air link between Ottawa and Iqaluit. As well, many unilingual Inuktitut speakers come to Ottawa for medical services, and so on, with the result that there are translators already here. From our point of view, that's the easiest one. Then it gets progressively more difficult.

Dene, because it has a large number of speakers, is potentially one where we can overcome these problems. Let me structure the question this way: are there translators, people who would be capable of doing simultaneous translation in Saskatchewan now, and would they have the skills and the availability to provide these services if those were asked for?

Ms. Cheryle Herman: Absolutely. I know a couple of people who do that type of work specifically, simultaneous translations, and so I'm pretty sure they would be available, especially if they knew the cause, why we're trying to do this, and the importance of it.

Mr. Scott Reid: Okay.

The idea was suggested to us by one of our witnesses, the idea of people doing translation from a remote location. Does that ever arise, or are the people who do simultaneous translation normally set up onsite? I'm not sure how it works.

Here we typically have translators who are in a translation booth. I think you can kind of see behind me on one side the edge of our translation booth. Is that the manner in which simultaneous translation is done where you are, or is it done in some different manner?

● (1225)

Ms. Cheryle Herman: The way I've seen it done has always been the way you have it set up there, where you have the translators onsite, but I don't see why it couldn't be done remotely, just as we're doing here, through video conferencing.

Mr. Scott Reid: Okay.

The other issue that has arisen is the need for what's called a “relay language”. This is a term that comes out of the European Union where they have—I'm not sure of the number—some 18 languages that are official, or more.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: It's a higher number.

Mr. Scott Reid: Mr. Graham says it's higher. They have a large number of languages, and it becomes a practical difficulty. I think they ran into a problem with someone who spoke both Greek and Danish, and there was some key thing where apparently no one in Europe speaks this particular set of two languages. So what they do is have a member of the European Parliament speak his or her language, then a translator translates into some widely spoken language—English, French, or German perhaps—and then it gets translated into others.

I don't know what the situation is. Obviously, people are bilingual, and Dene and English would be widespread. Are there people who also speak French with a high degree of proficiency, as well?

Ms. Cheryle Herman: [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] or aboriginal languages in general.

Mr. Scott Reid: I'm sorry, we lost the first part of your response. Would you repeat your response?

Ms. Cheryle Herman: Okay. Are you speaking to aboriginal languages?

Mr. Scott Reid: I'm speaking to Dene in particular.

Ms. Cheryle Herman: No, we don't speak French. There might be a handful of people who are trilingual and would speak English, French, and Dene, but there are not many. We mostly speak Dene and English.

Mr. Scott Reid: Okay. That's very helpful. Thank you very much.

The Chair: Mr. Graham.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Thank you. I'll build a bit on where Scott is going.

How many translators do you think there are available today for simultaneous interpretation of Dene? Do you have a sense or a ballpark number?

Ms. Cheryle Herman: In our area, the area I come from, and the Far North included, I think we have three simultaneous translators.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: If interpretation of this type were to become more common, do you think there would be a large market of people who would get that education to be able to do that kind of work?

Ms. Cheryle Herman: I think so. Definitely.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Perfect. What about for translation as opposed to interpretation, so after the fact, in written records? Everything we do in the House is translated after the fact into English or French, as the case may be. Part of the challenge of interpretation in the House is ensuring that our written record reflects accurately the language spoken. If it's not English or French, it'll just say “...speaks in Dene”, for example. Are there a lot of written translators available, or is it the same three people?

Ms. Cheryle Herman: No, actually, more people can write than translate.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: That's good.

Your philosophical points in your opening statement were quite well taken. You made some very good points, but we are looking, of course, for practical and graduated solutions to implement things here. How would you see the first steps for us from your point of view?

Ms. Cheryle Herman: The first member spoke on this, saying that it will be difficult to do because of the array of languages in Canada—indigenous languages. I'm just coming from the viewpoint of Saskatchewan where we have Dene, Cree, Nakota, and Lakota. Looking at the bigger context, I can see that there would be difficulties in doing this.

I'm not exactly sure how we could overcome it unless we looked at, say, the bigger populations of languages first. Try it as a project with one of the bigger languages—say, Cree—because I know Cree has a bigger population than Dene. To give that a run and see how it works out, I think, would be the better way to go about it, rather than trying to find all these translators and setting ourselves up for failure. I think the better way to go would be to try to make it succeed for everyone.

● (1230)

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Thank you. I might come back to you.

The Chair: Thank you for your very wise counsel.

Are there different dialects in Dene? If we had an interpreter, would some Dene people not be able to understand them?

Ms. Cheryle Herman: There's the “t” dialect and the “k” dialect. In our area, only one other community speaks the k dialect, and that's Fond du Lac. If you got a translator who was speaking only in t dialect, the other communities in Saskatchewan would understand. So it wouldn't be an issue in terms of that.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Nater.

Mr. John Nater: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Of the translators you're aware of in Saskatchewan, what type of work are they currently doing within Saskatchewan? Are they being used for court proceedings or within hospitals? What types of services are they providing locally and across Saskatchewan? What type of work are they undertaking?

Ms. Cheryle Herman: They do court proceeding translations. They do assembly translations, such as for the FSIN and their local tribal councils. At their assemblies they do simultaneous translation as well. They also work with industry in terms of doing translation work.

Mr. John Nater: That keeps them fairly busy, then? What I'm getting at is that we don't want to take someone away from somewhere else to fulfill our purposes. I'm looking at whether they have the availability and the time to maybe be flown to Ottawa for couple of days at a time for translation services. Do they have that availability?

Ms. Cheryle Herman: Some of these people work on a contract basis, so I think they would make themselves available. Speaking for myself, I'm taking a day off work to be here to speak to you. If they value the importance of what we're trying to do, I think they would make the effort and the time.

Mr. John Nater: Great. Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you for taking the time off work.

Mr. Saganash, did you have something...? No.

Do the kids learn Dene in school?

Ms. Cheryle Herman: In the Dene communities I work in currently, three of the schools I work with have Dene language programming. One is actually an immersion school from nursery to grade 3. All the rest of the other schools teach it as core, which is 30 minutes a day.

The Chair: Are there other questions from committee members? No.

What happens in the courts and the hospitals with elders who speak only Dene and not English or French?

Ms. Cheryle Herman: They usually have people come with them. If they are a witness in court, then the court provides a translator for them.

The Chair: Would you like to make any closing remarks? I think we've exhausted all the questions.

Ms. Cheryle Herman: I just want to say that we have a group of probably 20 young people coming out of DTEP, the Dene teacher education program, in La Loche at the Clearwater River Dene Nation. Those people will be looking for jobs in two years.

You can see what I'm getting at here. I'm sure they would be open to doing this kind of work, because all of them are fluent speakers.

Mr. Robert Morrissey (Egmont, Lib.): Do you want to repeat that in Dene?

Ms. Cheryle Herman: In Dene? I could. Do you have a translator?

The Chair: No, but we know what you're going to say.

Voices: Oh, oh!

● (1235)

Ms. Cheryle Herman: [*Witness speaks in Dene*]

[*English*]

The Chair: *Mahsi cho*. Thanks for taking the day off work. This was very helpful.

Ms. Cheryle Herman: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Is there anything else for the committee?

The meeting is adjourned.