The Mi'kmaq Language in Nova Scotia: Decline and Preservation

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Many linguistic minorities exist around the world, even in this small island country, Japan. Especially in Canada, there are over 50 Aboriginal languages now. Aboriginal language is a marker of identity, because it shows the group's culture, beliefs, and identity. Therefore preserving these languages is a significant thing. According to research conducted for the 1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, however, only three languages, Cree, Ojibway and Inuktitut, may be spoken in daily life in the future (Reed 16). A number of Aboriginal languages are faced with the threat of disappearing. Actually 8 languages are already extinct. Without making great some effort, it is difficult to maintain Aboriginal languages. The Mi'kmaq language is mostly spoken in the eastern Canadian provinces of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland, and it is considered as a language which can survive with a small population base (Norris 13). Although there are few Mi'kmaq speakers around urban cities of Nova Scotia, the people still exist in rural areas. In the rural areas, Mi'kmaq people have developed

curricula to preserve their Aboriginal language. This paper will research reasons for decline of Mi'kmaq language in the history, briefly compare their history with that of the Inuit, and finally deal with the present situation and efforts to maintain Mi'kmaq on the Eskasoni reserve in Nova Scotia.

Mi'kmaq is the earliest known language in Nova Scotia, the home of the Mi'kmaq people, who have lived there for more than 1,000 years (Cosper 356). However, according to the 1996 Census of Canada, 93.4 percent of residents in Nova Scotia said that their mother tongue was English, while 0.4 percent of the residents' mother tongue was Mi'kmaq. It is apparent that Mi'kmaq is not major language in the province. The past censuses show the course of Mi'kmaq speakers' decline. The 1921 Census, which did the first survey including questions about language, enumerated 2,048 Mi'kmaq people who lived in Nova Scotia. The Census said that nearly all aboriginal people over the age of 10 spoke both Mi'kmaq and English, 5 percent of them spoke only English, and the other 3 percent spoke only Mi'kmaq. Three percent of the Mi'kmaq could speak French. In 1941, the number of speakers who had Mi'kmaq as their mother tongue was 1,988. 7,530 persons indicated that they had Mi'kmaq ancestors, and 3,725 of these said that Mi'kmaq was their mother tongue in 1991. The number of people who said that they know the language was 3,845, and 2,985 persons used Mi'kmaq at home. While the number of Mi'kmaq speakers increased slightly, the percentage of Mi'kmaq ethnic origin speaking the language has declined (Cosper 357).

Aboriginal Languages	Mother Tongue Populations	Average Age of Population			Status of Language
		Knowledge	Mother Tongue	Home Language	
Inuktitut	27,780	23.9	23.9	23.3	viable large
Mi'kmaq	7,310	29.5	29.9	29.2	viable small
Wakashan	1,070	47.7	53.0	53.2	endangered

Source: Norris, Mary Jane 13

Fig. 1 Language classification: viable and endangered

Mary Jane Norris, an analyst with the Demography Division of Statistics Canada, has classified native languages in Canada based on data from Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 1996. These languages were divided into 3 groups: viable with a large population, viable with a small population, and endangered.

Fig. 1 is an extract of Language classifications from Mary Jane Norris's article. While Mi'kmaq is considered as a language which can survive with a small population base, Inuktitut, which is the language of the Inuit, is reckoned as one of three languages which may survive with a large population base. It is clear that the number of Inuktitut's speakers is overwhelmingly more than all others. Inuktitut is the most prominent language in the Northwest Territories and Nunavut. Seventy-seven percent of residents there speak it. Moreover in Nunavut, virtually 100 percent of its inhabitants speak Inuktitut (Norris 10). Evidently, Inuktitut is still strong compared with Mi'kmaq. The size of mother tongue population is the most important factor

when classifying these languages. Why is there such a big difference in size between each? The causes of the difference are reflected in their long history, especially each's contact with Europeans.

The encounter with Europeans was a trigger for all changes in Mi'kmaq life: disruption of their lifestyles, the decline in population, and decay of Aboriginal languages. The Mi'kmaq in Nova Scotia encountered European fishermen in comparatively early times, about 500 years ago, and contacts and trade doubtless occurred during the 16th century throughout Mi'kmaq territory (Miller, Virginia P 248, 258). The fur trade was sufficiently lucrative, and a post for fur trading was established in 1605. However, alcohol or disease for which the Mi'kmaq did not have immunity or cure were brought by Europeans, and these began to change the Mi'kmaq lifestyle in negative ways. Although fur trade during the 17th century intensified, the trade came to an end in the 18th century. Other changes happened in the 18th century, as the French sent permanent settlers to Mi'kmaq areas. After 1713, the French tried to strengthen their hold on Acadia by building a fortress at Louisbourg on Cape Breton Island. Friendship between the French and the Mi'kmaq was cultivated there, but the French incited the Mi'kmaq to commit hostile acts against the English. Hostilities between these two escalated into a so-called Indian-English War between 1722 and 1726. During that time, the Mi'kmaq harassed and seized English ships or fishing boats. Therefore, the English initiated a campaign of genocide against the all Mi'kmaq. The campaign took place in

various forms, for example, they served poisoned food at feasts, traded contaminated cloth, and sent soldiers to destroy Mi'kmaq camps and murdered them without regard to sex or age. Uncalculated numbers of the Mi'kmaq were killed by these attempts. Moreover the Mi'kmaq suffered severe epidemic and European diseases around Louisbourg, and the arrival of a French fleet brought the most disastrous epidemic in 1746 (Miller, Virginia P 258-59).

In the middle of the 18th century, all of mainland Nova Scotia had eventually fallen into English hands. In 1749, Edward Cornwallis, an army officer and colonial administrator of England, and about 2,500 settlers landed on Nova Scotia to establish a permanent fortified settlement, and founded Halifax as the capital of Nova Scotia. In the beginning, there were friendly relations between the English and the Mi'kmaq. However, friendly relations came to an end soon when several incidents occurred in the summer and early fall of 1749, incited perhaps by the French. They harassed an English settlement, captured several ships, and murdered five English men. It seems that the colonial administrator had negative prejudice against the natives. Therefore, he established two companies of volunteers to root out the Mi'kmaq throughout the province, and a bounty was placed on every Mi'kmaq killed or taken prisoner. The English campaign of genocide which had begun in the early 18th century intensified from that time. Record of the number of Mi'kmaq were killed was not kept, but it is clear that the English employed volunteer companies from at least 1744 to at least 1761

(Miller, Virginia P 259-61).

After 1780, more settlers came to Nova Scotia, especially to the most desirable locations. However, the locations were traditional Mi'kmaq hunting and fishing spots. Consequently, their opportunities for hunting and fishing disappeared gradually, and besides, the fur trade had dropped off. As a result, they labored with starvation, and it caused numerous deaths. The decline of Mi'kmaq population continued until the middle of 19th century. In 1800, a committee was established by the Nova Scotia government to study the situation of the Mi'kmaq and make recommendations for dealing with it. The outcome of the committee was the establishment of a small sum, paid annually, for relief of the natives. The sum was not enough to provide food, clothing, and medical care which the Mi'kmaq needed. Their suffering continued at least until 1867 when the federal government assumed responsibility for the natives (Miller, Virginia P 261-62).

Confederation in 1867 brought some new changes to the natives. The federal government established reserves throughout Canada for the natives. Reserves were set up far away from European society. The Mi'kmaq were able to hunt or fish on the reserve, but their catch was not enough; moreover, the government monies did not provide well for them. The changes took place not only on reserves at that time. The government began to establish residential schools for native children (Miller, Virginia P 263). The policy of the federal government was assimilation. Many Mi'kmaq children were separated from their families, and sent to be educated and acculturated at the school

in Shubenacadie. At the school, children were punished for observing their traditional practices and speaking Mi'kmaq. They had to speak English and practice English ways. The education system destroyed the transmission of their native culture and languages, which usually passed on among families or communities. The Shubenacadie Indian Residential School, in central Nova Scotia, was operated by two Roman Catholic orders from 1932 to 1967, and a lot of Mi'kmaq children went there (Googoo). The residential school did not reduce Mi'kmaq population, but it caused disruption of transmission of the Mi'kmaq language and decreased the number of Mi'kmaq speakers.

In 1969, the status Mi'kmaq of Nova Scotia created the Union of Nova Scotia Indians. It began administering their own programs on the reserves. Since that time, their efforts have begun to improvement their situation (Miller, Virginia P 263-64). However, negative legacies which Europeans left to the Mi'kmaq are deep-rooted. Some factors caused large decline of population, for example, the spread of European diseases, slaughters which killed uncalculated numbers of the Mi'kmaq, and loss of sufficient hunting or fishing opportunities. These incidents happened because of close contact with Europeans and deterioration of relationship with the English. Besides, the residential school destroyed the system of passing on Mi'kmaq to the next generation from parents or grandparents, and reduced the number of its speakers. Over several hundreds years, the English have dominated Mi'kmaq lands, and Mi'kmaq language or people have been reduced to a minority.

On the other hand, the Inuit history of contact with Europeans is different from the Mi'kmaq's, and some diversity can be seen. The Inuit also encountered Europeans at an early time like the Mi'kmaq. In the course of the 15th and 16th centuries, explorers and increasing numbers of whalers and fishermen from several European countries came and encountered the Inuit. In addition permanent European outposts began on their lands in the 18th century. Most settlers were missionaries or traders (Burch and Fletcher 49). Europeans needed their skills of housing, clothing, and transportation to survive in the harsh and inhospitable lands. The Inuit played a role of assisting Europeans for about 200 years from the late 18th century (Miller, James Rodger 284-85). The Inuit's relations with Europeans were usually peaceful. Violence did not occur there, and a large decline of population was prevented. While the fur trade between the Mi'kmaq and Europeans dropped off after the late 18th century, the whaling industry was extremely lucrative in the 19th and very early 20th centuries in the Inuit territories. The role of the Inuit in the industry was multifaceted and important for Europeans or Americans (Miller, James Rodger 289). The lucrative industry made the Inuit's relations with whalers much closer. The Inuit continued to be a needed presence, while the Mi'kmaq lost food or goods to trade. However, there were negative results for the Inuit, too, for example, deaths from European diseases, violence, and abuse. Although these negative effects were brought by Europeans, the encounter with them was not merely harmful, but equal in benefits to them (Miller,

James Rodger 292).

Inuit-European relations were usually friendly, but were not too close. Most Inuit continued to live in small widely dispersed camps which were far away from European society. They visited settlements just during the winter, and a couple of months in the summer (Burch and Fletcher 50). The distance prevented too much influence from European society, and caused low intervention by the federal government. Because of the low attention, the government did not provide enough relief for them until the 1950s when provision of services began. There were hard economic times for the Inuit, but the Hudson's Bay Company practiced assistance of its Inuit partners, and saved many Inuit from starving to death (Burch and Fletcher 296).

Residential schools were also established in the Northwest Territories. The first federal school was opened in 1951, more than 100 years later than the one in Nova Scotia (King 1). Actually, students were taught English, and the federal policy emphasized teaching English because the government believed that the Inuit who knew English would find jobs as the Southern economy moved to the North. Inuktitut was often ignored, but it was used in religious instruction and social activities (King 10). After 1970, control of education was handed over to the new Northwest Territories government. Finally the last residential school was closed in 1986 (King 1). The residential schools influenced natives language in the Northwest Territories, too. However, the start up of the schools was much later, and the period during which the schools operated was shorter, compared

with the school in Nova Scotia. Also, the federal government's strong policy of assimilation was not implemented in the North.

The harsh and inhospitable lands of the Northwest Territories helped to make friendly the Inuit-European relations. The relations prevented the violence which caused a large decline of population among the Mi'kmaq. Living in isolated places far from European society prevented the influence of the society or the residential schools on the Inuit and destruction of their culture or language. These factors protected the Inuit's large population and the number of Inuktitut speakers.

The difference in size between mother tongue populations of Mi'kmaq and Inuktitut were the result of long but different histories, and greatly influenced language survival to this day. Increasing the population is the first idea to boost possibility of Mi'kmaq survival because the large population is the most important factor. However, the idea is too simplistic. It is impossible to multiply the population rapidly, much less to get back a lot of Mi'kmaq people who disappeared because of mistreatment. Population is a thing which is increased gradually over the long term. Therefore, it is time to lay the foundation for the growth of the population. What effort should be done for that? The other differences which can be seen in Fig. 1, Language classifications from Mary Jane Norris's article, give us a hint about the effort. The other differences are among three average ages of populations: knowledge, mother tongue, and home language. In all average ages of populations, Inuktitut has the youngest averages, and Wakashan, considered an endangered language, has

the oldest ones. As these average ages of populations become higher, these languages move closer to danger of disappearance. It is young people who use and pass on languages in the future. Therefore, having young average age among language speakers is one of the important factors in language preservation. That is, speaking the language from early childhood is significant.

In 1991, there were 425 persons of Mi'kmaq ancestry living in Halifax, the capital of Nova Scotia. Only 20 of these persons said that they knew Mi'kmaq language, and almost no one used it as their home language. In Dartmouth, next to Halifax, there were 230 Mi'kmaq people, and 75 of them said that they knew Mi'kmaq (Cosper 358). The survival of Mi'kmaq in central cities is in crisis obviously. However, the language has continued to be spoken and learned by the young on only the larger reserves in eastern Nova Scotia.

The Eskasoni reserve is the largest reserve in the province, and has a high percentage of people who understand and speak Mi'kmaq.

Fig. 2 is an extract from Language Statistics for the Eskasoni reserve from *the 2001 Aboriginal Peoples Survey Community Profiles* of Statistics Canada. Most adults on the reserve understand, speak, and use Mi'kmaq at home. Therefore, the environment that children learn and use the language seems adequate. The percentage of children who understand the language is high, but the percentage of children who can speak it well is relatively low. It might be natural that these two percentages are lower than adults' percentages because "children" may include infants

Characteristics	Number
Total Aboriginal Population	2,710
- 15 years of age and over	1,630
- under 15 years of age	1,080
% of adults who understand their Aboriginal language	
- very well or relatively well	96
% of adults who speak their Aboriginal language	
- very well or relatively well	93
- with effort or a few words	6
% of adults who use their Aboriginal language at home	
- all the time or most of the time	84
- some of the time	11
% of children who understand their Aboriginal language	
- very well or relatively well	87
- with effort / a few words / not well at all	9
% of children who can speak their Aboriginal language	
- very well or relatively well	61
- with effort / a few words / not well at all	35
% of children who receive help learning their Aboriginal language from:	
- grandparents	76
- parents	94
- aunts and uncles	84
- school teachers	47
- other persons	86
% of children aged 6-14 years attending school	98
% of children aged 6-14 years who attended Aboriginal specific early childhood development or preschool program	88

Source: Statistics Canada 2001

Fig. 2 Language Statistics for the Eskasoni reserve

who cannot speak yet. A notable percentage is the 47 percent of children who receive help learning their Aboriginal language from school teachers. At first sight, the percentage is much lower than others, and the language education system on the reserve seems not enough. Is the system really unsatisfactory?

The Eskasoni band signed The Mi'kmaq Education Agreement in 1997, and gained direct control over education on their reserve (McCarthy 2). Seventeen years before, in 1980, Eskasoni assumed control over education, and formed the school board, while a program was formally managed by the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs. In the beginning, there were 550 students in their Elementary and Middle school. At present, 800 students go to the schools. A lot of Mi'kmaq children enroll in the school board's kindergarten program at the age of 4, and start to receive education. They can take either the Mi'kmaq immersion program or the provincially approved English mainstream program. By the beginning of grade 3, all students, including students who received the English program before the grade 3, merge into the mainstream program, which continues to incorporate specialist instruction in Mi'kmaq language until they graduate from the school at the end of grade 9 (Eskasoni School Board).

The school board administers not only the elementary and middle school but also High School, the Unama'ki Training and Education Centre, and the Ksite'taqnk Day Care. Eskasoni High School was established in 1998, and there are about 200 students now. The high school places an emphasis on Mi'kmaq cultural

and linguistic education for their students. Since its establishment they have received a good deal of support from the people of Eskasoni, elders from the community and people who have helped to maintain the culture or language. Also the students take part in a Mi'kmaq Speech Festival. The Unama'ki Training and Education Center is an institution of education for adults. The Day Care has an educational program, and children are taught in Mi'kmaq. They learn the Mi'kmaq calendar, colors, numbers, shapes, alphabets, days of the week, animals and nursery songs during circle time for 20 minutes a day (Eskasoni School Board).

Although the school board controls education on their reserve by themselves, they receive support and guidance by the Mi'kmaw Kina'mathewey, the Aboriginal education authority in Nova Scotia (McCarthy 2). The organization was established for the purpose of supporting the delivery of educational programs and services under the Mi'kmaq Education Act (The Government of Canada). The organization provides support and advice to 9 Mi'kmaq communities which signed the Agreement to develop their education constitutions, and share resources and expertise across the province (McCarthy 4, 6). In the spring of 2002, Foundation for Mi'kmaq / Miigmao Language Curriculum was distributed to Mi'kmaq communities as a basis for school curriculum. The document was a collaboration of Mi'kmaq educators, the Department of Education personnel, and university researchers (The Department of Education 1). The curriculum has eight general curriculum outcomes which state what

students are expected to know, to be able to do for each level (The Department of Education 13). The purpose of the curriculum is providing vision, promoting growth and development of students' communicative skills to enable them to pursue the preservation of the Mi'kmaq language and cultural identity by speaking Mi'kmaq, and a foundation for all subsequent Mi'kmaq language curriculum development (The Department of Education v, 1).

Although 4 Mi'kmaq communities in Nova Scotia did not sign the Mi'kmaq Education Agreement, the other 9 communities, including Eskasoni, signed the agreement and gained control over education on their reserve with support by the Mi'kmaw Kina'mathewey in 1997. The transfer of the jurisdiction over education changed and developed Mi'kmaq language education. However, there are probably some imperfections in the education system because just about a decade passed since the transfer. It takes long time to see positive results in education. The Mi'kmaq community recognizes the need to reclaim and strengthen their language in homes, communities, and schools (The Department of Education 1). Ninety percent of adults on the Eskasoni reserve said that keeping, learning or re-learning their Aboriginal language was very important. Ninety-six percent of children on the reserve said that speaking and understanding their Aboriginal language was very important or somewhat important (Statistics Canada 2001). Therefore, Mi'kmaq language education will continue to be improved and developed.

Mi'kmaq, an Aboriginal language flourished a long time ago,

became a minority language, and faces the danger of extinction because of the past negative struggles. Uncountable numbers of Mi'kmaq speakers disappeared in their long history, but they are not extinct. The Mi'kmaq community recognizes the danger of their language's extinction and the importance of language preservation. What should be done to preserve the language is creating young Mi'kmaq speakers. They have direct control over their education with the government's support now. It seems that the programs provide good and long-term opportunities to learn Mi'kmaq for their children, but their efforts have just started. It is probably impossible to improve the Mi'kmaq language's possibility of survival dramatically. However, continuing efforts and further development will prevent extinction, and make it possible to boost Mi'kmaq's possibility of survival. The future of the Mi'kmaq language depends on the Mi'kmaq people themselves.

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