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Researchers working to support the revitalization of Indigenous languages

By Krista Baliko **Posted:** May 30, 2017 6:00 a.m.



Bill Cook, (l) graduate student in the Faculty of Education, and Dr. Andrea Sterzuk, associate professor in the Faculty of Education, work on the Canadian Association of Applied Linguistics (ACLA) website as part of a research project to support the revitalization of Indigenous languages. *Photo: U of R Photography*

Most Indigenous languages in Canada are not likely to survive without massive revitalization efforts. Only Inuktitut, Cree and Ojibway are considered strong enough to be able to survive into the next century.

Dr. Andrea Sterzuk, associate professor of language and literacy education at the University of Regina, and current president of the Canadian Association of Applied Linguistics (ACLA), says acknowledging the precarious situation of Indigenous languages in Canada, among other effects of settler colonialism, spurred ACLA into action.

“In response to the 2015 Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Calls to Action pertaining to language and culture, our organization voted to make truth and reconciliation part of its official mandate by committing to support the work of communities, elders, researchers, educators, and students in maintaining, revitalizing and strengthening Indigenous languages,” says Sterzuk.

Sterzuk says one way ACLA will meet this mandate is through a collaborative research project focused on gathering community and academic knowledge on Indigenous language revitalization, teaching, learning and research ethics and housing it all on one website.

“The site – intended for settler applied linguists and other language educators, such as classroom second language teachers – will allow people to see what’s happening in Indigenous communities around language revitalization, to find out about protocols and to show people how to go about doing this work in good ways,” says Sterzuk.

Sterzuk explains that the main goal of this project is to change the way applied linguists think about Indigenous languages.

“We are not the experts here,” says Sterzuk. “Acquiring Indigenous languages is different from acquiring French or English, and treating the teaching and learning of Indigenous languages by and for Indigenous communities in the same way we do for settler contexts doesn’t work.”

Along with Sterzuk, the research team includes past ACLA president and project lead, Mela Sarkar from McGill University and her graduate research assistant April Passi, as well as University of Regina graduate students William (Bill) Cook, a Woods/Rock Cree speaker, and Denise Runns, who speaks Saulteaux. Both are full-time teachers of Indigenous languages.

Cook says the project is important because it provides information that previously didn’t exist or was difficult to find.

“When I first walked into the classroom to begin teaching Cree I had no Cree language teaching materials. This site will help ensure this doesn’t happen to other Indigenous language teachers.”

Cook adds that it’s great to be part of promoting, preserving and maintaining Indigenous languages and to be able to assist in developing an easy-to-use website that can help others seeking Indigenous language and cultural information.

Sterzuk says the website will be up and running by the end of the summer.

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