

Decolonizing the Museum. An Interview with Elaine Gold, Director of the Canadian Language Museum



Photo of the travelling exhibit "Beyond Words: Dictionaries and Indigenous Languages" on display at the Markham Public Library in 2019.

1. How did the idea to create the Canadian Language Museum (CLM) emerge?

The idea for the Canadian Language Museum was sparked by a posting on Linguist List in 2007 with the subject line "An International Language Museum in Denmark". I was teaching Linguistics at the University of Toronto at the time and this message intrigued me. I had never heard of a language museum before, and my first thought was that if any country should have a language museum, Canada should! I certainly had no clear vision at the beginning of what a language museum would look like. I did some research into the existing language museums and discovered that there were very few. Most were dedicated to a single national language rather than what I had in mind: a museum to reflect all of the languages spoken in our country. I discussed the idea with other linguists and found that there was a lot of interest in this type of outreach project. The Canadian Language Museum was founded at the 2011 meeting of the Canadian Linguistic Association, when a group of us crafted a very ambitious mission statement, which provides guidance for the museum's activities to this day.

2. Why has it been important for the CLM to foreground Canadian linguistic multiplicity?

Canada's linguistic multiplicity is a wonderful heritage for all Canadians. The CLM plays an important role in educating the public about how this variety of languages contributes to the culture we can all share and the value of preserving this inheritance. Languages have been central to the development of this country and language issues are extremely important to Canadian society today. Because Canada is officially bilingual, most Canadians are familiar with some aspects of issues around minority language rights and

bilingualism, as least in regards to English and French. Over the past century immigration has increased from countries around the world, so that Canada's cities have become polyglot; government policies support multiculturalism and there is widespread pride and interest in all facets of the Canadian "mosaic". There is, however, less awareness of the vast variety of Indigenous languages in Canada, with over 60 different languages in 12 language families. The CLM has an important role in conveying the ways in which colonial practices have contributed to the endangerment of these languages, and to educate about the pressing need to support their maintenance and revitalization. Most Canadians understand the need to protect endangered plants and animals; the CLM works to convey the importance of maintaining linguistic diversity.

3. The CLM has featured exhibits of Indigenous languages of Canada from the start. What Indigenous languages have been featured? How has the CLM developed these exhibits? How has it collaborated with Indigenous scholars and communities in their creation?

The CLM has created one travelling exhibit each year and the first four exhibits were '*Canadian English, Eh*', '*Le français au Canada*', '*Speaking the Inuit Way*' and '*Cree: The People's Language*'. Those exhibits focus on Canada's two official languages and the two largest Indigenous languages. Of the three other exhibits, one is specifically about Indigenous languages: '*Beyond Words: Dictionaries and Indigenous Languages*'. This exhibit traces the rather complex relationship between dictionaries and Indigenous languages over the past 400 years, from tools of exploration and trade, to tools of colonialism and conversion, to anthropological recordings, and finally to tools of language maintenance and revitalization, created by the communities themselves. However, every exhibit contains some information about Indigenous languages. The exhibit '*A Tapestry of Voices: Celebrating Canada's Languages*' includes information about Indigenous language families, their status in different provinces and territories, and issues of language preservation and loss, including a discussion of the devastating effects of residential schools on Indigenous languages. The exhibit '*Read Between the Signs: 150 Years of Language in Toronto*' includes information about the invisibility of Indigenous languages in Toronto's streetscapes up until very recently. The exhibits about Canadian English and Canadian French include examples of borrowings from Indigenous languages, and the newest exhibit, '*Sign Languages of Canada: Past, Present and Future*', includes discussion of three Indigenous sign languages.

We always work with native language speakers and linguistic experts in creating our exhibits. For the Inuit exhibit, we were fortunate to work with a woman who had worked extensively with linguists previously and so not only had native proficiency, but also was able to clearly explain the Inuktitut language structures. For the Cree exhibit, we worked with a Cree speaker who was also trained as a linguist and had edited a Cree dictionary. He was extremely knowledgeable about Cree dialects and was able to help us explain key aspects of Cree language with examples that would work in all dialects. For the *Beyond Words* exhibit we consulted with three different communities across Canada who were taking different approaches to creating dictionaries for their respective languages: Cayuga, Mohawk and Nakoda Sioux. For all of these exhibits, we have had

wonderful support from Canadian linguists who have studied these languages and were willing to check exhibit text and share audio files with us.

4. What role has translation of Indigenous languages played in the CLM? What is the importance of the Indigenous languages exhibits for the CLM's vision, mission, and existence?

The CLM has been involved with relatively little translation involving Indigenous languages. For our exhibits about Cree and Inuktitut, the Indigenous consultants were able to provide sentences in their own language and then translate them into English. Regarding translation in general, since the residential school system has had a devastating effect on language maintenance for most of Canada's Indigenous languages, this would probably impact on the availability of skilled translators. The school system hollowed out a generation, so that language transmission often skips the residential school generation and goes from the elders to the younger generation. This generation is making great efforts to learn and maintain the language, but in many cases subtle understanding of complex language structures and vocabulary can be lost. For this and many other reasons, the inclusion of Indigenous languages in our exhibits and programming is central to the CLM's mission. The CLM feels a special responsibility to promoting knowledge about Indigenous languages in Canada and supporting their maintenance. English and French are strong majority languages with legal protection in Canada. While more recent immigrant languages also face issues of language maintenance and language loss, in most cases there are more speakers in the home countries that can support that language's continuity. However, the majority of Indigenous languages in Canada are only spoken here and even the largest are facing serious problems of language maintenance. We are at a 'now or never' point if we want to see these languages survive.

5. The description of the CLM reads that it "encourages dialogue on language issues that are central to the future of Canadian society, such as bilingualism, multilingualism, and language endangerment, preservation, and revitalization." How do you see this happening? In regard to Indigenous languages, how does the CLM's work relate to "language endangerment, preservation and revitalization"?

We address these issues through the exhibits themselves as well as through programming in the exhibit space. When I lead group tours through the exhibits, be they elementary school students or seniors, I can tell that the visitors are considering these issues in ways they never did before. For example, many visitors speak a minority immigrant language at home, are bilingual or multilingual themselves and have experience with the challenges of preserving their language into the next generation. They are then able to relate to the challenges that Indigenous groups have in preserving their languages. Similarly, when visitors read about the wide range of official language status across the provinces and territories, they can begin discussions about which

languages should have status and what does this status mean. We believe that our exhibits support Indigenous language preservation and revitalization in many ways. Within the non-Indigenous community, our exhibits raise awareness of the richness and variety of Indigenous languages in Canada, as well as increasing public knowledge of their current state of endangerment and the role of Canada's colonial practices in Indigenous language loss. In this way we contribute to the conversation about language preservation and create allies in the non-Indigenous community for government programs to support Indigenous language revitalization. The exhibits also play an important role in the Indigenous community by raising an understanding of the value of these languages and an awareness of the importance of maintaining these languages. Indigenous communities are faced with many challenges, and language maintenance is not always seen as a priority. We have had wonderful feedback that these exhibits contribute to knowledge about and pride in their own Indigenous language.

6. How does the CLM offer an alternative to hegemonic and colonial ideologies of language? How does it “decolonize” public views and understandings of languages and language in Canada today?

The CLM presents every language as equally worthy of study and preservation. The CLM was founded during the time that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was carrying out its research into the impact of Residential Schools on Canada's Indigenous peoples. The museum has therefore been particularly sensitive to the effects of colonization on Indigenous languages and its programming has been shaped by the TRC's Calls to Action concerning language and culture. The CLM was involved with two national colloquia at Glendon College focussing on Indigenous language rights and so has been further educated about anti-colonial approaches to educational practices. Through Indigenous participation on the CLM Board and consultation with programming and exhibit design, CLM has worked towards respectful presentation of Indigenous languages and reconciliation work.

7. In the last few decades language museums have emerged in various parts of the world. What has the CLM learned from those other museums? How does it contribute to them?

For the past five years, the CLM has been actively engaged in creating an International Network of Language Museums. I have taken part in meetings in Milan and Florence that brought together language museum directors from a large number of countries. Our museum is unique in focussing on all the languages of one country. Most language museums focus on one national or created language or writing system (Nynorsk, Lithuanian, Hungarian, Afrikaans, Brazilian Portuguese, Esperanto, Korean) or on languages or writing systems in general (*Mundolingua*, *The Word: National Centre for the Written Word*, *Musée Chapllion*, *Nationa Museum of Language*). We've been creating our own path both because of our unique mandate but also because we have been operating on a very small budget. The CLM has been inspired by other language

museum's creative exhibits, websites and programming. We were able to learn from other museum's organizational structures, from their successes and their failures. We have also learned a great deal from other small museums in Canada, even those not dealing with intangible heritage. Other museums have been particularly interested in our successes with travelling exhibits and with exhibits about Indigenous languages.

8. Museums have the potential of becoming archives of artifacts related to the past, or of relating their subjects to current practices and forms of lived experience. Can you talk about what the vision of the CLM is in this regard?

Although we have "Museum" in our name, we do not collect artifacts and our main focus is on the present. We see languages as living entities and portray them as such. Our exhibits include discussions of ongoing processes like language contact and language change. Of course we have to look to the past to understand the present situation of our languages, whether it is a city's linguistic landscape, dialect variations across the country or language endangerment.

9. What is the CLM's current audience? What activities is it developing? Where does it want to go?

We are proud to have a very wide audience. Our exhibit space is situated on the Glendon College campus of York University, in Toronto. Our immediate audience is made up of university students, staff, and faculty. School groups and seniors groups also arrange visits to the gallery space. Our special events attract a wider audience from Metropolitan Toronto. However, we reach most of our audience through our travelling exhibits, which have travelled from British Columbia to Newfoundland, to large cities and to small isolated communities. These travelling exhibits started as a necessity – for the first five years the CLM didn't have an exhibit space – has turned out to be an excellent means of reaching a wide and varied audience. In the early years our exhibits were primarily shown in universities, audiences, because of my contacts with linguists across the country, but the variety of venues has greatly expanded. The exhibits have been shown in museums, community centres, libraries, hospitals, city halls, airports, historic sites, high schools and elementary schools. Our prime venues now are public libraries where we feel we can reach a wide audience including many that might not normally go to museums. We are particularly happy with the reach of our exhibits into the Indigenous community: they have been shown at conferences of Indigenous language educators and in community centres and libraries in quite isolated communities.

We recently published a booklet about the Indigenous languages of Canada, with the support of York University's Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies. There is already a great deal of interest in this booklet which will also be posted on our website. We are in the process of completing a French version. This is another way that we can disseminate information about Canada's Indigenous languages. We are in the process of completing our newest exhibit *Sign Languages of Canada: Past, Present and Future*. We are very excited about spreading awareness that signed languages are complete, distinct

languages on their own, and that there are at least six different sign languages in Canada. We look forward to expanding our audience to include the Deaf communities, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, across the country.

We are planning to create an exhibit in the near future about Anishinaabemowin, the third largest Indigenous language in Canada. We will continue to expand the visitor experience to our gallery space, and will host programs that include Indigenous languages. We will also work together with other organizations that are involved in language maintenance in Canada, such as the FEL, the Foundation for Endangered Languages Canada and ELAT, the Endangered Language Alliance Toronto. We also plan to continue our involvement with the Network of International Language Museums and expand our international profile. We are proud of what the CLM has accomplished in its first 10 years and we are in the process of developing a new 5-year plan to clarify our road ahead.

10. To conclude, is there a story about the CLM's Indigenous language exhibits that you'd like to share with our readers?

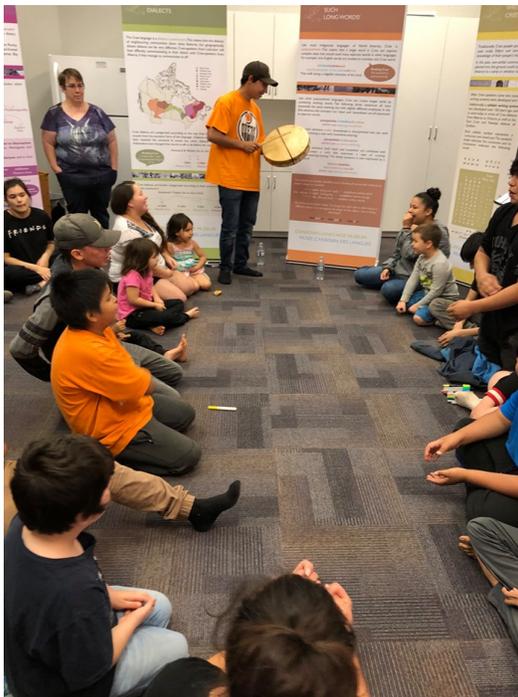


Photo of a group visit to the travelling exhibit "Cree: The People's Language", on display at the Ft. Vermillion Community Library in Alberta.

I'd like to share two stories here. The first is about the International Year of Indigenous Languages (IYIL) 2019. For that year we created the very challenging exhibit '*Beyond Words: Dictionaries and Indigenous Languages*' which has already travelled extensively across the country and has been well received. The CLM was invited to display an exhibit and present a paper at the UNESCO IYIL 2019: Perspectives conference in Ft. Wayne Indiana. There I met with people from around the world who are working on Indigenous language education and revitalization. I was very proud have the CLM included and to have our exhibit '*Cree: The People's Language*' displayed there.

I was just as proud to see photos of the same exhibit displayed in the library of the small northern Alberta community of Ft. Vermillion. The photos show groups of Cree school children brought in to see the exhibit, and a drummer entertaining them. This clearly illustrates the tie between culture and language, and the importance of passing that knowledge to the next generation. This is the CLM's goal: to be able to tangibly contribute to the continuity of Indigenous languages in Canada.