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Aimee Dawe

Abstract

Indigenous groups across North America have vast cultural and linguistic diversity. Specifically, in a linguistic sense, there are a broad array of Indigenous languages that encompass both the auditory-vocal (spoken) and the visual-gestural (signed) modalities. Herein, the focus is drawn to a comprehensive literature review of Indigenous signed languages that have been historically used in North America, including Plains Indian Sign Language, Inuit Sign Language and a modern attempt at creating an Indigenous-based sign language Oneida Sign Language. Beginning with an overview of what sign languages are, the euro-western sign languages that exist in Canada as well as their key components. Subsequently, an overview of the history of the Indigenous sign languages - from first mythological accounts to formal documentation, where they have been used, how they came to be and how they have been used for the Deaf Indigenous community, the hearing Indigenous community, and as Lingua Franca's to surmount linguistic barriers. Further, the various conservation attempts that have been made are discussed. As well as factors such as residential schooling, linguistic Darwinism and failures in academic documentation that have led to the decline of these languages in North America. Overall demonstrating the tragedy it has been to gradually lose these languages and culminating in a call to action to the individual as well as government organizations to ensure the preservation of these Indigenous sign languages for future generations.

Key Words: Indigenous sign languages, Plains Indian Sign Language, Inuit Sign Language, Oneida Sign Language

Introduction

The diversity of Indigenous groups in North America is reflected in the broad array of Indigenous languages that have been historically documented. For example, 50 different language families have been

classified, and linguists estimate that between 400 and 2,500 distinct Indigenous languages may have been in use across North America before the arrival of European settlers (Campbell, 1997). While the vast majority of these were oral languages, the current review focuses on Indigenous sign languages. Visual-gestural or signed languages have been formally documented in North America since the early 16th century (Meadows, 2015). However, references to Indigenous sign languages also exist in traditional mythological accounts. For example, the following excerpt for the Kiowa Indigenous people, as documented by Captain H. Scott in the late 19th Century, attests to the existence of sign language and its transition into verbal language by *Scinday*, the mythological trickster.

> "He [Scinday] rubbed some medicine in the palm of his hand, like rubbing tobacco, and spit in it, and put his fingers on it and when a man came up he rubbed his finger on his lips and poked his finger in his ears, bored his ears so he could hear, and then they told him to speak. And when he spoke to suit him he put them aside and did the same to another man, making them to speak and understand different languages. Before that they used only the sign language, but now they spoke different languages - Cheyenne, Pawnee, Sioux, Wichita, Kiowa, Comanche and Apache, all different." (Meadows, 2015)

Mythology and storytelling have been practiced throughout Indigenous history to convey Indigenous knowledge and impart life lessons, often in the form of fables. The story of Scinday and the birth of spoken language illustrates the deep integration of language within Indigenous cultures, demonstrating that Indigenous people considered universal sign languages preceding the inception of verbal language.

Indigenous sign languages share many functional aspects with modern sign languages (i.e., American Sign Language [ASL]). However, in addition to providing a means of communication to deaf and non0verbal individuals, Indigenous signed languages have also historically allowed for Inter/intra-tribal communication across languages and dialects.

Here, I will primarily focus on Indigenous sign languages that have historically been used in Canada, including Plains Indian Sign Language and Inuit Sign Language, as well as an emerging sign language being developed by Oneida community members located on Iroquois territory in Southwestern Ontario who are masters of the Oneida language. Additionally, other branches of the North American Indigenous sign language family also exist, such as Northeast Indian Sign Language (Oneida, Iroquois), Great Basin Indian Sign Language (Ute), Southwest Indian Sign Language (Navajo, Hopi, Pueblo, Apache), and West Coastal Indian Sign Language (Chumash) (McKay-Cody, 2019). However, I will not focus on them here as further investigation is warranted into these sign languages as very little currently exists and thus prohibits a comprehensive overview in this paper. It is also worth noting that in many cases, despite being classified as distinct languages, there is considerable overlap among the Indigenous signed languages described here. More research is needed to understand these group designations and their differences comprehensively.

History of Modern Sign Languages in North America

Before discussing Indigenous sign language, it is useful to briefly examine modern sign languages to provide a basis for comparison. As mentioned previously, sign languages are visual-gestural in nature, such that the primary modality of language perception is visual, while the primary mode of language production is through hand gestures commonly referred to as “signs” combined with non-manual gesturing (i.e., movements of the face and body). Key elements of sign languages are the hand shape, the location of the signs in space, the orientation of the sign, sign movement, and non-manual features accompanying the sign (Jepsen et al., 2015). The traditional use of modern sign languages is communication by and with deaf, non-verbal and hard-of-hearing individuals.

The most common sign language in North America is ASL, with approximately 500,000 users in the United States (Mitchell, 2006) and 35,000 in Canada (Canadian Language Museum, 2022). The origin of ASL has been traced back to the establishment of the American School for the Deaf in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1817 (Shaw & Delaporte, 2011). There, the previously established French Sign Language

brought over by European immigrants and a newer sign language flourishing from Martha's Vineyard in Massachusetts (Martha's Vineyard Sign Language) were homogenized into what is now known as ASL.

Other noteworthy sign languages used in North America include Manually Coded English - a direct translational form of verbal/spoken English using the exact same grammatical features but borrowing signs from ASL that emerged in the 1970s (Schick, 2003); Langue des Signes Québécoise (LSQ) - a sign language originating in French Sign Language with approximately 6,000 speakers in Canada, the majority of whom reside in the province of Québec (Canadian Language Museum, 2022); and Maritime Sign Language - a sign language that originated in British Sign Language, and which is used by fewer than 100 individual's (Yoel, 2009) in the Canadian provinces of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island, as well as the province of Newfoundland and Labrador (Warner et al., 1998).

Plains Indian Sign Language (PISL)

Plains Indian Sign Language, also known as "Hand-Talk", "Plains Sign Talk," and "First Nation Sign Language," is the most studied Indigenous sign language. It was first documented by Conquistador Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca during his travels between 1527 and 1535 between what are now known as the States of Florida and Arizona, as well as Northern Mexico (Meadows, 2015), and was prevalent among Plains Indigenous groups in the southern United States throughout the 18th century. PISL is thought to have originated along the Gulf Coast and to have subsequently spread throughout the central and northern plains with expanding trade routes and the introduction of the horse in North America beginning in the mid-1700s (Davis, 2010).

Geographical Expanse

The geographical borders of PISL are not strictly defined and likely expand beyond what is seen in the literature. Nevertheless, the area in which PISL is used is thought to have encompassed a large portion of the United States and reached up into southern Canada, ultimately covering some 4.3 million km^2. The region in which PISL has been documented extends from the North Saskatchewan River in

Canada to the Rio Grande in Mexico and from the foothills of the Rocky Mountains to the Mississippi-Missouri Valleys (Davis, 2010). In Canada, the use of PISL has been documented across the provinces of British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba (West, 1960).

Associated Indigenous Groups and Dialects

An expansive list of Indigenous groups is associated with the use of PISL. Notable groups include the Kiowa people (Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas) and the Siouan people (Ohio and Mississippi), who are designated as some of the earliest and most proficient users of PISL (Meadows, 2015; Davis, 2010; Clark, 1982). Considerable regional variability can be found in PISL; this variability most often manifests as differences in lexicon, and tribal/individual differences in body stance, sign execution technique, and delivery speed (Meadows, 2015). However, only two distinct PISL dialects have been documented: North Central 'Plains Standard' PISL, which is used used in the United States; and Far Northern 'Storytelling' PISL, which is used in the Canadian provinces (West, 1960). Additionally, there have been noticeable changes to the stylistic aspects of PISL over time, as evidenced by a reduction of motion, intuition and vividness in those born after 1870 compared to those before (Scott, 1928; Meadows, 2015).

The Development of Plains Indian Sign Language

The origins of PISL are unknown and largely undocumented. Based on his observation that the core geographical region where PISL is used is highly similar to bison hunting patterns, Harrington (1938) has suggested that as Indigenous people were hunting for food, frequent intermingling between the different Indigenous groups prompted the development of a common language (Meadows, 2015). That his novel language was allowed to flourish across such a wide geographical area was likely supported by a few key features of the Indigenous groups living on the land. First, it is noted that no single group was fully responsible for the development of PISL. Although the Kiowa and the Siouan people are commonly cited as the most skilled users of the language (Davis, 2010), each Indigenous group that interacted with

this language in some way had a role in how it was disseminated and grew in complexity. Second, no economically dominant group exerted a higher influence within the region (Meadows, 2015). Accordingly, there was not a dominant language in use across this region such that PISL was shaped by the words of every oral language with which it came into contact. Those who were frequent users of PISL introduced words during times of intertribal contact, which were then scrutinized by the group and subject to acceptance or rejection in future use (Meadows, 2015). Finally, signed languages were given the same level of respect as the oral languages spoken by these Indigenous groups (Meadows, 2015); thus, PISL was nurtured, taught and learned through generations and communities.

Use of Plains Indian Sign Language

PISL is considered a *Lingua Franca* of the Plains Indigenous groups - an adopted common language that is used between speakers that use distinct native languages. While other Lingua Franca existed in the Plains regions (e.g., Mobilian in the Southeast and Chinook in the Northwest), PISL was the most widespread and the only non-verbal language (Davis, 2010). In addition to facilitating communication across linguistic boundaries, PISL was also used for discourse and storytelling when speaking was not permitted (i.e., in times of mourning), In ritual practices (Meadows, 2015) and for trade during hunting and times of battle, wherein silent communication was crucial (Cody, 1970). Finally, PISL provided a means of communicating with deaf and non-verbal community members and continues to be used in this manner in modern-day.

Language Influences

The influence of individual oral languages on PISL are difficult to measure given the large number of languages and dialects with which PISL interacted across the Plains region. It is known that some lexical borrowing occurred between ASL and PISL through contact between the two languages. One example of this contact includes the creation of Indian Sign descriptions booklets that were distributed to Deaf educators in the 18th century. As well, throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, deaf

indigenous children were sent to specialized residential schools where the primary mode of instruction was ASL (Davis, 2010). However, the core lexicon of PISL has remained defiantly stable across the last 200 years. The extent of the lexical similarity of PISL between accounts from 1801, 1823, 1926 and modern-day ranged from 80 to 92%, while the lexical similarity between PISL and ASL averages ~50% across difference documentation cases (Davis, 2010). Thus, PISL and ASL are unquestionably separate languages with some indication of language contact.

Modern Status and Conservation Efforts

Today, PISL is still recognized in varying degrees by individuals across different Indigenous groups, including the Algonquin, Sahaptian, Salishan, Siouan, Dakota, and Uto-Aztecan people (Davis, 2010). However, users of PISL have dramatically declined since the early 1800s. Western expansion led to violations of land treaties previously entered into by European immigrants and the Indigenous people and the subsequent displacement of Indigenous people from their land. In addition, the United States and Canadian government adopted an aggressive stance in favour of cultural and linguistic assimilation (Davis, 2010) that included the introduction of residential schools where following cultural practices were strictly forbidden. Accordingly, deaf Indigenous students were taught ASL and English as their primary and secondary languages, respectively. As a result, current estimates suggest that as few as 100 signers still know and use PISL with varying proficiency (Davis, 2013).

PISL conservation efforts have been, for the most part, focused on documenting a language that was believed to be on the brink of extinction, with considerably less effort directed toward the preservation and conservation of Indigenous culture. Fortunately, what efforts have been made have resulted in well-documented descriptions of PISL signs and how they would be used in communication. A great example includes “Indian Talk” By Cherokee author Iron Eyes Cody (1970), in which he provides a comprehensive pictorial dictionary of PISL signs. Alongside the images, descriptions of the proper hand shapes and motion are noted to compensate for the information a photo cannot convey.

Another notable conservation effort arose from an act of US congress - the Second Deficiency Act (1930) - Which devoted $5,000 (~ $87,500 in 2022) to the Smithsonian Museum to develop a film dictionary of PISL due to its endangered status (Davis, 2010). This allocation gave rise to the Sign Language Council, which produced the "Film Dictionary of the North American Sign Language." Shot over the span of three days with input from 12 Indigenous groups across seven linguistic families (Davis, 2010), the film presented storytelling and common discourse without rehearsal to capture the natural flow of PISL in everyday use. Interestingly there were no deaf signers included in the production of the "Film Dictionary," which captured the uniqueness of this signed language and its predominance in hearing individuals. H. Scott - a European fluent in PISL who was involved in the project - also recorded a more traditional film dictionary in which he signed an expansive array of PISL words and, were possible, noted the Indigenous origin of the sign and the literal translation.

Thankfully, efforts aimed at preserving the use of PISL continue today. As recently as July of 2022, the Poundmaker Cree Nation of Saskatchewan hosted a multi-day language camp wherein individuals were encouraged to speak their native language and sign using PISL at the same time. The camp curriculum is organized around a "See it, say it, do it, and act it" interactive model that one of the founders first developed as a means of communicating with his hard-of-hearing relative but later saw as an effective tool in revitalizing PISL alongside spoken language (Favel, Real Bird & Powers, 2022). The camp is open to all individuals of Indigenous descent as well as those who are not and is in high demand, prompting the creators to begin offering a secondary winter session.

Inuit Sign Language (IUR)

Inuit Sign Language, also known as Inuit Uukturausingit, is a sign language utilized by the Inuit first nations people of northern Canada. The use of IUR stems back to the early 18th century (Olsthoorn, 2010); however, the first known written account was in 1930 (Schuit, 2012).

Geographical Expanse and Associated Groups

IUR is associated with the Inuit people of the Canadian northern territories, especially across the two million km² that comprise the territory of Nunavut. However, it has been suggested that users of IUR could have existed as far west as Alaska and as far east as Greenland (Schuit, 2012). Across these communities, no distinct dialects have been distinguished, and only minimal variations in signing have been recorded that would not be enough to create any linguistic barriers.

Features of Development

IUR was initially thought to have arisen as a Lingua Franca that allowed bands with unique oral languages to communicate across linguistic boundaries (as described above as the origin of PISL; Macdougall, 2000). This idea was supported by the knowledge that Inuit people historically lived a nomadic lifestyle and were likely to come into contact with other Inuit groups whilst travelling.

However, IUR is currently thought to have been developed in response to the communicative needs of deaf community members - an outsized problem among the Inuit population. The prevalence of deafness in Nunavut is six times higher than in southern Canada, occurring at a rate of approximately 5.7 in every 1,000 individuals (0.6%; Macdougall, 2000). A more recent study by Fitzpatrick et al. (2020) found that the prevalence of hearing loss across Inuit populations in the Canadian north was three times higher than that of non-indigenous children. Additionally, Inuit communities also suffer higher rates of otitis media, an infection of the middle ear that can cause partial to full hearing loss, than non-Indigenous groups (incidence rate estimates between 7% and 31% across Canadian Inuit populations [Bluestone, 1998; Bowd, 2005] vs. Global estimates of ~ 1% [WHO/CIBA, 1998]). Interestingly, multiple studies have highlighted the lack of stigma and social exclusion associated with deafness in Inuit communities (Macdougall, 2000; 2001; Schuit, 2012). Those who use IUR have been shown to be more connected to their Inuit identity - a fact that likely further facilitated the acceptance and expansion of IUR with both hearing and deaf community members.

Interestingly, the extreme arctic climate that is common in Nunavut has had little influence on the development of IUR. While it may have been assumed that the signs composing IUR would be limited in hand shape due to the restriction imposed by mittens and other winter garments, this does not appear to be true (Schuit, 2012). Instead, Schuit (2012) noted that IUR is just as complex as any other sign language and that conversations were only limited in a pragmatic stance; conversations were simply kept short outdoors and became more comprehensive once inside.

Language Influences

Historically and before colonization, Inuktitut was the predominant verbal language spoken by the Inuit people of Canada. Unsurprisingly then, the influence of Inuktitut on IUR is pronounced. This can be seen prominently in the fact that IUR does not contain a manual alphabet. This is because, prior to the introduction of Qaniujaaqpait syllabics by Christian missionaries in the 1860s, there was no Inuktitut alphabet on which to model the IUR equivalent (Schuit, 2012). The influence of Inuktitut can also be seen in loan translations wherein the meaning of a word is converted into a sign. For example, Iqaluit - the capital of Nunavut - means “(place of) many fishes” in Inuktitut and the IUR sign is the same as that used to denote fish. Finally, the influence of Inuktitut on IUR can be seen in the simultaneous mouth movements that often accompany signs and convey the same word without any vocalization/sound. Manual gesturing styles from Inuit culture were also incorporated into IUR; for instance, enumeration or counting begins with the little finger to denote “one” instead of the index finger, which is more common in Western society (Schuit, 2012).

Other influences on IUR come from other signed languages such as ASL and Manually Coded English. However, the majority of borrowed signs from ASL are recognized as such by Inuit signers. ASL is integrated into IUR, especially to accommodate words that did not previously exist in IUR. In addition, the ASL manual alphabet has been integrated into modern IUR and is often used in referring to different people or places (i.e. “B” for Baker Lake) and occasionally for finger-spelling but to a lesser degree due to the high rate of illiteracy in Inuit signers (Schuit, 2012).

Modern Status and Conservation Efforts

Currently, IUR is used by those in contact with deaf individuals and by deaf individuals themselves. The number of active users of IUR is currently unknown. A census obtained more than 20 years ago by surveying twenty of the twenty-five communities in the territory of Nunavut estimated that there were fewer than 50 individuals with knowledge of IUR (Macdougall, 2000), and it has been estimated that there may be two hearing signers for every one deaf signer (Shuit, 2012). However, many of those fluent in IUR were elders in the community when the survey was concluded, and it is possible some of these users have since passed.

Presently, a two-thirds majority of deaf Inuit use ASL rather than IUR. This is due, at least in part, to the fact that the majority of deaf Inuit, now aged 40 to 60, were brought to southern Canada to attend specialized schools for the Deaf (akin to residential schools) where ASL and Manually Coded English were the main languages taught. While deaf Inuit children are currently taught in their home communities, IUR is not standard practice and learning is facilitated with the help of an ASL interpreter (Schuit, 2012). Overall, IUR is not being taught to new generations and is dwindling quickly as native signers age and pass. All of this has contributed to its status as an endangered language.

Multiple organizations have expressed an interest in preserving IUR, but their efforts have fallen short of those described above in support of other languages like PISL. The Canadian Deafness Research and Training Institute (CDRTI) developed the 'Preservation and Revitalization of Inuit Sign Language: Nine Life Stories on Video" project headed by Dr. James Macdougall and Dr. Paige Macdougall in partnership with Nunavut Deaf Society (NDS). This project produced nine publicly available video recordings of deaf users of IUR recounting stories from their lives to provide insight into Inuit cultural practices concerning deaf individuals, friends, and family members. Joke Schuit (2014) provided a comprehensive typological analysis of IUR, wherein she describes a number of fundamental terms (i.e. kinship, colours, time, and numbers) in both Inuktitut and IUR, explaining how the terms are used and noting variations found in semantics due to different cultural factors (e.g., familial hierarchy). The paper also includes a limited set

of images of native Inuit signers demonstrating the signs being described. A collection of videos from which the images were pulled and documents illustrating IUR and its use have been collected and stored within the Endangered Languages Archive. However, to preserve this language for future generations, it is crucial to integrate it into the learning curriculum for deaf Inuit children instead of ASL.

Oneida Sign Language

Oneida Sign Language (OSL) is a relatively new sign language, unlike PISL and IUR. Originally beginning as the Oneida Sign Language Project in 2016, the goal of the OSL initiative was to create a new sign language that would allow deaf Indigenous individuals to participate and immerse themselves in their own culture. This ambitious idea was inspired by a deaf member of the Oneida community, who noted that sign language interpretation ended when conversations switched to Oneida from English as the interpreter was not knowledgeable of the Oneida language.

Developed by Marsha Ireland, Max Ireland, and Councillor Olive Elm in connection with the Oneida Language and Cultural Centre, the proposal was to create a new visual-gestural language based on the rules of PISL as well as the spoken Oneida language. As of 2018, there were over 250 signs which allow an individual to count to 100 and encompass 13 of the 15 letters in the Oneida alphabet (CBC, 2018). Thus far, there are approximately 24 OSL users, including multiple members of the Ireland family, due to a high prevalence of genetic deafness.

The initial project sought to train five typically-hearing individuals in OSL to serve as interpreters in the community to address the language antecedent directly. It has not been documented whether this goal has been achieved. The Oneida Language and Cultural Centre has also developed 13 short videos demonstrating some common signs for learners as well as their traditional thanksgiving address. Two longer videos demonstrating the traditional Oneida "Story of Creation" and the "Story of the Standing Stone" have also been created. These videos are available on the Oneida Language and Cultural Centre's website (https://oneidalanguage.ca/).

Contributing Factors to Language Decline

The main antecedent to the decline of the North American Indigenous sign languages as a whole was the policy of native assimilation imposed on all Indigenous people across the United States and Canada beginning in the 19th century. With the opening of the first residential school in 1831, the government of Canada undertook funding these schools with the primary intent to separate indigenous children from their families and strip them of their identities (National Center for Truth and Reconciliation, 2022). Indigenous cultural practices, including language, were not allowed to be practiced under the threat of severe punishment. Thus, the intergenerational imparting of Indigenous knowledge began to dwindle. Across 150 years of residential schooling and forced assimilations for European ideals, the vast majority of Indigenous languages have been lost forever, including Indigenous Sign Languages (Davis, 2010).

Another factor that contributed to the disappearance of Indigenous Sign Languages can be categorized as "Linguistic Darwinism." When Darwin published his theory of evolution, it was unfortunately characterized as a way to label certain languages and cultures as "primitive" or "unevolved" (Davis, 2010). This applied especially to Indigenous culture and sign languages more generally as a form of communication. Individuals who deemed themselves 'oralists' (e.g., Alexander Graham Bell) believed that speech was superior to sign and that signing in and of itself was a "subhuman characteristic" (Davis, 2010). As a result, European settlers did not readily learn Indigenous sign languages, except for those that remained in close contact with these Indigenous groups for extended periods (e.g., H. Scott). This way of thinking was also used to further the prominent Eugenics movement at the time, which further marginalized Deaf individuals.

The final factor that played a role in the decline of Indigenous sign languages is the way in which they have been historically approached by researchers and scholars. As is still commonplace in academia today, research was all too often undertaken in the absence of any collaborative effort with Indigenous groups. Therefore, a great deal of the nuance and complexity that underlie Indigenous languages, and their complex interplay with other aspects of Indigenous cultures, was lost. Concurrently, little effort has

been made to document these languages for the sake of preservation and to pass them on to future generations; instead, these initiatives too often serve merely as a testimony of the existence of Indigenous sign languages before their "inevitable" extinction.

In combination, these factors have perpetuated a severe decline in sign languages alongside other aspects of Indigenous culture and language. This is especially disconcerting as these languages were meant to be universal for all to use and share (Nordal, 2019). It is unlikely that these languages will recover to their former reputation, but there is no doubt that preservation efforts are essential to keep them alive.

Government of Canada Protection Policies

The Indian Act was enacted in 1876 and was used by the Canadian government as an assimilation tool to enforce colonialistic laws that directly targeted Indigenous people in Canada in an effort to "civilize" the native population (Bartlett, 1977). It forbade the practice of religious ceremonies and any form of cultural expression such as traditional dance and sanctioned mandatory residential schooling for Indigenous children. Since its enactment, the Indian act has undergone multiple amendments. In 1951, some of the harsh religious, cultural and political restrictions were overturned (Parrott, 2020). In the 1960s, Indigenous people were granted the ability to vote, and in 1985, Bill C-31 reversed enfranchisement laws which reestablished native status to those who had previously lost it. Since then, many additional amendments have been made to the Indian Act; however, this in no way erases the damage that has been done to Indigenous culture.

Upholding the rights of Indigenous people in Canada is now at the forefront of the Truth and Reconciliation movement. Accordingly, the Accessible Canada Act of 2019 recognized Indigenous sign languages alongside ASL and LSQ as a primary form of communication for deaf individuals in Canada. This act aims to "benefit all persons, especially persons with disabilities, through the realization … of a Canada without barriers" (Accessible Canada Act, SC 2019, c 10.). The recognition of Indigenous sign languages in this fundamental act opens up a higher standard of effort toward preservation. It also

encourages education and the use of Indigenous sign language to reduce barriers faced by deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals in Canada (e.g., Training Interpreters).

Coinciding with the Accessible Canada Act, the Indigenous Languages Act aims to “support and promote the use of Indigenous languages, including Indigenous sign languages" (Indigenous Languages Act, SC 2019, c 23) and provides support for Indigenous people to “reclaim, revitalize, maintain and strengthen Indigenous Languages….” (Indigenous Languages Act, SC 2019, c 23). Critically, the Act acknowledges the need for planned initiatives and programs designed to maintain fluency, create educational and preservational tools, support entities specialized in Indigenous languages and undertake research on Indigenous languages. Moreover, the Act notes that these goals will be undertaken with the supervisory council of an appointed person to represent the interests of Indigenous people in Canada. This commitment to respecting Indigenous Languages of Canada is integral to the process of preserving Indigenous culture, this act serves as a jumping-off point to the return of Indigenous languages in Canada.

Conclusory Statements

The diversity of Indigenous culture is undeniable and can be characterized by the vast range of oral and visual-gestural languages that exist across North America. Indigenous sign languages have historically played a crucial role in facilitating communication across oral language boundaries (e.g., PISL) and have allowed for the inclusion of deaf individuals in cultural practices (e.g., IUR and OSL).

Plains Indian Sign Language (PISL) was the most conspicuous of these languages, spreading across a large expanse of North America from northern Mexico to southern Canada. Many Indigenous groups used it as a Lingua Franca to overcome differences in oral language and for communication with deaf community members. With a significant body of research behind it, conservation efforts that continue to the present day and further commitments from the Canadian Government, its future seems bright.

Inuit Sign Language (IUR) has long been used by the Canadian Inuit population in Nunavut as a communicative tool for deaf Inuit and their families. Spurred by the high incidence of audiological

disease and associated hearing loss, it is integral to Deaf inclusivity. Whilst conservation efforts are not as abundant as PISL, there is still hope and time to preserve this unique language.

The modern development of Oneida Sign Language (OSL) is a show of perseverance and will to integrate Indigenous inclusivity into the Deaf community. As time passes, it is an encouraging show of Indigenous resilience and connection to culture and to keeping it alive for everyone.

The development of ASL became a predominant force in Deaf communication and education but ultimately contributed to the displacement and decline of Indigenous Sign Languages in coincidence with residential schooling and assimilation acts. The stigma imported by European society contributes to a lack of documentation and research. However, the Indigenous message of universality and inclusion rings through the noise that was fabricated to conceal it and will continue to survive alongside the Indigenous communities fighting to keep it alive.

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