

# Study: Aboriginal languages and the role of second-language acquisition, 2016

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In Canada, a growing number of people are learning an Aboriginal language as a second language. As a result, there were 263,840 people who reported that they could speak an Aboriginal language well enough to conduct a conversation in 2016, up 8% since 1996.

Over the same period, however, the number of people with an Aboriginal mother tongue—that is, the first language learned in childhood that is still understood— edged down 1%.

These results are from a new study based on census data and published in *Insights on Canadian Society*, titled "[Results from the 2016 Census: Aboriginal languages and the role of second-language acquisition](#)." The study is part a series of articles that examine social and economic topics in Canada based on a deeper analysis of the 2016 Census results.

Aboriginal languages are an integral part of the social fabric and culture of First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities. In Canada, over 70 Aboriginal languages are spoken, with Cree languages, Inuktitut and Ojibway the most commonly spoken.

The study examines the extent to which Aboriginal languages are spoken in Canada as well as the factors that are related to Aboriginal language use and retention.

## Second language acquisition is on the rise among Aboriginal language speakers

Among those who could speak an Aboriginal language, the share who learned it as a second language increased from 1996 to 2016.

In 2016, 26% of all Aboriginal-language speakers had learned it as a second language, up from 18% in 1996.

Aboriginal second-language speakers were significantly younger than those who acquired an Aboriginal language as a mother tongue. The average age of people who had acquired an Aboriginal language as their mother tongue was 37.1 years, compared with 30.8 years for those who had learned it as a second language.

The fact that those who learned an Aboriginal language as a second language were younger suggests that many Aboriginal children acquired an Aboriginal language from parents or grandparents living with them, even if was not the first language they learned. It also suggests that some learn it at school, in daycare or early childhood programs in the community.

## The transmission of Aboriginal languages is more common in families where the parents learned it as a mother tongue

An important factor in the acquisition of an Aboriginal language is the extent to which Aboriginal languages are transmitted from parent to child.

Parents who acquired an Aboriginal language as a mother tongue are more likely to pass on the language to their children than those who learned it as a second language.

Specifically, among families with children where at least one parent had an Aboriginal language as their mother tongue, 66% were home to a child who could speak an Aboriginal language.

This proportion rose to 78% in families where both parents had an Aboriginal language as a mother tongue.



By contrast, among families where no parent had an Aboriginal language as their mother tongue but at least one parent had an Aboriginal language as a second language, just under half (49%) had a child who could speak an Aboriginal language.

### **A larger share of Aboriginal speakers use Aboriginal languages at home**

The practice of speaking one's language at home is also an important aspect of language vitality.

Over the past decade, Aboriginal-language use at home increased for both those who acquired their language as their mother tongue and those who acquired it as a second language.

Among those who had an Aboriginal language as a mother tongue, 90% spoke an Aboriginal language at home at least regularly in 2016—up from 82% in 2006. The increase was driven by five Aboriginal languages: Cree languages, Ojibway, Oji-Cree, Dene and Inuktitut.

The use of an Aboriginal language at home increased even more among those who learned it as a second language, from 38% in 2006 to 73% in 2016. Within this group, most of the increase was due to changes in the number of those who spoke Blackfoot, Cree languages, Ojibway, Salish languages and Inuktitut.

People who learned an Aboriginal language as a second language, however, were more likely to report that they spoke it regularly as a second language (meaning that they spoke another language most often at home).

### **Aboriginal languages more likely to be learned as a mother tongue in smaller, linguistically-concentrated communities**

Community factors can also have an impact on the use and retention of Aboriginal languages.

Specifically, high concentrations of speakers who learned an Aboriginal language as their mother tongue, were often found in small communities, away from major urban centres.

Inuktitut is an example of such a language. In 2016, the majority (94%) of the Inuktitut-speaking population lived in the communities in Nunavut or Nunavik. Within Nunavut and Nunavik combined, 78% of the population could speak Inuktitut.

In addition, the majority of those who could speak Inuktitut learned it as their mother tongue, while 12% learned it as a second language.

By contrast, languages with a greater share of second-language learners were less likely to be found in places with high concentrations of people speaking those languages.

### Note to readers

Data in this study are from the 2016 Census of Population, as well as the 1996, 2001 and 2006 Census and the 2011 National Household Survey. Growth rates were conducted using an adjusted base to control for differences in incompletely enumerated reserves from one cycle to another. However, point estimates—unless otherwise specified—were compared without adjusting for incomplete enumeration. While the term Indigenous has seen increased use in Canada to refer to First Nations people, Métis and Inuit collectively, the 2016 Census asked respondents whether they identified as an Aboriginal person. As a result, the term Aboriginal is used throughout the text of this study.

Aboriginal-language speakers are defined as those who reported being able to speak an Aboriginal language well enough to conduct a conversation. It is based on the knowledge of an Aboriginal language variable.

The group of Aboriginal speakers who acquired the Aboriginal language as a mother tongue is comprised of those who reported an Aboriginal language as their mother tongue and who could still speak that same language well enough to conduct a conversation.

The group of those who acquired an Aboriginal language as a second language is comprised of those who could speak an Aboriginal language, but who did not report that same language on the question about mother tongue.

The vast majority of Aboriginal-language speakers (99%) were part of the Aboriginal identity population. Even though the number of people who could speak an Aboriginal language rose by 8% from 1996 to 2016, the share of the Aboriginal population with the ability to speak an Aboriginal language has declined (from 29% to 16%). This is because the Aboriginal population grew more rapidly than the Aboriginal-language speaking population, in large part due to an increased likelihood of self-identification. Much of the growth of Aboriginal self-identification has occurred in large cities where Aboriginal languages are less commonly spoken.

### Definitions, data sources and methods: survey number [3901](#).

The article "[Results from the 2016 Census: Aboriginal languages and the role of second-language acquisition](#)" is now available in *Insights on Canadian Society* ([75-006-X](#)).

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To enquire about the concepts, methods or data quality of this release, or for more information on *Insights on Canadian Society*, contact Sébastien LaRochelle-Côté (613-951-0803; [sebastien.larochelle-cote@canada.ca](mailto:sebastien.larochelle-cote@canada.ca)).