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Media Release

Strong demand for electronic resources in Canada's Aboriginal languages

Archiving and technical support are critical to maintaining those resources, says professor

ST CATHARINES, Ontario — May 25, 2014 — There is a strong demand for electronic and online resources in the languages of Canada's Aboriginal peoples, says a Carleton University linguistics professor.

But it's a struggle to develop and maintain those resources without ongoing political and financial support, says Marie-Odile Junker, even though the amount of money needed to provide that support is actually quite small.

Junker will be speaking about her work in putting information technologies to work to revitalize and preserve Aboriginal languages at the 2014 Congress of the Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences.

Junker, who is originally from France, was surprised when she came to Canada to discover that this country's Aboriginal languages were seldom taught in schools. One reason for that, she discovered, was the lack of resources available to people who wanted to study those languages.

The Internet offered an easy way to provide support to people who wanted to study native languages, so for many years now she has been working to create electronic language supports – for example websites and apps.

She has been surprised at how much demand there is for those resources.

For example, she says an online dictionary for the language spoken by the Cree people of Quebec's James Bay region is used to look up 1,000 words a week; a dictionary for Innu language spoken in Eastern Quebec and Labrador is used even more often.



And those resources are not just used by Aboriginal peoples. A non-Aboriginal salesman in Val d’Or, Que., for example, might use the dictionary to learn a few words and phrases in Cree – the better to greet Cree customers who come into the store.

“When we develop something for a specific use, we find it’s used for 10 things we hadn’t even thought of,” she says.

Aboriginal peoples across Canada are just as eager as anyone else to participate in the modern world, she says, explaining that just as they hunt today with snowmobiles instead of dog teams, so they want to text each other, in their language, on a mobile phone.

But there are challenges to providing electronic resources they can use.

For example, devices may have to be adapted to non-Roman alphabets. People selling those devices need to be trained to explain to potential customers how, for example, to write in Cree syllabics. And if potential users don’t know how to use the device in their language, they will get discouraged – much in the same way francophones get discouraged if they can’t type accents in French.

Another big challenge, she says, is archiving electronic material.

The current resources exist on a variety of platforms stored in a variety of places in a variety of forms. Some of those forms will become obsolete within a matter of years, rendering older material inaccessible.

Junker is working on a project that will allow material to be formatted for archiving, making it easier to save.

All of that takes money, she says. It’s not a huge amount, she adds, when compared to what is spent on the promotion of English and French. It also takes political will.

She is worried that if no effort is put into archiving and technical support, precious knowledge will be lost – and Aboriginal peoples will lose touch with their languages.

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About the Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences

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