

# SPEAKING OF SURVIVAL.

Imagine being taken away from your family to a school where you can't understand what the teachers are saying. You get slapped or worse if you speak the only language you've ever known. When the Canadian government forced Indigenous children into residential schools, the goal was clear: Destroy Indigenous cultures.

Residential school students caught speaking their language could have their meals taken away or be shamed in front of others. To make kids stop using their language, teachers might slap them in the mouth with a ruler, force them to eat soap, or strike their hands with a leather strap.

When they left residential school, most Indigenous children could no longer speak their language. If their family didn't know English or French, the kids couldn't talk to them or learn traditional ways. They couldn't even explain what had happened to them. Residential schools had cut them off from their past and their future.

Some Indigenous children did manage to hold on to their language. When she was at a British Columbia residential school in the late 1940s and early 1950s, Elizabeth Phillips "talked" to her parents in her head using the Halq'émeylem language. Other students whispered back and forth in their own languages after the lights were turned out at night, or talked to each other secretly while doing chores.



Children at the Old Sun Indian residential school, Gleichen, Alta., in the 1940s

**MICHIF** is the language of the Métis Nation. It's a mixture of Plains Cree and French words. Although it is considered an endangered language, Michif is gaining strength as more people learn it.

## SCOOPED AND SEPARATED

In the 1950s, the Canadian government decided it would be best for Indigenous children to be taken from their families and adopted by non-Indigenous families in Canada and the United States. No one asked the kids if that's what they wanted. This process took off in the 1960s, which is why it's known as the Sixties Scoop, but it continued into the 1980s. Once again, these children were separated from their families, their culture and their language.

Indigenous people traditionally passed on information and knowledge orally — through talking rather than writing things down. Some Indigenous languages use symbols called **syllabics**, like the Plains Cree sign on this issue's cover. Syllabics were created by an English-Canadian minister in the mid-1800s. Until very recently, there were several different systems for writing Inuit words. They are being replaced by one known as Inuktitut Qaliujaaqpaat.



An Inuit family, 1917



"I was quite nervous, but I was very excited." That's how former Winnipeg Member of Parliament Robert-Falcon Ouellette, shown above, described his feelings on January 28, 2019. That was the day when he became the first person to speak an Indigenous language in the House of Commons, with an interpreter there to explain his words to the other members.

Of the 1.5 million Indigenous people in Canada, about 230,000 speak a First Nations or Inuit language, or Michif.

The government of Nunavut requires signs to show Inuit text alongside Canada's official languages. Inuit have the right to speak their own language if they work for the territorial government.



## GROWING PRIDE

Many dedicated First Nations, Inuit and Métis people all over Canada have never stopped working to keep their languages alive. Some languages are still in danger of disappearing. But more and more Indigenous people are learning their languages. In June 2019, the Canadian government passed the *Indigenous Languages Act*, intended to help protect these languages.

Joi T. Arcand is an artist from Muskeg Lake Cree Nation, Saskatchewan. In her art she uses Cree syllabics — which she doesn't necessarily explain — to get people thinking about and maybe even learning some of the language. This 2017 artwork of hers is called “Don't Speak English”.



Emma Stevens, pictured above, and others from her high school on the Eskasoni First Nation in Nova Scotia recorded a version of “Blackbird,” a famous song by a group called The Beatles, in Mi'kmaq earlier this year. It has more than one million views online.



# SINGUISTICS

Singuistics is a free app that lets you dive right into Indigenous languages and cultures.

## Paniapiutsunga

For example, listen to the song *Paniapiutsunga* (pa-NIA-pee-oot-soo-NGA) in the Inuktitut language. In English, *Paniapiutsunga* translates to as a *little daughter*. *Paniapiutsunga* is a song to be sung by a little daughter (or *panik*, in Inuktitut) as part of a game. The girl in the song hops from place to place as Inuit children often do, navigating the uneven and rocky terrain of the tundra.



## Let the fun begin!

You can download the free app by visiting [appstore.com/pinnguaq/singuistics](https://appstore.com/pinnguaq/singuistics).

With the app on your iPad, you get 15 songs to learn by listening, practising and then recording your own version. There are also original paintings and illustrations by Indigenous artists to go with each song.