



Bridging the Gap; Addressing Collections in Native Languages

By Benjamin N. Thomas

Our languages are perhaps one of the most important aspects of our cultures and how we preserve them through the generations tells us much about how well they are valued. As has been the case throughout much of history, when a culture has been brought into another to be integrated, the first thing that is lost is usually the strength of the language. It's an unfortunate aspect of history that this happened in Canada in the past, as recently as the 1950's and 1960's native languages were still actively suppressed or replaced in

schools across the country. How does this factor into libraries today?

Libraries are a reflection of the culture in which they exist, and Canada being a majority English speaking nation, with the next greatest tongue spoken being French, books and resources in these two languages tend to be the primary points of acquisition for collections development and patron resource building. The difficulty in expanding beyond those two languages in library collections doesn't usually stem from a lack of resources in those languages, quite the contrary for major languages such as Chinese, Hindi, or Arabic, there are arguably just as many books written in those languages as there are in English or French. Native languages can be a little different.

The primary point of concern is usually the inability of both the collections development librarian to find and recognize important resources in languages they might not understand, as well as the catalogers difficult task of maintaining an accessible collection in such languages, especially if no MARC records for the item already exist. Where aboriginal languages in Canada come in however, the problems stem from both a

lack of resources as well as difficulty in understand what the resources are.

Fortunately, there are many libraries and universities around the nation that are working with aboriginal educators and scholars to translate and compile these resources. For example, the language of the Mi'kmaq peoples, Mi'kma'ki, a language very relevant for the people and libraries of Atlantic Canadian provinces such as Nova Scotia and Newfoundland, has a fair number of books available, many of which were written with the express intent of preserving folklore, history, and language for future generations.

Titles such as *Nkij'inen Teluet*, "Our Grandmother's Words" which is a compilation of Mi'kmaq traditional stories and folklore by Gerald Gloade, 2013, are exactly the sorts of books that one might look for in order to build a small collection of indigenous language books for a library of any size. Other titles include *Mikwite'lmanej Mikmaqu'k*, "Let us Remember the Old Mi'kmaq" by Frederick Johnson, 2001, or *The Stone Canoe: Two Lost Mi'kmaq*

Texts, translated by Elizabeth Paul, 2007, which includes not only the text of these works of folklore in the Mi'kmaq language, but also in English side by side so that anyone speaking either of the languages would be able to pick it up and read it, while being able to compare the languages and learn from the differences.

While it is true that the number of people speaking these languages will be fairly small, even within communities that have a larger proportion of indigenous peoples living within them, the incorporation of even a few works and resources in an indigenous language is a wonderful gesture of inclusivity for a library and serves to enrich the community. The monetary impact of including a small number of these books would be minimal compared to collections on a whole, and will play a part in helping to preserve these languages and cultural stories written in them for years to come, while fostering interest and inquiry by those to whom they are a new experience.