

Yukon First Nations Languages



Grade
5



Yukon First Nations Languages

First Nation Programs and Partnerships Unit
Yukon Department of Education
Yukon First Nation Curriculum Working Group
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HEADER Left To Right : Dakwakada Dancers, Champagne and Aishihik First Nations; Sockeye Salmon, Dwelling Frame, Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation, Crowflat Family Camp, Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation, YTG Photos; Wolf, Crow-istock Images.



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YUKON FIRST NATIONS LANGUAGES

"Our people have many deep feelings about our land."

from Together Today for our Children Tomorrow



Julia Morberg, (2007)
Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in Hän Nation



Edward Roberts, Elder, (2005)
Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in Hän Nation



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You Will Learn About

- traditional Yukon First Nations languages
- the languages our closest neighbours speak
- language families
- First Nation languages in Yukon communities
- multilingual communities
- the meaning of bilingual
- Canada's two official languages
- official language status
- dialects of Yukon First Nations languages
- what accents and dialects can tell us
- the importance of learning about dialects
- language as part of culture
- fluent speakers of First Nations languages
- the strength of the Elder's stories, songs and dances in Yukon First Nations languages
- the importance of keeping language and culture alive
- Yukon First Nation's oral tradition
- the importance of learning traditional languages
- how English came to the Yukon
- why Yukon First Nations began to speak English
- how to keep Yukon First Nations languages strong
- the future of Yukon First Nations languages



Lena Johnson, Kluane First Nation,
George Adamson collection

INTRODUCTION

Yukon First Nations Elders know many stories, songs and dances. They can teach us important lessons. We can learn about Yukon First Nations history and how to live a balanced life. A balanced life can bring us peace and harmony. We can understand the importance of respect for the land, the water and all living creatures, as well as for others and ourselves.

“Come be with us for awhile.
Our stories, songs and
dances will teach you about
Yukon First Nation People.”



Hazel Bunbury, Elder from Lake Laberge area and Hidden Valley School students, 2007

A. YUKON FIRST NATIONS LANGUAGES

Long ago Yukon **First Nations** spoke traditional languages. They didn't use French or English. People spoke the language from their area. Many people knew their neighbours' languages as well.

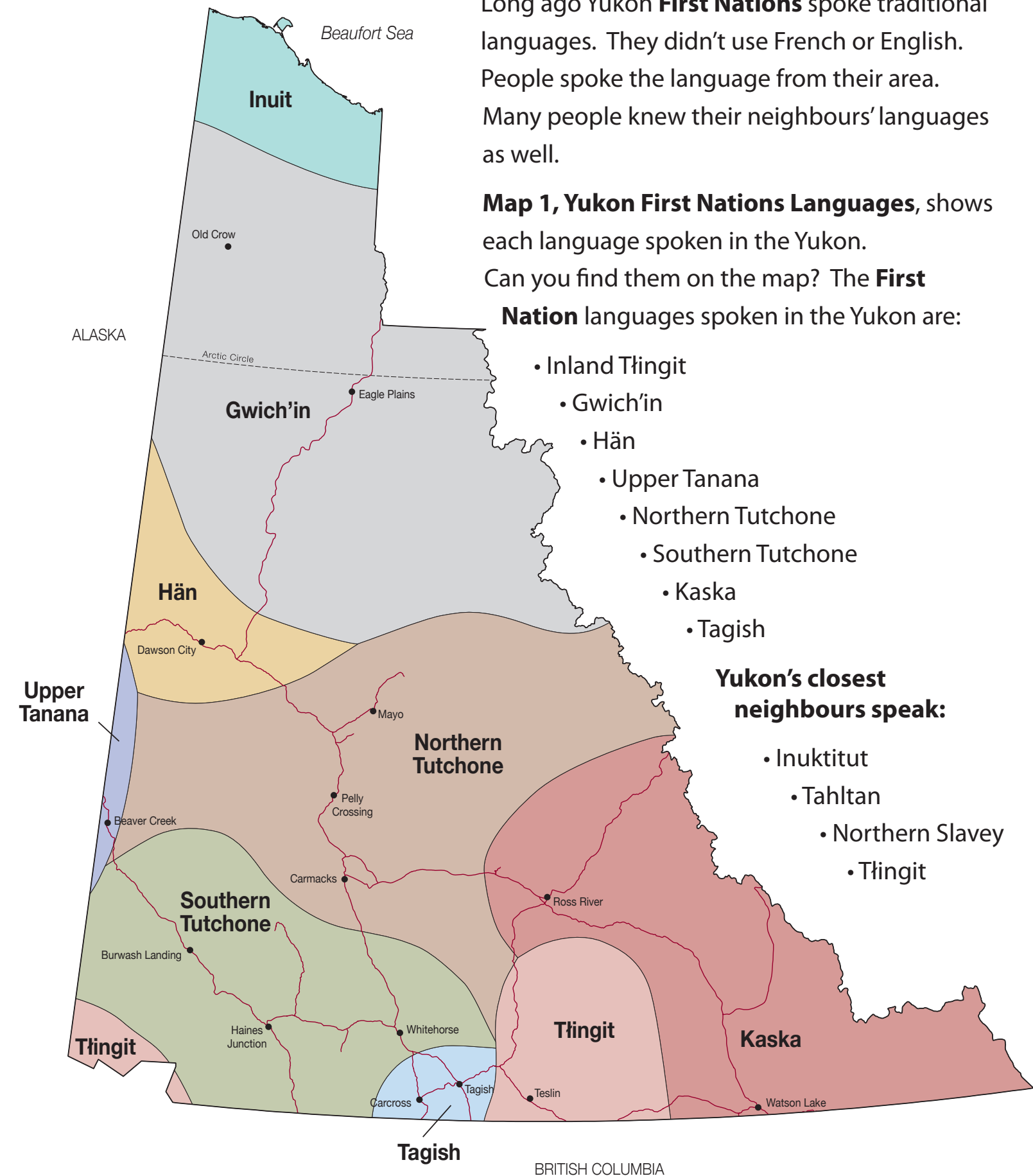
Map 1, Yukon First Nations Languages, shows each language spoken in the Yukon.

Can you find them on the map? The **First Nation** languages spoken in the Yukon are:

- Inland Tlingit
- Gwich'in
- Hän
- Upper Tanana
- Northern Tutchone
- Southern Tutchone
- Kaska
- Tagish

Yukon's closest neighbours speak:

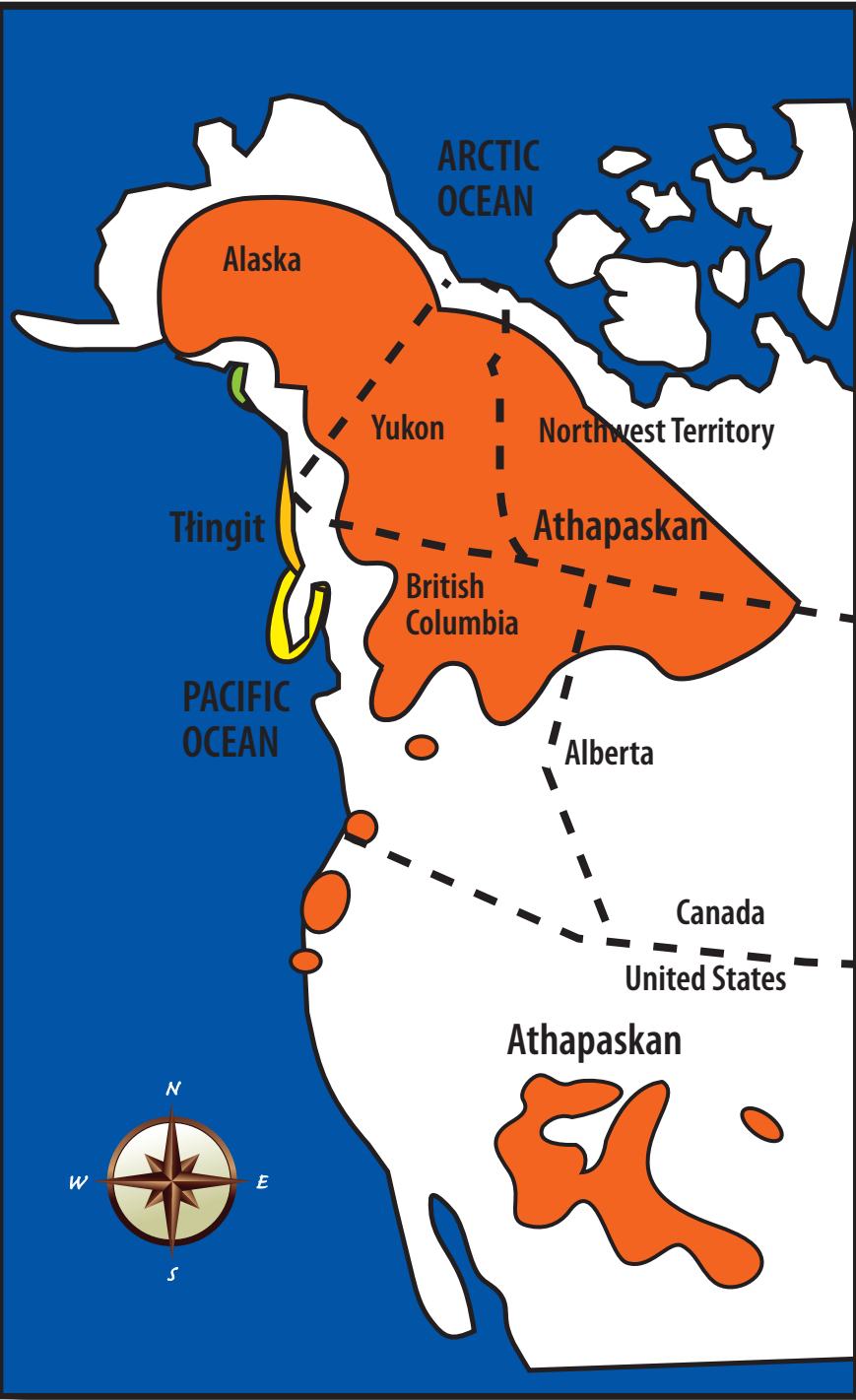
- Inuktitut
- Tahltan
- Northern Slavey
- Tlingit



Map 1, Yukon First Nation Languages

B. LANGUAGE FAMILIES

Map 2. ATHAPASKAN LANGUAGE FAMILY



Athapaskan languages are spoken throughout Western Canada and the western United States as well.

Inland Tlingit is the only Yukon language that does not belong to the Athapaskan language family. It doesn't belong to a large language family. It comes from the **Tlingit** language. Most Tlingit speakers live on the coast of Alaska. Tlingit have traded with Yukon First Nations for many centuries. A very long time ago some Tlingit families **migrated** to the Yukon. They became Inland Tlingit.

People who study languages are called **linguists**. Some linguists describe language families. A **language family** is a group of similar languages. They have similar words and sounds.

First Nation people live all over North America. They speak many different languages. Linguists have grouped all these languages into language families. They say there are only a small number of language families in North America.

Almost all Yukon First Nation languages are in the **Athapaskan** language family. Many First Nations near the Yukon speak Athapaskan languages. The Athapaskan language family is very large. It has the most speakers of any language family in North America.

Look at Map 2, Athapaskan Language Family. It shows how

Chart 1: First Nation Language Families and Language Groups

ATHAPASKAN LANGUAGE FAMILY	TŁINGIT LANGUAGE
Gwich'in	Inland Tlingit
Hän	
Upper Tanana	
Northern Tutchone	
Southern Tutchone	
Kaska	
Tagish	
Tahltan	
Northern Slavey	

C. FIRST NATIONS LANGUAGES IN YUKON COMMUNITIES

All Yukon First Nations belong to a First Nations language group. Various languages are spoken in Yukon communities. Some communities have people from more than one language group. These are called **multilingual** communities. Whitehorse is a multilingual community.

Chart 2: First Nations Languages In Yukon Communities

Note: Language groups in bold are the main First Nation Language used.

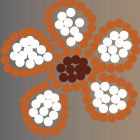
COMMUNITY	LANGUAGES SPOKEN OR UNDERSTOOD
Beaver Creek	Upper Tanana , Northern Tutchone
Burwash	Southern Tutchone , Upper Tanana
Carcross	Tagish , Tlingit
Carmacks	Northern Tutchone , Southern Tutchone
Dawson	Hän , Upper Tanana, Gwich'in, Northern Tutchone
Faro	Kaska , Northern Tutchone
Haines Junction	Southern Tutchone , Tlingit
Mayo	Northern Tutchone , Gwich'in
Old Crow	Gwitchin
Pelly Crossing	Northern Tutchone
Ross River	Kaska , Northern Slavey
Tagish	Tlingit , Tagish
Teslin	Tlingit
Watson Lake & Upper Liard	Kaska , Tahltan
Whitehorse	Southern Tutchone , Tagish , speakers from all language groups

Look at Chart 2, First Nations Languages in Yukon Communities.

What languages are spoken in each **community**? Which communities are multilingual?

Find Pelly Crossing, Mayo and Carmacks in the chart. All these communities have speakers from the Northern Tutchone language group. Where else is Northern Tutchone spoken? Which communities use the Kaska language? How many communities speak Southern Tutchone? What other languages are spoken in the Yukon?

Canada is a **bilingual** nation. Canada’s **official languages** are French and English. When a language is official, the **government** uses it for everything it does. The governments of Canada and the Yukon must use both French and English. For example, government offices, schools, hospitals and courts must be able to help people in French and English.



Did you know?

A **multilingual** person can speak more than two languages fluently. A bilingual person can speak two languages fluently.

D. DIALECTS

Some Yukon First Nations may speak the same language but say things in a different way. They may also write their language a little differently. We say they are using **dialects**. Dialect speakers can understand each other. For example, people in Ross River and Watson Lake speak Kaska. So do people in Upper Liard. The language is a little different in each place but they all understand each other.

All Yukon languages have dialects. Each dialect has its own **accent**. An accent is the way people from one place pronounce their words. Did you ever hear a person with an accent? Have you ever heard someone speak with a French accent?

When First Nations people speak, their accent will help identify where they are from. Dialects can reveal which family a person belongs to.

Examples of Southern Tutchone Dialects

Is it sunny?

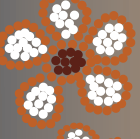
Sha kǎdnjǎ? (Burwash Landing)

Sha kǎnlǎ? (Haines Junction)

Sha kǎnlǎ? (Kluane)

Sha kǎljǎ? (Aishihik)

Sha kǎdi’ǎǎ? (Klukshu)



Did you know?

Little Salmon/Carmacks people can understand people from Mayo and Pelly. They all speak Northern Tutchone but with different dialects.

E. LANGUAGE IS A PART OF CULTURE

Fluent speakers often share stories and sing songs in Yukon First Nations languages. They know many dances as well. These stories, songs and dances teach important lessons. When the stories are told in a First Nations language they can teach more lessons than when English is used.

Every First Nations language group has stories, songs and dances from the past. Yukon First Nations languages help keep First Nations **traditions** alive. Yukon First Nations **Elders** teach us how to live in peace with the land, the animals and ourselves.

Yukon First Nations stories, songs and dances are most powerful when fluent speakers use their own language. Parts of the stories and songs are lost when they are **translated** into English.

To fully understand the Yukon First Nations oral tradition it is important to learn a First Nations language. The Yukon **oral tradition** includes many stories and songs that teach **history** and **values**.

When a story is in its **original** language you hear its true meaning. You will understand the culture more clearly. You can learn the history, **laws**, values and lessons in the stories, songs and dances. The stories, songs and dances will be beautiful when you hear the rich descriptions.



Did you know?

As well as their language, the Inland Tlingit culture has some things that are special to the Inland Tlingit people. Their paintings and carvings are like those from the coast. They use button blankets for dancing and they have totem poles.



Acrylic on moose hide, artwork from Ross River School, Photographer Fran Etzel 2007.



Dèshitàn (Beaver) Clan Emblem, Teslin Tlingit Council, YTG Photo

F. THE FUTURE OF YUKON FIRST NATION LANGUAGES

Long ago all First Nations used traditional languages. No one spoke English. When people came to the Yukon from other parts of the world they brought new languages here.

Fur traders came to the Yukon during the 1800s. They spoke French and English. During the Klondike **Gold Rush** 30,000-40,000 people came to the Yukon. Many of them spoke English. The **Alaska Highway** was completed in 1942. The highway brought more English-speaking people to the Yukon.

At one time most First Nations children had to go to **residential schools**. They could only speak English at residential schools. Many children lost their language, their **culture, their laws and their values** when they went to these schools.

Today there are very few First Nations children, if any, who can speak their Yukon First Nation languages **fluently**. A fluent speaker speaks and understands a language easily. Most children and teenagers study their traditional languages at school, but few of them become fluent speakers. Most fluent speakers are very

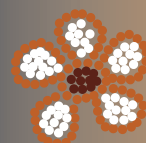
old. These Elders are trying to pass their languages on to their children and grandchildren.

Can you use a Yukon First Nations language all day? Can you use it for everything you do? If you can, you are a fluent speaker of a Yukon First Nations language!

There is a risk that all of the Yukon First Nations languages might be lost. There may be no fluent speakers in the future. Today's youth need to learn to speak their traditional languages fluently. This must be done before all the fluent speakers are gone.

Listen very closely when you hear a Yukon First Nations language. When you learn a language you will better understand the culture. You will learn about history and **tradition**. There are songs, stories, dances, laws and values to learn.

Angela Sidney was a Tagish Elder who wanted us to know Yukon First Nations language and culture. She said, *"I have no money to leave for my grandchildren. My stories are my wealth."*



Did you know?

Before contact, all First Nations used their traditional languages. Imagine a world like that!

G. SUMMARY

The Yukon First Nations languages can be divided into two language families: Athapaskan and Tlingit.

The main Yukon First Nations language groups are **Inland Tlingit, Gwich'in, Hän, Upper Tanana, Northern Tutchone, Southern Tutchone, Kaska** and **Tagish**. Our closest neighbours speak **Inuktitut, Tahltan and Northern Slavey**.

Each Yukon First Nation has a traditional language. Each language has one or more dialects. Some communities are

multilingual. We can tell where people are from by their accents or dialects.

Canada is called a bilingual nation. The governments of Canada and the Yukon use French and English. These are the official languages of Canada.

Language is the most important part of Yukon First Nations culture. All languages have words that are part of their culture. These words **express** how people think and feel. Every language has words that are not found in other languages.

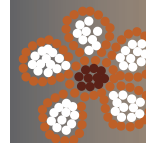
It is difficult to translate some words into English. There are no English words for many of the **concepts** or words in Yukon First Nations stories. It is difficult to add modern words to traditional languages. Stories, songs and dances are rich when they are told in their traditional language.

Long ago all First Nations spoke traditional languages fluently. Over the years there were many changes in the Yukon. Many people began to speak English instead of their traditional languages. Today there are fewer fluent speakers than there were long ago.

Yukon First Nations are working hard to keep their languages and cultures alive. Yukon First Nations Elders can teach traditional stories, dances and songs. It is very important to keep Yukon First Nations languages alive. When language is strong, so is culture.

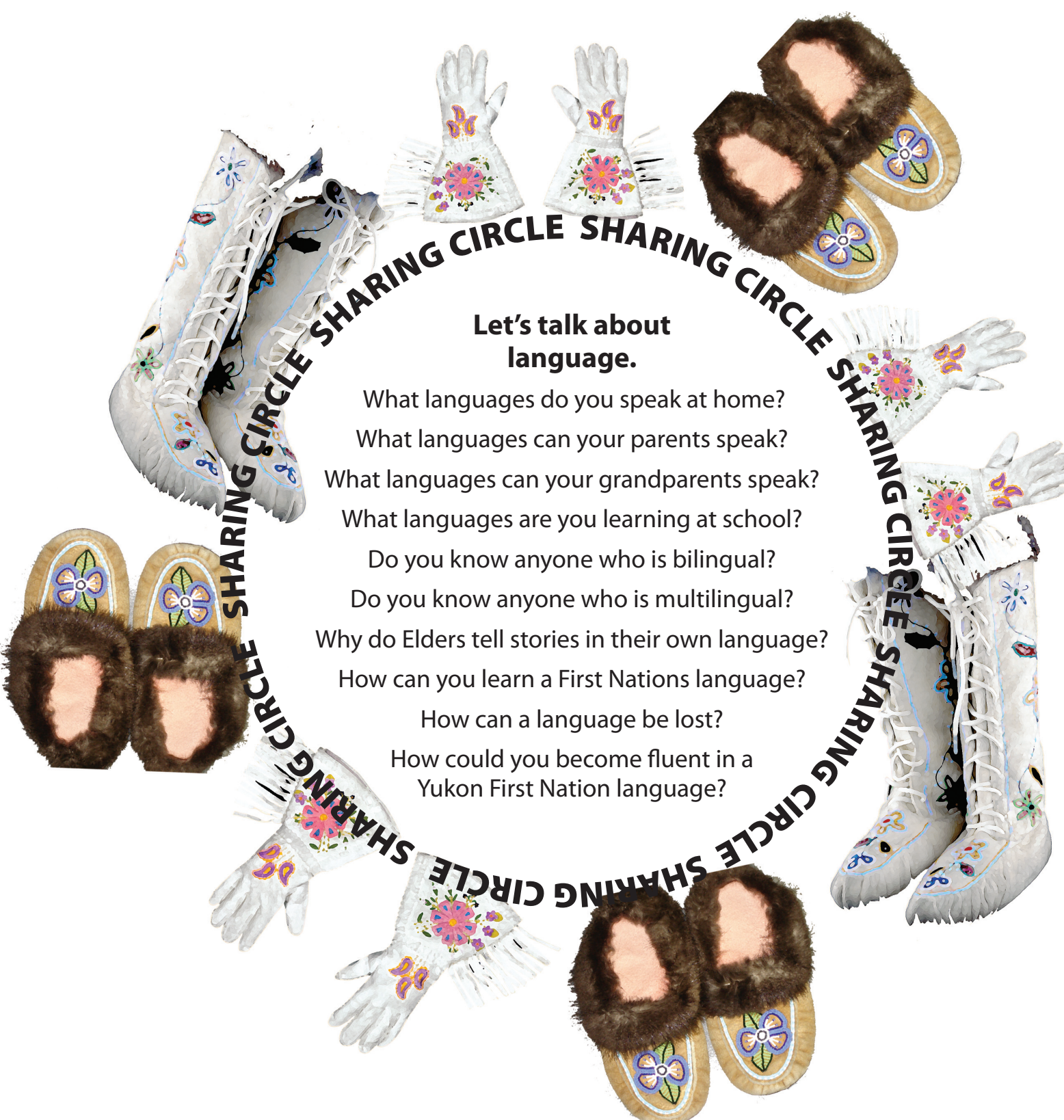


Mr. Sam Johnston (Ànyàlahàsh) is a well-respected elder of the Ishkitàn Clan of the Teslin Tlingit Council. He works hard to preserve Yukon First Nation culture and language.



Did you know?

When you learn another language, it helps you to use more of your brain.



Let's talk about language.

- What languages do you speak at home?
- What languages can your parents speak?
- What languages can your grandparents speak?
- What languages are you learning at school?
- Do you know anyone who is bilingual?
- Do you know anyone who is multilingual?
- Why do Elders tell stories in their own language?
- How can you learn a First Nations language?
- How can a language be lost?
- How could you become fluent in a Yukon First Nation language?

Gauntlets 1987.10.2 and Mukluks, 1987.10.1, McBride Museum Collection, YTG Photos; Moccasins, Irene Smith, Elder, Ta'an Kwäch'än Council.

Check What You Have Learned

- ☐ The main First Nations languages in the Yukon are Inland Tlingit, Gwich'in, Hän, Upper Tanana, Northern Tutchone, Southern Tutchone, Kaska and Tagish.
- ☐ Our closest First Nations neighbours speak Inuktitut, Tahltan, Northern Slavey and Tlingit.
- ☐ Most Yukon First Nation languages belong to the Athapaskan language family.
- ☐ The Athapaskan language family has the most speakers of any language family in North America.
- ☐ Inland Tlingit is from the Tlingit language family.
- ☐ Inland Tlingit migrated from coastal Alaska.
- ☐ Different languages are spoken in each Yukon community.
- ☐ Multilingual means a person who can speak many languages.
- ☐ Bilingual means a person who can speak two languages.
- ☐ Canada is a bilingual nation.
- ☐ Canada's official languages are French and English.
- ☐ Yukon First Nations languages have dialects.
- ☐ Dialects are similar to each other but they have some differences.
- ☐ Yukon First Nations stories, songs and dances teach more when they are told in a First Nations language.
- ☐ Yukon First Nations languages keep culture strong.
- ☐ Yukon First Nations languages have words and concepts that are not in English.
- ☐ Long ago all Yukon First Nations used traditional languages.
- ☐ Many changes brought new languages to the Yukon: the fur trade; missionaries; the Klondike Gold Rush; residential schools and the construction of the Alaska Highway.
- ☐ Yukon First Nations needed to use English when changes came to the Yukon.
- ☐ Fluent speakers use a language easily. They can speak their language all day long.
- ☐ It is important for today's First Nations youth to learn Yukon First Nations languages.
- ☐ When you learn a language you will understand the culture.

Math'ieya Alatini, Kluane First Nation, George Adamson collection



GLOSSARY

Accent

- the way people who live in the same place pronounce their words
When I listen to Sam speak, I can tell he is from Old Crow. He speaks the way people from Old Crow do. Sam has an Old Crow accent.

Alaska Highway

- a highway that stretches from Dawson Creek, British Columbia to Fairbanks, Alaska
We will drive up the Alaska Highway to visit my aunt in Beaver Creek.

Athapaskan

- a group of First Nation languages. There are many Athapaskan languages. They are spoken across western North America
- a person from a group of Athapaskan speaking people
Northern Tutchone is an Athapaskan language. Northern Tutchone people are Athapaskans.

Bilingual

- able to speak two languages
- written or spoken in two languages
Frank can understand English and Kaska. He is bilingual. That government report is bilingual. It is in French and English.

Community

- a group of people who live in the same area
- a group of people who have an interest in common
Many people in our community like to fish in the summer. Our school community wants to make our school safe for all the children.

Concepts

- ideas or thoughts
Sometimes the concepts in Tlingit are hard to understand. That story has many interesting concepts in it.

Contact

- a word used to describe the time when First Nations first met Europeans
Fur traders may have been the first people to make contact with Yukon First Nations.

Culture

- the language, customs, ideas, laws and values, and art of a group of people
Yukon First Nation culture has many wonderful stories, songs and dances.

Dialect

- the way people from one area or community speak a language
People from Carmacks speak a dialect of Northern Tutchone.

Elders

- wise cultural leaders in the community
It is important to help our Elders with work that is hard for them to do.

Express

- show your thoughts and feelings
- to tell your thoughts and feelings
When I hug my grandmother, I express my love and respect for her. When we have a circle discussion, I express my ideas.

First Nation

- a community of people who have a common First Nations ancestry
The Selkirk First Nation is in Pelly Crossing.

First Nations

- the first people to occupy and live on lands of Canada
There were First Nations in the Yukon over 30,000 years ago. Grandma May told me an old Yukon First Nations story.

Fluent

- able to speak or write easily and smoothly
- able to speak all day long in another language
She is fluent in three languages. He is a fluent reader. He reads easily and doesn’t make any mistakes.

Fluent speaker

- someone who speaks a language correctly and easily
My aunt is a fluent Kaska speaker. She can speak with all the Elders in Ross River.

Gold Rush

- a period of time when thousands of people came to find gold
Thousands of people came to the Yukon during the Gold Rush of 1898.

Government

- the leadership of a community, province, or nation
Chief and Council lead First Nation governments.

Gwich’in

- an Athapaskan language spoken in northern Yukon
My grandmother lives in Old Crow. She speaks Gwich’in.

Hän

- an Athapaskan language spoken in northern Yukon
My grandmother lives in Dawson City. She speaks Hän.

History

- everything that has happened in the past
I can learn about the history of Burwash from my Grandfather.

Inland Tlingit

- a nation of people living in Atlin, Tagish and Carcross.
My grandmother lives in Tagish. She can speak Inland Tlingit.

Kaska

- an Athapaskan language spoken in central Yukon
My grandmother lives in Ross River. She speaks Kaska.

Language family

- a group of languages
- languages with similar sounds and words
Tahltan is from the Athapaskan language family.

Laws

- a set of rules that explain how to live in peace and harmony
Yukon First Nations have laws about marriage.

Linguist

- a person who studies languages
I want to study to become a linguist.

Migrate

- move from one place to another
People migrate to new places for many reasons.

Missionaries

- people who are sent to another country to teach about their religion
The Anglican Church sent missionaries to the Yukon.

Multilingual

- many languages
My aunt knows six languages. She is multilingual.

Northern Slavey

- an Athapaskan language spoken in northern Canada
My grandmother lives in Ross River. She can speak Northern Slavey.

Northern Tutchone

- an Athapaskan language spoken in central Yukon
My grandmother lives in Carmacks. She speaks Northern Tutchone.

Official Language

- the language used by the government of a nation
French is an official language of Canada.

Official language status

- when a government uses a language for government business
First Nation languages do not have official language status in Canada.

Oral tradition

- stories and songs that teach history and values
All Yukon First Nations have a strong oral tradition.

Original

- the first or earliest to exist
Please tell the story about the Diver in Kaska. Kaska is the original language for that story.

Residential schools

- church run schools for First Nation children. Yukon First Nation children had to move away from their homes to live in residential schools
There used to be a residential school in Carcross.

Sam Johnston

- Chancellor of the Yukon College
- Elder from the Teslin Tlingit First Nation
I heard Sam Johnson speak at my uncle’s college graduation.

Southern Tutchone

- an Athapaskan language spoken in southern Yukon
My grandmother lives in Haines Junction. She speaks Southern Tutchone.

Tagish

- an Athapaskan language spoken in southern Yukon
My grandmother lives in Carcross. She speaks Tagish.

Tahltan

- an Athapaskan language spoken in northern British Columbia
My grandmother lives in Good Hope Lake. She speaks Tahltan.

Tlingit

- a First Nation language spoken in coastal Alaska and the southern Yukon
My grandmother lives in Teslin. She can speak Tlingit.

Trading partners

- people who trade goods with each other
The Tlingit were trading partners with the Southern Tutchone.

Tradition

- beliefs and customs that are handed down
- the handing down of beliefs and customs from parents to children
Some cultures have a tradition to serve Elders first at a feast. Tradition is very important to Yukon First Nations.

Traditional language

- the main language used by a nation of people
Gwich’in is the traditional language spoken in Old Crow.

Traditions

- customs, beliefs and ways of doing things
My grandparents teach me many of our family traditions. I want to pass these traditions on to my children.

Translate

- retell in another language
My grandmother is going to tell us a story in Kaska. My mother will translate it into English.

Upper Tanana

- an Athapaskan language spoken in central Yukon
My grandmother lives in Beaver Creek. She speaks Upper Tanana.

Values

- moral code
- ways of thinking about behaviour
We learn our values from our parents , grandparents and the community.



CHAMPAGNE and AISHIHIK First Nations



CARCROSS/TAGISH
FIRST NATION



TESLIN TLINGIT COUNCIL



Yukon
Education