

What It's Like to Speak AN ISOLATED LANGUAGE:

A strong nation is rising to the challenge.

BY SGAANA GAAHLANDAAY ALIX GOETZINGER

Haida Gwaii is a chain of islands known as an archipelago. Over 200 islands make up this beautiful place!

About the Author

Alix Goetzinger grew up in the village of **HiGaagilda**, meaning “place becoming stone” (also known as Skidegate), Haida Gwaii. Her Haida name is **SGaana Gaahlandaay**, meaning “Spirit of the Killerwhale.”

Alix comes from the **Kayahl** ‘Laanas Eagle clan, and has been learning and speaking the **Xaayda Kil** dialect of the Haida language all her life. She is also a traditional mask dancer, singer, and weaver.

British Columbia is home to 204 Indigenous communities and an amazing diversity of Indigenous languages. Approximately 50 percent of all the Indigenous languages of Canada are spoken in British Columbia. These Indigenous languages are very precious, as they hold the history of the land and people around them. But because of colonization, many of these languages are at risk and need to be saved.

WHAT IS COLONIZATION?

Colonization began in the early 1800s, when settlers came to North America. In many cases, these settlers created trading relationships with the Indigenous Peoples. They traded furs, tools, and food. Unfortunately, these relationships fell apart when the settlers wanted to take control of the land that the Indigenous Peoples lived on. Because of their advanced weapons and military control, the settlers were able to force the Indigenous Peoples onto smaller plots of land called reserves. The settlers then began replacing the cultures of Indigenous Peoples with European ways of life through the residential school system, which included the forced use of English.

Rainy Words

There are over 30 different words used to describe the rain in the Haida language! Depending on the time of year, it can be raining quickly or slowly, or as a fine mist. Sometimes it can rain so hard that the raindrops bounce back upwards!

PHOTOS: CHRIS BABCOCK (MAIN) ILLUSTRATIONS: DEAN AUCHTER

A NATION FAR OFF IN THE PACIFIC

If you travel west off the coast of British Columbia, you'll reach the islands of Haida Gwaii, home of the Haida Nation. Before colonization, there were roughly 30,000 Haida people with hundreds of clans and villages. Today, there are about 4,000 Haida across Haida Gwaii, other parts of British Columbia, and Alaska. The Haida have thrived on these remote islands for tens of thousands of years, living off the seafood provided by the ocean and the plants provided by the land. When the cedar trees emerged on the island, the Haida began building their large longhouses, carving monumental house poles to represent their family crests, and making precise canoes to travel to California and beyond.

HAIDA LANGUAGE

The Haida language is a language isolate, which means no other language in the world is similar to it, and therefore it is spoken only by the Haida. The Haida language can be identified by its unique back-of-the-throat and popping k-sounds, which are often difficult for new learners. Some of these sounds like, “G,” can be especially tricky. There are fewer than six fluent speakers of the Haida language, all over the age of 70.

The Haida language was originally an oral language only, meaning it was never written down. In the late 1970s and 1980s, an orthography (a guide with written letters used to represent sounds) was created. A handful of new speakers are using this orthography to create books and lessons to keep the Haida language alive. Language teacher Gidin Jaad Erica Reid shared her experience learning the Haida language as an adult:

“While traditionally, the Haida language was all orally taught, this agreed-upon modern orthography system allowed me to write and read in the Haida language, improving my pronunciation and retention of the language. I excelled being immersed in the language with the Elders while reading, writing, and speaking nearly every day. It became apparent that the language was in me, a part of me, and a gift to be shared.”

GIDIN JAAD
ERICA REID

TURN THE PAGE TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THE HAIDA LANGUAGE!



The Haida Heritage Centre at Kay Llnagaay is a place where people can gather to celebrate Haida art, culture, customs, traditions, and history.

LANGUAGE DIALECTS

A dialect is a variation of a language that tells you where a person comes from. Sometimes a person's social background can determine the dialect they speak. Before colonization, the Haida had hundreds of dialects. Today, there are only two main dialects spoken on Haida Gwaii: Xaayda Kil (Skidegate dialect) and Xaad Kíl (Old Massett dialect). There is also a third dialect spoken by Haidas in southeast Alaska.

SOUNDS OF THE HAIDA LANGUAGE

The dialects of the Haida language are so similar that two speakers using different dialects may understand each other. These speakers may also use the same word to describe something but pronounce it a little bit differently. For example,

the word for "eagle" in Xaayda Kil is **Guud** and in Xaad Kíl it's **Gúud**. The Xaayda Kil version is spoken with a prominent "G" sound at the back of the throat. The Xaad Kíl version is spoken even farther back in the throat, making the "G" sound much softer. Other sounds, like "hl," "ts," and "dl," are spoken at the front of the mouth using the tongue and teeth.



Learn to speak Haida!

Give this sentence a try:

"Dang gwa 'láa?"
(Dung gw-ah law)

This is a question, meaning "Are you well?"

The response can be:

"Dii 'láa ga!"
(Dee law g-ah)

"I am well!"

NEVER GIVE UP

Although learning the Haida language takes a lot of time and effort, the newest speakers are determined to keep it going. Much of the Haida language is passed down through programs such as the HlGaagilda Xaayda Kil Naay (Skidegate Haida Immersion Program), Xaad Kíl Née (Haida Language Office), Haida Gwaii Mentor Apprentice Program, and Language Nests. Some of these programs include language immersion, where learners join fluent speakers and talk to one another in Haida, using very little or no English at all.

They will also often use the Haida language during activities like cooking or harvesting. Other programs, such as the Language Nest, focus on teaching Haida to parents and their babies in a fun environment through song, stories, and games. There are also programs in universities across British Columbia that teach the Haida language. More speakers emerge every year, and it's only a matter of time before the Haida language is once again spoken across all Haida families.



Meet Haida Language Speaker Silas Brown!

Silas, 11, is from the St'langng Laanas clan (Rear Town People) from Yan Village. His Haida name is Hilang Dagwiias (Strong Thunderbird). Silas grew up with his brothers Kai and Everett in the town of Massett, Haida Gwaii. They wear the Raven, Killerwhale, Thunderbird, Hawk, Cumulus Clouds, Dogwood Flower, and Grizzly Bear crests. Silas speaks the Xaad Kíl dialect of the Haida language.

OWL: How long have you been speaking Xaad Kíl?

Silas Brown: I started in Chief Matthews School in Old Massett when I was four years old!

O: Where did you learn to speak it?

SB: I learn with my great naanii (grandmother), Nina Williams. She was a language

teacher in our school.

O: What does saving Xaad Kíl mean to you?

SB: It's special to me as a Haida person.

O: What is your number one goal for speaking Xaad Kíl?

SB: To keep learning about language in school.



Silas and his family perform for visitors on Haida Gwaii.



Silas with his great naanii (grandmother), Nina Williams, at a Halloween party in Old Massett.

PHOTOS: DREAMTIME (EAGLE); GETTYSTOCK (RAVEN); MARY HELMER (TOP) ILLUSTRATIONS: DEAN AUCHTER