

Inuktitut – the Inuit Language

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Who are you if you don't have culture? How do you feel? How do you see yourself? If you know who you are, if you know your language, your culture, if you know where you came from, then you are that much more confident in yourself, and you are ready to take on the challenges of life.

Eva Arreak, Nunavut Languages Commissioner

Language is a cultural mosaic of communication. Through song, story, and conversation, we reveal our cultural identities. The air of Nunavut is filled with sounds, resonating in four languages. Often, the words begin to meld together. The balance between Inuktitut, Inuinnaqtun, English, and French is a delicate one. Language is dynamic, capable of adapting and evolving.

Nunavut Department of Culture, Language, Elders and Youth

Introduction

There are a multitude of ways to communicate – through touch, “body language,” smell, color, movement, etc. But by far the most complex form of communication is language – the ability to use vocal noises and sounds to relay meaning. Today there are roughly 6,000 languages spoken around the world though 90% of those are expected to disappear within this century. Indigenous cultures, in particular, are being dramatically disrupted by globalization and the spread of a consumer economy and Western values.

Language contains cultural meaning and values and contributes to the diversity of human ideas, perspectives, and knowledge. But perhaps even more importantly, language provides us with a sense of identity and self-worth. When a minority community loses its language, the members of that community also lose a part of their identity and strength as a culture. For this reason many minority groups, such as the Inuit, have created language commissions to impact language policy and increase language training in their educational systems.

The Inuit across the circumpolar world are actively addressing language issues today. Unlike other aboriginal cultures in North America, it is only recently – since about the mid-20th century – that Inuit language has become threatened due to English-only residential schools. Fortunately, and within a generation, the Inuit began to address the need for language education and protection and are successfully influencing the survival of the Inuit language. The Inuit Circumpolar Conference, an international association for Inuit, has a Language Commission for the specific purpose of preserving the Inuit language and to develop a common writing system across the North.

This module focuses on the importance of the Inuit language and the cultural survival of the Inuit; the history of the development of the language particularly in its written form; and, the use of Inuktitut in the current educational system. Students should gain a sense of the history of the North from the perspective of language while learning about Northern geography in the process. The module will also, hopefully, point out the importance of language in maintaining a strong cultural identity. While the module discusses Inuktitut language in Canada, it focuses on Nunavut as that is where the majority of the population

speaks Inuktitut and where Inuktitut is the only aboriginal language with official status in addition to English and French.

The Eskimo or Inuit language is used by the roughly 150,000 Inuit of Greenland, Alaska, Canada and Siberia. The Inuit language has two major divisions – Yupik, spoken in Siberia and southwestern Alaska and Inuit, the language used in northern Alaska, Canada and Greenland. The Yupik and Inuit languages are pretty much unintelligible from one another but the Inuit language, while it varies from country to country and across regions, can be understood by the Inuit throughout the circumpolar North. The northern Alaskan Inuit or Inupiat speak Inupiaq; the Greenland Inuit or Katladlit speak Kalaallisut; and, the Canadian Inuit have two basic Inuit languages – Inuktitun, the language of the Inuvialuit in the Northwest Territories and Inuktitut, the language of the Inuit in what is called the western Arctic including Nunavut, Nunavik and Labrador. (Inuinnaqtun, mentioned in the quote above, is the dialect spoken by the Inuit in the Kitikmeot region of Nunavut.)

Inuktitut in Canada

Inuktitut is the language of the Inuit in Canada and refers to the Inuit language across the northern part of the country though there are different names for the language in some of the regions. Inuktitut roughly means “in the way of the Inuk” – Inuk being the singular of Inuit.

About 27,000 of Canada’s 30 million people claim Inuktitut as their first language. Of all the aboriginal languages in Canada, Inuktitut is the second most common mother tongue next to Cree (which has about 76,000 speakers). In Nunavut over 70% of the population of approximately 25,000 people claims Inuktitut as their first language – well over the average of any other territory or province.

Inuktitut and official language status in Canada

Federally there are two official languages in Canada – English and French. But each province or territory also has its official language or languages. For example, Québec is the only province or territory where English is not an official language as it is a unilingual province with French as the official language. Only New Brunswick, the Northwest Territories and Nunavut have more than one official language.

New Brunswick the only province or territory that, like the country itself, has both French and English as its official languages. Nunavut and the Northwest Territories are the only two jurisdictions in North America where aboriginal languages have official status. Nunavut has three official languages - French, English and Inuktitut. The Northwest Territories has eight official languages – English, French, Inuktitut and five other aboriginal languages. The Northwest Territories was also the first province or territory to have an aboriginal language as one of the official languages by way of protecting and preserving the aboriginal cultures.

While government proceedings are currently being carried on in English in Nunavut, it is the explicit goal of the Government of Nunavut to make Inuktitut its daily working language. Everyone who works for the government is supposed to be fluent in Inuktitut but this will take time as many Inuit are no longer fluent and those coming from the south to work for the territorial government only have rudimentary skills. The government currently has a 20-year goal to make everyone bilingual.

The development of the written language

Across the circumpolar North there are two forms of the Inuit written language – one that uses the Roman alphabet and another that uses syllabics or symbols to represent sounds. Both forms were created by missionaries and were implemented in different areas of the

world depending upon which missionaries were working where. Consequently, in Canada, there is a dual orthography for Inuit with the Innuvialuit in the Northwest Territories and the Inuit from Labrador using the Roman alphabet while the majority of the Inuit in Nunavut use the syllabic system.

Alaska is the only region where the Inuit developed their own system of writing again, in direct relation to the missionary goals of preaching the Bible. In the early 20th century, several individuals, not knowing any English, developed their own orthography based on picture writing. One of the most well known was Uyaqoq who assisted at a Moravian mission. Uyaqoq spent a good deal of time developing his system and eventually incorporating a syllabic system though today all this is lost and the Roman alphabet is used to write Inuktitut in Alaska.

Inuktitut was an oral language until relatively recently. When the written language was introduced words were written phonetically and the phonetic versions vary from region to region which is why one will often see the same word spelled differently in two publications.

The very first time Inuktitut was written was by Lutheran missionaries in Greenland in the mid-1700s who translated the New Testament into Inuktitut using the Roman alphabet. Over the next 100 years the written form adapted and changed with many variations of the written language developing. It was in the mid-1800s that a Moravian priest, Samuel Kleinschmidt, born in Greenland and fluent in the Inuit language, developed and published a standardized orthography. Thanks to Kleinschmidt's incredible dedication, Greenland, unlike Canada, has a standard written Inuit language.

It was the Greenland missionaries who came over to Labrador in the late 18th century that brought the written form of the language to Canada. The Inuit language in Labrador, Inuttut, has consequently developed quite differently from the language in the rest of the country and the Labrador Inuit are very protective of their language not wanting to replace it with a standard Canadian form of Inuktitut.

In the Central and Western Arctic, the written form of Inuktitut developed quite differently than in Greenland, Labrador or Alaska. Rather than the written language being based on the Roman orthography, it was developed from a syllabic system.

In the early 1800s in southern Ontario, the Reverend James Evans, after becoming frustrated with the limitations of using the Roman alphabet to write the Ojibway language, developed a syllabic orthography based on his knowledge of Pitman shorthand.

While Evans was never able to really implement the system with the Ojibway, he adapted it to suit the Cree at Norway House, a fur-trading post at the north end of Lake Winnipeg in Manitoba. The syllabic system was immediately successful – within a couple of hours one could master the written language. And, for the first time, the written system was used to communicate between the Cree and quickly traveled across the country as Cree left one another messages on birch bark. In fact, Evans became known to the Cree as “the man who made birch bark talk.”

Reverend James Evan's orthography was to become the basis for the Inuktitut syllabic system that developed outside Labrador and Alaska. By the mid-1800s two missionaries – John Horden and E.A. Watkins – were producing materials in syllabics for the Inuit. Horden was stationed at Moose Factory at the southern tip of James Bay and Watkins at Fort George on the mouth of La Grande River on the eastern shores of James Bay. The work of Horden and Watkins formed the basis of the syllabic orthography for Canada's Inuit.

The proliferation of the syllabic orthography is credited to Edmund Peck who, in 1876, was called to act as a missionary for the Inuit. He was stationed at Little Whale River on the east shore of the Hudson's Bay where he worked with both the Indians and Inuit. Peck dedicated years of his time to writing out the complete Inuit language and in syllabics. Apparently he spent 6 hours per day for 7 years to become fluent and was respected by the Inuit who nicknamed him, Uqammak or the "one who speaks well." After working on the eastern shores of Hudson's Bay he spent time in the Ungava region and finally established the first mission on Baffin Island on Blacklead Island in Cumberland Sound. His translations of church literature may their way around the North and in no time the Inuit were teaching one another about the Bible based on Peck's writing system.

Literacy in the North

The syllabic writing system made it very easy for the Anglican Church to proselytize over a large area of the Arctic as it was so easy to learn and was passed on from Inuk to Inuk and community to community. The Inuit ended up doing much of the teaching to one another. By the early 1900s there were many Inuit men who acted as preachers and Inuit women who taught in community schools. In many areas where missionaries had never visited, the Inuit were still able to read.

The memory of the Inuit regarding the missionaries was very positive in those early years and before mandatory federal government education. Peter Pitseolak, an Inuit historian who passed away in the mid-70s wrote:

I was born when Christianity had already come to Baffin Island. For myself, I did not like the old, old way because the shamans would kill the people they did not like. When the ministers came the shamans stopped their killings. Reverend Peck – Okhamuk – was the first minister to bring the word of God to Baffin Island. People were very fond of him because he was so loving and friendly with all the people.

People from Our Side, 1975

Literacy developed in the early 20th century in the North as a result of missionary-run classes for children and parents passing on literacy and the reading of the Bible to their children. An Inuk woman writes of her memories as a child:

I will never forget the few nights that I spent learning syllabics. There were few of us inside that igloo, dad, mom, Marie, my older sister, Susie, my younger sister, and myself ... Dad would open his Bible and teach me one syllabic after another until I was able to read it well enough.

*"Writing in Inuktitut: An Historical Perspective," Inuktitut, September 1983
by Kenn Harper*

In the early 20th century the Inuit also began to record their own activities thanks to the development of the written language. Peter Pitseolak's diaries are now the most famous of Inuit written diaries/journals. He wrote *People from Our Side*, a history of the people of Baffin Island and *Escape from Death* about he and his son's narrow escape from death on a hunting trip. Both journals were written in syllabics and later translated into English. Pitseolak realized that life was changing dramatically in the North and that he wanted to keep a record of traditional life for his grandchildren.

Records were also being kept in Roman orthography the most famous being *I, Nuligak*, the autobiography of a man who lives on Herschel Island. The first book written and published

in syllabics was *The Autobiography of John Ayaruaq* published in 1968. The first novel was published in the late 60s entitled *Harpoon of the Hunter* by Markoosie.

Standardizing the written language

Obviously the syllabics, in this era when the Inuit feel their culture to be so deeply threatened, have assumed a symbolic significance over-riding any considerations of "efficiency" ... [the majority of the Inuit feel] that the syllabics are their own culturally distinctive form of writing, and worth retaining for cultural identity reasons alone.

Professor Bob Williamson
quoted in "Inuktitut Writing Systems: The Current Situation," in
Inuktitut, September 1983, by Kenn Harper

It was in the 1950s that the federal government had an increased role in the North offering a variety of social services and implementing mandatory schooling that there was also an increased need for materials published in Inuktitut. The various Inuktitut orthographies presenting a problem in publishing material for all Inuit. Consequently the federal government began the process of hiring linguists to assist with unifying orthographies and making recommendations as to how to proceed with printed materials.

In the 50s and 60s the federal government hired linguists to recommend how to standardize Inuktitut (Gilles Lefebvre was hired in the 1950s; Raymond Gagné in the 1960s). Both linguists suggested the use of Roman orthography. Neither realized the Inuit attachment to syllabics as the Inuit felt that the syllabics were more unique to their culture whereas Roman orthography was more English. According to Mark Kalluak, an Inuk who assisted the linguists:

When I became familiar with the use of syllabics, I became, as it were, in love with them, even so far as to defend their use if someone wasn't pleased with the way I write, or hinted I was wrong ... Some Inuit do not want to give up syllabics simply because they're different and it makes them appear to be genuine Inuk; some perhaps even think that syllabics was invented by Inuit.

quoted in "Inuktitut Writing Systems: The Current Situation," in
Inuktitut, September 1983, by Kenn Harper

In 1972 the Inuit held a four-day conference on the syllabic orthography and standardization and sought public input and debate. This led to the creation of the Inuit Language Commission in 1974 funded by a quarter million dollars from the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs and under the jurisdiction of the Inuit Tapirisat of Canada. Jose Kusugak was appointed the Executive Director of the Commission.

The Inuit Language Commission was made up of one representative from each of the six major dialectal areas. Each commissioner visited his areas and sought input from the communities in that area. There was a basic consensus throughout the north – except from Labrador and aside from some dissent among the older Inuit – to alter the local orthographies to produce a standard writing system. Each area had developed its own orthography and these particular ways of writing reflected that local culture and history and while there is definite attachment to those systems there was also a willingness to adopt a written system that could be understood across the communities.

The Labradorians were an exception. They wanted to retain their own writing system and to resolve any inconsistencies themselves. They resented that a new system was being suggested and imposed from the outside. They felt their own writing system had a 200-year history and reflected their own culture. While Labrador has not standardized its written

system with the rest of the North, it was the first region to publish an Inuktitut dictionary by the Inuit.

After the commissioners shared the responses of their various communities, it was decided to develop two standard orthographies - Roman and syllabic. For this purpose the Technical Orthography Commission was established. The Technical Orthography Commission created two standardized orthographies that were completely compatible and interchangeable with one another. The dual orthographies were ratified in August 1976 in what is today, Iqaluit, with government representatives and members of the Anglican and Catholic churches in attendance. The Roman orthography was named, *qaliujaaqpait* and the syllabic orthography, *qaniujaaqpait*. Inuit living in the Northwest Territories (the Innupialuit), western Nunavut and Labrador use the roman orthography or *Qaliujaaqpait*, and those living in Nunavik and Nunavut use syllabics or *Qaniujaaqpait*. The issue over whether to have one or two writing systems is still not resolved but two writing systems have been the standard now for over 25 years and this is unlikely to change soon.

Once the two systems were ratified, the Technical Orthography Commission was no longer necessary and was replaced by the Inuit Language Commission, now part of the Inuit Cultural Institute in charge of language development, implementation and recommendations.

Therefore, while there is a standard dual orthography for Canada's North, there is no standard or official spoken dialect. Greenland, on the other hand and with a much larger population, does have its own official dialect called Kalaallisut that has been used and accepted for over a century. This will likely never happen in Canada for though most Inuit would favor a standard dialect, they are also strongly attached to their own regional dialects. For the Canadian Inuit, a standard dialect would mean extinction of regional dialects. Greenland did not have this struggle as Kleinschmidt produced a standard dialect that was basically imposed on the Greenland Inuit without their consultation.

Preservation of Inuktitut

Inuktitut is one of the eight official languages in the Northwest Territories and one of the three official languages in Nunavut along with French and English. The Nunavut government has promised to make Inuktitut the working language in parliament, but at this point many of the government employees are from outside the territory and do not speak the language. Language training is usually provided prior to an employees tenure in Nunavut, but nonetheless the skills would be rudimentary. The Nunavut government has a 20-year plan to implement Inuktitut into the daily workings of government.

In the 50s and 60s, when mandatory residential schooling was imposed, most families could at least communicate in the written language to stay in touch. But, at the residential schools, Inuktitut was not allowed and so, from the 50s until the mid-70s, the language was lost to the younger generation. It wasn't until the mid-70s that Inuktitut was reinstated in the schools.

Unfortunately, while the Inuit are well aware of the importance of children learning Inuktitut throughout their education, there is a severe lack of teachers fluent in the language. Consequently, Inuktitut is not taught throughout elementary and high school – in Iqaluit it is only taught until Grade 4. All students in the Nunavut start their day by singing "O, Canada" in Inuktitut.

There is some confusion over the fact that the federal government has put more money into French programs in Nunavut than into Inuktitut programs. (In 2002 just over 1 million was

dedicated to Inuktitut language programs while almost 1.5 million was earmarked for French language programs.) However, as strange as this may seem in Nunavut where about 85% of the people are Inuit, it is written in the Canadian Constitution and the Official Languages Act that the federal government must provide funding for French language minorities outside of Québec. Though the federal government is not required by law to fund aboriginal languages in Nunavut and the Northwest Territories, it provides this funding nonetheless.

Of the 4,500 people in Iqaluit, 60% are non-Inuit. Therefore, most of the town signs are in English only. There is now a move to create a law much like the one in Québec regarding French, where signage – public signs, posters and commercial advertising – must be in Inuktitut and while English and French may also appear, those languages must be less prominent. Apparently, and unlike Québec, the local merchants have little issue with this potential law.

Firsts in Inuktitut

Inuktitut was first used in Canadian federal parliament in 1979. In 1979 the federal government created a second seat in the House of Commons for the Northwest Territories. As it was that seat was from roughly the same area as today's Nunavut. The first Inuk was voted in as a Member of Parliament, Peter Ittinuar. Every new member must give a maiden speech to the House and Mr. Ittinuar gave his speech in Inuktitut. This was, of course, the first time that Inuktitut was used in the House of Commons.

The first ever feature film in Inuktitut was just produced in 2001. *Atanarjuat* (The Fast Runner), produced by Zacharias Kunuk, is based on a legendary Inuit tale. It is the first time in history the Inuktitut language was spoken at the winner's podium at the Cannes International Film Festival in May of 2001 when Kunuk was awarded the Camera d'Or for the film. In February Kunuk won three Genie awards, the Canadian equivalent of the Oscar's. Again, he first gave his acceptance speech in Inuktitut and then in English. *Atanarjuat* is the first Inuit-made movie in Canada.

Kunuk is from Igloolik, a 1,200-member community on the northern tip of the Melville Peninsula. Ninety percent of the crew in *Atanarjuat* and all of the actors were from Igloolik. After accepting the award Kunuk said that now he wanted to return home to fix his ski-doo and get ready for hunting season. "I've been working so hard on this movie for the last four years I haven't had time to hunt. Now I'm going to give myself a reward."

Conclusion

The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in the North has been broadcasting in Inuktitut for decades and now these programs and interviews can be heard on the CBC website. Inuktitut is used on northern television and in videos and film. Again, the territorial government has a goal to make Inuktitut the working language of government by 2009 and while currently Inuktitut is not available in Nunavut up to high school, every effort is being made to offer Inuktitut at the higher grades. While the preservation of a language takes tremendous resources and effort, it is the vision of the Inuit across the circumpolar North to keep their language alive and thriving. With the continued support of the federal and territorial governments and such organizations as the Inuit Circumpolar Conference, there is every hope that this may be the case.