

Inuktit Uqausiit (Inuit Languages) in Canada – History and Contemporary Developments

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Language not only communicates, it defines culture, nature, history, humanity and ancestry. Preserving endangered languages is a vital part of securing the culture and heritage of our rich human landscape. Language keeps traditions alive, it inspires knowledge and respect about our past and the planet on which we live, and it links communities across borders and beyond time.

Quoted from the United Nations web site
"The UN Works for Cultural Diversity: Endangered Languages"

The scientific community has warned that such historical assimilation campaigns—combined with declining Indigenous populations, increased mobility, economic pressures, as well as exposure to television and other communications technologies—could lead to the loss of half of the world's 6,000 to 7,000 languages by 2050. With such a decline, they warn, will come the demise of local knowledge, mentalities, creativity and heritage, as well as specialized information such as unique survival skills and traditional medicines.

from *Canada World View*, Fall 2004

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

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

Introduction

Today there are roughly 6,000 languages spoken around the world with 90% of those 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. For this reason many minority groups have created language commissions to impact policy and increase training in schools. This is certainly true for the Inuit in Canada. Against all odds and in direct challenge to the forces of globalization, the Canada's Inuit are making strides in language retention that are models for the rest of the world. From language training in the schools to the first Inuit language feature-length films to the adoption of Inuit names for solar bodies, the Inuit of Canada are impacting the strength of their communities and bringing worldwide attention to the language.

Canada is officially a bilingual country. However, each province or territory also has its own official language(s). New Brunswick, for example, is the only province or territory that is bilingual like Canada. Most of the rest of the political jurisdictions claim English as their official language. Québec is unilingual with French as its official language; the new territory of Nunavut (1999) has three official languages – English, French and Inuktitut; and the Northwest Territories has 11 official languages – English, French, three Inuit languages and six additional Aboriginal languages.

Of Canada's approximate 33 million people, about 1.2 million are Aboriginal and of those, only about 25% (or 300,000 people) can speak their mother tongue. In fact, of the 50-70 Aboriginal languages spoken in Canada today, it is argued that only three – Cree, Ojibway and the Inuit language – have sufficient speakers to ensure their survival. Already several Aboriginal languages in Canada are extinct, with the majority destined for extinction by mid-century if the current trend continues.

Of all the aboriginal languages in Canada, the Inuit language is the second most-common mother tongue next to Cree. In Nunavut over 70% of the population of approximately 25,000 people claim the Inuit language as their first language – well over the average of any other territory or province. The strength of the language may be due to the isolation of northern communities that has ensured some protection against overwhelming outside influence. Of course, the nature and intensity of contact with outsiders varies from region to region in Canada's Arctic. However, in general, while there have been outsiders in the North for hundreds of years now, it wasn't until very recently –

in fact, not until the mid-20th century – that the survival of the Inuit culture and language became seriously threatened.

The Inuit language has two major divisions – Yupik, spoken in Chukotka and southwestern Alaska, and Eskimo-Aleut used in northern Alaska, Canada and Greenland. The Yupik and Eskimo-Aleut languages are pretty much unintelligible from one another but the Eskimo-Aleut, while it varies from country to country and across regions, can be understood by the Inuit throughout the circumpolar North. Eskimo-Aleut languages may also be referred to as *Inuktit Uqausiit* (“Inuit languages”). Greenland has the largest number of speakers – about 54,000 Kalaallit speak Kalaallisut. In Alaska Inupiatun is spoken along with Yupik.

In Canada there are four distinct Inuit regions. From west to east these include Inuvialuit, part of the Northwest Territories; Nunavut, created in 1999 out of the eastern portion of the Northwest Territories; Nunavik, the Inuit region in northern Québec; and Nunatsiavut, the Inuit region in Newfoundland and Labrador. While Inuktitut (which means “in the way of the Inuk”) is commonly used to refer to the Inuit language across Canada, the spelling of the word and names for variations of the language differ making it more precise to use “the Inuit language” or *Inuktit Uqausiq* (“Inuit language”) when referring to the language of Canada’s north as a whole and to use the more specific spellings/language names when referring to a particular region/language.

Jay Arnakak, Qikiqtani Inuit Association, Nunavut, offered the following breakdown:

The distinctive names for the *Inuit Uqausiit* of Canada’s Arctic are:

- Inuvialuit region – Inuvialuktun and Inuinnaqtun (two major dialects)
- Nunavut region – Inuktitut and Inuinnaqtun (two major dialects)
- Nunavik region – Inuttitut or Inuktitut (Ungava Bay and Hudson Bay, respectively)
- Nunatsiavut – Inuttitut or Inuttut (one language, two interchangeable spellings).

Development of a Written Inuit Language in Canada

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 Inuvialuit 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 (in Kitikmeot the roman orthography is used for Inuinnaqtun).

(Alaska is the only region where the Inuit developed their own system of writing. In the early 20th century, several individuals, not knowing English, developed an 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. However, his efforts were lost and today the Roman alphabet is used to write Inupiatun in Alaska.)

The very first time the Inuit language was written was by Lutheran missionaries in Greenland in the mid-1700s who translated the New Testament from English 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 that has had much to do with Greenland having a singular standard orthography today.

Moravian missionaries came to Labrador in the late 18th century, some of them already fluent in Greenlandic. They set up missions in Labrador where they used Roman orthography to write translations of the Bible into Inuttitut/Inuttut. The missionaries also set up schools promoting reading and writing in the Inuit language. By the mid-1800s, of the 334 Inuit in one congregation in Labrador, only about nine or ten were not able to read. The schools were run by the Inuit and in Inuttitut/Inuttut. It was only when Newfoundland joined Canada in 1949 that all instruction in the Inuit language ended with the imposition of a provincial school system.

In the Central and Western Arctic, the written form of the Inuit language 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 the written language could be mastered. And, for the first time, the written system was used by the Cree to communicate – the syllabic system quickly traveled across the country as the Cree left one another messages on birch bark. Evans became known as “the man who made birch bark talk.”

Reverend James Evan's orthography was to become the basis for the Canadian Inuit language 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.

However, 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 Hudson Bay where he worked with both the Cree and Inuit. He was given the job of translating portions of the Bible into the Inuit language and teaching the Bible, reading, and writing to the Inuit. Peck dedicated his life to this endeavor and his impact was profound. He apparently spent the better part of every day for seven years to become fluent in the dialect of the region and to write out the complete Inuit language in syllabics. Because of his incredible dedication, Peck earned the name, *Uqammak*, or "the one who speaks well" and is remembered to this day for his contributions to literacy in the North.

Peck spent considerable time in two other regions – the Ungava region in northern Québec and later on Blacklead Island in Cumberland Sound on the east coast of Baffin Island (near present-day Pangnirtung). In both areas he taught syllabics to the Inuit and introduced communities to his translations of church literature and the Bible. As with the Cree, the Inuit found the system easy to learn and began teaching one another the written language via Bible groups and school settings enabling literacy to spread to regions that the missionaries had not even visited. The syllabic writing system made it very easy for the Anglican Church to proselytize over a large area of the Arctic as it was easy to learn and readily passed on from community to community.

First Published Works in the Inuit Language

By the early 20th century, the Inuit began to write down their activities and stories. The first Inuk to publish was Peter Pitseolak (from Baffin Island), whose diaries are now the most famous of the Inuit written diaries or journals. In the early 20th century, Pitseolak 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, later translated into English, and published after his death in 1974. Pitseolak realized that life was changing dramatically in the North and that he wanted to keep a record of traditional life for his grandchildren. Other early works were *I, Nuligak*, the autobiography of a Nuligak who lived on Herschel Island that was translated and published in 1966; and, *Harpoon of the Hunter*, the first Inuit novel written by Markoosie in the late 60s. The first book written and published in syllabics was *The Autobiography of John Ayaruaq* published in 1968.

Inuktitut Language Threatened

It wasn't until the mid-20th century that the *Inuktitut Uqausiq* became threatened. Following World War II, Canada's Arctic came to the attention of the Canadian federal government due to sovereignty and security concerns (brought about by the Cold War), as well as the discovery of tremendous natural resources. To work more effectively with the Inuit, the Canadian government decided that it was important to provide citizenship education and training in English. The rationale was to "help" the Inuit and, in fact, in 1958 Prime Minister John Diefenbaker based his election campaign on the "Northern Vision," which he believed would improve living conditions in the Far North. Mandatory schooling and social services were established in the Inuit communities. To entice families to send their children to school, the government offered family allowances and welfare payments in exchange for attendance.

Until this time, the Inuit were not overwhelmed by the language of the *Qallunaat* (white outsiders) or the missionaries and were able to successfully incorporate English words into their vocabulary without impacting the integrity of the language. Freelance Inuk writer, Ann Meekitjuk Hanson, describes how the Inuit language incorporated English words during the various periods of contact. "When the whalers came, they brought with them many things that would alter this way of life, including a new language. Words like tea, sugar, flour ... became everyday Inuktitut words, but their pronunciation was distinctly Inuk: "tea" became *tii*, "sugar" was pronounced *sukaq*, *palaugaaq* meant "flour" ... when the clergy came, more new words and phrases were added to our language ... when the Hudson's Bay Company came, more terms and phrases were invented, all in Inuktitut ... when the RCMP came, they too brought new words and expressions that broadened our language" (from *The Nunavut Handbook*). While the Inuit language may have been evolving, its survival and the ultimate integrity of the language were not initially at risk.

Beginning in the 1950s, and for the first time, Inuit children were learning from *Qallunaat* who did not know the Inuit language and in many cases its use was disallowed in the schools. Consequently, the language and traditional survival skills were all but lost to this generation. By the 1970s, and in response to this incredible social impact, the Inuit across Canada began to organize politically.

Political Organization and Protection of the Language

The 1960s and 1970s were a dynamic time globally for minority nations, cultures and racial groups who wanted increased powers and rights. Several European colonies were undergoing independence movements, Blacks in the US were engaged in the Civil Rights Movement, and the French in Canada initiated the Quiet Revolution – a vehicle to fight for the survival of their culture and language. Similarly, the Inuit across the Circumpolar North began to

form politically in an effort to increase self-determination. In the 1970s an Inuk from Alaska, Eben Hopson, founded the international Inuit organization, the Inuit Circumpolar Conference (now the Inuit Circumpolar Council). In Canada a national political organization was created, the Inuit Tapirisat of Canada (now the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami). And, in each of Canada's four Inuit regions – Nunavik, Inuvialuit, Nunavut and Nunatsiavut – political organizations were created to address immediate and local concerns regarding land claims and self-governance.

In terms of language training, some of the most impressive efforts occurred in Nunavut and Nunavik. In Nunavik, control over education began with the creation of the Kativik School Board founded in 1975 with transfer funds supplied by the James Bay and Northern Québec Agreement. The Kativik School Board worked closely with the School of Education at McGill University in Montréal creating a partnership to train Aboriginal educators. The program started by offering community-based courses in Nunavik to meet the growing need for Inuit language speakers at the elementary level. The first students were Inuit women. Many of them lacked formal education but most had tremendous experience working as classroom assistants for non-Inuit teachers in Northern Québec.

Some of these early graduates later worked with McGill consultants to plan courses that reflected the academic standards of McGill but incorporated Inuit content and organization. Today, the Office of First Nations and Inuit Education and the School of Education work together to provide the Certificate in Education for First Nations and Inuit and the Certificate in Aboriginal Literacy Education. Many of the courses are now offered in *Inuktitut Uqausiq*. The program was so successful that Nunavut pursued a similar partnership with McGill offering courses in Iqaluit, the capital of Nunavut (Arctic College has since taken over the education program).

In Canada, all four Inuit regions have at least some measure of jurisdiction over their education and provide training to educators in the Inuit language. In Nunavut and Nunavik the language of instruction for Kindergarten, Grades 1 and 2 is exclusively the Inuit language. After the early grades the children are taught in English (or in Nunavik they can select French) with Inuit culture and language training continuing through graduation. Currently, however, there are not enough teachers fluent in the Inuit language to offer many courses at the high school level nor does the system allow for *Inuttitut* instruction.

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

During the 1950s when the federal government was implementing mandatory schooling in Canada's Arctic, there was also an increased need for materials published in the Inuit language. However, the various orthographies presented challenges to publishing. 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. The linguists suggested the use of Roman orthography throughout the regions not realizing that certain regions used and therefore were attached to syllabics. 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. There was consensus to alter the local orthographies to produce a standardized writing system. While each area had developed its own orthography, there was also a willingness to adopt a written system that could be understood across the communities.

The Nunatsiavummiut (the Inuit from the Labrador regions of Nunatsiavut) were an exception. They wanted to retain their own writing system and to resolve any inconsistencies themselves. They felt their own writing system had a 200-year history and therefore reflected the culture.

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 creating two standardized orthographies that were completely compatible and interchangeable. 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 anytime 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. For the Canadian Inuit, a standard dialect would mean extinction of regional languages or dialects.

Preservation of Inuktitut

In Canada's Inuit regions, strides are being made to increase the use of the Inuit language and to recognize it as an official language, but there are still barriers. In Nunavik, for example, only French enjoys official language status and not the Inuit language. Nunavut adopted the official languages of the Northwest Territories when it became its own territory in 1999. However, it was only this last spring (2008) that the Nunavut Legislative Assembly passed the Official Languages Act for Nunavut giving a clear legal statement for the right of use of the Inuit language (this act has to be passed by the Government of Canada before it becomes law).

"This is a very important and historic step that the government has taken on ... for the betterment of our future generations, where our Inuktitut language is pretty well guaranteed that it will have the protection by law," said Louis Tapardjuk, the territory's minister of culture, language, elders and youth.

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 the Inuit language 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 proposed law.

In Inuvialuit in the western Arctic, Inuvialuktun is classified as an endangered language because it is spoken by fewer than 50% of the population, many of whom are elders (Inuvialuit Region Corporation website).

Firsts in Inuktitut

In Canada's Arctic there is a solid base of fluent speakers and many positive developments in language policy and education that will hopefully ensure the survival of the Inuit language. For example, for many years the Inuit language has been used on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation North (or CBC North); it is one of the languages of *Nunatsiaq News* (the newspaper for the territories); and there is increased television programming in the Inuit language.

The Inuit language 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 part of his speech in the Inuit language. This was, of course, the first time the language was used in the House of Commons.

Currently there are two Inuit serving in the Senate – Charlie Watt and Willie Adams. In 2008 they worked with the national organization to introduce a groundbreaking pilot project in the Senate regarding the use of the Inuit language – it will become the first Canadian aboriginal language to be represented in the Senate and will be an official language of the Upper Chamber. What this means is that some of the proceedings, debates and meetings of the Senate will be translated from English. And, the meetings of the standing committees on aboriginal affairs and fisheries and oceans will be interpreted in *Inuktitut Uqausiq*.

Just recently, the first feature-length film was produced by an Inuk and in the Inuit language with English subtitles. *Atanarjuat* (or, *The Fast Runner*) is the first feature film written, directed and produced by the Inuit, with an all-Inuit cast. The film is based on an ancient legend that addresses the dangers of putting individual desires before the needs of the community. The director, Zacharias Kunuk, is from the small village of Igoolik in Nunavut and worked with Igoolik Isuma Productions to direct and produce the film.

Atanarjuat won the 2001 Caméra d'Or at the Cannes International Film Festival for the Best First Feature Length Film, as well as six Genie awards in 2002 (the Canadian equivalent of the Oscars). At both Cannes and Toronto,

Kunuk gave his acceptance speech in Inuktitut, marking the first time the Inuit language had been spoken from the winner's podium. "Zacharias Kunuk, an Inuit director from the 1,200-member community of Igoolik, thanked the bemused multilingual elite of the international film world in his native language," reported *The Globe and Mail*, "the 43-year-old Mr. Kunuk said that he was happy to 'promote our culture around the world, but that he would return home this week, where he hoped to fix his Ski-Doo and get ready for hunting season.'" *Atanarjuat* was significant in bringing the North and Inuit culture to movie houses around the world.

Most recently, the Inuit language was brought to international attention when the four new moons of Saturn were named after Inuit mythological characters. A group of astronomers, including Canadian scientist J.J. Kavelaars, discovered the moons. Kavelaars was aware of the work of Michael Kusugak, the prolific Nunavummiut writer of children's stories, and suggested that the icy moons be named after Kusugak's Inuit characters. In 2003 the International Astronomical Union approved the names Paaliaq, Ijiraq (a mythical character in Kusugak's book, *Hide and Sneak*), Kiviuk, and Siarnaq. These new moons are the first objects in the solar system to be given non-European names or names not based on traditional Greco-Roman mythological characters.

The Inuit language is receiving increased attention and "visibility" globally as are the Inuit and the Circumpolar North. While the Inuit language may not be the first language that comes to mind when thinking of Canada's official languages, it has, in fact, shaped the linguistic distinctiveness of the country. There are only about 30,000 Canadians that speak the Inuit language and those Canadians – the Inuit – have shaped Canada's identity in a way that is distinct and has influenced people throughout the world.

(Much of the history of the language was taken from Kenn Harper's superb essays in the September 1983 edition of *Inuktitut*. Harper is the author of *Give Me My Father's Body: The Life of Minik, the New York Eskimo*. The author would like to thank Anne Hilton, Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies, for her assistance with editing, and Suzanne Beaubien for taking the time to assist the author in connecting with linguistics.)