

## Trends on Inuit language: ICC, Tromso Norway

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Most if not all standardized languages were not necessarily chosen by native speakers like Italian or Kalaallit. Rather they were like in the case of Kalaallit Nunaat a result of the work of a capable and dedicated missionary, Samuel Kleinschmidt, who laboured throughout his life for the development and preservation of the Greenlandic language. Perhaps he was lucky in some ways living and working in a central position, both geographical and linguistic, among Greenlandic dialects.

I think it must be clearly stated, it was not chosen as the result of any polling of Inuit opinion or the seeking of any consensus among Inuit themselves. Many people assume this could not be duplicated in the Canadian north today.

But, why not? Why do some people assume it could not be duplicated today? It is happening as we speak. It is happening naturally and fast enough that we can see it happening. With the new language bill in Nunavut we are creating a "taiguusiliuqtiit" committee. This will go a long way in creating a standard Nunavut Inuit language but not a Canadian Inuit standard dialect for the school curriculum, news media, emailing nor books. Why not take this opportunity to work with all dialects of Inuit language from Alaska to Kalaallit Nunaat.

In a book titled "eat, pray, love" by Elizabeth Gilbert. I quote: "...Europe was once a pandemonium of numberless Latin-derived dialects that gradually, over the centuries, morphed into a few separate languages – French, Portuguese, Spanish, Italian. What happened in France, Portugal and Spain was an organic evolution: the dialect of the most prominent city gradually became the accepted language of the whole region. Italy was different. It didn't get itself unified until quite late in life (1861) and until then was a peninsula of warring city-states dominated by proud local princes or other European powers. So for the longest time a scientist in Florence could barely communicate with a poet in Sicily or a merchant in Venice (except in Latin, of course, which was hardly considered the national language). In the sixteenth century, some Italian intellectuals got together and decided that this was absurd. Unquote:

I think this is where we are right now in the Inuit circumpolar world. Many Inuit intellectuals are getting together and deciding that it is absurd that 5 interpreters are needed for what is basically one language when we meet when there should be none.

We find it hard to develop international curriculum, nor newspaper. It is absurd, ridiculously incongruous, unreasonably bizarre, indeed absurd.

Dante Alighieri the great Florentine poet published his "Divine Comedy" book back in 1321, he shocked the literate world by not writing in Latin. Instead Dante' turned back to the streets, picking up the real Florentine language to tell his tale. Later a group of nationalist intellectuals sat down and decided that Dante's Italian would now be the official language of Italy.

It would be like deciding that the standard west Greenlandic dialect works well in all aspects and in Tromso Norway Inuit intellectuals decided that – from this point forward – all Inuit language speakers are going to speak pure west Greenlandic. AND IT ACTUALLY WORKED!

Apparently the Italian spoken today, is not roman or Venetian (though these were the powerful military and merchant cities), Italian is essentially, Dantean.

It is difficult to summarize Inuit opinion on the subject. Probably it is most accurate, as a general statement, to say that most Inuit informed on the topic would support, philosophically, the idea of a standard national Inuktitut dialect. But what dialect?

Many Inuit communities are made up of many dialects and only in the last few years have their differences begun to be "levelled" in the speech of the young. Right now one of the major needs of interpreters is multi-dialectual awareness and as a result of radio, many Inuit, although often speaking only one dialect, are able to understand much of the vocabulary of many dialects.

Inuktitut is one of the few aboriginal languages linguists give a chance of survival over the long term.

There are many new initiatives to help survival of the Inuit language but nothing would come close to standardizing Inuktitut.

In the magazine called Inuktitut then produced by Indian and northern affairs Canada, September of 1983 which seems to be very close to today's trend says:

There is as yet no standard Inuktitut dialect to use for official purposes, for publication, or for broadcasting in Canada. Until such time as one standard orthography is chosen, if ever, it is doubtful that there will be one. And until that time comes, Inuit have but little access to each others' writings, even with Canada. A report on Labrador notes:

Because of differences in dialects and writing systems, no material developed by the Kativik school board or the NWT department of education can be used directly in northern Labrador schools. However, there has been an exchange of ideas and some borrowed materials have been adapted and reprinted.

Similar adaptation and reprinting of materials has happened with some Greenlandic texts, which have been adapted for use in the schools of the eastern arctic, in syllabics. But transliteration of the orthography is not all that is required, for the vocabulary of Greenlandic differs sufficiently from that of the eastern arctic that translation of much of the material is also necessary.

It seems clear, then, that knowledge of the roman version of the ICI orthography is a prerequisite for Canadian Inuit who wish to have access to the orthography of Greenlandic literature. But knowledge of the vocabulary used in that literature will only come through conscious study of west Greenlandic. The use of orthographies so different as roman and syllabics makes the possibility of the development of a pan-Inuit literature in Inuktitut seem very remote indeed.

Edna Ahgeak Maclean is an Inuk linguist working at the Alaska native language centre in Fairbanks. She has proposed a partial solution to the problem of the plethora of writing systems. Her proposal is for an international auxiliary Inuit writing system, which would use the roman alphabet, and which would increase written mutual intelligibility between Inuit presently using different orthographies:

I believe that the common writing system for the Inuit language should be an auxiliary one. Why auxiliary? An auxiliary writing system is not intended to replace the existing major writing systems. Unquote

So, in finishing my 12 minutes, lets' between now and the next ICC general assembly work to pick a dialect and a writing form and decree it to be the standard dialect and writing system henceforth.

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