The Innu Language Documentation Project

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Abstract
In a situation of language endangerment, communities express a strong need for the documentation and preservation of their language which is increasingly threatened as the older generations of monolinguals pass away. The paper presents the Innu Language Documentation project, an endangered Algonquian language spoken by approximately 13000 people in 11 communities spread out over Northeastern Quebec and Labrador in Canada. It addresses the issues related to Native language endangerment but also focuses on models of collaborative research that may enable communities to move towards a better and more thorough documentation of their native language.

Introduction
Over the past twenty years linguists have been alerting the international community of the imminent threat to the world’s minority languages and especially to oral aboriginal languages (Hale et al. 1992, Brenzinger et al. 2003). As opposed to written languages, the disappearance of oral languages constitutes a complete lost for the cultural and linguistic world heritage. In reaction, institutions such as UNESCO (2006, 2009) have put forward a series of recommendations for the conservation and preservation of cultural knowledge through the archiving of oral materials.

This paper presents the Innu language documentation project. The first part of the paper explains the context and aims of the project. The partnership developed with the Innu community and the expected outcomes are described in the methodology section.

Context
Innu is an endangered Algonquian language spoken by roughly 13,000 speakers, scattered in eleven communities in Northeastern Quebec and Labrador in Canada. Innu has been the subject of intensive grammatical and sociolinguistic analysis by the first author over the past thirty years. Despite being one of the most studied languages in Quebec, there is no suitable linguistic documentation of the language to insure its conservation and preservation (see Lambert-Brétière, 2011).

Following the set of «best practices» developed by Himmelmann (1998, 2006), Austin (2006) and Woodbury (2003), among others, the ongoing Innu language documentation project is a step forward in the long term preservation of the language.

Objectives
The overall objective of the Innu language documentation project documentation project is to sustain Innu knowledge about their culture, traditions, and language.

The specific objectives of the project are a) to document and describe the Innu language, b) to insure its long term conservation by providing access to a large corpus of transcribed and annotated oral recordings in formats exploitable by both the speakers and specialists, and c) to support the speakers of Innu in their efforts and desire to maintain and promote their language. In addition to the elaboration of a linguistically analyzed collection of texts, the Innu language documentation project aims to provide the Innu community with a high quality documentation of their language. The Innu language documentation includes valuable information about traditional ecological knowledge, e.g. waterways, hunting and fishing practices, etc.

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Methodology

Phase 1 of the project is centered on developing tools for digitalizing, accessing, analyzing and archiving the corpus of oral recordings. Audio files are processed with Transcriber which allows for a time-synchronized transcription. The parsing and interlinearization of texts with detailed grammatical information is done using Toolbox, a software designed by SIL International for the management and analysis of language data. On the whole, the Innu digital corpus includes audio materials provided with time-aligned transcriptions in standard orthography, multi-tier annotations, morpheme-to-morpheme glossings, and free translations in French and English. All documentation materials, including sound files and recordings, transcriptions, linguistic analysis, as well as translations, are organized using Arbil, which associates metadata to the data into a format appropriate for archiving. This makes the documentation all the more valuable to linguists, including those interested in the study of language variation and language death, and to the communities interested in promoting language retention and revitalisation. Language documentation of the language is the most important prerequisite to language revitalization if there are no speakers left (Hinton, 2010).

Partnership

The Project was initially set up in partnership with the Innu Cultural Institute (Institut Tshakapesh), but participants from other linguistic communities of Quebec (Cree, Naskapi, Atikamekw) were later included. The project has a flexible structure that insures fluid collaboration between linguists and the community. It is organized around two working groups. The ‘scientific’ team is mainly made up of linguists, technicians and Native members with linguistic training. This group is responsible for the linguistic analyses of the data, and for the production of training manuals (in French) for the benefit of the community, as well as for designing community programs to enhance Native capacity at language documentation. The second group acts as a ‘steering’ team and is constituted essentially of community members. Its role is to evaluate the needs of the community, recommend specific formats for the outputs, for example the creation of pedagogical material or the publication of written literacy, and assess different scenarios for archiving the material. The flow of interaction between the two groups is represented in Figure 1.

Conclusion

By providing a corpus of high quality original materials, the Innu language documentation project aims to make an important contribution to the ongoing developments in language documentation research and a major step in building valuable tools for language maintenance and revitalization.

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References


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