Standardization of the Inuit Language in Canada

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Abstract
This research project describes the various efforts at the standardization of Inuktut in Canada. The questions investigated relate to pedagogical considerations of accounting for dialectal differences and the different writing systems in Canada. These questions will hopefully serve as a resource to promote understanding and awareness of the different dialects and the writing system used in the Inuit regions of Canada and which of them might be most appropriate and readily accepted as 'the dialect of instruction'. This research will also have implications for the governments in the Inuit regions and their curriculum development– all of which have a stake in the successful implementation of the new standards as they will have to ensure it is taught to the Inuit students across Canada. It should be noted that the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami also includes the standardization of Inuktut across the four Inuit regions as a priority in the Strategy on Inuit Education (2011).

Résumé
Ce projet de recherche a pour but de décrire les divers efforts de standardisation de l’inuktut au Canada. Les questions abordées ici sont liées aux considérations pédagogiques au sujet des différences dialectales et des divers systèmes d’écriture au Canada. Ces questions sont conçues comme une ressource pour encourager la prise de conscience et la compréhension des divers dialectes et systèmes d’écriture utilisés dans les régions inuites du Canada et pour aider à déterminer quel dialecte pourrait être admis comme ‘dialecte d’instruction’. Cette recherche aura également des conséquences pour les gouvernements dans les régions inuites du Canada et leur développement du curriculum puisque – comme ils devront assurer son enseignement aux étudiants inuits à travers le Canada – ils ont tous un intérêt dans l’implotmentation réussie de nouveaux standards. Il est à noter que l’Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, l’organisation inuit au Canada, a également indiqué dans sa Stratégie sur l’Éducation Inuite en 2011, que la standardisation de l’inuktut dans les quatre régions inuites est une priorité majeure.

Introduction
Inuit writing systems were introduced at different times from Alaska to Greenland and introduced by the missionaries wanting to convert Inuit to Christianity. Unsurprisingly, colonization has impacted not only the continuity of Inuit society, but also its language and culture across the Arctic (Dorais 2010). The resulting fact that Inuit do not have a uniform way of writing is an indication of this non-uniform, historical process of colonization. The Inuit language is spread and divided between different nations and political units, who were reached and colonized by different peoples at different times. One result is that there is no uniform way of writing the Inuit language across the circumpolar world. Syllabics is used in most of Nunavut and Nunavik, while various Latin-based alphabets are used in the western part of Nunavut, Northwest Territories, Nunatsiavut, Alaska and Greenland. A Cyrillic alphabet is used for the Siberian Yupik languages of Russia (Harper 1983; Dorais 2010).

History of the Writing Systems
For Inuktitut magazine, Kenn Harper writes a historical perspective on writing in Inuktitut. He says Inuit throughout the North did not have traditional writing systems and no attempts were made to develop writing until contacts with the missionaries, with the exception of Alaskan Inuit who attempted to develop their own picture-writing systems in the early 1900’s (Harper, 1983). It was through the missionaries that writing, with varying writing systems and rules, was introduced at different times to the different regions of Inuit in the North.

Greenland
The earliest introduction to the written language was to the Greenlandic Inuit in the 1700’s by the Lutheran and Moravian missionaries. Paul Egede, son of Hans Egede who was the first missionary to Greenland, published a Greenlandic dictionary in 1751. He was possibly the first person to record first hand observations of Inuit in Greenland (Carl. C. Olsen 2011). From Greenland, missionaries traveled to Labrador in the late 1700’s where writing similar to that developed for Greenland, was introduced (Harper, 1983).

Labrador
Labrador Inuit were the first Canadian Inuit to have a written form introduced to them by the Moravian missionaries who came from Greenland. Their first mission opened in Nain as early as 1771. In 1791, the first school was opened and the only language of instruction was in Inuktitut (Dorais, 2003). Their writing system was similar to that of the Greenlandic as the missionaries had spent time in Greenland before arriving in Labrador. The slight differences can be seen in the use of the capital k for the q sound used in Greenland and other Inuit regions. Even when the q appears in the middle of a word, ‘K’ is used as in AjoKittuqjigingit for aujuqtuqjigingit. Another difference in writing appears with the use of the long vowels. In all other Inuit regions the long vowels are written as double vowels: ii, uu and aa, but in Labrador, the letter e is used for ii and o is used for uu and à is used for aa. We see examples of
these in words like nulettuk for nuliittuq (bachelor), Kalotik for qaluutik (bailer) and aunättuk for unaqaqtuq (is bleeding).

Alaska

The earliest documents in Alaska date from the late 1800s. They were religious documents written by Russian Orthodox, Jesuit Catholic and Moravian missionaries. Much has changed since. Edna McLean discussed the similarities and differences between dialects of Alaska, Canada and Greenland and the writing systems in her presentation on “Thoughts on a Common Writing System” during the Nunavut Language Summit in Iqaluit (February, 2010). In her presentation she spoke about ways some identical sounds are represented with different symbols thus creating differences in writing. In Alaska, the sound r is written with a dotted g (ġ) as a symbol not used in any other Inuit region. An example of the use of the dotted g appears in the word ilisâqvik (school) which is written as ilisarvik both in Canada and Greenland. They also use this symbol ƞ for the ng sound. The Inuktut word for wave is iŋiulik in Alaska and inguilik in Canada and Greenland. In Alaska they also have a distinctive difference with the sound ‘n’, which they write as ‘ǹ’, as in the word ñtuniq. This sound is similar to the sound used in the Spanish language for niño (boy) and niña (girl).

We also see some differences in the use of consonants. For example, the Inuktut word for kayak is written as qayaq in Alaska and qajaq in Canada and Greenland. In the case of the word eye, it is slightly different in all regions; iri (Alaska), iji (Canada) and isi (Greenland). Note that the word iri for eye in Alaskan is very similar to the pronunciation of iji with a more fricative sound. This same sound is written with a capped r in Eastern Qitirmiut in Canada, iiri.

McLean spoke about the idea of each region keeping their traditional writing systems while using an auxiliary writing system for cross regional communication. To achieve this, each region would need to be willing to compromise and make slight changes to the way they currently write and be determined that the initiative succeed (McLean, 1979).

Nunavut

In the 1800’s two different types of writing systems were introduced to the Inuit of Nunavut. In the Western Arctic, Roman characters were used, while in the Eastern Arctic, syllabics were used. John Horden and E.A Watkins, two missionaries from England, adapted the Cree syllabics to suit the Inuit language. After struggling to devise a means of recording accurately the sound of the native Ojibway speech in the Roman alphabet, Reverend James Evans adapted the Pitman shorthand writing system, which grandfathered most Canadian Aboriginal language syllabic writing systems in use today. Edmund Peck is usually credited for introducing the syllabics to the Inuit because he translated biblical material into Inuktutit and spent much time in the some parts of Nunavik and at Blacklead in the Cumberland Sound (Harper, 1983).

Most non-Inuit missionaries who introduced writing systems to Inuit were not trained linguists. These old writing systems needed much improvement because some characters did not properly represent the sounds of the Inuit language. In the 1970s, orthography reforms took place in all Inuit regions, from Alaska to Greenland, including in Canada.

ICI Standard Orthographies in Nunavut

In 1976 the Inuit Cultural Institute developed a standardized dual writing system, in syllabics and in Roman orthography, both forms mirroring each other so they are easily convertible. The new writing system introduced new symbols for sounds that were not previously represented in the old syllabic writing system. The reform also included “finals” or diacritics so each letter would represent one sound in the Inuit language. During the time of the reform, linguists and language professionals also put together spelling rules, whereby voiced sounds may only be paired with other voiced sounds and voiceless sounds may only be paired with other voiceless sounds.

Today, Inuktut in Nunavut is written using the ICI standard writing systems in all but the Qitirmiut dialects, which are closer to the Inuvialuit language. Other Inuit regions in Canada use modified forms of the ICI standard (Nunavut) or not at all (Nunatsiavut, Nunaput). Despite calls from some individuals in Nunavut for changes and reform (Bell 2010a, 2010b), the ICI standard systems are widely used today by Nunavut teachers and translators, and have been taught since the late 1970s to students in most Nunavut communities. It is well implanted in government publications, school materials and books for children and adults.

In 1976, the ICI Inuit language commission recommended that “this dual system of writing should be reviewed after five or ten years of use to measure its effectiveness and make revisions where necessary” (Harper 2011). This planned review never took place. Today, very little information or research data is available on the use of either writing systems in Nunavut. Generally speaking, there have been a few assumptions that “syllabics is holding Inuit back,” but these arguments are usually met with an “outcry of support for the retention of syllabics” (Harper 2011). Regardless of the arguments, they usually end up leading to passionate debates among Inuit.

Qitirmiut orthography does not comply with the ICI writing system that the Government of Nunavut has committed to use as a guideline for language services. Unlike the rules set in the ICI writing system, Qitirmiut words end in n’s and m’s such as tamaannik (both of them) and Nunavutim (Nunavut’s). These two words end with k and p using the ICI standard, tamaannik and Nunavutip. They also use y’s, d’s and f’s. The y is used in place of the single j as in iyi (eye) and not iji, tadja
Choosing a Standard

The chosen standard must be agreed upon. If there is no agreement, a standard cannot be implemented. Grenoble and Whaley state that “it is important to ensure that standard orthography is also acceptable to religious authorities, educational authorities and other leaders.” They go on to say, “Considerations must also be given to speakers of the language of wider communications (e.g. English) who might be involved in the areas of language planning, language training, and education” (2006). To inform, educate and get opinions from the community radio stations or phone in shows, meetings, television phone in shows and posters. The population will need to be informed of the advantages and disadvantages of standardization for our language and for the future. If we do not take action now we risk losing our language or see a rapid decline in use in the near future, as Qitirmiut and Labradormiut have. If the language is not being spoken and passed on, it takes only one generation for it to be lost.

People will need to be educated on Inuktut grammar and the use of consonants in the different dialects. It is important to define why one particular dialect is ideal as the standard. Good examples are needed to clarify the use of consonants from the more conservative to more assimilated dialects; qinmiq qinmiq, apqt aqqt, as well as differences used for the same meaning; anijumajunga – aniguaqtungua, ajjigiikasakatut – aajjikkiivjaktut. Grammar rules will have to be clearly identified and written. People will also have to know that language and writing are always evolving. We no longer speak like our ancestors spoke generations or even decades ago. We can develop a writing system with rules that are not exactly represented phonetically. Teachers will need to be taught how and what they will be teaching under the new standard at the different grade levels in the education system.

People will resist as they will be personally attached to their dialects but one must think of the future generations and the fact that as children learn to read and write they will not judge and have personal attachments. They will learn to write a system that is used by everyone else. It is because of the anticipation of the resistance that it is important to understand the attitudes of people and educators about the dialectal variances. It is equally important to determine which dialect people will most easily accept as a standard.

References


