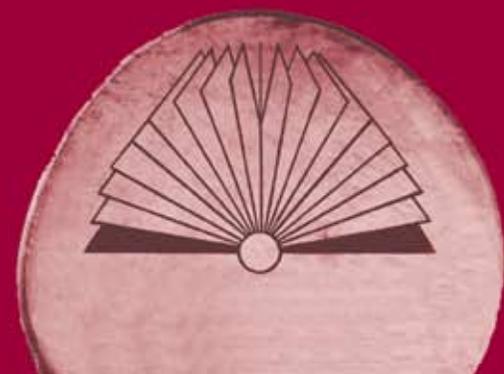


Language and Literacy in Nunavut



Magic Words

*In the very earliest time,
when both people and animals lived on earth.
A person could become an animal if he wanted to
and an animal could become a human being.*

*Sometimes they were people
and sometimes animals
and there was no difference.*

*All spoke the same language.
That was the time when words were like magic.
The human mind had mysterious powers.*

*A word spoken by chance
might have strange consequences.*

*It would suddenly come alive
and what people wanted to happen
could happen –*

All you had to do was say it.

Nobody could explain this:

That's the way it was.

Inuit – anonymous

Will Inuit Disappear from the Face of This Earth?

By John Amagoalik

We must teach our children their mother tongue. We must teach them what they are and where they came from. We must teach them the values which have guided our society over the thousands of years. We must teach them our philosophies which go back beyond the memory of man. We must keep the embers burning from the fires which used to burn in our villages so that we may gather around them again. It is this spirit we must keep alive so that it may guide us again in a new life in a changed world. Who is responsible for keeping this spirit alive? It is clearly the older people. We must have the leadership which they once provided us. They must realize this responsibility and accept it. If the older people will remember, the young must listen.

When I talk about the future and try to describe what I would like for my children, some people sometimes say to me that I am only dreaming. What is wrong with dreaming? Sometimes dreams come true, if only one is determined enough. What kind of world would we live in if people did not have dreams? If people did not strive for what they believe in? We must have dreams. We must have ideals. We must fight for the things we believe in. We must believe in ourselves.²

An excerpt from *Inuit Today*, May 1977.

John Amagoalik was born at Inukjuak, Nunavik, and grew up in Resolute Bay. He has been a force in Inuit politics for many years and is often called 'the father of Nunavut'.



² Also from *Northern Voices*

For those who already speak it and for those who are learning it, how do we maintain, strengthen and develop it so they are using it academically, intelligently and professionally? Through each subject, language is used and learned by the students. When an Inuuqatigiit topic or theme is integrated into all the subjects, language is naturally integrated which provides a more meaningful context for children. It is important to create a language rich environment for students at all levels through play, print, books, oral stories, drama, use, singing, reading and writing.

A strong sense of pride and respect for Inuktitut, Inuinnaqtun and Inuvialuktun and the different dialects has to be created for all, particularly our students who will eventually become the carriers of the language. The Inuit language has developed and evolved over many years and through vast experiences and knowledge of a people. It is these experiences and knowledge that Inuit want to preserve, use, and in some cases, revitalize through language.

“No matter how good the language program is in the school, it will not save the language. It has to start in the home and the school program can support that.”

“We cannot afford to bury our language with our Elders.”
Public Hearing, Aklavik, Learning Tradition and Change

Annie Arngnauyuq on Language

In Qitirmiut the children all speak English, but when I come to the Kivalliq and Qikiqtani regions I hear very small children speaking fluent Inuktitut. My ears perk up when I hear them speak and I wish our children could speak as fluently... and another concern that I have about language is that some of the words are said in Inuktitut and some in English. This is very disturbing. If they speak Inuktitut they have to speak all Inuktitut. I have seen too much of this mixture being used.⁴

⁴ From the Elders Advisory Meeting held by the Department of Education in Rankin Inlet, April 2002

The Obsolete Language

- The language is not taught to the children at home.
- The number of speakers is declining rapidly.
- The speakers are all bilingual and English is preferred in most situations.
- The language no longer adapts to new situations.

The Extinct Language

- There are no living ‘mother-tongue’ speakers.

“On every inhabited continent, languages keep falling silent. New replacements are rare. Linguists believe that about six thousand languages still flow into human ears: the exact total is a matter of debate. By some estimates, a maximum of three thousand are likely to be heard at the century’s end, and fewer than 600 of those appear secure. Within our children’s lifetimes, thousands of human languages seem fated to dwindle away.”

Mark Abley in Spoken Here

I Want to Learn Syllabics

By Mark Kalluak

I know I don't stand alone when I say I never learned syllabics in school... like many others, I learned it from the back of prayer books and Bibles, and I believe people who claim learning syllabics is one of the simplest systems there is. When I was sent to the hospital at the age of four, I thought I was being transported to another world and my parents would never find me. Perhaps because of my desire to communicate with my parents, I had one object in mind – to learn to write. Maybe that is why I learned to write syllabics so early.¹

Excerpt from Kenn Harper, *Writing in Inuktitut*, Inuktitut, September 1983

Mark Kalluak has been active in language development for many years. His work with the Inuit Cultural Institute in Arviat and recently with the Department of Education has helped preserve valuable stories and knowledge.

Reading and Writing in the Iglu

Excerpt from an Interview with Rachel Uyarasuk

There were no pencils. I'd never seen a pencil. I'd never seen anything to write on. When the Bibles were brought, our parents would work at learning how to read. That's when our parents started reading to us children, and we got the desire to learn to write. We tried to be better than our fellow-children. We would practice writing on the frost in winter.

For instance *ikuma*, or *mannik*, because there were only two or three letters in these words.

¹ From *Northern Voices, Inuit Writing in English*, edited by Penny Petrone, published by University of Toronto Press, 1988

Ptarmigan intestine is something we do not think of as useful. Yet it was used for survival... even though it is not used any more, we have to recognize it and put it in writing.³

Rhoda Karetak is an educator and artist who has been involved with many projects related to Inuit language and culture in her community, in Nunavut, and in Canada. She currently works with the Department of Education in Arviat.

*On the Dreamtime –
Yolngu stories of Aboriginal Australia...
“But it was our ancestors moving
across the land, singing and dreaming
and talking, that made it possible
to live in a world we find human.”*

Michael Christie from Northern Territory University in Australia

From *Spoken Here* by Mark Abley, published by Random House Canada, in 2003

³ From the Elders Advisory Meeting held by the Department of Education in Rankin Inlet, April 2002

5. *Avatittinnik Kamattiarniq*. The concept of environmental stewardship – the intimate and respectful relationship between humans and all aspects of the land. The vast store of Inuit knowledge about the environment.
6. *Qanuqtuurniq*. The concept of being resourceful to solve problems.

Could these IQ principles guide you as you plan and work on your oral history and literacy project? Your group may want to spend some time thinking about and discussing Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit when you begin your project. If the group feels the principles are valuable, you could post them in your workspace and use them as guiding principles in your work.



The Government of Nunavut's Vision for Nunavut

In 1999 the Government of Nunavut identified a vision for Nunavut and made a plan for reaching that vision by 2020. The result was a document called *Pinasuaqtavut* or *The Bathurst Mandate*. The vision is guided by four priorities: Healthy Communities, Simplicity and Unity, Self-Reliance and Continuing Learning. Here are some of the Government of Nunavut's hopes and plans for the future in each area:¹

1. *Healthy Communities*

In 2020, Nunavut is a place where...

- self assured, caring communities respond to the needs of individuals and families;
- we respect the accumulated wisdom of our Elders, examining and evaluating our actions based on the best of both modern knowledge and traditional ways;
- the raising and teaching of children and the care of those in need, 'Ilagiinniq' (kinship) and 'Inuuqatigiinniq' (community kinship), are a collective community process; and
- we enjoy and manage a clean, pristine environment, in our communities and on the land and waters.

2. *Simplicity and Unity*

In 2020, Nunavut is a place where...

- Inuktitut, in all its forms, is the working language of the Government of Nunavut;
- equal opportunities exist across Nunavut in areas of jobs, education, health, justice and all other services; and
- an informed public has taken up the challenges and assumed the responsibilities of active community.

¹ From *Pinasuaqtavut: The Bathurst Mandate*, Government of Nunavut, 1999

3. *Self Reliance*

In 2020, Nunavut is a place where...

- there are options for individuals to achieve personal growth within Nunavut communities;
- an informed society is making decisions for self, family and community; and
- Nunavut is an active and respected contributor, nationally and internationally.

4. *Continued Learning*

In 2020, Nunavut is a place where...

- our population is adaptable to change and welcomes new skills, while preserving its culture, values and language of origin;
- we are a fully functional bilingual society, in Inuktitut and English, respectful and committed to the needs and rights of French speakers, with a growing ability to participate in French;
- Inuit professionals of all kinds have been supported in their training and have taken leadership roles in our communities;
- our history and accomplishments have been preserved and recognized in books and artworks, in recorded stories, in places of learning, and in the common knowledge of our people. We are a source of pride to all Canadians; and
- in our areas of strength, we have assumed a leadership role in Canada and have looked beyond Nunavut to give and receive inspiration and support, and to lead an active exchange of ideas and information.²

² From *Pinasuaqtavut: The Bathurst Mandate*, Government of Nunavut, 1999

The Nature of Inuktitut

By Alexina Kublu and Mick Mallon¹

Is there a Canadian culture? Is there an Inuit culture? An Inuktitut word for ‘way of life’ is *inuusiq*. Based on the word for person, *inuk*, it means something like ‘the way of being a person’. Is there a connection between the language I speak and the person I am? Let us tell you a story.

Some years ago, Kublu applied for a job with an Inuit organization in Ottawa, and dashed off the usual résumé. On checking it over, however, she thought, “But this is an Inuit organization. If the person who reads this résumé is a traditional Inuk, what will he think of it, and of me?”

So she translated it into Inuktitut... and it sounded arrogant, boastful, and cold, cold, cold. Then she sat down and wrote a résumé directly in Inuktitut. It came out fine, until she translated it into English. The English version was vague, unfocused, even wimpy!

In fact, studies have suggested that many fluently bilingual people shift their personalities (or shall we say their cultures?) as they shift language. So there is a connection.

For an Inuk like Kublu, language and culture are inextricably entwined in the perception of who she is, to herself and to others. In the eyes of older people in the community, she is a child who has tapped into the mysterious powers of the *qallunaat* (white people), but who still depends on her Elders for so many answers about daily life in the past.

To her colleagues at the college where Kublu works, she is, we hope, an equal, with a professional competence extending beyond her particular role as instructor of interpretation and translation. To her students, she is a role model, one who has attained a balance between two worlds. To herself... well, she knows she can never be the kind of Inuk her Elders were, but, with all due respect, she doesn’t want to be, and she never could be a *qallunaaq*.

¹ From the web site www.nunavut.com

Will they solve the problem? Or to put it more broadly: can institutions such as government and education save a language on their own? No.

Commitment in the Home

The essential element is commitment in the home: commitment by parents. Institutions can't legislate that. What they can do is encourage and support it. But the essential element will come from the people. The essential element will be a pride in the language, and a determination to use it.

Two factors chip away at the stronghold of a minority language such as Inuktitut. One is that by the time parents realize its use is disappearing, it is already too late. The second factor is the overwhelming power of English, a power felt today across the world. It's not just that English is the language of Shakespeare, and Ernest Hemingway, and Margaret Atwood. It is also the language of Coca-Cola, and the Apollo program, and Bill Gates, and Michael Jackson, and Disney World. English is the language of power, and of glitter. Parents use English to link their children to the source of power.

Education

However, many people believe that Inuktitut will be a source of strength to Nunavut. So what else can the institutions do to ensure its survival and growth? Education comes to mind immediately. Research and development in Inuktitut curriculum began soon after the birth of the NWT Department of Education in 1970, and has continued. A training program for Inuit teachers teaching in Inuktitut was started in the early 1980s.

But there is still room for improvement. While a fully developed curriculum for high schools is lacking, even more crucial is the need to develop skills in second-language instruction, and to ensure that there is funding for Inuktitut second-language curriculum and materials. It is not only that the situation in the central Arctic is critical, and that the handful of dedicated Inuit teachers there needs skilled technical support. Even children in eastern Nunavut, in communities such as the territory's capital, Iqaluit, need an Inuktitut second-language emphasis in their language classes. This is especially true for children in cross-cultural families.

In the vital area of adult education, there is a demand for classes in first-language literacy training, and in second-language training.

Government

Inuktitut will be one of Nunavut's three official languages (English and French are the other two). What's more, Inuktitut is to be the working language of the government. For those who believe in the importance of the language, this is a laudable objective. But there will be obstacles along the way.

In the central Arctic, where many younger Inuit are much more comfortable working in English, will there be an exception to the rule of using Inuktitut, or some compromise permitted?

A second complication is that for years to come, certain specialized positions will need to be filled by skilled southerners until such skills are acquired by residents of Nunavut. If Inuktitut is to be the working language, then there must be Inuktitut instruction for non-Inuit. This won't be easy. Thirty-odd years of French instruction in the Canadian federal government have had mixed results at best.

One possible compromise is an increased Inuktitut flavor in the workplace, combined with a well-thought-out language training program. Inuktitut expressions would increasingly be used in the office. A growing number of non-Inuit staff would be able to communicate at a very basic level before having to fall back on English to develop their ideas, and some would eventually be able to function in the language.

Language and Culture Tomorrow

So here we stand, on the threshold of the new century, facing a future that holds promise and challenges. Would we have the courage to accept the offer of a glimpse of Nunavut in 2099? Would such a glimpse show us homes where Inuktitut continues to be spoken, offices where it is in common use, a lively cultural scene with literature and music expressing our way of life? In our present situation there is indeed the promise of such a future. Let us hope and work for the strength and commitment to attain it.

Aqqaluk Lynge is Right

Question for discussion: Would Inuktitut be stronger if there were a common writing system across the Circumpolar world?

Aqqaluk Lynge, the Greenland vice-president for the Inuit Circumpolar Conference, made yet another pitch last week for one of Greenland's long-cherished dreams – a common, pan-Arctic writing system for the Inuit language.

In an interview with CBC in Iqaluit, Lynge, in Iqaluit for a meeting of ICC's executive council, tried to reassure Canadian Inuit radio listeners that ICC does not want to replace the syllabic writing system – only supplement it.

Despite the clarity and sincerity of Lynge's proposal, it's likely to go nowhere, just as it always has. Inuit leaders in Canada and abroad have been banging their heads against the writing system issue since the late 1980s, when the ICC first raised it.

Some Inuit leaders, such as John Amagoalik and Jose Kusugak, have long advocated a common writing system, and even a move from syllabics to Roman orthography. But such enlightened suggestions are always smothered by the conservatism of Canada's eastern Arctic communities, where attachment to the syllabic system is deep.

As a poet and politician, Aqqaluk Lynge knows the power of the written word. He knows that a language without a common writing system will eventually sicken and die, as history has demonstrated repeatedly. He knows that different writing systems create barriers to communication and unity among people who otherwise have much in common.

In Nunavut, advocates for better Inuktitut programming within the schools are crying out for more curriculum material, and more things to read. In Greenland, a well-funded publishing system has produced books, magazines and newspapers in the Inuit language for more than 150 years.

But this vast storehouse of written material is not accessible to most readers of the Inuit language in Canada. Similarly, if Greenlanders want to communicate in writing with their Canadian cousins, they are usually obliged to do it in English, now standard for international communication everywhere on the planet.

It's impossible to believe that this is what ICC's founders had in mind when they created the organization in 1977.

The development of common language standards is always a difficult, lengthy process. But whenever it's raised in Nunavut, it's always put off until later. The danger is that it will be put off one time too often, when it will be too late to serve any useful purpose.



*And so, in January 2002, Kahnawa:ke
became the first Mohawk territory
to put its own language law into effect.
(The law) arose from a declaration made
by the community's Elders in the winter of 1998.*

*'Fearful of the loss
of our beautiful Kanien'keha language,
the Elders urged the Mohawk Council of
Kahnawa:ke to take action.*

*What emerged was a law that sets out
'...to revive and restore the Kanien'keha
language as the primary language
of communication, education, ceremony,
government and business
within the Mohawk territory of Kahnawa:ke.'*

Mark Abley in Spoken Here