

Meeting of the Inuktitut and Yup'ik Family of Languages

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The Kativik School Board and Guy Delorme, Pedagogical Counsellor, provided the initiative for the meeting. Mr. Delorme saw the Stabilizing Indigenous Languages Conference as a wonderful opportunity for all the native speakers of Inuktitut present to meet and have a roundtable discussion. There was no official presentation as such; the delegates spoke about the language situation in their region: the state of the Inuktitut language, language programs, language initiatives, the number of monolingual speakers, and so forth. The first one to speak was Sarah Bennett, Co-ordinator of Teaching Services at the Kativik School Board.

The Kativik School Board was constituted under the James Bay and Northern Québec Agreement, and it has been given jurisdiction over and is responsible for the elementary, secondary, and adult education in Nunavik.

Delegates from the Kativik School Board opened the meeting with a reiteration of the Board's mission statement, goals, and objectives. There was also an introduction by Sarah Bennett and a welcome statement. The setting was informal (i.e., everybody sat in a circle).

Alaska

There was a delegate from the Athabaskan Nations who lives in Fairbanks, Alaska and who speaks Iñupiaq. In Alaska, they are concerned about language preservation. They are including the environment in their curriculum. They teach in a classroom, and then they go out on the land.

The delegate described how there are villages in Alaska with only 400 people. In these small villages, saving the language is an urgent problem for future generations. A language becomes endangered when there are no more monolingual speakers. If the youngest good speakers are largely past middle age, the language is seriously endangered. Young children are losing their language because it is not spoken at home. Young adults need to be taught in their Native language. News bulletins and magazines can be used to help revive the language.

Inuvik (Northwest Territories)

The Inuvik delegates talked about the teaching materials they have in the public school system. They have published children's stories. They also have a database of over 300 recordings and translations, community language programs, curricula that include culture and language, a language curriculum, and a teacher's training program.

Labrador

All the Labrador participants introduced themselves and discussed their teaching initiatives regarding language and culture. Everybody mentioned what he or she was doing to keep the Inuktitut language alive.

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Participants from Labrador schools in Goose Bay and Hopedale talked about childcare initiatives at the 2 to 6 year old level on the north coast and language initiatives and obstacles to language development created by the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador. They also talked about community radio and television.

There was a delegate from Nain, Labrador. He is from the Torngat Region. He has worked on a translator and interpreter program. He has been involved with Social Services and worked on geology and mineral projects. He talked about an Inuktitut language preservation program and a multiyear agreement they have with the Department of Canadian Heritage, which will come to an end in the year 2002; he hopes that the agreement will be renewed.

There was another delegate from Nain, Labrador who was a language coordinator. He is involved in the Labrador Inuit Association. He teaches at the secondary level. He also mentioned that in Labrador there have been no land claim settlements. As well, he talked about how there is no authority specifically responsible for education in Inuit communities and about how language programs should be implemented there.

In Labrador, the level of understanding of Inuktitut is low. Elders speak the language, but grandchildren do not; they cannot communicate with their grandparents. This is a loss. On the other hand, in Nunavut and in Nunavik, the language is strong. A delegate asked about ways to revive the language.

In Labrador, Inuit communities have had Inuktitut as a second language programs and immersion programs. They all require community involvement. English curricula have a worldview of their own. What the Inuit need is a curriculum that includes a perspective relevant to them.

The delegates talked about how all of these language programs cost money, and how the Labrador Inuit do not have any. The Government of Newfoundland and Labrador allows them to operate their own schools and to teach whatever subjects they want as long as they follow provincial programs and hire certified teachers. If they want to do it their own way, they have to pay for it.

First Nations issues have been brought up at conferences. National organizations need to get involved in the process. There is also a need for a national fund on language and education. Human Resources Development Canada has also sponsored some projects.

In Labrador, there are no Elders to respect as far as language is concerned. The Labrador Inuit were the first ones exposed to Europeans centuries ago; their culture has been eroding ever since.

Minnesota

There was a delegate from a private philanthropic organization. His organization funds Native language research in the United States. He is of Yup'ik origin.

He mentioned a Home School System they have in Minnesota, and he wondered whether this system could fit somehow in Canada. In Minnesota, Inuit teenagers quit school and lose interest in their first language at the same time.

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After this point, the community must be involved for the students to maintain their interest. Adolescents must find a way to be proud of their language. This starts at the family level and requires good speakers. Adolescents can become the role models for the young kids. A positive buzz must be created around them for language reinforcement to work past adolescence.

Nunavik

According to the Nunavik delegates, their school board set up a committee four years ago to review its mission, its language issues, and its bilingual education system. They want to readdress these issues.

They were also interested to know what models other people were following. The struggle is just starting, and there are more challenges to come. Some parents are complaining about the fact that there is too much Inuktitut in the schools and not enough English. They have started language of instruction projects because new educational models are necessary. These could come from the land of the Inuit (i.e., the Circumpolar Region). The language programs and the school curriculum should follow a more Inuk model: land, resources, history and heritage.

The delegates from Nunavik addressed the following issues:

- The Inuktitut language
- The new vision of the school board
- Inuktitut culture
- Religion
- Parents complaining about the small number of graduates and the lack of survival skills

There was a delegate from Inukjuak who has developed a K-7 reading program and a social studies program, a delegate from Kangirsuk with a lot of experience in education, a delegate from Kuujjuaq who is involved in the training of teachers, and a delegate from the Kativik School Board's teaching services. This last delegate mentioned that the Kativik School Board has had a language policy for twenty years. Now the Board is looking at ways to improve it.

There was a delegate from the teacher-training program. There was also a delegate who has had over ten years of experience in the training of teachers within an institution and who, along with the Teaching Services of the Kativik School Board, developed a Social Studies program. However, the project was not a success because the community as a whole was not involved in the development. There was no heart (i.e., spirit) in the process: "We went wrong. We have developed a good social studies program for the secondary level," the delegate said, "but it has not worked out as planned until now because teachers had not been involved. We have to involve the community in the process. We have to undo what has been done and redefine ourselves."

It was also noted that sometimes the Board hires teachers who are good in languages but who have limited classroom management skills. There are also people with sound language skills who show little interest in teaching; they choose other careers.

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Nunavut

The Nunavut delegates talked about the learning centre in Iqaluit, the language arts program, and their long experience as language consultants and co-ordinators. They have published up to now 239 books for children and young adults. They have developed teaching materials, a dictionary in one sub-dialect, a parenting program, and an Aboriginal Head Start Program.

There was a delegate with 11 years of experience in education and with the Teaching Learning Centre (TLC) who has developed a language arts program in Iqaluit for grades seven to nine.

There was an instructor from Rankin Inlet, an author and artist from Pond Inlet, who has developed teaching materials. This person had left the learning centre to develop materials for Inuktitut as language of instruction. There was also a delegate from the Nunavut Department of Education.

There was a delegate from Igloolik who is involved in education, a delegate from Arviat who has developed a language program and published magazines for the Nunavik Department of Education, a delegate from Arviat who works on curriculum development, and two delegates from Nunavut who have been working on computer and Internet projects, including the beginning of a "Living Dictionary."

There was a delegate from Arctic Bay who sits on the Language Commission and a language specialist from that region. There was also somebody with a long career in the teaching of Inuktitut. She is trying to promote Inuit rights and culture in the schools. She is also the co-ordinator of a social development program. She has worked for various Inuit organizations.

One of the delegates talked about how in Cambridge Bay they have an experimental project called *Generation to Generation*; Arctic College sponsors it. It involves parents. In the program, children try to learn like the older generations did. The skills are being reinforced at the community level. The traditional line has become broken for the new generation. It must be restored.

One of the delegates noted that sometimes isolation from other cultures has helped in the preservation process. People create stronger bonds with each other when they have no input from the outside. Outsider input is not very helpful.

There were seven people from Sanikiluaq who were sent to a hostel when they were young. In the past, students had to leave their home community and attend residential schools for the Inuit. The Government of Canada had to provide education to Aboriginal people in order to meet its obligation under the Indian Act. Today, the Government of Nunavut has a project that includes traditions and customs (i.e., knowledge from the Elders) in the curriculum. The Elders are dying, and they are the ones who know the culture, the language, and the traditions. One person mentioned that recordings should be done to prevent the loss of this knowledge.

Industry Canada has a project called *Generations CAN Connect*. Young people are asked to interview Elders. The information is then put on the Internet. This project helps bridge the gap between youth and Elders.

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One delegate told how in the early days of Inuit formal education teaching was done with translated texts written from a perspective foreign to the Inuit. Teaching materials should include the knowledge transmitted by Elders—old traditional survival skills. Traditional ways and customs should be brought back into the classroom for students to regain their strength.

One delegate said,

In Nunavut, we tried translations, but that method did not work. Then Inuktitut became a subject taught at school. Later came teacher training. A new approach was developed in Port Smith. We also have more teachers from the community. Before now, there was no relevant material in the social studies program; the approach had a southern perspective. Now, we have introduced affiliation and kinship into the curriculum; the content is changing rapidly. School personnel are Inuk [i.e., principal and teachers].

The curriculum is out there [i.e., fish and birds]. In the schools, we have asked Elders to do some teaching in the pre-school years. After two years, we already see a difference, and parents are getting more involved.

The old system did not produce any graduates. The proficiency level in Inuktitut was low and that of English was high. We are trying to include games and stories that get students to interact with Elders. Elders come to school when they are invited. Now, there is a place for Elders in the schools.

Another delegate suggested that second language courses could become optional or elective, and students could take pride in their identity. Education is not progressing in the classroom. The link between the past and the present is broken. The learning environment in the schools has a southern perspective. Each community is different and could have its own approach in avoiding language loss.

One of the delegates told his story:

I was born in Arviat in 1950. I was a teacher and a developer of programs when the Inuit language was as strong as you could make it. Then came the federal schools, and our children were taken away to these schools. We need programs that are given in Inuktitut and an advanced Teacher Training program. Where are the Elders now? True Elders are gone. We have to make a statement about our language and culture.

We could bring our children on the land, in our tents or igloos, to observe a flame, to feel the smoke and the cold. They could observe things, use their various sensory inputs. There could also be a project to observe the clouds. Students learn from the people who speak Inuktitut. In Pond Inlet, we have involved Elders in the development of teaching

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materials, and we got their endorsement. It has been a wonderful experience, and we have been able to create a dictionary.

Another delegate suggested to the Labrador delegates that they should tape their Elders before they pass away. Then these recordings could be transferred to CDs or DVDs. The information gathered should be included in textbooks and dictionaries.

Another delegate told her story,

I'm from Baffin Island. I'm involved in the development of programs [i.e., language curriculum]. We have an immersion program, and my daughter is in Grade 2 and doing very well."

In Rankin Inlet, they teach Inuktitut until Grade six. Parents and the rest of the community are involved at different stages. The process also requires leadership and some form of structure like a Department of Education.

Maybe the Internet can help. Maybe we could avoid cutting the rope at a certain level. The link between the teenager and his or her family or the school is cut at the High School level.

The culture is changing. It started with residential schools. In a context of globalization, we see this phenomenon in India, Thailand, and downtown Toronto. Elders are saying the same thing everywhere: "Why don't we ask kids what they want!" Some solutions can come from radio and television.

We cannot stop the change; we have to adjust, find ways to use these new technologies and to not see them as roadblocks. There are reports now that say that 50% of the Internet content is English, but that it will go down to 8% soon. Let us not forget that it was 100% English at the beginning.

Another delegate described the linguistic and cultural situation in Rankin Inlet:

I'm a language teacher from Rankin Inlet and a language program developer, but I am also computer illiterate. Inuit have oral traditions, and we must not become too dependent on technology for our traditions. We have a day camp for students that provides an Inuk environment. Needs have changed. We have identified new problems. After a few days at the camp, where children learn affiliation and kinship and old customs, they walk with their heads high. They also learn to respect the environment.

High School is most often the cut off point for language instruction. High School students see Inuktitut as a token language, not as something worthwhile. The camp is just an example of what we can do to help the situation. We start small, and we continue progressively.

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Northwest Territories

There was a delegate from Yellowknife who is a Language Co-ordinator. He talked about school education, the issue of funding, and the fact that teaching materials were often translated documents irrelevant to the Inuit's environment.

Russia

There are 1,300 Inuit living in Russia, and Elders are dying rapidly. One delegate told how they need suggestions on how they can preserve their different languages.

There was a Yup'ik delegate, a Chukotka. She is a teacher in Anadyr. There was also a Sireniki delegate who has published books in Yup'ik. She mentioned that she has three children.

There was a freelance journalist, a native Chukotka. "I am a happy woman," she said. She covers events that are important to the Native People of Russia. She is also the vice-president of the Inuit Circumpolar Conference (ICC) for the region. She is also the Chief of an Eskimo Centre in Russia.

There was another Chukotka delegate who was a specialist in grammar and literature.

Germany

There was a student of linguistics from the University of Toronto originally from Germany. She is fascinated by the Inuktitut language family.

Spain

There was a delegate from the Basque Region. He is trying to revive the teaching of the Basque language in Galicia, a region of Spain.

Universities

Brock University: There was a delegate from Brock University who has taught in Quaqtaq and has completed an Ed.D. degree in the teaching of minority languages such as Cree and Inuktitut.

Memorial University: There was a student who is developing a Native and Northern Maintenance Program at Memorial University.

UQAT: There was a delegate from the Université du Québec en Abitibi-Témiscamingue who works on teacher training in Nunavik.

York University: There was a delegate from York University who is part of a team of researchers in Nunavut. They have a project on language of instruction. She mentioned language implementation policies, which require treatment and attitude.

University of Ottawa: There was somebody from Yellowknife who teaches Inuktitut in Ottawa to those who show interest in the Inuktitut language. She has developed a youth curriculum.

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Conclusion

There was an acknowledgement of Barbara Burnaby by the facilitator.

Note: Jacques Raymond is a Translator and Interpreter Trainer at Kativk School Board, Montreal, Quebec, Canada.