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Inupiaq writing and international Inuit relations

Lawrence Kaplan*

Résumé: L'écriture inupiaq et les relations inuit internationales

La dérive des langues en Alaska menace de remplacer l'inupiaq et d'autres langues autochtones par l'anglais à moins que les conditions l'ayant créée soient renversées. La vitalité du groenlandais de l'ouest et de l'inuktitut dans l'Arctique de l'Est pourrait avoir une influence positive dans l'ouest si les groupes d'Inuit partagent le matériel publié et accroissent la communication internationale dans leur propre langue. Des systèmes d'écriture uniformes sont cruciaux dans la lecture de ce que les Inuit s'écrivent. Une comparaison des orthographes utilisées en inupiaq de l'Alaska et en groenlandais de l'ouest montre comment différents systèmes peuvent compliquer des échanges écrits internationaux.

Abstract: Inupiaq writing and international Inuit relations

Language shift in Alaska threatens to replace Inupiaq, and other indigenous languages, with English unless the conditions that create the shift are reversed. The vitality of West Greenlandic and Inuktitut in the Eastern Arctic can exert a positive influence on the west if Inuit groups share published materials and increase international communication in their own language. Congruent writing systems are crucial to the process of reading what other Inuit write. A comparison of the orthographies used for Alaskan Inupiaq and West Greenlandic shows how differing systems can complicate international written exchange.

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Introduction

“Reversing Knowledge Shift in the North” is the subject of this collection of papers, relating to Joshua Fishman’s (1991) book title *Reversing Language Shift*. The two concepts go well together in the case of Alaska Native languages. The term “language shift” is used by linguists to refer to the situation where a population changes or shifts from one language to another, and pretty much all of Alaska’s Native languages, like many other indigenous languages of North America, are somewhere in the process of language shift, as evidenced by the paucity of younger speakers. Alaskan Inupiaq has about 2,200 speakers but barely any first language speakers under the age of about 45. In much of the Kuskokwim River region of Southwest Alaska, Central Alaskan Yup’ik is the first language of the entire Yupik population, from youngest to oldest, yet even this language is endangered, since English use is on the increase in villages that were all Yup’ik-speaking a decade or two ago.

The term “knowledge shift” was coined based on “language shift,” since language shift generally entails larger cultural and social change. Although it is conceivable for a community to undergo language shift while changing little or none of its culture, the more usual situation for indigenous groups is probably what we see in Alaska, where replacement of Native languages by English occurs alongside sweeping changes in technology and culture. Language shift in indigenous populations is particularly dramatic since it typically results in language loss, when the shifting language is not maintained anywhere else by any group. There may be a consequent breakdown in communication between generations, when young people and their grandparents no longer speak a common language. Language shift, then, can be compared to knowledge shift, where local knowledge based in an indigenous culture gives way to more global knowledge and culture. Again, traditional cultural knowledge needs not diminish when a language shifts; most traditional knowledge can be translated and transmitted through European languages, for example. But generally patterns of cultural transmission change as the associated language changes, and the two types of shift go hand-in-hand, because they are the result of exposure to the same overwhelming forces that have introduced Western customs and English language to the north.

Language shift and loss of indigenous languages in the Arctic are of course much discussed today by scholars and Native communities. It is not my purpose here to review that discussion but instead to point out that knowledge can be exchanged across the north and needs not always be imported from the south, using language as an example.

The international border between Alaska and Canada goes from north to south, dividing indigenous groups, primarily the Inuit and the Athabaskan/Dene and emphasizing north-south relationships over east-west ones, which would bring indigenous groups into closer touch with related neighbouring groups. The Inuit Circumpolar Conference was formed largely to bridge the international divisions that detract from Inuit unity. Of course the north-south border reflects the colonial nature of how relations developed between north and south, with southern governments in charge of northern “outposts.”

Writing as a unifying force

In the realm of language, once publication and other means of mass dissemination of information came to the north, knowledge was not always transferred in ways that would benefit related groups. In the case of Inupiaq, related languages have been known and researched for more than two centuries. West Greenlandic has language materials dating to the early 18th century. Kleinschmidt's renowned grammar from the mid-19th century was accompanied by the development of a practical orthography. Inupiaq writing began in the early 20th century with a pictographic system adapted from the Yupik system of Helper Neck. A practical writing system was not developed for Inupiaq until the late 1940s, when linguist Eugene Nida of the Summer Institute of Linguistics worked with Inupiaq Roy Ahmaogak from Alaska's North Slope, a Presbyterian minister, and F.G. Klerekoper. The result was a phonemic orthography that was used by the community largely for religious purposes. Hymnals and later the *Inupiat New Testament* (in 1966) were published, followed by the *Inupiat Eskimo Dictionary* in 1970, along with several primers and pedagogical booklets (Krauss 1973: 830).

From today's perspective this writing system would have had to take into account writing in related dialects to be maximally effective and follow principles and choice of symbols found in orthographies already in existence or at least not contradict these principles. Representation of velar and uvular stop consonants found in all Inuit and Yupik languages and now written as *k* and *q* is particularly significant. Kleinschmidt's original West Greenlandic orthography used an ordinary *k* for the velar and a small upper case *k* (*K*) for the uvular. The original Ahmaogak-Nida Inupiaq system also used *k* for the velar, but *k* with a dot underneath for the uvular. The letter *q*, a standard phonetic symbol, was not used initially in either system and was therefore easily available when spelling reforms were implemented in the 1970s. The Greenlandic and Inupiaq systems thus became more similar to each other when *q* was added to symbolize the same sound in both.

An incompatibility in the two orthographies is found in the symbol *r*, since *r* exists in both Alaskan and Greenlandic writing but represents very different sounds, a voiced uvular fricative in Greenland and a retroflex liquid in Inupiaq, somewhat similar to the English *r*. There are good reasons for this difference: the Greenlandic sound is akin to the German *r* that would have been used by Kleinschmidt, and the Inupiaq *r* is much closer to English *r* than to any other English sound, making it a natural choice. Identical in sound to the Greenlandic *r* is the Inupiaq dotted *g* (*ḡ*), as in the word for 'shadow' written *tarraq* in West Greenlandic but *tagḡaq* in Inupiaq. The Inupiaq *r* as in *iri* represents a sound not found in West Greenlandic. This orthographic difference adds difficulty to the process of reading in another dialect and would have best been avoided if international relationships had been taken into account when the Inupiaq orthography was designed. The earliest version of the Inupiaq writing system did not include the symbol *r* at all; *iri* 'eye' was written with *z* with a subscript dot. With the absence of *r* in the early Inupiaq system, there was neither equivalency nor contradiction with Greenlandic, and *ḡ* could eventually have been replaced by *r*, bringing the two systems into line on this important point. Instead, the second version

of the writing system substituted *r* for the dotted *z* rather than for *ġ*, creating the present incompatibility with Greenlandic and much other Inuit writing.

It may seem a small point, but this issue was taken up by the Inuit Circumpolar Conference in 1983, resulting in the adoption of "Resolution Addressing a Uniform Writing System," calling upon the Alaskan Inupiat to make changes to their orthography. The resolution states that although "there is a high degree of mutual intelligibility between Inuit speakers," differences in writing impede communication. The value of facilitating written communication between dialects gave rise to a recommendation for changes in Alaskan writing (ICC 1983). Later, an auxiliary writing system was proposed through the ICC by Edna MacLean, not to replace any existing orthography but to provide an international system which could serve the entire Inuit Arctic, eliminating differences in symbols that hamper reading from one dialect to another.

If there is value in having the *r* as it is in Inupiaq, it lies in the carry-over from English, since the Inupiaq *r* resembles the English *r* phonetically, a resemblance that has grown with the increased use of English, so that for some younger Inupiaq speakers, the Inupiaq sound has come to closely resemble the English one. The choice then is between emphasizing pan-Inuit language relationships or closest sound equivalencies between Inupiaq and English.

Conclusion

Inupiaq writing began on Alaska's North Slope as a local phenomenon used primarily in religion. Probably no one at the time foresaw the international relationships that would develop across the Arctic a quarter century later nor the role that language and writing could play in developing a sense of pan-Inuit unity. Almost 60 years after the Inupiaq practical orthography was developed, there remain serious questions for Inuit languages across the Arctic and writing figures importantly in the discussion. Primary is the issue of language endangerment in the Western Arctic (Alaska and Western Canada) and Labrador versus the Eastern Arctic (Greenland and much of Nunavut), where Inuit language is widely spoken and remains quite viable. Can the language vitality of the east exert a positive influence on the west, or are the social and political conditions that underlie the differences in language status immutable?

A second question concerns whether Inuit who speak different dialects can communicate with each other on a wide scale in their own language. Must English serve as a lingua franca or can an Inuit dialect or dialects serve this function? (It is unrealistic to include Yupik languages here, since they are too distant from Inupiaq to be mutually intelligible, although bilingualism is always possible and existed traditionally in the border area between the languages.)

Third, what role can Inuit language reading and writing play in international communication, and will publications be shared increasingly among different areas?

There is a great deal of Native language publication in the Eastern Arctic, particularly Greenland, in various areas from journalism to academic subjects to creative writing. This material is of benefit to other Inuit groups, and sharing depends on a familiarity of the reader with the dialects used in print. With increased pan-Inuit consciousness and relationships, these questions have only increased in importance in recent years.

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