

A FEW THOUGHTS ON THE LANGUAGE OF THE INUIT¹

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ABSTRACT/RESUME

The author outlines the present linguistic situation of Inuit, and discusses both political-economic reasons for it, and possible future developments. He then proposes an explanation for certain changes occurring in Inuktitut over the past several decades.

L'auteur décrit la situation linguistique actuelle chez les Inuit et aborde une discussion portant sur les causes politico-économiques de cette situation, de même que sur son évolution éventuelle. Par la suite, il émet une hypothèse expliquant un certain nombre de changements qui se sont produits dans l'inuktitut au cours des dernières décennies.

In spite of the fact that over the past few years the study of Inuktitut, both theoretical and applied, has attracted a great number of researchers, the position of this language, at least in Canada, does not yet seem to be as secure as it should be: English is gaining more and more over it. The situation is somewhat discouraging, but we only have to look at what happens in Greenland to realize that Inuktitut is not necessarily bound to disappear. In that country, Greenlandic Eskimo is the customary language of private conversations, schools, books, radio and administrative activity.

Among Canadian Inuit, recent progress in native education and culture (like the development of local school boards and new curricula) has not reversed this trend towards linguistic assimilation. At best, it has given a few positive results in well-defined, but rather narrow, spheres, like the standardization of Inuktitut syllabics and Roman orthography, which was achieved in 1976, and the release of a few texts and audio-visual productions on traditional life. At worst, these undertakings give a few people, mostly opportunistic and White, jobs or research money without much impact on the overall language situation. In the meantime, they serve the different levels of government (federal, territorial/provincial and local) as a justification for their interference in Inuit affairs.

An outstanding example of the last is the great number of highly technical administrative and law texts which are almost daily translated into Inuktitut. These translations, ranging from the unabridged version of laws and agreements to the verbatim accounts of parliamentary debates, give good conscience to Ottawa, Yellowknife or Quebec officials, as having done their duty towards Inuit. But they are quite useless. Their language, which literally translates very specialized Western concepts, is not readily understandable for most Inuit (just as it is not for English speakers). The few people who really need these texts generally prefer to read them in their English version.

This type of undertaking has a symbolic value. It gives the impression that the State has done its duty for the promotion of Inuktitut. However, the real problem is not dealt with. As far as I know, no Canadian political or institutional body has ever done anything to help Inuit in devising a kind of government really suited to their own type of society and to Northern conditions, rather than simply translating, both in language and political praxis, our

Southern bureaucratic institutions. The near failure of the Nunavut project and of the dissident movement in Northwestern Arctic Quebec is primarily due to the obstruction of bureaucrats.

But naturally, it would not be in our interest (or rather, that of our so-called democratically elected representatives) if Inuit did possess even one little measure of real political power. As the main function of our beloved governments is to protect the superior interests of finance and industry, it could be dangerous if real people decided to take their economy and politics into their own hands. They could be tempted to throw off some financial or industrial exploiters of the North, along with their representatives. Thus, it is considered better to establish in their midst a Southern-style bureaucracy, which can forever deny to ordinary people any degree of economical or political power. If this denial is accompanied by a few cultural and linguistic candies (like the translation of unreadable administrative texts), it should be accepted without pain, so hope our rulers.

If we do not agree with this process of alienation, then, what should be done? The present situation and future development or disappearance of the society and language of the Inuit are not only a question of which quantity of English or French texts will be translated into Inuktitut or how many children will learn to read and write syllabics or Roman orthography. They are rather linked to the overall usefulness of the language and to its relation with the social and political context of the moment. If Inuit must live in a world in which they believe they don't have any significant part to play, it is absolutely useless to translate English, French or, for that matter, Russian or Chinese material into their language. As long as the social conditions enabling them to initiate the production of reading material written by themselves and for themselves do not exist, there is little use in their learning to read Inuktitut.

These conditions can appear when people feel that it is possible for them to create a new kind of society, different from traditional culture, but still uniquely Eskimo. The advent of this feeling is likely to stem from economic cooperation among people (as opposed to capitalist development) and from political autonomy. It has nothing to do with Inuktitut formal education, as long as curricula simply translate Southern contexts into the native language. Northern schooling must be completely thought over again and

adapted to local conditions and world vision. If that is not done, teaching in Inuktitut will simply become a practical medium for the easier transmission, to native children, of Southern ideologies and semantic categories.

So, the question is far from being solved. What, again, should we do? As a White man with a strong academic bias and interests in both social science and linguistics, I think that the first step towards a real solution to the culture and language problems of the Inuit lies in a better understanding of the overall sociolinguistic situation in Northern Canada. It is not sufficient to describe how Inuit speak (which is the task of linguists). We must also try to understand what are they speaking about and what language means for them.

The present situation in Arctic Canada may be defined as one of diglossia. This is a state of linguistic relations where two or more unequal languages co-exist: Inuktitut and English in the Northwest Territories and Labrador; Inuktitut, English and French in Arctic Quebec; Inuktitut, English and another native language in some areas of the Mackenzie Delta, Arctic Quebec and Labrador. Each of these languages has its specific functions and value. The "higher" functions (upper education, government, well-paying work, literature) are performed in the dominant language: English or French. They are the most valued. Inuktitut and other native languages are used only for "lower" tasks: private conversations, non-specialized jobs and, sometimes, to help young children during their first years at school. Inuktitut may have some official status, but it is generally more symbolic than real (see above what is said about the translation of law-texts).

In a situation like this one, the dominated native language tends to disappear along with the growth of formal education, increasing integration into the mainstream society and the economic upraising of its speakers. Naturally enough, diglossia is part of the general system of domination by which the ruling segments of the society maintain the lower groups in a state of subordination. In Arctic Canada, linguistic inequality strengthens the domination of Southern exploiters and bureaucrats over Northern native populations and their resources. It enforces the marginality of local people, as their mother tongue is erroneously perceived as not suited to modern life, while their knowledge of English, even when it is very good, cannot ensure them a dominant position in the Canadian society.

It is the study of this kind of situation that I advocate as the anthropology of language. It should lead us towards a global understanding of the relation between linguistic meaning and social structure and of the conditions of existence of the language. The justification of such research lies in the knowledge it should give Inuit concerning the concrete linguistic situation in Arctic Canada. This knowledge should enable them to find better and more lasting solutions to their problems, in the field of culture and language maintenance.

I shall now give two examples of the relation between the social conditions of existence of Inuktitut and the preservation and evolution of the language. To show that this kind of relation is not unique to Canadian Inuit, my first example comes from Greenland.

People living on the East Coast of Greenland speak their own dialect. It differs from West Greenlandic, the official language, in both pronunciation and vocabulary. Naturally, the dominant form of speech, besides Danish (Greenland is still part of the Kingdom of Denmark), is the official one. The East Greenlandic dialect is never used in school or church, on the radio or in newspapers or books. All these institutions and media are exclusively run in West Greenlandic and, in a lesser way, Danish. However, since Greenland received, in 1979, some measure of home-rule, the municipal government of the East Coast wishes that the local dialect be used in official texts and, maybe, in school. But a problem arises. There exists no standard orthography for East Greenlandic. To cope with this, a committee has locally been set up, consisting of three members: the commune (town) secretary, the local kateket (church minister and teacher) and an older hunter. The first two are, obviously, "language experts", as their jobs require a good deal of writing. It happens, however, that they are West Greenlanders (no East Greenlander has yet reached such important positions); and they do not speak the East Coast dialect. So, it is most probable that the orthography committee will propose a system of writing based on the West Greenlandic official transcription, which is not really fit for rendering the pronunciation of the East Coast language. The chance this language has of ever becoming a full-fledged means of communication in East Greenlandic schools, churches and printed material would thus appear to be somewhat reduced.

If this is what really happens, it should be a good example of

how linguistic inequality is reproduced. Because of the cultural (and political) dominance of official West Greenlandic, a small establishment of West Greenlanders controls the orthography committee. This committee proposes a writing system similar to the official one. This, in turn, impairs the development of the East Coast dialect, thus helping to maintain the cultural dominance of West Greenlandic.

My other example is more historical. In the Eastern Arctic (Northeastern Canada and Greenland), one notices a simplification and variation of consonant clusters (groups of two consonants), which seems to run from West to East (the simpler phonological patterns occurring in Labrador and Greenland). For instance, the word for "house" is pronounced *iglu* in Keewatin and North Baffin, *illu* in Arctic Quebec and Labrador and *illu* in Greenland (l is a voiceless l). A road is called *apqut* in Keewatin, *aqqut* in the Baffin region, Arctic Quebec and Greenland and *akqut* in Labrador. A ladle is *imrngusiq* in Keewatin, *irngusiq* on Baffin Island and *inngusik* in Labrador. Without being too technical, we may notice that all these examples denote the presence of fewer types of consonant clusters in Eastern dialects as compared to Western ones. The number of these types ranges from four, in Keewatin, to one in Labrador (North Baffin has three, South Baffin, Arctic Quebec and Greenland, two each). This simplification seems to be linked to the early presence of *qallunaat*, White people. The regions where this presence was felt at a later time (Keewatin, North Baffin) harbor dialects with less simple phonological systems.

How can we explain this phenomenon? Some scholars have suggested that the simplification probably originated in Greenland and has spread out from there. That is why geographically more remote dialects would have been less affected by it. The problem with this explanation is that until very recently, there were almost no contacts between Greenlanders and the different groups of Canadian Inuit. How then, would this pattern of simplification have been diffused?

Other people have suggested a possible influence of Danish and English on the pronunciation of Inuktitut. But the changes considered here had begun to take place long before any significant number of Inuit did speak a *qallunaaq* language.

Personally, I feel that the explanation is not historical (diffusion)

or linguistic (influence of another language), but truly sociolinguistic. A simpler pattern of pronunciation has always characterized the speech of Inuit children and young adolescents. It is also possible (but this is only a hypothesis) that traditionally, adult women too did speak like younger people. Before the period of extensive contacts (18th century in Greenland and Labrador, late 19th century in Arctic Quebec and South Baffin, 20th century in North Baffin and Keewatin), the dominant form of pronunciation was that of adult males. But after the creation of trading posts and religious missions, the speech of women and youngsters, because they were less mobile than men, would have become associated with settlement life. With the change in social conditions and the end of nomadic living, the language of young people and, maybe, women, could have progressively become for everybody the dominant linguistic norm, as "language of the settlement" (the "bush language" of adult male hunters becoming somewhat obsolete). Under these conditions, it would be normal that the dialects spoken by people living a sedentary life over a longer time (as in Greenland and Labrador) exhibit more simple pronunciation patterns, as phonetic simplicity characterizes the speech of youngsters.

These two examples are very limited in scope. However, they show that sociolinguistic problems may be approached from many sides. It is only through the accumulation of this type of research that Inuit people will gain the knowledge necessary to a better understanding of the social and cultural conditions which may ensure the sutural and development of their language.