Community Report
Inuvialuit Language & Identity:

Perspectives on the Symbolic Meaning of Inuvialuktun in
The Canadian Western Arctic

By Alex Oehler
University of Northern British Columbia, 2012

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A few years ago, I came across an interesting article in the archives of the New York Times. Although its tone seemed a bit presumptuous at first, I was quickly drawn in: *"The Inuvialuktun Language Project has embarked on a venture more curious than selling iceboxes to Eskimos. It is teaching them how to speak their own disappearing dialects."* Christopher Wren (1985), the author of the article, had made some intriguing points regarding language and identity in Inuvialuit context, making me wonder about what had changed since 1985. What were some of the factors that had weakened Inuvialuktun—a language so ancient? I wanted to know what it is like to re-learn one's heritage language, and whether it was possible to retain a strong and distinct cultural identity, even if one's heritage language was no longer used on a daily basis. With these and other questions, I set out on a small research project in Inuvik from August to December of 2011.

Why the Western Arctic, Why Inuvik?

Although several of my questions were specific to the Inuvialuit context, many could have been placed in similar settings elsewhere. In fact, Shelley Tulloch, a linguistic anthropologist from Saint Mary's University in Halifax, had conducted a similar study in Nunavut in 2004. Although her project was significantly larger than mine, my choice of Inuvik was in many ways inspired by her work. Tulloch had focused on Inuit youth and their language attitudes on Baffin Island. I chose Inuvik for many of the same reasons Tulloch chose Iqaluit as one of her research communities. Inuvik is a multi-ethnic community of 3,504 people, and it is a regional center with a high turnover of southerners who come here for work, reinforcing English as a default language in the work place. These and other factors made Inuvik the perfect place to study a minority language in contact with other languages of varying power (e.g., English, French, Gwitch'in). At the same time, placing my work in Inuvik also allowed me to speak with people who had come here from other communities in the Inuvialuit Settlement Region (ISR).

Land and language in context

Because this report is based on my thesis, which seeks to communicate to a larger audience, I have included some basic information about the Inuvialuit and their language, in order to benefit readers who are new to the region. At the same time, by presenting this basic information to the Inuvialuit community, I hope to ensure its accuracy.

Inuvialuit, or "the real people," traditionally refer to their land as Nunaqput. It is the western-most of Inuit Nunangat (Inuit territories of Canada) and encompasses extensive marine and terrestrial ecosystems that have defined Inuvialuit culture for centuries. The other Inuit regions are the territory of Nunavut; Nunavik in northern Quebec; and Nunatsiavut of northern Labrador. Inuvialuit residing in the ISR represent 6% of Canadian Inuit, as contrasted by Nunavut where almost 50% of all Canadian Inuit reside. The majority of over 4,000 Inuvialuit beneficiaries live

across 6 communities of the ISR: Inuvik, Aklavik, Tuktoyaktuk, Sachs Harbour, Paulatuk, and Ulukhaktok. Until the end of the Second World War, most Inuvialuit predominantly spoke a variant of Inuvialuktun in the home. Inuvialuktun belongs to the Eskaleut language family, and as a language belonging to the Eskimo language family, Linguists group it under the Inuit-Inupiaq sub-branch. Variants of the Inuit language are spoken from Alaska to Greenland: Alaskan Inupiaq, Western Canadian Inuktun, Eastern Canadian Inuktitut, and Greenlandic Kalaallisut. Inuvialuktun is a modern cover term for three regional language variants: Siglitun, Inuinnaqtun, and Uummarmiutun. Siglitun and Inuinnaqtun are Western Canadian Inuktun language variants, while Uummarmiutun is a North Slope variant of Alaskan Inupiaq. Inuinnaqtun consists of four related variants, one of which is known as Kangiryuarmiutun, spoken by Inuvialuit in the community of Ulukhaktok. Inuvialuit from the communities of Tuktoyaktuk, Sachs Harbour, and Paulatuk traditionally speak Siglitun, while Uummarmiutun is traditionally spoken in Aklavik and Inuvik, where it now overlaps with Siglitun.

Who speaks Inuvialuktun today?

According to NWT statistics for 2004-2007, there were 2,743 Inuvialuit within the ISR, of whom 552 had the Inuit language as mother tongue. But only 130 used it in the home. According to a 2009 community survey by the Bureau of Statistics of NWT, there were a total of 499 individuals across the territory able to converse in Inuvialuktun (Siglitun & Uummarmiutun). The largest number of these speakers was 60 years or older. According to Statistics Canada, as few as 38% of Inuvialuit children between the ages of 2 and 5 understood Inuvialuktun in 2006. When compared to other Inuit regions across Canada, the ISR has a comparatively low level of speaker competency. This can be attributed to multiple factors; the most prevalent being perhaps that the region has had the strongest southern influence historically. Additionally, residential schooling beginning in the 1950s and leading up to the early 1990s represented a systematic contributor to the demise of ancestral languages across the Western Arctic. Today the lack of a comprehensive Inuvialuktun immersion program in the territory's education system is a certain contributor to the present linguistic situation.

Purpose and problem

The purpose of this study was to examine how some Inuvialuit beneficiaries in Inuvik thought about the importance of Inuvialuktun, especially in connection to their cultural identity. The idea behind the study was twofold: Firstly, the results would contribute to our knowledge of the interrelatedness between language and identity, and of what happens to cultural identity once the heritage language is no longer spoken. Secondly, the data would aid language planners and teachers in the ISR. We know from research conducted elsewhere that an understanding of the role of heritage language in the lives of learners enhances the success of its survival, because such knowledge allows language planners to promote materials accordingly. Hence, part of the goal was to see whether differences in age influenced how people felt about their

ancestral languages, what kind of attitudes and beliefs existed regarding Inuvialuktun in potential and current learners, and what these realities would tell us about obstacles to and/or opportunities for language learner motivation.

Ethnography from Hopi

In order to better understand the language situation in the ISR, I referred to the academic literature on Indigenous language revitalization projects in North American and global contexts. One comparative example came from Sheila Nicholas' (2010) study on Hopi language revitalization in Arizona, U.S.A. Similar to the Inuvialuit context, the use of the Hopi language had diminished, in part due to the education system. Two contradictory, but not mutually exclusive, perspectives existed among Hopi. One view held that cultural knowledge was encoded in the heritage language and that for this reason it could not be transmitted to other without the language. Another view held that there were many ways in which culture could be experienced and expressed, and that language was merely one of them. "I live Hopi, I just don't speak it" was a common quote (Nicholas 2010:137). Thus, being Hopi did not require knowledge of the language. As a result, one was Hopi by birthright, and because "thinking, feeling, and acting" Hopi are all based on ancestral work ethic (Nicholas 2010:138, 139). Interestingly enough, I would find a similar situation with my Inuvialuit co-researchers.

How did we collect data?

From the beginning I wanted to hear stories from people, and listen to deeper reasons individuals would give for their actions. This called for a qualitative research design in which I was able to capture perceptions of identity and language attitudes that are not easily established in statistical surveys. Working together with the Inuvialuit Cultural Resource Centre, the Aboriginal Language and Culture Instructor Program at Aurora College, the Beaufort Delta Education Council, as well as the Inuvialuit Regional Corporation was of great help because each institution provided access to potential participants. With my Inuvialuit research assistant, Dwayne Drescher, I was able to conduct semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and questionnaires. Together we worked with a total of 45 individuals between the ages of 6 and 59[1]. The data we collected I was able to combine with two years of informal participant observation that I had conducted while living in Inuvik prior to the study. Methodologically, I also tried to see research as a kind of relationship with the community, so that it would be of mutual benefit to my co-researchers and myself. This was partially accomplished by teaching workshops at Aurora College, the community Learning Centre, and Samuel Hearne Secondary School on language and identity and qualitative research methods.

What did we find?

It is a bit of a challenge to present the findings from a qualitative study in bullet point format, or in numbers. Therefore, the following section

[1] 4 individuals 6-16 (8.9%), 5 individuals 16-19 (11.1%), 27 individuals 20-39 (60.0%), 9 individuals 40-59 (20.0%), the highest percentage of individuals were young adults (group B) at 60%.

provides a few key themes that were encountered, and several of which are illustrated by quotes from participants.

Ideological disjuncture

As is true in the case of Hopi in the American Southwest, there seemed to exist some disjuncture in the beliefs about heritage language in the Inuvialuit community. Disjuncture occurs when an individual maintains seemingly contradictory convictions. Disjuncture was evident, for instance, in individuals who believed that cultural wisdom was imbedded in stories told by elders, and that such stories were best told in Inuvialuktun – not in English. Assuming that the loss of cultural wisdom is accompanied by a loss of cultural identity, losing one's ancestral language would contribute to a loss of cultural identity. However, while many individuals valued the protection of cultural wisdom, they did not feel an absolute need to learn Inuvialuktun. Charlie, a young Inuvialuit man, said: "You don't need [Inuvialuktun], but it's sort of crucial." For Charlie, Inuvialuktun was not important as a communicative device, because he could conduct traditional activities in English. But at the same time, Inuvialuktun was *crucial* to him as a marker of the past, and therefore he felt that it should not be lost entirely. In this context, ancestral language takes on a symbolic role.

Inuvialuktun has symbolic value

Because many individuals knew a few words of Inuvialuktun, they did feel connected to their cultural heritage through language. This limited knowledge of the ancestral tongue was primarily of symbolic nature, as it did not allow individuals to freely communicate with their elders. Those who knew a significant number of Inuvialuktun terms still lamented over their inability to form coherent sentences. Although it was often expressed that Inuvialuktun was important as an indicator of Inuvialuit cultural identity, in the same breath individuals would maintain that not being able to speak the language did in no way subtract from their being Inuvialuit. Consequently, the language retains a symbolic function, but this function is not the only way people maintain their cultural identity. Other markers of cultural identity were more important. Among them were participation in on-the-land activities, such as hunting, trapping, whaling, fishing, and camping, as well as participation in traditional drum dances and songs, the making and wearing of traditional clothing, traditional games, and values such as sharing and spending time together with elders.

Inuvialuktun strengthens Cultural identity

Although Inuvialuktun did not seem to serve as primary marker of Inuvialuit social or cultural identity, almost all potential learners were certain that acquiring their heritage language would increase their pride as Inuit and strengthen their personal and collective cultural identity. Individuals anticipated such qualities as greater self-confidence, deeper connection with the land, and the ability to communicate with their grandparents and thereby attain access to their stories. However, the great demands in terms of time and resources required to attain a fluent knowledge of Inuvialuktun seemed to outweigh the

relative benefits of the language. This was especially true in light of the fact that Inuvialuktun was not perceived as a necessity, but merely as a precious benefit to anyone already belonging to the Inuvialuit community.

Learning desire is influenced by age

Children attending primary school expressed a desire to learn the language, an enthusiasm that was encouraged by their language instructors and elders. During the teenage years, however, this desire often receded, in part due to the onslaught of youth-oriented global media, but also because teenagers realized that the majority of their own parents were not able to speak their heritage language, and that English was the only language in which most economic transactions took place. This wave of disinterest in ancestral language was often reversed by the time an individual entered a long-term relationship, had children, or matured in other ways. Usually this occurred around the age of 20 or 30, but there were also several individuals in their forties, especially women, who felt a strong desire to learn their heritage language, or to relearn it if they had spoken it as children but lost it in the course of residential schooling.

Perspectives on Inuvialuit identity

To better understand the role of language revitalization in the maintenance of strong cultural identities, I first examined some general ways in which Inuvialuit identity was being established. For this purpose I focused on several sociological themes, among them: freedom and constraint, fluidity and stability, cause and effect.

Freedom & constraint:
Land, city, and stories

Most individuals in the study indicated the importance of land to their cultural identity. Yet, especially younger individuals were somewhat divided on the importance of land. While some could not imagine being Inuvialuit without a profound knowledge of the land, others emphasized that a modern Inuvialuk could and should have knowledge that is not rooted in the land. In the same way, individuals often affirmed that living in the south did not deprive anyone of being Inuvialuit, while at the same time noting that nothing could replace the central role of land in Inuvialuit identity. A similar opposition of views was evident in how younger people related to the art of story telling. For instance, one person emphasized the importance of freely voicing new experiences as being genuinely Inuvialuit, thereby keeping an old tradition alive, while another demanded conformity to traditional norms and values in story telling. It can be said therefore that Inuvialuit identity is perceived, among other factors, through land and stories, but that there exists a tension between more traditionalist and modern perspectives. Both approaches helped establish what is and what is not culturally representative.

Fluidity & stability:
Blood ties, land claims, and regionalism

Cultural identity is generally quite stable because it is able to fluidly adapt to changing social realities. This is true also of Inuvialuit identity as it continuously adapts to new circumstances. Inter-cultural marriage, as an example, is an adaptive feature, yet

it can challenge blood-tie as principle marker of Inuvialuit identity. One young lady's response to this reality was to emphasize culture-specific upbringing over descent: "I don't have [purely] Inuvialuit blood, but it's the way my parents raised me. I grew up knowing that I was Inuvialuit, and that that would never change." Thus, the Inuvialuit Way is not merely a matter of descent, but also a matter of upbringing. Rapid modernization is another reality that has challenged cultural identity. While some saw modernization as a threat to the Inuvialuit Way, most persons saw it as an extension of the ancient ability of Inuvialuit to adapt to changing environmental demands. Another arena for adaptation is the land claim settlement. The Inuvialuit Final Agreement (IFA) has clearly led to a stronger sense of regional coherence in younger individuals. Consequently, young persons were less aware of the cultural and linguistic diversity across the ISR. Wallace, for example, saw himself as being Inuvialuit, not Siglit, Uummarmiut, or Kangiryuarmiut, while ultimately he spoke of himself as "Inuvialuit-Canadian," alluding to an identity that ties into the larger national mosaic. Intermarriage, modernization, and regional unification are only three examples in which we can see fluidity and stability interacting to perpetuate Inuvialuit cultural identity.

Cause and effect:
Camps, contractual mutuality,
And citizenship

Sociologists have pointed out that surroundings influence the formation of our identities, and that through our identities we, in turn, choose our surroundings. How this works becomes evident in the example of Inuvialuit hunting camps. Because Inuvialuit identity is largely expressed in relationship to land and animals, many individuals and families spend time at hunting camps, especially in spring and summer. Hunting camps represent social contexts that reflect traditional Inuvialuit social identity, and reversely the camp environment shapes a person's outlook on life. For many individuals, on-the-land experiences reconnected them with their ancestors and awakened a desire to learn about their cultural and linguistic past, sometimes influencing even career paths. A similar cause-effect scenario stands in connection to the land claims process. For many, one role of the Inuvialuit Final Agreement (IFA) has been to define who Inuvialuit are, where their land is, and what is of importance to the people. At the same time, the IFA ties Inuvialuit into a national consciousness by protecting part of Canada's larger Aboriginal heritage. While the IFA was primarily meant to protect the unique rights and heritage of Inuvialuit, it also effects identification with the nation state and justification of joint effort in its defense.

Perspectives on language beliefs

Looking at what shapes our perceptions of cultural identity, we realize that there are always many factors at play. The same is true of the way we perceive languages. Following, I will briefly outline some of the beliefs encountered in relation to Inuvialuktun and other languages spoken in the ISR.

Internalized language hierarchies

While speaking to Inuvialuit individuals of different ages, genders, and

occupations, I noticed a commonly accepted hierarchy of languages. This hierarchy was established on how each individual assessed a language's usefulness. While each language may have its own use and importance for the individual, the most pervasive criteria for evaluation seemed to be a language's relative economic value. Because salaried work has become an integral part of Inuvialuit society, favoring minority languages over dominant ones has become, in the minds of many people, economically disadvantageous. A young woman told me: "I love languages! […] The three languages I want to speak are English, French, and Inuvialuktun." The order she applied seemed indicative of the region where she lives: English is seen as indispensable to all daily affairs, French is considered highly useful for higher and nation-wide employment, and Inuvialuktun serves as a regional marker of identity. This hierarchy shows how Inuvialuktun is not prioritized due to the more powerful status of non-regional languages.

Language inequality and Aboriginal independence

The relative power of non-Aboriginal languages is further evident when we look at the importance of English in Inuvialuit self-determination. My co-researchers were well aware of inequality between minority and majority languages; as pointed out one woman: "If you're going to do business, it needs to be in English." Another individual pointed out: "In the Aboriginal world everything is in English. Now you can't only speak one language and be an executive president of some big corporation." This argument is of uttermost importance because a relatively high degree of Inuvialuit regional independence is maintained through the success of Inuvialuit-owned corporations. If leadership and self-determination are largely exercised through corporations, which in turn depend on national and global economic connectedness, it is not surprising that several individuals drew a symbolic association between economic connectedness (e.g. as exemplified by year-round road access) and majority language. Consequently, the benefits of contemporary Inuvialuit independence were perceived by many to be dependent upon collective acceptance of the dominant status of English in the region.

Effort & Reverence

A common attitude regarding heritage language in young people is expressed in the following quote: "Inuvialuktun should be considered important too. When I have kids I want them to learn the language. At least they should know some sentences. But I know that they are not really going to speak it fluently." This young man felt a need for intergenerational transmission of Inuvialuktun, but at the same time he already anticipated relatively poor success in regard to fluency. Instead of being upset with the factors that inhibit fluency and multi-generational retention, he seemed to accept them. Outlooks of this kind indicate that a continued support of language acquisition itself is a way to show reverence for one's cultural heritage. The degree of fluency obtained through such attempts is not prioritized at this point. Instead, an expression of appreciation and respect for the past comes to fore, and an effort to ensure that Inuvialuktun "stays around" is

made. Given the time and effort required to learn any language to a degree of fluency, a symbolic approach to heritage language seems to be accepted as most logical choice.

Esteem & Priorities

Not one of the 45 individuals I worked with had ever heard another community member comment negatively about existing efforts to keep Inuvialuktun alive. All individuals were certain that the community was in support of revitalizing Inuvialuktun, even if this did not translate into an active effort to learn the language. The majority of research partners were also confident that the image of the language was positive throughout the region and beyond. Given the fact that the image of Inuvialuktun is quite positive, and that its status is officially recognized and protected within the NWT, younger generations of Inuvialuit no longer suffer from the shame that was impressed on the parent and grandparent generations through the residential schools. At the same time, the sense of security that comes from official protection of the language may also have a negative impact on potential learners. It was repeatedly said that Inuvialuktun now existed 'in the books,' and if future generations wanted to bring it back, they could always do so by referring to the books. This sense of a safety net alleviated the urgency in younger people to learn while their elders were still around. It should be mentioned, that learning from books alone does not seem to be a realistic alternative.

Some recommendations

Following, I would like to offer several ideas that are intended to encourage continued efforts of community-based language planners, instructors, and activists. These ideas were inspired by data from my research partners during the study.

'Language homes' & Coming-of-age

It was repeatedly mentioned that Inuvialuktun remains to be a marker of Inuvialuit pride and identity - especially when away from home. Yet, being away from the ISR is also one of the most challenging factors in language maintenance. Developing clubs or programs at colleges and universities most commonly attended by Inuvialuit may reduce the language loss that occurs during the transition from high school to post secondary education in the south. At the same time, young adults in their 20s and 30s will often experience a renewed interest in their cultural and linguistic roots. Programs and materials specifically geared to young parents who are searching for ways to impart their cultural heritage to their young children represent an opportunity to introduce concerted language study.

Dialect diversity and
Learning partnerships

Several of my co-researchers had abandoned their efforts of learning Inuvialuktun as a direct result of criticism they had received for using the wrong dialect in the presence of elders from another language variant. Such discouraging experiences may be reduced by propagating an image of Inuvialuit unity through diversity,

especially among young people. To accomplish this, a greater acceptance of all three dialects across the six communities of the ISR would be necessary. This could be accomplished in part by displaying dialectological variation as a welcome indicator of regional belonging. Where individual learners find themselves isolated, or where they lack immediate support from relatives in learning a particular dialect, a 'study buddy' may be of great help. By setting up peer networks in each community (online or otherwise) that can be consulted to find like-mined individuals who can be contacted as study-partners for formal, informal, and personal Inuvialuktun study, may increase the number and success of learners.

New motivators &
New language domains

Language awareness could also be raised in teenagers by hosting innovative language events, such as youth language conferences with speakers from other northern minority language groups in order to facilitate a public exploration of existing motivators for language revitalization. For instance, young indigenous language activists from Scandinavia or Russia could be invited to share their motivations for learning and maintaining their ancestral languages. Young Inuvialuit learners may thus begin to see their own heritage language in a new light. With the opening up of new perspectives on language, it would also be of great benefit to introduce venues for language use that are not directly associated with the past. By introducing language use in a way that connects the past with the future, language use could be diversified and perceptions of language relevancy may be increased. An existing example of this is the deliberate attempt by many young Sami to move away from the stereotypes that continue to exist for the use of Sami dialects.

Closing note

In summary, I would like to thank all Inuvialuit co-researchers and participants for their valuable time and precious insights. It is my sincerest hope that the insights we have shared on Inuvialuit language, culture, and identity will contribute to a strong future, both on our personal paths, but also – and especially - in the collective identity of the Inuvialuit community.

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This Community Report summarizes some of the findings of a qualitative research study conducted by Alexander Oehler in Inuvik between August and December of 2011. The research was part of his master's thesis in interdisciplinary studies (Anthropology and First Nations Studies) at the University of Northern British Columbia, Prince George. To obtain an electronic copy of Mr. Oehler's thesis, please go to inuvialuktun.unbc.ca, or contact the Inuvialuit Cultural Resource Centre. A hard copy is also available from the library at the University of Northern British Columbia. To contact the author: oehler@unbc.ca.

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