

SURVIVAL OF THE INUKTITUT LANGUAGE

Introduction

Focus

This story concerns the erosion of the Inuktitut language among the Inuit of Nunavut. It is estimated that only 38 per cent of people in Nunavut feel they are fluent reading and writing Inuktitut. Many people believe that if the Inuktitut language disappears, Inuit culture will disappear as well. But there is hope. The Inuit of Greenland have been able to protect their language, and both it and their culture are thriving.

YV Sections marked with this symbol indicate content suitable for younger viewers.

“Language is the living system of terms people use to share their history, culture and ideas—when one dies, it deserves to be remembered. Leaving no records at all can rob humankind of historical concepts that may not even have words in surviving tongues. Someday, a Middle Eastern recipe might hold the key to a cancer cure. Or an African dialect might reveal another take on the origin of man. Or some Indian phrase might simply help connect another grandmother to her ancestors.”
— UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) study, February 2002

It is estimated that of the approximately 6000 languages spoken worldwide, at least 3000 are endangered or dying in many parts of the world. Up to 90 per cent may actually die over the next century. Languages can disappear when its speakers relocate and are required to speak the dominant language to get a job and function in the new society, or because they confront a more aggressive or economically stronger culture. In some cases, language groups are invaded and overrun by a more powerful society speaking new languages.

North American Aboriginal languages have one of the worst survival records. Many Aboriginal languages are now extinct because of harsh assimilation policies and residential schools that prohibited students from using their mother tongue. Approximately 60 Aboriginal languages exist in Canada. Inuktitut is one of the healthiest of these languages, but even it is in trouble. In Nunavut, where 85 per cent of the population is Inuit, 40 per cent report that they are losing the ability to speak in their mother tongue. Only 38 per cent say they are fluent in reading and writing—but this is because Inuktitut is primarily an oral language. Clearly the survival of the language is at stake.

Today in Nunavut, where the official

language of government is Inuktitut, a debate is developing over what should be done about the decline. Those who believe that Inuktitut should be preserved argue that if the language is lost Inuit culture will be lost as well. These people blame television, inadequate government policies and funding, a lack of Inuktitut teachers, and parents who do not make the language a priority at home. Others believe that the decline of the language is not a threat to the culture and believe that a simple challenge to the community to use the language more will be enough to increase the use of Inuktitut. Interestingly, many Inuit elders are against an active policy to promote the language because this would involve selecting one writing style for Inuktitut (there are currently two) and making everyone comply with that standard.

But all is not lost for the Inuit of northern Canada. They can look to their neighbours in Greenland for hope. Inuit living in Greenland have been able to successfully defend their mother tongue and, as a result, their language is thriving. The native language, Greenlandic, is the dominant language in the media, the community, the government, and most importantly, on the playground.

Of the nearly 60
Aboriginal languages
spoken in Canada,
only three are spoken
widely enough to en-
sure their preservation.

To Consider

1. Carefully reflect upon the importance of language to your own identity and culture. What words or phrases can you think of that are uniquely Canadian?

2. What words or phrases do you use with your friends that you do not use with your family? How do these words/phrases play a role in the subculture to which you belong: adolescence?

3. If your family background is not English-speaking, how does your mother tongue shape who you are? What steps has your family or community taken to protect your language and culture?

4. Who should be responsible for preserving languages? Is it up to the government, the community, the individual, or all of these? Explain your conclusions.

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Video Review

YV Understanding the Issues

To learn more about the future of Inuktitut, watch this video report and respond to the questions on this and the following pages.

This video story concerns the erosion of the Inuktitut language in Canada's north. In Nunavut, where 85 per cent of the population is Inuit, 40 per cent of people have already lost, or are losing, their ability to speak in their mother

tongue. In the first section of the video you will learn about three factors that have had, and are continuing to have, an impact on the Inuktitut language. As you watch the video, carefully make notes outlining the role of these factors.

1. Popular English culture and the media:

2. Education policies and practices:

3. Government policies and funding:

Follow-up Questions

With a partner, or in a small group, answer the following questions.

1. What similarities and differences did you observe between Inuit teens and your peers?

2. In what ways are Inuit kids being given the message that Inuktitut is not important?

3. If you were an Inuit parent, would you want your child educated in Inuktitut or English? Why?

4. How do the various levels of government support education in your region? In what ways do you get the message that education is important and that it is important to be fluent in English and/ or French?

On a positive note, a Canadian Inuit-language film, *Atanjuarat* won best picture, director, screenplay, editing, and original score at the 2002 Genie Awards, Canada's premier film award. The film has also been well received across the world.

5. What language(s) is spoken in your own home. How well has your family been able to maintain its language, if it is not English?

Exploring Possible Solutions

In the latter part of the video you will learn about the Inuit in Greenland. Eighty per cent of Greenland's residents are Inuit, and their native language,

Greenlandic, is thriving. As you listen to this part of the story, answer the questions below.

1. What did the Greenland Inuit do to maintain their language?

2. As their language thrived what impact did this have on other parts of Inuit culture?

3. What are the primary differences in the history of the two Inuit communities that may have affected the vitality and future of the language?

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Taking a Closer Look at Inuit Culture

Early History

The Inuit have a long history in Canada. It is believed that the Inuit descended from the early Paleo-Eskimo cultures that crossed the Bering Strait to present-day Alaska, northern Canada, and Greenland over 4000 years ago. The people of the most recent of the Paleo-Eskimo cultures—the Thule—are considered to be the ancestors of the Inuit. The early Inuit societies were egalitarian and developed two principal traits: the sharing in the hunt to ensure the survival of the group, and an attitude of patience, acceptance, and enduring confidence. (This second trait is known as *ayurnamat*, roughly translated as “Oh well, it can’t be helped.”) This attitude

also results in a culture that does not try to dominate and change nature but instead lives with nature and follows its seasons and moods.

Although the Inuit had contact with Norse explorers 1000 years ago, contact with colonizing Europeans was relatively sporadic until the 19th and 20th centuries. At that point, missionaries, mounted police officers, and Hudson’s Bay Company traders began to interact with the Inuit on a more regular basis. Though no treaties were signed, the Canadian government put northern peoples under its jurisdiction in 1870. It was not until 1960 that all Aboriginal peoples gained the right to vote in federal elections.

Discussion

1. Why is the cultural value of *ayurnamat* very important for a people that must survive off the land?

2. Why do you think European, or southern, culture had relatively little impact on the Inuit until the 1950s?

Major Changes of the 50s, 60s, and 70s

Canadian Inuit lived primarily beyond the influence of southern society until the 1950s and 1960s. At that time, the Canadian government began providing health care, housing, and education in “settlement areas.” Parents who wanted their children to read and write in English moved into these settlements. This had a profound impact on traditional Inuit skills since these families no longer lived off the land. The launch of the Anik A-1 satellite in 1972 brought television into the Arctic. Thus the Inuit were exposed to southern consumer goods and values. This led to a decline in the use of the Inuktitut language. These changes were further compounded by the fact that activities such as the sealskin industry almost disappeared in the 1970s, eliminating a traditional occupation for many young men.

The Creation of Nunavut and the Reclamation of Names

In April 1999 the Inuit took a large step forward in shaping their own destiny when the territory of Nunavut was created. The creation of this 800 000-square-mile territory made the Inuit one of the first indigenous peoples to retrieve territory based on ancient claims. With it came a sense of renewed pride. One of the first steps the Nunavut government took to reclaim and reaffirm traditional Inuit culture involved changing many names throughout the territory.

About 400 people have come forward to the Nunavut Court of Justice to get rid of “E numbers” that were still being used to identify them on government papers. These “E numbers” (short form for “Eskimo numbers”)

were assigned to the Inuit by government workers from the south who could not understand the way the Inuit were named. Traditional Inuit names reflect all aspects of what is important in Inuit culture: the environment, landscape, kinship, animals, birds, and spirits. For example, someone might be named Tulugaq, for raven, or Amaruq, for wolf. As well, since the Inuit believed that the spirits of the dead continued to live, newborns were often named after a dead person, and were addressed as “mother” or “father,” as the departed person had been. Children named after elders were revered and often called “little mother” or “little father” by the child’s family. Those “discovering” Inuit culture could not understand this, and as a result came into each Inuit community and counted the people there. If someone was the 37th person in the 7th community they visited, that person simply became E7-37. Understandably Inuit wish to rid themselves of these culturally insensitive “names.”

In the 1970s the Canadian government issued a new order. Officials went to every part of the Arctic to decree that people adopt surnames, which were not part of the Inuit tradition. The drive became known as Project Surname, and prompted confusion and resentment among the Inuit. “The Inuit were degraded. The [white men] never thought to understand the existing culture. But whatever they ordered, the Inuit felt they had to follow . . . You were taught to listen to elders, listen to adults. These guys coming [in] were adults.”

Nunavut means “our land” in Inuktitut.

Did you know . . .

The term *Eskimo* is no longer used to identify Inuit? It was based on an Algonkian name meaning “eaters of raw meat.”

Discussion

1. Outline your reaction to government policies that provided E numbers for Inuit.

2. Why are names such an important part of identity and culture? How do you feel about your given name and your surname? Would you be upset if someone else changed your name because it was hard to pronounce?

3. Have you thought about whether or not you will change your surname upon marriage? (This question applies to both females *and* males in the class.) State the reasons why you would or would not want to change your surname.

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IV *Impact of Residential Schools*

What Were They?

Residential schools began in the mid-1850s. These schools were part of the government's plan to "Canadianize" Aboriginal persons, partly by converting them to Christianity. The government and several churches and religious orders co-operated to run these schools. Children were taken from their homes at a young age and sent away to be "civilized." The residential schools taught Christianity, reading and writing English, arithmetic, and skills such as cooking, cleaning, and working in the fields. The curriculum was based on European values and traditions. It was foreign to Inuit culture.

What Was Their Impact?

The schools destroyed many Aboriginal children and their families. This happened for a number of reasons:

1. The schools used very strict discipline to force the students to become more "Canadian." In addition to physical, mental and emotional abuse, many children were also sexually abused in these schools.
2. The children who were in the schools had little contact with their parents and extended families. They could

not learn their customs. Children who spoke Aboriginal languages were severely punished.

3. The parents and grandparents were deeply troubled. They often knew that their children were being treated cruelly in these schools, yet they were powerless to protect their own children. With the children removed, the families lost their natural structure and purpose. Aboriginal communities began to fall apart.
4. Many of these children left the schools feeling that their relatives—even their parents—were backward and embarrassing. However, these students were still Aboriginal themselves, no matter what they had learned. So the attitudes they learned also affected how they saw themselves.
5. As a result, low self-respect is common among people who went to residential schools. This low self-respect is the root of many problems that now exist in Aboriginal communities.

Discussion

1. Why do you think the government thought it was necessary to "civilize" Aboriginal children? Why were traditional ways deemed unacceptable?

2. Summarize the short- and long-term effects of residential schools.

The Problem of “Scooping”

By the 1950s, the schools were starting to become controversial, and they were not achieving their goals. Governments began removing large numbers of Aboriginal children from their families, saying that the parenting or living conditions were inadequate. Many Aboriginal children were put in foster care or adopted by non-Aboriginal families. Aboriginal Canadians often call this “scooping.” This was later considered

to be a form of kidnapping.

The very conditions the government complained of in Aboriginal homes may have been created during the era of residential schools. Since the government controlled most conditions in the North, it was unfair to blame parents for the challenges faced by children. Many First Nations communities and families again suffered because their children were taken away. Of course, the children were affected most of all.

Discussion

1. What do you think would be the impact of “scooping” on the children themselves, on their parents and grandparents, and on their communities?

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YV *Other Languages Facing Extinction*

Of the 800 000 people who identify themselves as Aboriginal Canadians, only about a quarter consider an Aboriginal language to be their mother tongue.

Unfortunately the Inuit are not the only people concerned about the loss of their language. As you read the following information, ask yourself what common features these language groups share.

The following information comes from a study conducted by linguists—people who study languages—at the University of Manchester in England and published in 2002.

North America

There are only about 85 000 speakers of Pennsylvania German left. Spoken mainly by the Amish in North America, the language is being used less and less. As well, the language Gullah, spoken by descendents of former slaves is disappearing. The language still appears among inhabitants of the islands off South Carolina and Georgia.

South America

There are about 300 languages in the Lowland Amazonia area, but many are almost extinct. For example, it is estimated that only three people are still able to speak Oro Win while only another 300 still communicate in Piraha.

Middle East

Modern Aramaic is spoken by only 400 000 people in the Middle East. It is descended from Aramaic, the language

believed to have been Jesus Christ's native tongue. It was the main spoken language in Galilee in the first centuries BC and BCE.

Asia

The southern Chinese language Nushu is on the decline, and it may be the world's only language just for women. This language is characterized by writing on silk screens, and one of its popular sayings is "Beside a well, one does not thirst. Beside a sister, one does not despair."

Europe

There are a number of minority languages in Europe that are in danger. They include Faeoroese, spoken on the Faeroe Islands, Sardinian, from the Italian island of Sardinia, and Yiddish, a Jewish language that has been on the decline since the Holocaust and the Second World War.

Australia

Many of the Aboriginal languages of Australia are in danger. These include the tribal tongues Wanyi, Wakka Wakka, and Kullilli from the Queensland area. It is estimated that Aboriginal languages are dying at a rate of one every three years.

Follow-Up

1. Should we be concerned about the loss of a minority language? Explain.

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YV *News Makers: Paul Okalik*

If you wish to stay informed of recent government activities in Nunavut visit the official Web site at www.gov.nu.ca. This site is presented in four languages, including both forms of Inuktitut, English and French.

Did You Know . . .

- *Inuk* is the singular form of Inuit?
- The government of Nunavut comes to a decision by consensus rather than voting along political party lines?

“My mother would explain the names of our traditional sites and teach me how to respect the animals we hunted. That’s what I enjoyed the most.”

— Paul Okalik

As the example of Greenland demonstrates, for Inuktitut to survive, strong government policies that protect and promote the language may be necessary. The current head of Nunavut’s government is Premier Paul Okalik, and it may well be his vision and influence that determine the future of Inuktitut.

Who is he?

- Born 1964 and raised in a small community on Baffin Island he has experienced many of the problems that Inuit youth face today.
- He was unhappy in the English-language school he had to attend and hurt when his older brother Norman committed suicide.
- He was an alcoholic by 17 and was jailed for breaking and entering and theft.
- He entered an alcohol treatment program and went to live with his family to learn his people’s culture and ancient traditions.
- He got his “lucky break” when he landed a job as a researcher with the Tungavik Federation of Nunavut, which was negotiating the land claim that would later result in the creation of the new territory.

Reflecting

If you were an aide to the Premier of Nunavut, what advice and help would you offer in the search to build a healthy, prosperous society?

- Encouraged by his Inuit elders to pursue a career in law, he eventually did so at the University of Ottawa.
- He was the first Inuk lawyer in Canada’s eastern Arctic, called to the bar in 1999.
- He was a 37-year-old who had little political experience when appointed in 1999. This lack of experience was considered an asset, however, by the peers who appointed him—as a new leader for a new territory.

Current Challenges Facing Okalik

- trying to preserve and strengthen Inuit culture in the face of southern influences
- getting enough Inuit people educated and trained to take on positions within the new government’s administration
- dealing with an unemployment rate of around 28 per cent
- trying to rebuild a wounded society. The rate of sexually transmitted disease runs at 15 times the national average; alcoholism and drug abuse continue to cripple many families. Suicide rates are higher than the Canadian average.

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YV *Summary Activity*

Rationale

As you learned in this *News in Review* report, residential schools had a significant impact on many Aboriginal peoples in Canada. To gain greater insight into this impact select one of the following activities to complete in class.

Activity 1

The following are actual examples of the type of punishments given to some Aboriginal children at residential schools:

- For failing a test — no food for a day
- For not working hard enough — four hours of extra work (in school or garden)
- For disobedience, and rude or disorderly conduct — no food or water for a day, a beating (with a stick on the back), extra garden work
- For speaking an Aboriginal language — (first offence) no supper — (second offence) no supper and beating — (third offence) considered disobedience and punished as such
- For going off by yourself (without another student present) — several hours of kneeling alone on a rock floor where all can see

Assume you are an Aboriginal student at a residential school. Write a letter to your family at home. Describe to them what the school is like, what type of daily tasks you have been asked to perform, what your opinion is of the administrators (mainly clergy), what (if anything) you miss about home.

OR

Activity 2

Aboriginal students at residential school often had a difficult time fitting back into family life when they eventually returned to their communities. Prepare a short skit in which a family is adjusting to having their children return from residential school. You will need at least two characters (a student and a parent), but you may have more: one or more students, a mother, a father, a grandparent, brothers and sisters. Try to put yourself in the shoes of the characters you are portraying. What were some of the problems experienced by the children and their parents when the students arrived home? What effect did the residential schools have on the way Aboriginal people—students and parents—felt about themselves? After writing your skit, present it to your peers for their reaction.