Language is a cultural mosaic of communication. Through song, story, and conversation, we reveal our cultural identities. The air of Nunavut is filled with sounds, resonating in four languages. Often, the words begin to meld together. The balance between Inuktitut, Inuinnaqtun, English and French is a delicate one. Language is dynamic, capable of adapting and evolving.

—Nunavut Department of Culture, Language, Elders and Youth

When we think about language in Canada the first thing that comes to mind is the country’s bilingual (English and French) character and the critical role that Québec has played in shaping that character. Conversations about language in Canada often focus on the controversial French language laws in Québec, the terrific opportunity of French immersion schools for students across the country, and the challenge of trying to figure out how to win les grandes prix on the back of the Kellogg’s cereal box.

It is much less commonly known that the Northwest Territories has 11 official languages—English and French, and nine Aboriginal languages—or that Nunavut, the newest territory in Canada, has three official languages, one of which is Inuktitut, the Inuit language. Just two years ago, the federal government, through Heritage Canada, committed tens of millions of dollars to the Aboriginal Languages and Cultures Initiative in an effort to “preserve, revitalize and promote Aboriginal languages and cultures.” While French is spoken by roughly one quarter of the Canadian population, the total number of Aboriginal language speakers is only about 250,000, or far less than 1% of the entire population. Still, the survival of those languages is a key concern in Canada, thanks primarily to efforts by the Aboriginal people themselves.

In Canada, Aboriginal people are divided into three major categories; First Nations, Inuit and Métis. Since
the 1970s, these groups have demanded that self-determination issues and land claims be addressed by the provincial, territorial and federal governments. In an attempt to respond to these concerns, the federal government appointed a Royal Commission on Aboriginal People in the 1990s. The 1995 Report of the Commission recommended a strong commitment to aboriginal culture and values and recognition of the inherent right of self-determination for all aboriginal people. In the 2002 Speech from the Throne, Canada's Governor General announced that the Canadian government was committed to "work with Aboriginal people to preserve and enhance Aboriginal languages and cultures" and pledged significant funding for the Aboriginal Languages and Cultures Initiative mentioned above.

Announcing the new initiative in a press release, Heritage Canada emphasized the importance of Aboriginal languages and cultures to the fabric of Canadian society. It was beautifully put: "Aboriginal languages, stories and heritage are the foundation of Canada's diversity. These languages must be cherished because they are unique on the face of the globe and help shape the identity and the meaning of Canada. Strong Aboriginal languages and cultures will continue to enrich Canadian culture and are integral to the heritage of Canada."

Although funding for the Aboriginal Languages and Cultures Initiative is impressive, the "health" of Aboriginal languages in Canada is less positive. Of Canada’s 30 million people, only about 1 million are Aboriginal, and of those 1 million only about 25% can speak their mother tongue. In fact, of the 50-70 Aboriginal languages spoken in Canada today, only three—Cree, Ojibway and Inuktitut—have sufficient speakers to ensure their success. Already 10 Aboriginal languages in Canada are extinct, with the majority destined for extinction by mid-century. These realities were part of the impetus to create the Initiative.

Of all the Aboriginal languages in Canada, Inuktitut is faring the best with about 75% of the approximate 45,000 Inuit fluent (the figure is 90% in Nunavik, the Inuit territory in northern Québec). The strength of the language in the North may be due to the isolation of northern communities that has ensured some protection against overwhelming outside influence. South of the tree line, aboriginals had more contact with Europeans, Canadians and Americans and were culturally and linguistically impacted much earlier. While outsiders have visited the North for hundreds of years, it was only recently—during the middle of the 20th century—that the Inuit culture and language became seriously threatened.

Freelance Inuk writer Ann Meekitjuk Hanson describes how the Inuit language incorporated English words during the various periods of contact. "When the whalers came, they brought with them many

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**GUIDE TO INUKHTUT WORDS**

The Inuktitut language is written in symbols (syllabics) that represent a combination of sounds.

**Common Inuktitut Sounds**

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- nasal "ng":
- guttural "k":

**Syllabic Writing System**

The syllabic writing system in Canada's North was developed from a modified version of Pitman Shorthand by Reverend James Evans in the early 1800s. (The Inukshuk book, pg. 62)
things that would alter this way of life, including a new language. Words like tea, sugar, flour ... became everyday Inuktitut words, but their pronunciation was distinctly Inuk: tea became ttt, sugar was pronounced sukaq, flour was called palauqaq... when the clergy came, more new words and phrases were added to our language ... when the Hudson’s Bay Company came, more terms and phrases were invented, all in Inuktitut ... when the RCMP came, they too brought new words and expressions that broadened our language.”

(from The Nunavut Handbook.)

While the Inuit language may have been evolving, its survival and the ultimate integrity of the language were not originally at risk. Even the missionaries who started coming North in the late 18th century, did not enforce the use of English and actually made significant contributions to literacy.

For example, Moravian priests from Greenland, fluent in Greenlandic, set up missions in Labrador where they used Roman orthography to translate the Bible into Inuktitut. The missionaries also set up schools promoting reading and writing in the native language. By the mid-1800s, only about nine or ten of the 334 Inuit in one congregation in Labrador were unable to read. The schools were operated by the Inuit in the Inuktitut language. The Inuit in Labrador developed a very distinctive written and spoken form of Inuktitut that remained resistant to a standard Canadian Inuit written and spoken language. It was only when Newfoundland joined Canada in 1949 that all instruction in
the Inuit language ended with the imposition of a provincial school system.

In the central and western Arctic of Canada (or what is today the new territory of Nunavut and Nunavik, the Inuit territory in northern Quebec) the written form of Inuktitut developed quite differently than in Labrador. In the early 1800s in southern Ontario, the Reverend James Evans became frustrated with the limitations of the Roman alphabet to write the Ojibway language, and developed a syllabic orthography. Curiously, his syllabic system, now used throughout the western Arctic, was developed from his knowledge of Pitman Shorthand, the writing system used by secretaries to take dictation. Evans even took the Pitman symbols and adapted them to indicate the sound of the language.

When Evans later moved to Norway House (near the north end of Lake Winnipeg in Manitoba), he used the syllabic system to write the Cree language. Apparently the system was successful and, in a short time, the Cree had mastered their language in written form. Because the language was written on birchbark, Evans became known as "the man who made birchbark talk."

The proliferation of the syllabic orthography among the Inuit is credited to another missionary, Edmund Peck, who came to Canada in 1876. Peck established a mission at Little Whale River on the east coast of Hudson's Bay where he worked both with the Indians and the Inuit. He was given the job of translating portions of the Bible into Inuktitut, also teaching the Bible and reading and writing to the Inuit. Peck dedicated his life to this endeavor and his impact was significant.

Peck apparently spent the better part of every day for seven years becoming fluent in the Inuktitut dialect of the region and writing out the complete Inuit language in syllabics. Kenn Harper, in the 1983 edition of Inuktitut (originally published by Indian and Northern Affairs, Canada) wrote that because of Peck's incredible dedication, he earned his Inuktitut name—Uqammak—or, "the one who speaks well" and is remembered to this day for what he did for the Inuit language.

Peck spent considerable time in two other regions; the Ungava region in Northern Quebec and later on Blacklead Island in Cumberland Sound on the east coast of Baffin Island (near present-day Pangnirtung). Peck's translations of church literature circulated throughout the North and were used by the Inuit to teach one another about the Bible. The syllabic writing system enabled the Anglican Church to proselytize over a large area of the Arctic because it was easy to learn and therefore was readily passed on from Inuk to Inuk, community to community. The Inuit taught one another the written language in both Bible groups and school settings enabling literacy to spread to regions that the missionaries had not even visited.

In the early 20th century the Inuit began to record their own activities thanks to the development of the written language by the early missionaries. Peter Pitseolak's diaries are now the most famous of Inuit written diaries and journals. He wrote People from Our Side, a history of the people of Baffin Island and Escape from Death, about his narrow escape from death on a hunting trip. Both journals were written in syllabics, later translated into English, and published after his death in 1974. For hundreds of years, then, visitors had come to the North but without impacting the integrity of the language. All this was to change in the mid-20th century.

Following World War II, the North came to the attention of the Canadian federal government began to pay more attention to the North because of sovereignty and security concerns brought about by the Cold War and the wealth of natural resources that were being discovered. To work more effectively with the Inuit, the Canadian government decided that it was important to provide citizenship education and training in English. The rationale was to "help" the Inuit and, in fact, in 1958 Prime Minister John Diefenbaker based his election campaign on the "Northern Vision" which he believed would improve living conditions in the North. Mandatory schooling and social services were established in the Inuit communities and, to entice families to send their children to school, the government offered family allowance and welfare payments in exchange for attendance.

Beginning in the 1950s, and for the first time, Inuit children were learning from white outsiders (Qallunaat) who did not know Inuktitut or the traditional culture of the Inuit. In many cases, use of the Inuktitut lan-
The first book written in Inuktitut was in the early 20th century by Peter Pitseolak, an Inuk from Baffin Island.

Agreement empowered the Inuit to take control of their education and provided funding to support this goal. The Katavik School Board worked closely with the School of Education at McGill University in Montréal creating a partnership to train Aboriginal educators. The program began by offering community-based courses in Nunavik to meet the growing need for Inuktitut speakers at the elementary level. The first students were Inuit women who lacked formal education, but worked as classroom assistants for non-Inuit teachers in northern Quebec.

Some of the early graduates of this program later worked with McGill consultants to plan courses that reflected the academic standards of McGill but incorporated Inuit content and organization. Today, the Office of First Nations, and Inuit Education and the School of Education work closely to provide a Certificate in Education for First Nations and Inuit, and a Certificate in Aboriginal Literacy Education. Many of the courses are now offered in Inuktitut. The program was so successful that Nunavut pursued a similar partnership with McGill offering courses in Iqaluit, the capital of Nunavut (Arctic College in Nunavut has since taken over the education program).

The Inuit have at least some jurisdiction over their education and provide training to educators in Inuktitut in all four Inuit regions in Canada. In Nunavut and Nunavik, the language of instruction for Grades one and two is exclusively Inuktitut. After the early grades the children are taught in English (or in Nunavik they can select French) with Inuit culture and language training continuing through graduation. Unfortunately, there is a shortage of teachers fluent in Inuktitut to offer many courses at the high school level in the North.

While much has yet to achieve in terms of language training in the North, there is a solid base of fluent speakers, and many positive developments will hopefully ensure the strength of the language. For example, Inuktitut is used by the Canadian Broadcast-
ing Corporation in the North, by Nunatsiaq News, the
northern newspaper, and on some television pro-
gramming. Also, more films are being produced by the
Inuit and in Inuktitut. The most well-known of these is
Atanarjuat, or The Fast Runner, that was shown at
film festivals around the world just a few years ago
and whose popularity illustrates the strength of Inuit
language and culture and its global impact.

Atanarjuat, completed in 1999, was the first feature
film written, directed and produced by Inuit, with an
all-Inuit cast, and in Inuktitut (with English sub-
titles). The film is based on an ancient Inuit legend
that addresses the dangers of putting individual de-
sires before the needs of the community. The director,
Zacharias Kunuk, is from the small village of Igloolik
in Nunavut and worked with Igloolik Isuma Produc-
tions to direct and produce the film.

Atanarjuat won the 2001 Caméra d’Or at the Cannes
International Film Festival for the Best First Feature
Length Film; the film won six Gente awards (Can-
dian version of the Oscars) in 2002. At both Cannes
and Toronto, Kunuk (BELOW) gave his acceptance
speech in Inuktitut marking the first time the Inuit
language had been spoken from the winner’s podium.
As the Globe and Mail reported (2 May 2002), "Zacharias
Kunuk, and Inuit director from the 1,200-member
community of Igloolik, thanked the bemused multilin-
gual elite of the international film world in his native
language . . . the 43-year-old Mr. Kunuk said that he
was happy to "promote our culture around the world,"
but that he would return home this week, where he
hoped to fix his Ski-Doo and get ready for hunting
season." This film was significant in bringing the
North and Inuit culture to the world for the first time
since Nanook of the North was released in 1922.

Most recently, Inuktitut gained further world atten-
tion when the four new moons of Saturn were named
after Inuit mythological characters. A group of astra-
nomers, including Canadian, J.J. Kavelaars, dis-
covered the moons. Kavelaars knew the work of Inuk
author, Michael Kusugak, and suggested that the icy
moons be named after Kusugak’s Inuit characters.
The International Astronomical Union approved the
names Paalaaq, Ijiraq (a mythical character in Kusugak’s
These new moons are the very first objects in the solar
system to be given non-European names or names not
based on the traditional Greco-Roman mythological
characters.

Inuktitut is receiving increasing global attention and
"visibility" as are the Inuit and the North, in general.
From stories and songs about the fabled Northwest
Passage, to Nanook of the North, to the contemporary
children’s stories by Inuk author Michael Kusugak,
to the new moons of Saturn, the North and the Inuit
continue to represent a unique part of Canadian na-
tional identity. "A sense of northerness," as quoted in
a recent policy document (The Northern Dimension of
Canada’s Foreign Policy) published by the Canadian
government, "has always been central to Canadian
identity." And that northerness is most impressively
illustrated in the efforts and successes at self-deter-
mination that have been made by the Inuit.

While Inuktitut may not be the first language that
comes to mind when thinking of Canada’s official
languages, it is, in fact, an official language for Nunavut,
Nunavik, Nunatsiavut and Inuvialuit and has, like
French, shaped the linguistic distinctiveness of the
country. The fall edition of Canada World View, a
publication published by the department of Foreign
Affairs Canada, is dedicated to Aboriginal peoples
and language. In that publication the Canadian gov-
ernment warns that with the loss of language comes
"the demise of local knowledge, mentalities, creativ-
ity and heritage, as well as specialized information
such as unique survival skills and traditional medi-
cines." It is heartening that Canada recognizes what
is lost when a language dies and realizes the intrinsic
value of language to a community and nation as a
whole. There are only about 30,000 Canadians that
speak Inuktitut but those Canadians—the Inuit—
have shaped Canada’s identity in a way that is dis-
tinct, and now has impacted people throughout the
world.

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info: 206-543-6269 or nfabb@u.washington.edu. Much
of the history of Inuktitut in this article was taken
from Kenn Harper’s superb essays in the September