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# Inuktitut and Parliamentary Terminology

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*The territory of Nunavut came into existence on April 1, 1999 when the Northwest Territories was divided. Among the structures inherited by Nunavut were a consensus-style legislature and a set of legislation, including the NWT's Official Languages Act, a Languages Commissioner and language services reflecting the needs of the public, government and parliamentarians alike. This article looks at the use of the Inuit language in Nunavut's Legislative Assembly including the challenge of developing terminology within the parliamentary context.*



Language is one of the most prominent and critical issues when it comes to politics and public administration in the north. It affects all areas of service delivery, from health and social services, to education and the expectations of our educational system, to the composition of our labour force and the way business is conducted in the workplace.

Prior to division in 1999, all aboriginal languages used across the North were recognized and protected in legislation. Although the Inuit language is the mother tongue of approximately eighty per cent of our population in Nunavut, the *Official Languages Act* that we inherited from the NWT listed no less than eight official languages, eleven if one counts distinct language communities. The definition of "Inuktitut" was deemed to include "Inuvialuktun" and "Inuinnaqtun" which are, in fact, distinct from "Inuktitut". Nunavut's new official languages legislation refers instead to the "Inuit language," which includes "Inuktitut" and "Inuinnaqtun".

The Inuit language is used in this House by the elected Members of the Legislative Assembly a significant proportion of the time. Although it is difficult to

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quantify, I would estimate that approximately 50% of proceedings of the Third Legislative Assembly are conducted in Inuktitut, the remainder in English. In the previous two Assemblies, it was my impression that a somewhat higher percentage, between 60% and 70%, of our proceedings were conducted in Inuktitut.

Our Chamber is well equipped to deal with bilingual and even trilingual proceedings. Simultaneous interpretation is available to all Members and witnesses. Our *Hansard* reflects the languages that are spoken in the House. English and Inuktitut versions of *Hansard* are produced on a daily basis.

The choice of language used in the House is not only determined by the preference of the individual Member but, in many cases, is influenced by the topic under discussion. Certain subjects relating to modern life and its technical aspects lack formal Inuktitut terminology. For example, during the Second Legislative Assembly (2004-2008), a three-day debate in Committee of the Whole focused on the issue of "bad gas" with Members discussing and questioning the chemical properties of that year's supply of gasoline, which is purchased in bulk once a year and transported to the North by ship. While the cost and quality of gasoline has a significant impact on traditional activities such as hunting and harvesting, in order for MLAs to discuss the specific details affecting cost and quality, we had to resort to English in order to ask questions about such gasoline additives as Methylcyclopentadienyl Manganese Tricarbonyl (MMT).

Although the Inuit language is an aboriginal language of Canada, it is not closely related to any of the First Nations languages. Indeed, even with respect

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to our dealings with the federal government, Inuit have always been and continue to be treated quite differently from First Nations peoples in Canada.

### **Development of the Inuit Language**

The Inuit language uses a different range of sounds than English or French. As with any language, the phonology of the Inuit language has its particular traits and quirks. Inuit have become remarkably skilled at adapting the language to accommodate foreign words. For example, Inuktitut does not have a sound like the English 'b' as in "brother" or "ball". So when it comes to pronouncing a foreign word which includes the [b] sound, an Inuktitut-speaker simply uses 'p' or 'v', whichever sounds most harmonious within the context of the word. If your name is "Bob" you may find that it is pronounced and written in Inuktitut as "Pap".

Inuktitut has two distinct sounds, 'q' and 'k', that have only one corresponding sound in English or French, which is a 'k' or a hard 'c' as in the words "kin" or "cat". The subtle distinction between the velar 'k' sound and the uvular 'q' sound in Inuktitut is often difficult for learners of the language to distinguish and pronounce.

Thus, we have the word for "dog" which is "qimmiq" and the word for "heel" which is "kimmik". There is a subtle difference in the sounds uttered but one which can represent an important difference in meaning.

For centuries, Inuit only had a spoken form of their language. It was not until missionaries came to the northern regions of Canada that a written system was developed with its primary purpose being to disseminate religious materials. The first written works in Inuktitut were the Bible and various prayer books or hymnals.

The system of syllabics, wherein the sound of each syllable is represented by a distinct symbol, was originally invented in the late 1800s by Reverend James Evans for the Ojibwa and Cree languages. It was later adapted for use in Inuktitut by the Reverends John Horden and E.A. Watkins and was further entrenched through the work of the Reverend Edmund Peck.

The syllabic system is a simple and elegant means of transcribing Inuktitut. It is a unique type of shorthand and is zealously protected by many Inuit of the Eastern Canada. However, Inuit in other parts of the world have successfully adapted to using the roman alphabet for Inuktitut and other Inuit languages. Inuinnaqtun, which is spoken in Nunavut's westernmost communities of Kugluktuk and Cambridge Bay, has always been written using the roman alphabet.

Some argue that being required to learn two alphabets, one for Inuktitut and one for English, hampers literacy efforts and the sharing of knowledge with other Inuit groups who use the roman alphabet system. On the other hand, there is still a significant segment of the population who are most comfortable using syllabics. Advances in computer technology now allow for the production of syllabic publications at the stroke of a key. Converting syllabics to roman orthography or vice versa can be done in seconds with a simple computer application.

***Although the use of syllabics is a source of cultural pride, there is debate over whether the use of syllabics is still useful in the modern world.***

Documents produced by the Legislative Assembly, including *Hansard*, Committee transcripts, Bills and news releases are produced in English, using roman orthography, and in Inuktitut, using syllabics.

The Inuit language uses stem or root word elements combined with affixes to incorporate various concepts into one long constructed 'word' to articulate a complex meaning instead of stringing discrete words in a sequence to form a phrase as in languages like English.

Let us take, as an example, the term used for Speaker of the House. I choose this term deliberately – not just for the obvious reason – but because there are two variations. The root form is "uqaq". As a noun-like root, "uqaq" means "tongue." As a verb-like root, "uqaq" means "to speak" or "to say (something)".

The morpheme "-ti" or "-ji" means "one who (does something)". The characteristic of the preceding consonant determines which version of the morpheme is used. So, "uqaq+ti" gives "Uqaqti" meaning "one who speaks". Even in English, the term "Speaker" could logically be interpreted as "one who speaks".

This is the term that was originally used by Inuktitut translators in the Parliamentary context.

But in Inuktitut we can refine the term to be more precise. The morpheme "-tit-" means "to make or facilitate someone (to do something)." So if we combine "uqaq + tit + ji" we get the meaning "to speak" + "make / facilitate" + "person who does." So the final concept is "the person who allows others to speak".

My preferred term for Speaker in Inuktitut is thus, "Uqaqtitiji". The Speaker of the House is a facilitator for those who wish to speak on behalf of the people they

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represent. This is one example of how we constantly refine and improve our Inuktitut parliamentary terminology.

We also borrow terms from other languages. Given that English has borrowed some important Inuktitut words such as “iglu”, “kayak” and “ulu”, it seems only fair that we return the favour! The Inuktitut term for “Minister” is exactly the same as in English but pronounced “Mi-ni-s-ta” corresponding to the appropriate Inuktitut syllables.

### **The Use of the Inuit Language Beyond the Assembly**

As Speaker, it is important to protect the right of all elected Members to speech in his or her mother tongue. When I was the Minister of Justice, one of the most important objectives under my administration was the strengthening and enhancement of the court interpreter program. Providing Inuit language services in the court system means that those individuals who appear before the justice system are able to use their mother tongue. It is a basic human right but one which needed support to ensure that it was protected.

In 2009, I had the honour of appearing before the Standing Senate Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs as it considered the concurrence of the passage of Nunavut’s new *Official Languages Act*. I was very pleased, along with my colleague, the Minister of Culture, Language, Elders and Youth, that we were able to make our presentations in Inuktitut. The Senate Standing Committee on Rules, Procedures and the Rights of Parliament issued a report in 2009 which stated, amongst other observations, that:

“For Inuktitut-to-English interpretation to be successful, the translation bureau has deemed it necessary to ensure that terminology in Inuktitut renders parliamentary debate comprehensible and meaningful in Inuktitut. Since parliamentary terminology in Inuktitut is still relatively limited, the terminology used in Nunavut will be of great assistance as a basis for developing the appropriate federal language terminology.”

The vast majority of Nunavut legislation introduced since 1999 has been translated into Inuktitut. Another unique aspect of our legal system is that once Nunavut’s new *Official Languages Act* comes fully into force, the Inuktitut language versions of our legislation may be designated as equally authoritative as the English and French versions.

Although our official languages legislation currently applies to services delivered by the territorial government, it will eventually be extended to municipal governments and, to some extent, to the private sector.

Nunavut has introduced new legislation entitled the *Inuit Language Protection Act*. This Act establishes far-reaching measures to support and promote the Inuit language across Nunavut. It addresses the language of education, the language of work in territorial institutions, especially institutions of public service, as well as the language used for communications and services throughout all sectors of Nunavut society.

### **Conclusion**

The lifestyle and culture of the Inuit people has undergone profound changes in a relatively short period of time. We have gone from being a nomadic, hunting and trapping culture to being settled in permanent communities with a wage economy, all within less than a hundred years. The Inuit language has always been rich in terms relating to weather, wildlife, kinship and spirituality. However, other areas of life relating to technology, industry, and formal organizations such as government and administration are relatively new.

More specifically, the parliamentary context has only been relevant for our northern languages since the 1970s, when a northern system of government was established and Inuit and other aboriginal representatives were elected to represent the needs and interests of the northern population.

The Westminster parliamentary tradition has had centuries to evolve, with a corpus of terminology and procedure that is described in volumes that are some 600 to 1,000 pages in length. The first Speaker to be designated to the British House of Commons was over 600 years ago. The first Inuk to be designated Speaker in Nunavut was in 1999.

Our counterparts in the francophone world have the luxury of having a legal authority on terms, forms, usage and grammar. L’Académie française for the French language was established in 1635. To this day, almost 400 years later, its rulings are still recognized as authoritative and it continues as an arbiter of correct usage in French. For the Inuit language, our parallel authority, the Inuit Uqausinginnik Taiguusiliuqtiit, has only recently been established within the past year.

Comparatively speaking, both our linguistic and legislative institutions in Nunavut are still new and have some work ahead of them to formally establish a comprehensive and authoritative set of parliamentary terminology.

The potential for new Inuit language parliamentary terminology is endless.