



REFLECTIONS ON THE ROLE OF TRANSLATION IN THE CIRCUMPOLAR WORLD: A COMPARISON BETWEEN TWO REGIONS OF THE INUIT HOMELANDS: THE CANADIAN ARCTIC AND GREENLAND

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Abstract: A study of translation practices between languages exhibiting markedly asymmetrical indices of power and vitality, such as translations between Euro-origin settler languages and the indigenous languages of the Americas, raises questions of the historic role of translation in indigenous language endangerment while also suggesting the possibility of a positive role for translation in indigenous language revitalization projects. However, few translation scholars deal with issues of endangerment, just as few scholars of endangerment mention translation as a factor in (high or low) language vitality. For instance, the well-known UNESCO 2003 statement of language vitality doesn't include translation (to or from) languages as one of its nine factors. Those translation scholars concerned with the issue are divided on the role of translation in colonial contact situations. Niranjana (1992) for instance, sees translation as part of the ideological structure of British rule in India, while Cronin (2003) argues that colonized minorities, such as the Irish, developed their language through translation, thereby resisting assimilation. So, both possibilities are theoretically open: translation in colonial contexts may be used either to develop or to restrict minority language vitality. This paper offers a comparative case study of translation and language contact between (i) on the one hand, two major varieties of Inuit Uqausingit (Inuit Language), one called Inuktitut (the majority official language in Canada's Nunavut Territory) and the other called Kalaallisut (the majority, and only, official language of Kalaaliit Nunaat/ Greenland, a self-governing country associated with the Kingdom of Denmark), and (ii) on the other, English (in Nunavut) and Danish (in Greenland). The case study briefly reveals two different colonial histories, two different translation policies, two different language vitality outcomes, and argues that a key factor in the different outcomes (Inuktitut with "nothing to read" vs. Kalaallisut/Greenlandic with significant translated and indigenous literature) is their very different translation histories.

Key words: translation studies, Inuit Language, colonial translation policy;

Introduction



The phrase “translation as a double-edged sword” is one of those paradoxical comments whose validity needs to be tested in concrete, local translation practices. Indeed, all translation practices are local, and in deciding on the ethics of an individual instance would require close, possibly comparative, study.

In my studies of the language situation in the Canadian Arctic, especially in Nunavut, I have seen that the English-to-Inuit Language translation traffic is for all practical purposes a one-way street from a powerful standardized language into an unstandardized indigenous language. The source texts range from the Bible and Christian hymnaries to, more recently, the deluge of institutional and technical documents produced quadrilingually (English, French, and the two Inuit Languages, Inuktitut and Inuinnaqtun) by the Nunavut government, as required by the territory’s Official Languages Act. There has never been a tradition of translation of imaginative secular literature into the Inuit languages of Canada, and perhaps this is one of the reasons that there has never been a imaginative literature in print. Of course, Inuit cinema production is another story.

In my oral presentation at this conference, I expressed the view that there needs to be more contact between those concerned with language endangerment, vitality and revitalization on the one hand, and translation studies on the other. It would require, above all, an ethical concern with language-contact situations in which the languages (and consequently their speakers) are substantially asymmetrical.

By way of a written contribution, I offer the following comparison of translation practices in two Inuit Homelands (Inuit Nunaat) regions in the circumpolar world: The Canadian Arctic (especially Nunavut, the region I know best) and Greenland.

The Development of a Language of Literacy in Nunavut

The conventional name of the majority Inuit Language varieties of Nunavut is Inuktitut. The vast majority of speakers of Inuktitut learned to read and write their language, in syllabic script, beginning in the early years of the twentieth century. Syllabics had been developed first for use among the Cree, by James Evans, a Wesleyan missionary at Norway House, Manitoba, in the 1840s. This writing system spread extremely rapidly across Cree territory to James Bay, and beginning in the 1850s, tentative steps were made to adapt the system to the language of the Inuit living along the east coast of Hudson’s Bay.

The first translations into Inuktitut were small books of translated Bible stories printed at Moose Factory, using a Roman orthography developed earlier by Moravian missionaries for the Labrador Inuit dialect.

A small conference of key members of the Anglican Church Missionary Society's mission to James Bay was held in England in 1865 with the objective of "fixing the Esquimaux language". This meeting – the first instance of language planning with respect to Inuktitut – decided to adapt the syllabic script instead of the Labrador Moravian version of Roman. Later, in the 1870s, the missionary Edmond James Peck, the first missionary to learn to speak fluent Inuktitut , adopted the 1865 syllabary in his Biblical translation work over the next forty years. The last twenty years of his life, from 1900 to 1924, were spent bringing Christianity and syllabic literacy to the South Baffin Inuit, from where it spread rapidly from camp to camp up the east coast of Baffin Island.¹

While Peck was working in the Baffin area, another missionary, Father Anquetil, introduced a Catholic version of syllabics into the Keewatin (Kivalliq) region in 1912.

In the first half of the last century, conventionally called the "contact-traditional period", there were two competing syllabic scripts into which were translated little more than Biblical texts and hymnaries.

It took the Second World War to bring the Inuit to the attention of the Canadian federal government. During the 1950s and 1960s, the Department of Northern Affairs and National Resources began to formulate a view, influenced by the apparent success of the Romanized orthography system in use in Greenland for the writing of Kalalaasut/ Greenlandic, the easternmost member of the Inuit Language family, that there was a need to create "a native, supra-dialectal written means of communication" for the purpose of a new secular translation project, which was to help the Inuit be exposed to modern systems of governance. Two Quebec linguists working for the Department, Gilles Lefebvre and Raymond Gagne, recommended replacing the syllabic systems with a unified Romanized orthography. Gagne's Tentative Standard Orthography (TSO) proposal for a romanized orthography, with double-letters representing vowel length, became public with the publication of a bilingual (English-Inuktitut), bimodal (written in TSO and syllabics) book, called the Q-Book (Dept. of Northern Affairs and National Resources, 1964).²

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² The Q-Book, though bilingual, was essentially an English to Inuktitut translation project which included syllabics-to-roman transliteration as well.

But the Inuit proved themselves much more competent orthography planners than the federal government. The federal attempt to supplant syllabics with roman script failed to take account of the attachment which many Inuit felt for the syllabic script which had served them for three generations. When, in the 1970s, the Inuit themselves became involved in orthography planning, they developed both Roman and syllabic scripts. Especially important were two pioneer Inuit linguists, Mark Kalluak, from Arviat, and Armand Tagoona from Baker Lake. Eric Anoe, a respected Arviat elder supported them in recommending syllabic reform in Keewatin. At a seminar in Rankin Inlet in 1972, called to discuss the printing of the first generation of Inuktitut-original school text-books, these linguists³ made decisions have remained valid to this day.

At the same time (1974), the newly-created Inuit Tapirisat of Canada (ITC), with Tagak Curley as President, set up the Inuit Language Commission (ILC), with Josie Kusugak of Rankin Inlet of Rankin Inlet as the Commission's executive director. Its principal task was to develop a common orthography for all Inuit, since, as an ITC creation, the ILC's scope included all Inuit communities across the Canadian Arctic. The Commissioners travelled and consulted widely, and in 1976, published their findings. They reported that the Inuit indeed wanted their language to survive, but, significantly, they did not want wholesale linguistic standardization, only a standardized writing system in which dialect variation would continue to be represented.

Thus, the ILC, under a new name – ICI (Inuit Cultural Institute) – proposed a dual system, with two phonemically-equivalent systems, one syllabic, one Romanized. This “ICI Dual Orthography” was declared to be the official orthography of the Inuit of Nunavut. There were modifications in the orthography made over the years, and even today, with the 2011 creation of an Inuit Language Authority by the Nunavut Government, there may be further developments.⁴

Therefore, as has happened in many post-colonial situations around the world, the first generation of Inuit political leadership became active language planners, and thanks to their LP work and vision, Inuktitut/Inuinnaqtun has been for 30 years endowed with a fully adequate, modern, phonemic, flexible, easily learnable, technologically-supported, Inuit identity-associated, orthography.

The main problem, however, is that just having an orthography isn't enough, since, even after 30 years, “there is nothing to read in Inuktitut.” (Harper, 2000). Indeed, apart from Biblical scriptures,

³ The leading non-Inuk linguist present in these orthographic development meetings was Mick Mallon.

⁴ The principal change would be to adopt the ICI syllabary to Netsilik dialect, adding new characters to allow Netsilingmiut to write syllables representing the distinct phonemes present in their dialect.

hymnaries and prayer books, translations from English of bureaucratic government documents, *Nunatsiaq News* (Iqaluit's bilingual weekly newspaper serving both Nunavut and Nunavik) and a slowly increasing number of school materials, there is not yet a written literature in Inuktitut attracting an adult or young adult reading public.

On occasion, the comparison is made between the slender amount of reading material available in Nunavut with the situation in Greenland, where there has been a thriving indigenous and translated creative literary output, produced in a standardized written language, Kalallasut, for well over a century. However, this comparison is misplaced without a comparison of the conditions for the production of literature in the two regions.

Apart from the differing attitudes to the development of a standard written language, there is the simple fact that Greenlandic has been a language of instruction in the schools for over a century, while in Nunavut, Inuktitut is phased out in favour of English by Grade Four, thereby limiting the possibility which a school system can offer to build a literate public in Inuktitut, with fluent readers and writers in a variety of genres.

True, as early as 1971, a breakthrough literary work – the first book in English published by an Inuk – was written first in Inuktitut by the Quebec Nunavik author, Markoosie Patsauq, later self-translated as *Harpoon of the Hunter* (1971).

There is, however, a not insignificant body of Inuit literature written in English. Such anthologies and surveys as Robin McGrath's *Canadian Inuit Literature: the Development of a Tradition* (1978), R. Geldof's (ed.) *Paper Stays Put* (1980), Penny Petrone's *Northern Voices: Inuit Writing in English* (1988), J.R. Colombo's *Poems of the Inuit* (1981) all pointed, a quarter of a century ago, that there were both Inuit writers and translators and a reading public interested in hearing the Inuit voice expressed not through Inuktitut (few non-Inuit learn Inuktitut) but through texts which were first put down on paper in English, however much they may have had their origin in Inuit orality. Indeed, the balance of written works in Nunavut is overwhelmingly in favour of English. In the public library of Iqaluit, the capital of Nunavut Territory, at least in the summer of 2000,⁵ 98% of the books were in English.

The best-known Inuit authors are those who write in English. Early examples are Pitseolak Ashoona, with her autobiographical account *Pictures out of My Life*, and Mark Kalluak, with his

⁵ This was the date of my research paper Aajiiqatigiingniq: Language of Instruction in Nunavut Schools. (Department of Education, GN, Iqaluit).

anthology of short stories *How Kabloonat Became and Other Inuit Legends* (1974). Michael Kusugak, one of the most popular children's writers in Canada, is an example of a major contemporary Inuit literary figure who has chosen to use English to address his tales of Inuit life to a wide, perhaps world-wide, reading public of children.

But looking more closely at what is meant by “literature”, we should try to avoid limiting our preferences to written semiotic practices. In the Canadian Arctic, we need to be open to what Michael Kennedy refers to as orature, and what Ong (1982) refers to as primary orality. Of course, much of what was eventually written down by these bilingual Inuit authors began textual life as an oral story. For instance, Pitseolak's autobiography, cited above, began life as Inuktitut oral tales which were later transcribed⁶ and then translated into a written English text. But autobiographies are only one of the many oral genres, forms and styles which form part of Inuit traditional orature, which should include poetry and song, and a rich genre of didactic tales often told with a studied indirectness, reflecting the speaker's belief in the personal independence of the hearer's own *isuma* (reason) to reflect on the sense of the tale.

The magnificent oral epic of *Atanarjuat*, for instance, had been passed down for many hundreds of years in the Igloodik area before serving as the basis for the award-winning film released in 2000 by Igloodik Isuma Productions.⁷ One of this production company's explicit goals is to re-connect through film and video the chain of storying formerly carried by elders to youth, a chain which was damaged by the imposition of a Southern school system which systematically has been denying Inuit children access to their birthright of a full heritage available not in books, but through listening to elders through their sophisticated, elegant spoken mother tongue.

The role of translation in the development of a native national Greenlandic literature.

The narrative of language and culture contact in the Greenland of today begins in the early C18, when Hans Egede, a Lutheran minister from the north of Norway petitioned the Danish King to allow him to search for the lost Norse colony of Greenland and convert them to Lutheranism, since he imagined that they would have remained Catholic.

⁶ The original Inuktitut transcription of her oral stories, to the best of my knowledge, has never been published.

⁷ Directed by Zacharias Kunuk, the prolific Igloodik-based film-maker..

He was permitted to go on this journey, arriving with his wife and three young sons, in Greenland in 1721. He found evidence of the abandoned Norse settlements, but the only people he encountered were Inuit. He decided on remaining to found a colony, conduct missionary work and establish Greenland as Danish territory. This required him to acquire a working knowledge of Kalaallisut/Greenlandic, (while his sons were acquiring native fluency), and required his Inuit flock to acquire the art of reading.

This occurred peacefully, and Egede dedicated himself to starting a translation of the Bible and a hymnary, The new Christian community, centred in a location which eventually became the capital Godshaab (today's Nuuk), grew. A seminary was founded, which provided education in Danish and in Greenlandic.

After Egede retired, his son Poul, continued his father's bible translation work, in collaboration with a young Inuk woman convert, Arnarsaq. She is described as critical of Egede's translation choices, she prevented censorship and imposed her translation choices – she may have been responsible for the cultural translation of the biblical phrase “give us this day our daily bread” as “give us this day our harbor seal”. Poul also completed a translation into Greenlandic of the life of Thomas a Kempis, and produced a Greenlandic grammar.

So, on the basis of three generations of missionary translation and education, the stage was set for secular translations. This is a stage which did not occur in the Canadian Arctic.⁸

By 1800, Danish adventure tales – and I believe, the tales of Hans Christian Andersen - were being translated into Greenlandic and they are said to have been so popular that circulated from house to house until they were no longer readable.

By the 1850s, a printing press was established, with 10 books published in Greenlandic and Danish in the first 5 years, particularly Inuit legends were popular.

One element of their popularity was that they were illustrated, among others, by the great artist Aron from Kangeq. Wood-cut illustrations were also featured in the first newspaper, dating from 1861 – which is still the leading newspaper today! – Atuagagdittutit (“reading material which is offered to you”) This newspaper was absolutely important for the intellectual development of Greenland society.

⁸ For a history of writing in the Canadian Arctic and a discussion of the fact that, even after 150 years of (missionary-introduced) literacy “there's almost nothing to read”, see Harper, K. “Writing Systems in Nunavut: Issues and Challenges” Retrieved Feb 1, 2012 at: groups.itk.ca/sites/groups.itk.ca/files/08_Harper.pdf



Seal hunters wrote in about their adventures; legends and tales were contributed, and reports from outpost communities came in regularly, as well as news from Europe and the world – all in Greenlandic.

Greenlanders love to sing, and their hymns, which began as hymns translated from Danish, before long stimulated the production of indigenous hymns, with the Hymn Guuterput Qutsinnermiu (“Our Lord in Heaven”) sung today as the national Christmas hymn.

At the same time, to satisfy the educated reading public, there was a brisk business in European world literature re-translated from Danish into Greenlandic: Robin Hood, the 1001 Nights, Rob Roy, Victor Hugo, Alexandre Dumas – all these were popular in the last decades of the C19.

The C20 saw the flowering of an indigenous national literature in Greenlandic, with poets such as Henrik Lund and Jonathan Pedersen bursting onto the literary scene. Lund’s poem Nutarput Utoqqarrsuanngoravit (“Our Ancient Land”) was set to music and is Greenland’s national anthem.

The first two Greenlandic novels were published in 1914 and 1931, and they deal with themes of the relationship between the values of the ancient hunting culture of the Inuit and the challenges of the new century, as well as of the colonial relationship between Greenland and Denmark. Several of these and other, later, novels, were translated into Danish and published in Copenhagen a few years after the original had been published in Greenland.

In contemporary Greenland, there is a thriving publishing industry, with native Greenlandic literature holding its own with translated literature. Also, the capital, Nuuk, has a dynamic pop music scene, with rappers such as Nuuk Posse able to hold their own with any in the world.

So, unlike the translation situation in the Inuit Homelands of the Canadian Arctic, translation into Greenlandic has been a positive force in the development of a native print literature, first in the domain of religion, later in secular domains. As well, the same happened in music. First, Christian hymns were translated from Danish into Greenlandic in the nineteenth century. Later, original Greenlandic hymns and secular songs began to appear.

Greenland’s progress from colony to nation, evident in the field of translation, has a political parallel. In 2009, Greenland achieved self-determination with control of its internal affairs, with Denmark retaining control of foreign affairs and defence, while continuing to subsidize the country to the generous tune of several billion kronor per year. This is one more step toward complete independence



within the Nordic Union. Last year, Greenlandic was declared the sole official language of the country, and there is widespread support for full independence in the very near future.

Residents of the Canadian Inuit territories can only look with envy at the success of Greenland in strengthening its language and transforming it in ways which make it an fully developed means of written textual production for a small Arctic nation, soon to become a nation-state. I would argue that the great difference in the translation histories of these two Inuit Homeland regions need to be considered in any account of the significant difference in contemporary textual vitality between the two geographical varieties of Inuit Language, Inuktitut and Greenlandic.

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