Discourse Practices and Inuit Contemporary Political Scene: the Individual and the Collective. A focus on Terminology Development.

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Abstract

This paper presents one aspect of the preliminary findings of a Ph.D project that paves the way for documenting and analysing the conditions of creation, reviewing, diffusion and reception of new terminologies in Inuktitut (Inuit language), and more specifically, concerning the terminology related to the political sphere. Data was gathered in Iqaluit, the capital of Nunavut, during a five months fieldwork in 2005 and 2006. Interviews were given by actors of Nunavut political life, language professionals and Inuit from various ages, including elders. Preliminary results reveal that the development of institutionalized terminology and the attempts at incorporating new words and concepts in Inuktitut tend to influence the population into making specific choices between oral and writing, when it comes to having access to information. This preliminary fieldwork raises larger issues concerning the interaction of individual and collective interests, as well as authority dynamics among the actors involved in the terminology development process, and in language issues at large.

Introduction

This presentation introduces the preliminary step of an anthropology-oriented research I am conducting as a Ph.D candidate at the INALCO Institute in Paris and at Laval University in Quebec City. This paper focuses on terminology development, presenting

some issues regarding the creation, reviewing and diffusion of neologisms[1], which constitutes one aspect of my ongoing study.

My research topic emerged from a presentation by Arnaq Grove, a Ph.D. student from the Department of Eskimology at the University of Copenhagen, at the INALCO Institute in Paris in 2004. Grove exposed some aspects of the influence of Danish language on Kalaallisut, which is one of the dialects of Inuit language spoken in Greenland. She explained how the emerging terminology specific to sectors such as politics or economy is remarkably shaped by calques from Danish, or even by Danish conceptions, to a certain extent. She argued that this influence would eventually be generating a gap between a bilingual elite familiar with these terms, and unilingual Greenlanders[2]. Being unable to grasp the meaning of the new words relayed by the media, she mentioned a high possibility for the latter to consequently turn away from political matters.

Starting from Grove's presentation concerning the interaction of Kalaallisut and Danish in Greenland, I hypothesized that there might be a similar gap phenomenon in Nunavut. However, I chose to observe the process of terminology development and its impacts in a broader perspective, rather than studying calques only, since calquing is a secondary resort for terminology development in the Canadian Arctic (see DORAIS 1983). In practice, in a transitional context such as the early years of the Nunavut territory, the government has to deal with an urgent need for terminology, in order to reflect the political sphere and fulfil its responsibility towards its four official languages (English, French, Inuktitut and Inuinnaqtun). In practice, each government document has to be made available in these four languages. Starting from this, I conducted fieldwork with two major questions in mind: which are the consequences of the recent dynamics generated by large scale terminology development, and how do they affect the general public and the persons involved in the process?

Fieldwork

In my first fieldwork research which took place for three months at the end of 2005 and two months during the summer of 2006 in Iqaluit (the capital city of Nunavut), I conducted a preliminary consultation among Iqaluit inhabitants. The consultation was two-fold.

On the one hand, by selecting a small sampling of the Iqaluit population based on age, sex, and community of origin, I started challenging the viability of the hypothesis according to which difficult access to new terminology leads to loss of interest in events

[1] My Ph.D. research project explores discourse practices in the contemporary Inuit political scene, in order to document the structure of Inuit worldview, focusing on the interaction of the notions of authority, identity and power.
[2] In her research on calques and attitudes towards Danish calques in Greenlandic, Birgitte Jacobsen pointed out this gap: "There is also a risk that the gap between those with good proficiency in Danish and those with less proficiency will increase" (JACOBSEN 2002: 238).

happening in the public sphere.

On the other hand, I met with people involved in the creation, use, reviewing and diffusion of neologisms, such as professional translators and interpreters in the public and the private sector, as well as local and political representatives. Using open-ended questions as an interview method, I documented the way these professionals were affected by the terminology development process. I gathered a variety of insights which can participate to a larger reflexion on individual versus collective interests.

Consulting *Nunatsiaq News* readers

Like I mentioned earlier, Arnaq Grove pointed out specific features of media language in Kalaallisut such as literal translation that retains the Danish original word-order, high degree of abstraction of the language, and the shock effect of the first words when context is missing. According to Arnaq Grove these features were, for the most part, due to mechanical translation and conceptualizing in Danish.

In order to verify whether Grove's observations on media language in Greenland apply to media language in Nunavut, I submitted copies of *Nunatsiaq News*[3] to a panel of readers. I presented an article dealing with political and economic matters to five persons (three elders, one adult and one youth[4]).

The three elders interviewed were involved at different levels of Iqaluit political life. Interestingly, the more they were implicated in it, the deeper interest they showed towards the newspaper article and towards written media in general. Yet, it is worth noting that showing little interest towards written media does not necessary reveal a lack of awareness concerning public events, since radio or television news bulletins constitute popular alternatives for information, the latter being actually much appreciated by elders. However, it could entail that there is something problematic about Inuktitut written media, especially for people who are not familiar with official public affairs.

The elder who was most involved in the public sphere stated that the poor quality of Inuktitut media language had long been a concern for him. He mentioned that he was already in the process of making a difference, by putting awkward words and ideas on paper, and discussing them with other elders.

Adult and youth response to the article was quite homogeneous. Both confessed that reading the article in syllabics was challenging, because understanding took much more time than reading in English. They added that, when they made the effort to read the

[3] *Nunatsiaq News* is a bilingual weekly newspaper (English and Inuktitut) based in Iqaluit. The newspaper is available all over Nunavut and Nunavik (Arctic Quebec) since 1973, and more recently online. Its affordable price and its focus on community and Arctic events make it an essential part of Nunavut inhabitants' everyday life.

[4] Data was collected during preliminary fieldwork, which is why consultation was conducted at such a small scale. Again, this qualitative consultation was meant to test the relevancy of a theoretical hypothesis, and to bring out related issues, by paying close attention to concerns expressed by consultants.

Inuktitut version, they would read only part of it and eventually lose interest. Both noticed the word-by-word translation from the original version. Terminology itself was also an issue. In a general sense, younger consultants found it more convenient to read newspapers articles dealing with political or economic matters in English and listen to the news bulletins on the radio or on television in Inuktitut[5]. In a word, this could imply that Inuktitut media language is more efficient orally than in writing, which is an aspect that deserves further investigation.

Going back to the initial hypothesis, difficulties and frustrations related to reading articles in Inuktitut does not seem to make people turn away from politics, but rather influences adults and youth into turning to Inuktitut oral media and English written media, thus leaving Inuktitut articles to elders.

One might wonder why so much time and money are invested in translating articles in Inuktitut, if only a small portion of the population actually reads them. In fact, these articles in Inuktitut make up most of the updated available written material in Inuktitut in Nunavut communities. Consequently, this can explain why elders are so benevolent towards the publication of articles in Inuktitut, in spite of the recurrence of dubious features such as word-by-word translation, or the constant use of made-up words emerging out of context.

Even though literacy and access to syllabics are certainly at stake, as far as the introduction of the new terminology is concerned the main problem seems to be the way it is introduced. Actually, if Inuktitut radio and television bulletins are more popular than Inuktitut newspaper articles, it is probably because when it comes to the audio-visual media, the news itself is more often conceptualized in Inuktitut. It is noteworthy that Inuit journalists are very few in the written media, while they are more numerous and more visible in the audio-visual media. Similarly to written media, audio-visual media introduce new terminology, but in a descriptive manner in which context is clarified.

The small-scale investigation I conducted recently in Iqaluit clearly indicates that currently available terminology and the way it is relayed do not allow the Inuit to fully access current public affairs. Besides, the large corpus of Inuktitut government documentation is quite difficult to comprehend, and actually seldom read by the general public.

Going back to the core of my first hypothesis, I could not prove that problematic access to Inuktitut written media increased the gap between neology experts and the general public. However, the danger of seeing adults and youth developing the feeling that Inuktitut may not be appropriate for modern or public realities is real. These language choices for accessing information emerge at the individual level, but in fact, they may be related to collective representations of the language, themselves relayed by political

[5] These findings are consistent with the investigation supervised by Louis-Jacques Dorais among Iqaluit inhabitants (DORAIS 2006).

decisions. For instance, the fact that, in Nunavut, higher education is mostly provided in English tends to reinforce the view that Inuktitut may not be fit for modern realities and may be insufficient to integrate the local workforce.

As I could observe during the interviews, Nunavummiut (Nunavut inhabitants) react differently to their difficult access to written information in Inuktitut, either by being benevolent towards imperfect written material, hoping that it will improve when professionals gain more experience, or simply by turning to Inuktitut oral media avenues or simply to English.

In order to obtain a more accurate picture of terminology development issues, other actors needed to be consulted, such as terminology-related professionals, whose constant reflexivity raises central concerns. Considering their statement that difficult access to new terminology is due to the starting up period of Nunavut, the interviews would rather deal with the way they perceive this transition.

According to the Bathurst Mandate, Inuktitut is meant to be the working language in Nunavut by 2020. Three years after the advent of Nunavut in 1999, Eva Arreak, the Language Commissioner of Nunavut, expressed concerns about the fulfilment of this objective. She pointed out that the workplace itself was English, particularly in bigger communities such as Iqaluit. To her, the fact that Inuit workers speak and think in English most of the time in the workplace, was most disturbing (NUNAVUT 2001: 13).

Terminology development is a necessary step for Nunavut to be operational as a territory. Taking a closer look at this step, it is obvious that the increasing interest and efforts of the Government of Nunavut to find Inuktitut words for modern realities has deep implications for people involved at the core of the process.

Consulting language professionals: responsibility, teamwork and material

During fieldwork, twenty professionals where interviewed. They unanimously expressed a strong sense of responsibility concerning the quality of their work, and a high degree of reflexivity towards Nunavut beneficiaries. Among translators, interpreters and terminologists, the level of satisfaction and comfort regarding new terminology differed, depending whether they worked within a team or individually.

Interpreters, such as the ones hired by the Legislative Assembly of Nunavut, gradually gain efficiency by constantly working as a team and regularly participating in workshops. These professionals benefit from government training because they depend directly on it. During the interviews, consultants pointed out the positive dynamics deriving from frequent terminology development sessions and discussions, formal or informal. In this scenario, discussing neologisms revives ties among Inuit government workers, by making them think together in Inuktitut, which is one practical example of the use of Inuktitut in the workplace.

Translators working at Pirurvik, a private Inuit-owned centre for language and culture, also declared that they value teamwork as a necessary working practice. For instance, they are aware that their work on the first Inuktitut version of Windows Microsoft, being so innovative, is under heavy constraints that only joint efforts can overcome.

On the contrary, isolated translation professionals working in the private or even the public sector share a deep feeling of frustration. It originates from seclusion, from difficult access to scattered terminology material and from lack of training. Plus, poor feedback and regular staff turnover are also at stake. They declared that they hold a real responsibility to provide quality written materials, especially to elders. During the interviews, they said that being unable to fulfil these responsibilities constitutes a major source of dissatisfaction for them. Yet, they find their own ways to gather information, creating their own dictionaries, and consulting familiar elders. However, this energy and time consuming perfectionism may not be valued by employers, especially if they have no particular interest in the quality of written Inuktitut, and particularly if there is no negative feedback from clients or beneficiaries. In a general sense, poor translation found in newspapers articles is mainly due to lack of time and means available to translators. In fact, as of yet, there is no regulation protecting, promoting or enforcing the quality of Inuktitut in Nunavut. At the bottom line, high standard translation and interpretation requiring easy access and training to terminology use, depends on employers' goodwill.

The government of Nunavut is currently conducting a broad consultation of Nunavummiut about two bills revising the *Official Language Act*, and dealing with language protection. It plans on including the creation of an equivalent to the *Office québécois de la langue française*, endowed with a form of authority granted by law and offering terminology material and guidance. The issue of language protection and promotion is currently a burning issue in Nunavut, and it mobilizes various people whose voices are becoming increasingly heard[6].

This governmental initiative responds to some concerns pointed out by language professionals who were interviewed in the course of my fieldwork, such as quality enforcement and availability of new terminology data. And yet, the benefits for Nunavummiut, their access and understanding of information relayed through terminology, still largely depend on the method used to develop terminology, for there are no official guidelines. In the perspective of finding solutions to the introduction of new terminology, an Inuit language professional I interviewed firmly stated that new words or old words re-emerging need to be introduced as contextualized concepts through an educational process so that Nunavummiut can appreciate their relevancy.

[6] In a recent letter to the editor in the *Nunatsiaq News*, Peter Irniq, former Commissioner of Nunavut and internationally renown speaker on behalf of Inuit, advised the Nunavut Department of Culture, Language, Elders and Youth, as well at the Nunavut Language Commissioner to set up a "meeting of Inuit elders and youth and talk about preservation, protection and promotion of Inuktitut and Inuinnaqtun languages" (IRNIQ 2007).

“Inuktitut words already out there”

During the interviews, many Inuktitut terminology professionals stated that all the words needed for the description of modern concerns are “already out there”. Professionals recommend calling for the expertise of elders, keepers of ancient words. Like I mentioned earlier, they do regularly and informally call for their own elders’ guidance on specific terms. Also in a rather formal way, elders are growingly called upon by the Nunavut Government to jointly share their expertise during terminology workshops. Not only does it individually provide them with a significant source of income, but collectively it recognizes their knowledge through their official status as experts. For Nunavut elders involved in a process of regaining authority, they are using it to instil Inuit values to the public sphere and voice their concerns and comments about the future of Nunavut.

The process of terminology reviewing, one aspect of terminology development, is sometimes prompted by elders. It is a way for them to play an active part in a reflexive approach on the language. The term “chairman” and its evolution constitute an interesting example of reviewing. It reveals various aspects of the constraints surrounding the choice of a term, in relation to the diversity of actors involved in its creation, reviewing and diffusion. It all started at the Legislative Assembly of the Northwest Territories from the literal translation *iksivautaq* (designating a seat for one person, with a support for the back). For many years, interpreters made this term coexist with the term *uqaqti* ("the one who speaks"). This second term became increasingly popular among interpreters at the Legislative Assembly, probably because it was more relevant to the role of the chairman, and also because of its small size. In 2003, during their first mandate, elders who were the experts of terminology development forming the *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit Katimajiit* at the Department of Culture, Language, Elders and Youth, recommended that the word *uqaqtitsiji* ("the one who facilitates speech") replace *iksivautaq*. In practice, *uqaqtitsiji* is not yet commonly used by the Legislative Assembly interpreters. In fact, this new term, being longer than *uqaqti*, constitutes an added difficulty for interpreters, constantly concerned with efficiency and time. This way, they tend to stick to *uqaqti*, the meaning of which is not as adequate as *uqaqtitiji* since the former refers directly to a speaker instead of referring to a facilitator. In recent practice, Nunavut Members of the Legislative Assembly and Ministers tend to use *uqaqtitiji* more often in public, thus allowing a larger diffusion of this term to the general public.

When it comes to being part of official terminology development, the elders involved in the process tend to collectively provide a rereading of the language, and take conscious and concerted action on the language, in order to preserve values of which they are keepers. In the changes initiated by elders, it is interesting to note the way they encourage terminology professionals to translate concepts instead of words, which is more demanding but also more relevant to the enhancement of the Inuit culture. Voicing these recommendations is one of the first signs of their newly recovered influence as language

experts, appointed and supported by the Government of Nunavut. Playing an emergent part in the government, these elders also make the most of the circumstances to promote elders' participation in Nunavut. In 2003, these elders suggested that the Government of Nunavut "use Inuit elders/advisers to develop relevant programs and services". In 2006, *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit Katimajiit* elders approved the *Elders Toolkit* distributed to all elders in Nunavut, "to teach [elders] how to set up a committee and maintain society status" (NUNAVUT GOVERNMENT 2006).

The active and reflexive approach undertaken by these elders, as well as their close relations with language professionals is a dynamic aspect of the contemporary terminology development process. On the other hand, inefficient introduction of new terminology and difficulties for Nunavummiut to access written information in Inuktitut means that it is the diffusion step that remains problematic. Giving a close look at the various steps of the terminology development process, education appears again as a solution. The project by the Nunavut Government concerning the creation of an Inuktitut school in Nunavut might be a place where such education could be provided, facilitated by close contact between the elders involved in the terminology development process and youth. Even though the conditions of the involvement of elders in school will have to be carefully thought of, this connection would certainly contribute to the reinforcement of the intergenerational bond.

Conclusion

The process of turning Nunavut into a functional territory requires many adjustments and implies large scale initiatives such as terminology development. These adjustments have a real impact on the status and role of the actors involved in the process itself. To a larger extent, it contributes to a redefinition of local authority and power relations. The growing role of language professionals and elders presented in this paper is only one example of this phenomenon.

Indeed, these authority and power relations affect local and global matters. For instance, the growing involvement of elders contributes to voicing the general public's perspective in the public sphere. This way, instead of a vertical transmission of newly developed words and worldviews going from the government to the people, a circular pattern can be observed, leaving space for more culturally relevant worldviews. However, we can now ask ourselves to which extent these dynamics are paving the way for a practical application of *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit*[7] which was prescribed during the negotiations for the creation of Nunavut, and meant to be applied at all levels. We can also wonder how the variety and worldviews that elders are beginning to voice locally will find

[7] Editors' note: suggested translation "Inuit long-standing knowledge still meaningful today." See "Concerning Inuit Orality, introduction to the Proceedings".

avenues to be heard on a larger scale where Inuit leaders are making a move towards unity. While new power and authority relations are changing locally, how can the Inuit from the various arctic regions embrace these changes and strengthen their ties?

To cite this publication:
CANCEL, Carole. "Discourse Practices and the Inuit Contemporary Political Scene: the Individual and the Collective. Focus on Terminology Development" *In* Collignon B. & Therrien M. (eds). 2009. *Orality in the 21st century: Inuit discourse and practices. Proceedings of the 15th Inuit Studies Conference*. Paris: INALCO.
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