

## Signs of Urbanity: Visualizing Orality and Directionality

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### Abstract

Study of the use of public space in Canadian Inuit localities for the creation of terms pertaining to traffic (e.g. stop and street signs) in the language of the Inuit. Collignon (2006; 1996) has shown the importance of the presence of human beings in Inuit landscape interpretation. The comparison of a number of road signs from various Canadian northern communities illustrates the positioning of the language of the Inuit in urban landscapes. The main focus of the study is Kuujjuaq, Nunavik.

**Keywords:** Language in public space, road signs, urban placenames, Nunavik

### Introduction

In this paper, we study the use of public space in Canadian Inuit localities for the creation of terms pertaining to traffic (e.g. stop signs) and directionality (e.g. street signs) in the language(s) of the Inuit. The discussion of stop signs leads us to question the benefits of writing on universally recognized signs while street signs are analyzed as urban placenames. We will see that in Kuujjuaq stop signs and street signs complement each other in terms of the much broader theme of languages and writing systems.

In Canada, lists of lexical items have emerged as by-products of research related to the delimitation of the lands of the Inuit during land claims negotiations. In the process, Inuit words for resources have come to illustrate land use, including hunting practices,

while Inuit placenames legitimize land occupancy. In this type of data collection, the language of the Inuit is instrumental in order to elicit local knowledge, which becomes information of a scientific nature in political arenas. Most of this work was particularly effective in mapping the North; establishing how extensive Inuit lands are. However, territories, and regions that have been delimited are usually conceived of as rural areas. Indeed, in Canada, limited efforts have been devoted to either understanding the language of the Inuit per se, or how northern urban settings have developed through time.

This paper focuses on urban areas in the Canadian North (not on Inuit populations established in southern cities). While various views exist on what an urban setting is<sup>1</sup>, some Inuit localities are definitely better understood as towns or small cities, even if only in comparison to other Inuit settlements in Canada. This is specifically the case of Kuujjuaq, in Nunavik (Northern Québec), where most of our visual material on road signs was collected.



According to land tenure regimes in this part of the Canadian North, localities are referred to as administrative centers, municipalities, or villages. Kuujjuaq is the administrative center of Nunavik; many Inuit institutions like Makivik Corporation, the Kativik Regional Government, the Health Board, etc. have their head office in Kuujjuaq. In that sense, Kuujjuaq certainly fits criteria proposed by Søren Thuesen (1999) in his study of the making of towns (Sisimiut) in Greenland, and in particular his emphasis on the presence of

<sup>1</sup> The discussion following our session during the conference clearly indicated how sharply European and American views vary on this topic.

institutions rather than the quantity of population living in a given locality.

Some compare non-written Inuit forms of expression like inuksuit and contemporary road signs in the North. For example, under a section entitled 'Markers on the Land', an inuksuk is presented on a website for the Canadian Museum of Civilization (2005), followed by a photograph of a stop sign in Nunavut, with the statement: "Today there are other markers on the land." We agree there is continuity between orality and writing but our work is an attempt at mapping the urban north. Indeed, road signs belong to dense, restricted areas, not to open (some would say barren) lands where the human presence requires explicit marking. In fact, our comparison of a number of road signs from various northern communities illustrates the positioning of the language of the Inuit in urban northern landscapes, as opposed to Inuit or humans themselves.

We will start by discussing universal regulations regarding road signs that are relevant in Kuujjuaq. We will then narrow the discussion to, first, stop signs, and then, street signs.

### **Universal rules about road signs**

International treaties regulating road traffic date back to 1926<sup>2</sup>. The Vienna Convention on Road Signs and Signals seems to be the most current document regarding international traffic regulations. It came into force 6 June 1978<sup>3</sup>. This international treaty was designed to increase road safety and aid international road traffic by standardizing the road signs, traffic lights and road markings in use internationally.

Standardising traffic rules in Kuujjuaq is worthwhile considering the increase in the number of road vehicles in the last decade. According to a business plan submitted to Makivik corporation, there were a 100 vehicles in Kuujjuaq in 1996 while as much as 600 are used in 2006 (Bruce Turner, pers. com., May 2006). Statistics on road related accidents also justify taking measures to implement international rules in a place like Kuujjuaq.



Kuujjuaq, Nunavik, Canada (Andres Droulias, 2006)

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<sup>2</sup> See: <http://homepages.cwi.nl/~dik/english/traffic/>

<sup>3</sup> See: <http://www.unece.org/trans/conventn/signalse.pdf>

According to the Vienna Convention on Road Signs and Signals (WIKIPEDIA 2006b) a stop sign can either be octagonal or circular. It should be no smaller than 0.6 meter and no larger than 0.9 m. The colours used for stop signs in the world are red, white and yellow. Wording on the sign can either be white, or blue and black pending on the background color. The word stop is written in English or 'the language of the State concerned'<sup>4</sup>.

In Canada, in the 1970s, a debate arose regarding the status of the word STOP<sup>5</sup> as a French lexical item. It was argued then that because the word STOP is used in France, it automatically qualifies as a French word. Without going into the details of that debate, we believe signs in more than one language have started to be used in Canada around that period of time.



STOP / *nurqarit*<sup>6</sup> (Kuujuuaq, Nunavik, Canada)

Andreas Droulias 2006

In short, even if rationales are in place for standardizing visual material used on roads, a fairly high degree of variation remains in signs used in Canada, and in the world (e.g. in Japan stop signs are triangular<sup>7</sup>). It should also be noted our paper is not based on a systematic analysis of all existing signs in Kuujuuaq. In that sense, our interpretations remain preliminary. However, our work shows the variability in road signs in southern Canada also exists in northern areas, sometimes for similar reasons but not always.

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<sup>4</sup> "Model B, 2 a is octagonal with a red ground bearing the word "STOP" in white in English **or in the language of the State concerned**; the height of the word shall be not less than one third of the height of the panel;" (<http://www.unece.org/trans/conventn/signalse.pdf>, p.36)

<sup>5</sup> We capitalize the word STOP when it refers to its usage on a sign; we don't when using it as a lexical item in the text.

<sup>6</sup> Since capitals are not relevant in syllabics, we don't use italics for words in Inuktitut rather than capitals.

<sup>7</sup> See: <http://www.wbs.ne.jp/cmt/kenkei/e-html/yobu-1-h.htm>



4-way stop (Kuujjuaq, Nunavik, Canada) Andreas Droulias 2006

It is likely how old a sign is can be determined by 1) the number of languages used on it and 2) the order in which the languages, if more than one, appear. Signs in more than one language have replaced those in English only. On the most recent ones, syllabics are printed on top of the English word. Similar patterns are noted in southern parts of Canada where signs in English and/or French are used. In the south, there are also unilingual sign in a language other than English. So far, in Kuujjuaq, we haven't encountered any stop sign in a language other than English exclusively. We will see later, this is not necessarily the case for street signs.

### **Variability in the language of the Inuit**

Within the same community, we can see the word stop spelled in the language of the Inuit in a number of different ways. Some of this variability is intrinsic to the language of the Inuit, pertaining to phonological processes related to gemination (the contiguous presence of two consonants, a salient phenomenon in a language otherwise structured on the CVCV pattern)<sup>8</sup>.

However, some variability can also be related to the fact that the syllabic writing system was implemented by English native speakers who could not perceive all the sounds relevant to Inuit ears. It was the case for the distinction between the k and q sounds, that have been written with a digraph which can still create confusion as it combines the symbols for r + k (Mick Mallon discusses this situation in details in his guide *Inuktitut*

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<sup>8</sup> Gemination: r -> q before k? devoicing. or qk -> q (uvular assimilation)



*linguistics for technocrats*)<sup>9</sup>.

In our set of random pictures taken in Kuujjuaq, there are as many instances of *nurqarit* (2) as there are of *nuqkarit* (2). From a sociolinguistic perspective, these various forms are what William Labov (1972) labelled variants of a single linguistic variable. Variants are semantically equivalent: the different written forms all mean STOP, which is the variable. So, from a theoretical point of view, establishing the standardised written form could be viewed as a fairly simple task. However, Labov has also shown that speakers are sensitive to variants, even when they only recognise the similarity among them at an abstract level. To speakers the variants have symbolic, emotional, historical, and other types of value.

The different styles of romanization, promoted by the Inuit Circumpolar Conference, in Kalaallisut (Greenland), or in Nunavik specifically, may also contribute to different ways of representing the gemination of consonants common in the South Baffin and Nunavik ways of speaking of the Inuit. We are illustrating with an example from Iqaluit which may appear as more simple than other variants already presented. For many, simplicity is of interest in standardization efforts; it is also often perceived as desirable in language issues related to security, like traffic rules.



STOP / *nuqarit* (Iqaluit, Nunavut, Canada) Jon Lodge 2006

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<sup>9</sup> According to Mallon, the *r/q* medial debate is also at stake. In Nunavik, *r* is used medially.

However, more variability exists in Nunavut, in the South Baffin area. For example, *nuqkarlutit* is used in this Cape Dorset sign:



STOP / *nuqkarlutit* (Cape Dorset, Nunavut, Canada)

Frank Darrow 2004

The institutional framework in Nunavut is not the same as in Nunavik. This difference is particularly tangible in terms of language management. For example, an Office of the Languages Commissioner exists in Nunavut while in Nunavik elders receive limited support as language experts. When she was Languages Commissioner of Nunavut, Eva Aariak made stands for the use of the languages of the Inuit in the public sphere. In an interview in *The Guardian* (Feb.4<sup>th</sup>, 2002), she said “In order for a language to survive and to have an impact on the public, it has to be visible in your environment. One way of addressing that is through business and public signs.”



*nuqkarit* / STOP + 4 way sign (Iqaluit, Nunavut, Canada)

Shelley Tulloch 2000

The more formal approach to language issues in Nunavut may explain some of the

lexical creativity in Iqaluit, in particular for the 4 way stop signs. There are other examples of innovative lexicography in the domain of traffic in Nunavut, including maximum speed signs in Iqaluit. Dorais (1993) discusses issues related to tradition, modernity, and neology in the language of the Inuit. In Kuujuaq, we have already seen (page 7) a universal and exclusively visual symbol used for the purpose of indicating conditions applying for incoming traffic when streets cross each other.

So, it seems appropriate to ask ourselves if writing on traffic signs is necessary. Article 8 of the Vienna Convention on Road Signs and Signals states:

In order to facilitate international understanding of signs, the system of signs and signals prescribed in this Convention is based on the use of shapes, and colours characteristic of each class of sign and, wherever possible, on the use of graphic symbols rather than inscriptions<sup>10</sup>.

To our knowledge, red traffic lights in the world do not require writing for drivers to stop in front of them. It is part of learning how to drive to know that if you don't, you are not obeying the rules and you may be putting the life of others at risk.

Other road signs are much more productive language wise than stop signs, and this is particularly the case in urban settings. We will now focus on street signs that we consider to be examples of urban placenames.

### **Street signs as urban placenames**

Placenames are recognised as efficient and valuable tools, locally, globally, and theoretically (*e.g.*, REPORT ON PLACENAMES WORKSHOP 2002, MÜLLER-WILLE 2000, etc.). We view streetnames in urban centers as equivalent to placenames anywhere on Inuit lands. In Canada, street signs are usually of a rectangular shape, have a green background and white writing. It is usually possible to figure which languages are relevant in a Canadian community when paying attention to street signs.

In 2002, Nunatsiaq News (Rideout) reported on the naming of Iqaluit's streets. According to elders, many of Iqaluit's then-nameless roads already had names in the language of the Inuit. There was a strong push for using traditional names as opposed to introducing words, even if they were from the language of the Inuit. *Ulu* was an example used as irrelevant for a street name in Iqaluit. This is a very good example of traditional knowledge, as described by Therrien (2002), i.e. long standing and still relevant information<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> See: <http://www.unece.org/trans/conventn/signalse.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Similar trends are noted in other Canadian aboriginal communities, *e.g.* Christine Schreyer (2006) documents the involvement of elders in naming streets in Atlin, BC (Canada) and how younger people find important Tlingit to appear first, (on top) on the signs.



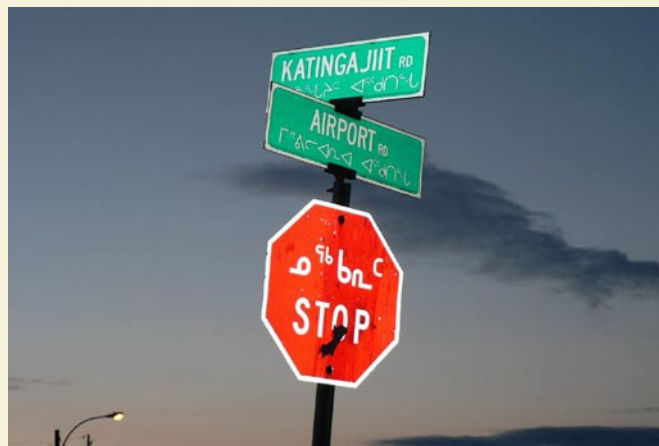
On the 4 way stop sign in Kuujjuaq (on page 7), English and the language of the Inuit appear. There are regulations in place in Canada, regarding the translation of personal names. Accordingly, Ford seems phonetically represented in syllabics while arqutinga, corresponds to road in the language of the Inuit. (Arqutik is used for street.)



Fairview CR / *Nuitatsiavik* (Kuujjuaq, Nunavik, Canada) Andreas Droulias 2006

In this one, *nuitatsiavik* is providing an equivalent to Fairview from an Inuit perspective. *Nuitatsiavik* deals with something coming into view in the distance, like a seal popping up. For example, *nuipoq*, *nuila* (it emerges, comes into view), *nuittijuq* (waits on the shore for a seal to pop out), *nuivaa* (seal emerges). This seems a good example of Collignon (2006)'s emphasis on the presence of beings in Inuit landscape interpretation.

It is worth noticing the CR in English stands for Crescent and it seems to have been ignored in the translation. To most English urban native speakers a crescent corresponds to a less busy street because of its shape and relative isolation from thoroughfares. The relevance of such urban knowledge in the Kuujjuaq context is debatable.



*Katingngajit* RD / Airport RD (Kuujjuaq, Nunavik, Canada) Andreas Droulias 2006

Some street signs in Kuujjuaq are not necessarily translated from another language.

For example, Airport road is translated here as *mivviliaria arqutinga* while *katinggajit arqutinga* is written in two different scripts: the Roman alphabet and syllabics. The same phenomenon is noted in another part of the city.



*Akianut ST / Akianut arqutik* (Kuujuuaq, Nunavik, Canada)

Andreas Droulias 2006

These multigraphic signs illustrate another stage in the strategies adopted for naming places originally in the language of the Inuit. The use of two scripts in public space makes the ongoing debate regarding the various ways of writing the languages of the Inuit tangible locally. Uniformising the writing habits of the Inuit is promoted internationally as a necessary step. For example, Inuit Circumpolar Conference proposed a long time ago to drop the usage of the syllabic writing system in favour of the Roman alphabet (DAVELUY 2004). However, in Canada, many acknowledge the syllabic writing system contributed to the maintenance of the language of the Inuit (among others, see HARPER 2005, DORAIS & SAMMONS 2002). Unilingual multigraphic street signs make this debate visible and salient in Kuujuuaq. It remains to be seen if this strategy will ultimately favour a uniform approach to language in the circumpolar world or if it will ensure the maintenance of the syllabic writing system in the public space.

## Multilingual and multigraphic signs (Concluding remarks)



Trilingual warning sign (Kuujjuaq, Nunavik, Canada)

Larry Kaplan, 2006

There are numerous multilingual and multigraphic signs in Kuujjuaq, Nunavik. We have focussed on visual signs providing directions, an activity most often orally performed. It remains however that street signs are used more often in daily conversations about directions than stop signs. Indeed stop signs are relatively unproductive to give directions since they are similar to each other and do not convey information specific enough to be of help for describing locations. Indeed, in urban settings we tend to use buildings or other features on streets rather than stop signs to give directions. In our title, we also refer to visualising orality in relation to the presence of syllabic writing on road signs in Kuujjuaq, which keeps fairly recent developments from an oral society to a literate one in the public arena.

So we would like to conclude by suggesting not too much emphasis should be put on the differences in the stop signs and more work should be accomplished to document the naming of streets in Inuit urban settings. As this trilingual warning sign shows, there are a number of other opportunities for creativity in the language of the Inuit in public space.

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