

Uumajunik uqaruluujaqtuq “speaking badly to/about the animals” or how human speech affects them

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Both adult and young Inuit maintain a close relationship with their natural environment and specifically with wildlife. Despite the fact that Inuit culture is more and more influenced by the Western way of life through Christianity, school, jobs, television, regulations of all sorts and so on, one of the still largely shared beliefs is that animals are affected by human speech (as well as behaviour and intentions)¹.

In this paper I will examine the connection between human speech and animals among the Inuit, relying on data collected during a field research I conducted in Igloodik (Iglulik), Nunavut, in 2004. I also use very valuable materials available through ethnographical literature (see References). Nevertheless, this paper should be considered merely as a preliminary contribution, for much more research must be undertaken in order to explore and understand this aspect of the relationship between Inuit and animals. It will be the topic of further publications.

Concerning the importance of speech in Inuit culture², one may say that Inuit society “weighs its words”, since they do have effect on living beings as well as on natural and social phenomena. They have to be used with caution and discernment.

In the past, shamans even used words (through special formulas) as weapons (*sakkuit*) against their enemies. One could kill somebody just with words (*uqausinarmut*) as reported by Rasmussen (1931: 201):

“Orpingalik [...] made evil magic words that were intended to kill...”

Nevertheless such an action was very risky:

“... the evil words have consequently turned against their source [...] Another example of

¹ Note from the editors: see for example Keith and Arqviq paper in these Proceedings.

² Therrien recently (2008) published an article that deals specifically with this question.

such words having a boomerang effect is told by Itqilik who once sought to kill Nakasuk with an *irinaliut*, but instead they rebounded against Itqilik's own wife and killed her." "Therefore it is believed that the cause of the disaster [the death of a son] was magic words, bad magic words that rebounded upon their own master: *irinaliut utiqtuq inungminut.*"

From their very childhood, Inuit learn how to master Inuktitut including correct use of grammar and knowledge of common and specialized vocabularies as well as appropriate social utilization of speech. Mastering language is one of the requirements in order to be considered as an *inullarik* ("accomplished adult person, genuine Inuk").

It seems impossible to understand contemporary concepts and attitudes towards animals without referring to Inuit "pre-Christian culture." According to the oral tradition (myths), from the very beginning, words were involved in the construction of the world: they created various natural and social phenomena. I shall explore below how some of these events are told by the Iglulingmiut.

Major events caused by words

1) *Human female gender*

"... the earth itself was destroyed. Afterwards, two men appeared on earth. They came from hummocks of earth; they were born so. They were already fully grown when they emerged from the ground. They lived together as man and wife, and soon one of them was with child. Then the one who had been husband sang a magic song:

*Inuk una
usuk una
paatuluni
nirutuluni
paa paa paa.*

A human being here
a penis here
may its opening be wide
and roomy
opening opening opening!

When these words were sung, the man's penis split with a loud noise and became a woman, and gave birth to a child." (RASMUSSEN 1929: 252)

2) *Human death*

Later on, people started multiplying and the earth became overcrowded:

“But the people there propagated their kind, and as none ever left the land where they were born, there were at last so many that the island could not support them. [...] But then an old woman began to shout; she had power in her words, and she called out loudly:

tuquguaglutik pilirlit tagja nuna tattuqtualuniarlirattigu.

"Let be so ordered that human beings can die, for there will no longer be room for us on earth."

And the woman's words had such power that her wish was fulfilled. Thus death came among mankind." (RASMUSSEN 1929: 92)

3) *Light*

The following myth relates how the raven created light. This major invention was a starting point of Inuit culture and society. A subsistence way of life based on animals was thus initiated with its complex hunting methods and rituals.

Ulluq unnuarlu

Tiriganiarjuguuq uqallaliqpuq:

"Qausuilli qausuilli!"

*Tulugaaluk suuqaima pisunnginami tingmigami maunga imaamut
tuluqattaqtualuulirami*

Ninngalirami uqaliqpuq:

"Qauvuq – ulluqpuq qauq ! qauvuq – ulluqpuq qaurng!" [the cry of the raven]

Ammaguuq tiriganiarjuk pilirujuq:

"Unnugli unnugli!"

Taimannganilluguuq qauqattalirlunilu unnukpaliqtuq.

"A fox, it is said, started to speak:

"There be no light, there be no light!"

The raven of course not walking but flying to the sea used to hit its head.

It became angry and started saying:

"It grows light – it becomes day, light! It grows light, it becomes day!" [the cry of the raven]

And, it is said, the fox begins to exclaim:

"Evening there be, evening there be!"

From that time, it is said, the light started to be and evening started to be."
(RASMUSSEN 1930: 26)

(I have adapted the above translations from Rasmussen's).

It is worth noting that both animals and humans used words for this purpose. Actually, in those days, animals understood human speech and were able to communicate with people through language, and conversely.

Little by little animals were differentiated from humans but their proximity and intimacy remained very strong. According to Fienup-Riordan (1990: 172), “Even today, the view persists on Nelson Island that animals were once closer to humans and used human clothing and speech but were gradually differentiated from their human counterparts.” Implicated in a “collaborative reciprocity” relationship (“the animals gave themselves to the hunter in response to the hunter’s respectful treatment of them as “persons” in their own right,” FIENUP-RIORDAN 1990: 167) humans and animals share some fundamental characteristics (like having a personhood and participating in a cycle of birth and rebirth, being capable of conscious decisions, having feelings). This obliges the Inuit to treat them as partners and not just as a subsistence resource³.

Rules in relation with animals

All Inuit agree that even today animals have to be treated with respect⁴. Young Inuit learn from their parents that they are not supposed to mistreat animals or to make them suffer (to wound them on purpose, to butcher an animal or to pluck a bird while still alive). Otherwise animals will strike back, even years later (RANDA 1995).

Other rules have to be respected:

- One must not give up even when there is no more wildlife (*nirjutiit*) in an area or leave a place because there is no more game, as they will return.
- One must not hunt for game when food is not needed.
- One must not waste wildlife (and leave part of one’s kills).
- One must not kill more than what can be carried.

Sometimes animals might refuse to be caught by a particular hunter:

- They cannot be approached: they maintain some distance with the hunter. In this case, it is wise not to insist.
- They cannot be hit with a bullet (or a harpoon) even if the hunter is an excellent shot using a high power rifle. Such situations are an indication that there is something wrong between the hunter and the game.

³ This point is confirmed by Qulittalik: “since animals have feelings (*ikpigusuktuq* “he feels it, experiences the sensation of it”) the Inuit have rules (*maligait*) when dealing with them” (*pers. comm.*, 2004).

⁴ Unlike in the past, rules today are more proscriptive (not to do something) than prescriptive (to do something in order to please the animals and attract them).

Naming and talking

Almost all animals are identified and named in Inuktitut⁵. These names enable people to talk about them and to address them⁶. It was and still is believed that animals are aware of their name. In the past, it was thought they didn't like to be named by "unclean" persons like menstruating women⁷ or by those who had recently lost a relative⁸. Such individuals were not allowed to use ordinary names for game animals but had to use substitution. This is an indication that naming creates a special link between an individual person and an animal species. When communicating with invisible powers (great spirits and helping spirits), shamans also used that same specific terminology. The use of replacement terms was required to avoid hurting animals' feelings or to please and attract them.

At this point, it is necessary to remind that different language registers exist in Inuktitut. Actually, besides the so-called common or everyday language, the Inuit developed at least two other language registers, the ritual or shaman language, and the poetic language. It is on purpose that I use the term "language" and not just "lexicon," for as far as we know from the ethnographical sources, grammar (syntax) was also somehow concerned (this field of research is still to be investigated).

1) The shaman language⁹ is called *angakkuit uqausingit* by elders of Igloodik ("shamans words") because it is believed it had been created by shamans. It included different lexical fields: specialized lexicons concerning animals and humans, their anatomy, tools and weapons, natural phenomena, social categories, all kinds of actions and so on, which were publicly known but also "magic" songs, formulas and prayers (*irinaliutiit*) used in order to obtain favours from invisible entities, some of which were secret (RASMUSSEN 1929; 1931; 1932).

⁵ Of course most of mammals and birds, a lot of fishes and some of the "minor" animals (insects, crustaceans, sea shells...) are identified and named in Inuit dialects (see IRVING 1953, RANDA 1994, 2002a, 2002b; RAUSCH 1951; ROBBE 1994).

⁶ There would be a lot of things to say about animal names, about the way they are constructed and organized lexically in subgroups but space is limited. (For readers interested in this topic, see DORAIS 1984, RANDA 2002a, 2002b). Most of them are impossible to deconstruct into meaningful segments. Therefore their meaning remains hidden. On the other hand, metaphoric terms used in poetic and shaman languages are more often accessible to morphosemantic analysis that reveals their conceptual background.

⁷ ... menstruating women (*aunaaqtut, ak&iqtut*) must not "mention game animals by their common names; if forced to do so, it must be done in the special language of shamans" (RASMUSSEN 1931: 262).

⁸ "A brother who lost his sister, or a sister who lost her brother [...] may not mention the names of the game animals in ordinary speech, but only in the phraseology used by the shamans" (RASMUSSEN 1931: 264).

⁹ Since it had also to be used by ordinary people in particular situations, the more appropriate term might be "ritual language."

2) Another register is the language used in personal songs *pisiit* (recently also called *ajaaja* songs), the poetic language aimed to express personal emotions and experiences to be shared with other people. A special attention is paid to metaphoric expressions and words that sound nice thus making people happy (see BULLE, RANDA & THERRIEN 2000).

Let's examine some animal names in common, shaman¹⁰ and poetic language. It is obvious that bridges exist between these different registers:

1) Same term or closely related terms designate the same animal in two different registers:

Common language	Shaman language	Poetic language
<i>Tuktu</i> Caribou (<i>Rangifer tarandus</i>)	<i>kumaruaq</i> "the louse-like"	<i>kumaruaq</i> "the louse-like"
<i>nanuq</i> polar bear (<i>Ursus maritimus</i>)	<i>pisukti</i> "the walker"	<i>pisuqasiaq</i> "the ever-wandering one"
<i>tiriganiaq</i> arctic fox (<i>Alopex lagopus</i>)	<i>pisukkaa</i> "the one that walks much"	<i>pisukkaa</i> "the ever-wandering one"

2) Same term designates two different animals in two different registers:

<i>aiviq</i> walrus (<i>Odobenus rosmarus</i>)	<i>tuugaalik</i> "the one with tusks"
<i>tuugaalik</i> "the one with tusks" narwhal (especially male) (<i>Monodon monoceros</i>)	

¹⁰ Most of the data concerning the special terminology used by shamans comes from Rasmussen's materials (RASMUSSEN 1929, 1930, 1931, 1932).

As mentioned previously, there is no sharp separation between these lexicons; shaman and poetic lexicons especially are very close.

Current situation

Today the situation is quite different since the conceptual and ritual contexts have changed. Personal songs *pisiit* are still composed and shared but the shaman language is almost forgotten. There is a general agreement among the Iglulingmiut that there is no more need to use terms of substitution when addressing animals. Yet, people have to talk about animals with caution and respect because the latter are believed to be receptive to human speech. Otherwise disorders of different kinds will occur.

According to the elders I interviewed – the same situation seems to exist in other Inuit areas – the relationship with animals today is disturbed mostly by the way the latter are talked about when people speak ill (*uqaruluujaqtuq*) or too much (*uqausiuluartuq*) about animals. In fact, they mean animals are talked about in an inappropriate way. Some say human words destroy (sg. *suraqtuq*) animals. Such a situation occurs when Inuit argue with Qallunaat over the quota system¹¹ (*kutarujuit* “quota-*rujuit*”) or over other hunting regulations (*maligait*, *piqujait*) like protecting polar bears in summer or polar bear cubs all year round. According to these elders, animals are not supposed to be a subject of discussion¹². As consequence polar bears become dangerous and ferocious. They may even attack people. Conversely, walrus become unpredictable when approached by hunters.

Another consequence of speaking of animals in an inappropriate way is to make them disappear¹³ from an area and not return. They are not extinct, just less available. It is also prohibited to say wildlife turned bad (having germs or worms) or to boast that one can get any kind of wildlife like seal, walrus or caribou.

¹¹ The government settled down regulations in order to limit harvest of some species (polar bear, walrus, narwhal, beluga, bowhead whale) though Inuit view traditionally animals as an “infinitely renewable resource” (FIENUP-RIORDAN 1990: 167) that the human (Inuit) predation cannot affect (nevertheless they reckon the responsibility of qallunaat whalers in over hunting of bowhead whale through the 19th and 20th centuries). The human attitudes towards animals affect just their accessibility/availability.

¹² This point of view is shared by other elders in Nunavut (Iqaluit):

“... une règle majeure veut que l’on s’abstienne de se moquer d’un animal, de tenir des propos indécents à son sujet ou encore de le placer au centre d’un débat, ce dont l’actuelle gestion des quotas imposés sur les captures de certains mammifères fournit un bon exemple...” (THERRIEN 2008: 260).

¹³ The Inuit admit that the fluctuations in animal populations in any given area may have other reasons:

- natural causes: for example, shortage of food (*niqiksaq nungurutirujuktuq*) caused sometimes by caribou by depleting vegetation resources; other reasons (population dynamics, climate changes);
- human factors: disturbance due to the use of 4-wheelers and of aircrafts (helicopters) that fly too low.

Many Inuit continue to believe that human speech, as well as acts and thoughts¹⁴, affects the attitude of animals towards humans. This belief is based upon the concept of reciprocity between human and nonhuman persons and their ability to communicate. If humans do not respect the rules settled by their forefathers, animals will become less available.

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¹⁴ There is a general belief in Igloodik (Iglulik) that not only human actions and words but also thoughts may affect wildlife. Animals are believed to understand thoughts of human beings. About a dozen years ago, a hunter had a very strong desire to see a polar bear of which some people had been informed. The following day a bear came to town in response to the wish of that man. Thinking negatively about wildlife has a negative impact on their attitude towards humans.

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