

## **Inuit=People**

For thousands of years, Inuit thought they were alone in the world. They called themselves Inuit or the people. There are different variations of “Inuit” across the circumpolar world. There are the Yupik of Siberia; Inupiat/ Yupik of Alaska; Inuvialuit in the western Arctic of Canada; Inuinnaqtun in the Kitikmeot Region of Nunavut; Inuit who cover all of the regions from Kivalliq, Qikiqtaaluk, Nunavik and Labrador; and then the Kalaallit of Greenland.

Inuit were given the name *Eskimo* by the early Europeans—as we are widely known around the world today. We have always called ourselves *Inuit* and most regard *Eskimo* as a foreign word that it is. In fact, many Inuit today find the word *Eskimo* to be offensive and derogatory. We prefer the name *Inuit* as that is what we call ourselves. The word *Eskimo* comes from Cree and means, “eater of raw meat”. Inuit are known to eat cooked meat once in a while!

In Inuktitut (our language), we have grammatical singular, dual and plural forms as opposed to the English singular and plural. That is: one person = *inuk*; two persons = *inuuk*; and, for three or more, it is *inuit*. When referring to the Inuit as a collective, some English-speakers may say “the Inuit people” which is, to Inuktitut-speakers, just repeating the word *people* twice. “The Inuit” by itself is sufficient, and that is what we prefer.

Inuit believe that they have one language that they share with the rest of the other Inuit groups around the world. Even though Inuit are scattered all over the globe, they share one language—the Inuit Language<sup>1</sup>. Although, the terms referring to animals, landscapes, ice and weather are very stable and do not vary much across the Inuit world, there are variations in pronunciation and some words differ completely—especially terms for “new” technologies and political/social realities.

The Inuit Languages have different dialects which follow major regions, like North and South Baffin, and, further, each community has its own variation within a region. Inuit can identify and tell where an Inuktitut-speaker comes from by the way he/she speaks. Some can even identify which family the speaker comes from just by the way that person speaks! This is because each family tends to have its own distinctive variation of speech and/or pronunciation. Some families do have a unique way of pronouncing certain words that clearly identifies the speaker.

There are different writing systems in the Inuit world. In the Eastern Arctic of Canada, which includes Kivalliq, Qikiqtaaluk, and Nunavik, we have two writing systems that were standardized by the Inuit Cultural Institute in the 1970s: a roman orthography and syllabics. In the Central Arctic, which includes the Inuvialuit and Inuinnaqtun speakers, they use their own forms of roman orthographies. In Greenland or Kalaallit Nunaat, they also use their own form of standardized roman orthography.

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<sup>1</sup> The scientific term classifies the Inuit Language as the Eskimo-Aleut Language Family.

In the Canadian Arctic, there is no standardized literary Inuktitut. This poses some problems for mass communication and documentation of knowledge (i.e. teaching materials, archiving, etc.) given that each community has its own dialect and variations of culture according to prey-animals and ecology. This makes it costly to produce teaching materials in each dialect.

Inuit knowledge and literary sections of our libraries are somewhat thin because most of our communities have no literary tradition. Many capable experts of Inuktitut and storytelling are not given many opportunities to produce original works and/or to translate material into their dialects. Most Inuit educators translate and produce teaching material on their own time, but the material often stays in the community and is not shared with other communities, or other educators.

This situation is unfortunate as many individual Inuit teachers have unique ideas that they could share with other educators. This situation has to be remedied so people of different backgrounds can share their ideas and best practices for the cause of teaching Nunavummiut children and knowledge-making for students of Inuit culture and language. To this end we would like to see Inuit Contact Teachers work on this problem sometime soon.

I truly believe that we should develop a standardized literary form of Inuktitut with a standardized writing system for academic and literary purposes. I'll be one of the first to admit that standardization has to happen. Greenland has a standard literary language that they use system wide and each community speaks their local dialect as well. This can also happen in Canada: it has to happen.

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