

## Inuit Writing Systems in Nunavut: Issues and Challenges

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**Abstract:** The Inuit residents of Nunavut use two distinct orthographies to write the Inuktitut/Inuinnaqtun dialects spoken there. The majority (95%) use a Syllabic orthography, while the remainder use the Inuinnaqtun Roman orthography. This paper analyses the historical factors which led to this situation, and considers its implications for the development of language policy in Nunavut.

**Keywords:** Writing systems, Nunavut, Syllabic orthography, Roman orthography, Inuktitut, Inuinnaqtun.

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### Background

In Nunavut today, Inuit use two different writing systems, and issues of language and orthography are very much a part of the political landscape. Use of the Inuit language forms a part of the nebulously-defined concept of *Inuit Qaujimaqutuqangit*, and use of the language in government constitutes a part of the rhetoric surrounding this concept. Most Inuit leaders express a desire to see the Inuit language used more extensively, not only in government but in all areas of Inuit life. There is also periodic discussion of the two writing systems used by Nunavut Inuit. (This paper will not discuss the issue of a standardized circumpolar orthography for all Inuit, raised occasionally in international venues, most often by the Inuit Circumpolar Conference.)

Today, some Inuit leaders, both within and outside Nunavut, express a need for a change from the use of the Syllabic writing system to a system using the Roman alphabet, a change, if undertaken, that would profoundly affect the lives of most adult Inuit. In Nunavut, there is also some discussion of the need for using the standardized Roman orthography in place of the non-standard Roman orthography used in the Kitikmeot (i.e. western) Region.

To begin any such discussions, we need some understanding of Inuktitut/Inuinnaqtun as used and written in Nunavut, and of the history and possibilities of orthographic reform.

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## **Dialects and Writing Systems**

Linguists generally divide the Inuit language into four groupings of dialects (Alaskan Inupiaq, Western Canadian Inuktun, Eastern Canadian Inuktitut, and Greenlandic). Of these, three are spoken in Canada, and two in Nunavut. Those spoken in Nunavut are Eastern Canadian Inuktitut (North Baffin, South Baffin, Aivilik, Kivalliq, and Arctic Quebec dialects) and Western Canadian Inuktun (Inuinnaqtun and Natsilingmiut dialects). The problem – perhaps I should call it the challenge – arises when one considers that two orthographies are in use today to write the dialects spoken in Nunavut. Further, the dividing line separating the Syllabic orthography used in most of Nunavut and the Roman orthography used in western Nunavut is not the same line that separates Eastern Canadian Inuktitut from Western Canadian Inuktitut. Syllabics is used for all Eastern Canadian Inuktitut dialects and Natsilingmiut dialect; Roman orthography is used for only one dialect, Inuinnaqtun, spoken in only two Nunavut communities, Cambridge Bay and Kugluktuk, and a few unorganized communities.

An extrapolation from census records for 1986 shows that 13,500 community residents identified an Inuit dialect as their mother tongue. Of these, 12,840 or 95% were in communities which use the Syllabic orthography, and only 660 or 5% were in communities where Inuinnaqtun is spoken and a Roman orthography used.

### **Syllabic Orthography**

The Syllabic system was the invention of a missionary, James Evans, who developed it for use with Cree Indians in Manitoba. In the 1850s Reverends Horden and Watkins adapted the Cree syllabics to the writing of the Inuit language. Reverend Edmund Peck continued to use and promote the Inuit Syllabic orthography on the Quebec coast of Hudson Bay after 1876, taking the script with him to Cumberland Sound in 1894. His efforts resulted in Syllabics being used throughout the eastern Arctic.

The Roman Catholic church established its first mission in the eastern Arctic at Chesterfield Inlet in 1912, under the leadership of Father Turquetil. To counter the influence of the already-established Anglican Church, the Catholic missionaries also used a Syllabic orthography for Inuktitut, although it differed in some respects from that used by Anglicans. The main, although very significant, difference was in showing vocalic length.

The Inuit language is strongest in the Syllabic-using areas of Nunavut. Census statistics show that the farther west one goes, however, the less strong the language becomes. 1986 census statistics showed that 80% of the population of the Baffin Region had Inuktitut as its mother tongue, compared with 83% in the Kivalliq Region and 85% in the Natsilik communities of the Kitikmeot region. However, in the Baffin region, 96% of those identifying Inuktitut as their mother tongue also identified it as their home language, compared with 84% in the Kivalliq and only 64% in the Kitikmeot Natsilingmiut communities.

### **Non-Standard Roman Orthographies**

The orthography used to write the Inuinnaqtun dialect is a non-standard Roman orthography, generally also called Inuinnaqtun. Inuinnaqtun, as a dialect and an orthography, is used in Nunavut's Kitikmeot administrative region in the communities of Cambridge Bay and Coppermine and some smaller unorganized communities. The Kitikmeot administrative region, however, includes three other communities, Pelly Bay, Taloyoak and Gjoa Haven, which use the Natsilingmiut dialect of Western Canadian Inuktun but the Syllabic writing system. Thus, in this small administrative district (2001 population 2,531), a native language is written using two distinct orthographies for two dialects.

The orthography historically used in Inuinnaqtun communities was an inconsistent Roman one devised by Anglican missionaries. Very little written material, other than church literature, was ever produced in it. This orthography under-differentiates certain consonant sounds and uses its five vowels inconsistently, making for an unpredictable orthography, although many of its users claim it is not confusing.

1986 census statistics showed that only 31% of the population of the Inuinnaqtun communities of Cambridge Bay and Coppermine identified themselves as having Inuinnaqtun as their mother tongue, and only 38% of those identified Inuinnaqtun as their home language.

### **Orthographic Reform**

Attempts by the federal government to create orthographic reform for Canadian Inuit dialects were led in the 1950s and 1960's by two linguists, Gilles Lefebvre and Raymond Gagné. Both rejected the Syllabic system and proposed that it be phased out and replaced with a new Roman alphabetic writing system. Gagné's goal was the establishment of "one system of writing for all Canadian Eskimos." (Gagné (Introduction) 1965: 1) He worked with Inuit such as Elijah Erkloo, Mary Panegoosho, Elijah Menarik, Abe Okpik and Joanasic Salamonie, and in 1961 published *Tentative Standard Orthography for Canadian Eskimos*. The suggested reforms were never implemented.

### **The I.C.I. Language Commission**

By the 1970s Inuit and educators recognized the need, not for an abandonment of the syllabic writing system, but for a reform. Mark Kalluak and Armand Tagoona were among the first Inuit to promote reform. In 1974 the federal government funded Inuit Tapirisat of Canada to establish an Inuit Language Commission; one of its objectives was to study the present state of the written language and recommend changes for the future. The project was later transferred to the Inuit Cultural Institute (ICI), under the direction of Jose Kusugak.

The result was the development of a dual orthography. A Roman orthography was devised, built on an analysis of the language and the application of scientific principles. The Syllabic system was standardized - differences in style between Catholic and Anglican orthographies were abandoned - and made compatible with the Roman system. Because the Roman and Syllabic versions were both based on the same analysis of the language and its orthographic needs, it was in fact one system with two orthographic forms. The dual orthography was ratified by ICI in 1976, intended for use by all Canadian Inuit.

The main difference between Standardized Syllabic Orthography and "Old Syllabics" is that Standardized Syllabic Orthography is a 3-column system, the original first column of the old Syllabic chart having been replaced by a combination of two graphemes. Sound linguistic reasons were advanced for this major revision, a deletion of 25% of the main characters, but the real reason is more mundane. The Government of Canada had contracted IBM to develop a syllabic ball for the new IBM Selectric typewriter, and there was not room for everything on the ball; the original first column of the syllabary was sacrificed.

Each form of the dual orthography was given its own name - *Qaliujaaqpait* for Roman orthography, and *Qaniujaaqpait* for syllabics. Although seldom used, these are the official names.

### **Use of Standardized Syllabic Orthography**

The standard Syllabic orthography was accepted by all Inuktitut speakers [not Inuinnaqtun-speakers] in the Northwest Territories. At a conference of Inuit elders from all regions of the then-NWT, held in Hall Beach in 1985, elders endorsed the use of the "new" writing system in both its Syllabic and Roman versions.

The Syllabic standard is used by government and Inuit organizations in official publications. Indeed it has even been generally adopted by the Anglican Church, long a critic.

### **Use of Standardized Roman Orthography**

When ICI introduced its standard Roman orthography in 1976, it was meant to apply to the Inuinnaqtun speakers of the Kitikmeot region, as well as to the rest of Canadian Inuit, Syllabics-users who would develop proficiency in both systems. It was, however, generally rejected by most adults in the Kitikmeot Region; attempts by educators to use it in the schools there were often met with hostility. Non-standard and inconsistent versions of Roman orthography are still the norm among adult speakers of Inuinnaqtun, and even by translators employed by the Government of Nunavut.

Although the official Roman orthography - *Qaliujaaqpait* - was designed to be a mirror image of the ICI Syllabic standard, and therefore capable of easy transliteration, almost nothing for adults is ever published using it. It is used as a teaching device in

teaching Inuktitut as a second language, sporadically as an aid in teaching Inuktitut as a first language in senior grades, and more generally in teaching the Inuit language in schools. Recently the Kitikmeot Heritage Society and Nunavut Arctic College have published a major Inuinnaqtun-English Dictionary using the *Qaliujaaqpait* orthography.

### **Further Orthographic Reform**

The situation is this: 95% of Inuit in Nunavut use the Syllabic orthography; 5% (Inuinnaqtun-speakers) use a non-standard Roman orthography.

### **Perceptions of the Need for Orthographic Reform**

Some Canadian Inuit leaders perceive that the Syllabic writing system, the system of the majority, is holding Canadian Inuit back, that it is preventing them from joining fully in the modern world. Some, like John Amagoalik, have recommended the abolition of Syllabics and the adoption of a standard Roman orthography, a standard that has already been created but seldom used.

In the Kitikmeot region, educators (and a few others) see the need for a greater public awareness of the deficiencies of the non-standard Roman orthography in use there, and the promotion of the ICI-ratified *Qaliujaaqpait* standard orthography.

It will be helpful to understand how orthographic reform has been handled elsewhere.

### **Spelling Reform vs. Script Reform**

Many languages have undergone orthographic reform. However, this is usually a matter of spelling reform, rather than of a change of script. The Greenlandic reform of 1973, although major, was not a change of script; it was a "radical spelling reform" motivated by "the wish to make it [Greenlandic] easier to spell - to get written and spoken language in greater accordance with each other..." (Jacobsen 1996: 119.) Even so, at its outset it was controversial and aroused much opposition.

Within Nunavut, the spelling reform that resulted in a standardization of Syllabics in 1976 was accepted, although not without some quarrel, especially from the church. This spelling reform can be considered major in that it eliminated 25% of the syllabary, through the elimination of the former first column of symbols.

Much rarer are orthographic reforms in which the type of script, the writing system itself, is changed. Only one example exists in the Eskimo world; in the 1950s a Roman alphabet devised by Russian researchers and teachers in the 1930s for Siberian Yupik was replaced by the Cyrillic alphabet.

Elsewhere in the world, the best known example of script reform is in Turkey. In 1928, the nationalist Turkish leader and social reformer, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk,

abolished the Arabic script, which Turks had used for a thousand years, and replaced it with the Latin alphabet. In recent years, script reform has been initiated in the Turkic-speaking former Soviet republics, including Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Azerbaijan.

Thus it may be seen that Inuktitut/Inuinnaqtun speakers would not be in a unique position if they were asked to contemplate major orthographic reform which, if it resulted in one orthography for all of Nunavut, would also constitute script reform for one of the groups.

### **Is Further Orthographic Reform Needed in Nunavut?**

This is really three questions: 1. Should Syllabics be abandoned? 2. Should Inuinnaqtun orthography be standardized? 3. Should Inuinnaqtun orthography be abandoned in favour of Syllabics? The third question is almost never voiced. It has always been the unthinkable – certainly the unspeakable.

Before the advent of modern computer technology, Syllabics was a costly system to maintain. Today, however, there is probably little, if any, cost premium to publishing in Syllabics. No matter what orthography is used, translation costs will remain constant. An international effort has been made in the standardization of syllabic characters for computer use. Education authorities in Nunavut have published hundreds of texts for school children in Inuktitut syllabics. (Hundreds more have been published in Nunavik.)

Clearly, initiatives have been made to help Syllabics live and thrive. But has enough been done?

For adults, there is little other than government handouts and religious literature to read. The cultural periodical that was a mainstay of a previous generation of Inuktitut readers, *Inuktitut* magazine, has turned itself in recent years into a podium for expressing Inuit political aspirations. There is almost no culturally-relevant literature in book or magazine form for adult readers of Inuktitut or Inuinnaqtun.

One cannot underestimate the emotional attachment that Inuit have for syllabics. Consider the following statement by the educator and editor, Mark Kalluak, representative of many similar statements by other Inuit: "When I became fully familiar with the use of syllabics, I became, as it were, in love with them... Some Inuit do not want to give up syllabics simply because they're different and it makes them appear to be genuine Inuk; some perhaps even think that syllabics was invented by Inuit."(Mark Kalluak in Harper 1983: 46-7)

Inuinnaqtun speakers also feel an emotional attachment to their non-standard Roman orthography, but it must be recognized that the *Qaliujaaqpait* orthography which many presently resist using is also a Roman orthography.

In the Kitikmeot Region, there is a need for a major public education campaign on the desirability of a standardized Roman orthography and the legitimacy of the *Qaliujaaqpait* orthography.

The forces that mitigate against the longterm survival of Inuktitut and Inuinnaqtun are massive. Foremost among them is the ubiquitous television with its preponderance of English language stations. Aboriginal language programming must compete against big-budget television from the south. There is almost no secular literature of other than a government nature to read in Inuktitut (Syllabics) or Inuinnaqtun (Roman) above the primary school level. Government involvement is necessary to nurture the publication of literature in Inuktitut and Inuinnaqtun, for the market is simply not large enough for publishing as a business venture to succeed without subsidies. In short, a major effort to promote adult reading is necessary. This is not the same as promoting literacy. Most adults are literate in that they have the ability to read in Inuktitut Syllabics or in Inuinnaqtun Roman orthography. But there is almost nothing to read!

Only after efforts are made, over a long period of time, to create interesting reading materials would one be able to decide whether or not Syllabics will be an appropriate orthography to maintain over the long term. It is premature to sound its death knell now. Although introduced to Inuit 150 years ago, it hasn't really been given a chance to thrive.

The Government of Nunavut publishes most of its material of general application in both Syllabics and Roman Orthography, the Roman orthography version being for the use of Inuinnaqtun-speakers and often written in non-standard Roman Orthography, reflecting the individual preferences of the translator assigned the work. At the very least, the Government of Nunavut should agree to be bound by the ICI-ratified *Qaliujaaqpait* orthography, to teach it to its employees involved in language issues, including all translators, and to demand its usage.

The harder question is whether the Government of Nunavut can afford to continue to support two writing systems for one language, remembering that one of those writing systems is used by only 5% of Inuit language speakers in Nunavut. When it is faced, as it eventually must be, the question should be: Will Syllabics – the orthography of the vast majority of Inuit in Nunavut – be abandoned by government for official purposes in favour of a standard Roman Orthography? Or will the orthography used in Cambridge Bay and Coppermine, the Inuinnaqtun orthography, be abandoned in favour of a Nunavut-wide Syllabic system? The first question is the one that has always been asked in the past. I suggest that the second may well be asked in the future.

### **A Way Forward**

Inuit embraced Nunavut with the expectation and assumption that Inuktitut and Inuinnaqtun would be working languages of the Nunavut Government, employed for official purposes to a greater extent than they were under the Government of the Northwest Territories. This is already a tarnished dream. To resurrect it and allow it to

become a reality, the government and its citizens will have to address issues of orthography.

In her most recent report, the Languages Commissioner of Nunavut has recommended the enactment of an Inuktitut Protection Act. Her report states: "The real struggle to make Inuktitut/Inuinnaqtun a healthy and equal language will take place, not in the Legislative Assembly, but in the streets, homes, schools and workplaces of Nunavut's communities. The Languages Commissioner is calling on the Government of Nunavut to put in place legislation that will address the language issues people face on a daily basis." (Languages Commissioner of Nunavut 2002: 8)

The specific recommendations as to what this act should include do not deal with questions of orthography.

What follows as summation reads largely as a list of recommendations to government on issues of language and orthography. This is unavoidable, given the overwhelming dominance of government in the affairs of Nunavummiut. But other organizations and agencies, and ordinary citizens, should also make these issues their business.

The Government of Nunavut should make a major commitment to the production of culturally-relevant material for readers of all ages, in Inuktitut Syllabics and Inuinnaqtun Roman orthography, and establish a subsidy programme to support the private publication of Inuit literature. It should undertake a public education campaign to instill pride in the use of Inuktitut/Inuinnaqtun. It should undertake, or encourage, the publication of a periodical in Inuktitut and Inuinnaqtun which will avoid political themes and, instead, focus on culture, language, history, poetry and creative fiction.

It should conduct a major campaign of public education in the Kitikmeot Region to inform adults of the merits of the Standard Roman orthography, and should teach Inuinnaqtun consistently in the standard Roman orthography in schools in the region.

It should continue its admirable approach to the production of reading materials for the primary grades. It should develop appropriate curricula for all grades, produce reading and other support material for the teaching of these curricula, and train teachers of Inuktitut/Inuinnaqtun for these grade levels to high levels of competency and professionalism. It should undertake studies on the speed and ease with which readers are able to acquire reading skills in both Syllabics and Roman orthography, and study the implications of the results for language teaching methodologies.

The Government of Nunavut and the Government of Canada should increase their funding to aboriginal organizations to produce high-quality television programming in Inuktitut and Inuinnaqtun.

The official names for the Syllabic and Roman orthographies - *Qaniujaaqpait* and *Qaliujaaqpai* - should be used and promoted.

When Inuktitut/Inuinnaqtun place names are officially adopted, their spelling should be that of the official orthography.

The Government of Nunavut should establish, within its Department of Culture, Language, Elders and Youth, a "Language Academy", in which the language bureaucracy will draw regularly on the expertise of language scholars to ensure that the promotion and use of Inuktitut/Inuinnaqtun remain priorities of the Government of Nunavut, that the results of linguistic scholarship are known to bureaucrats and policy-makers, and that evolving language policies are linguistically and pedagogically sound.

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## LANGUAGES COMMISSIONER OF NUNAVUT

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