

***Language, Politics, and Social Interaction in an Inuit Community*¹**
By Donna Patrick²

Reviews Counterpointed by Donna Patrick

The issue of language preservation and endangerment has attracted a great deal of attention in recent sociolinguistic and language planning research. My 2003 book, *Language, Politics and Social Interaction in an Inuit Community*, contributes to this body of work, examining the historical, political, economic, and social dimensions of Inuktitut language maintenance in a multilingual Inuit community in Northern Quebec. The reviews of the book that appear in this journal, by Lawrence Van Horn, Michael Downs, and Ellen Schnepel, have raised a number of important concerns regarding the book's audience, its relation to a broader circumpolar context, and the data that form part of the ethnographic component of language use. In what follows, I will briefly respond to these concerns.

The book's primary goal was to provide a sociolinguistic analysis of the linguistically, socio-culturally, and politically complex region of Northern Quebec that would be relevant to Native and non-Native teachers, educators, community workers, public servants, and others employed by northern institutions and agencies that work in and with Inuit communities. In the book, I attempted to answer two questions: 1) why the speakers of a minority language (understood as a language with less power within larger state structures than a "dominant" language like English or French, even if it not is actually spoken by a minority of the population) might consider it desirable and beneficial to maintain that language; and 2) how language maintenance actually works. Crucial for answering these questions was a historical understanding of the circumstances surrounding contact between Inuit and Europeans and the social, political, and economic processes that have shaped the ways that Inuit and non-Inuit relate to each other at community, institutional, and state levels.

A key challenge that I faced in writing the book – as does any researcher working in a particular theoretical tradition – was to make my work accessible to a general audience. Achieving the right balance between theoretical orientation and accessibility is often difficult. In my own case, as the reviewers note, the balance is tipped in favor of an academic audience, especially given my use of theoretical terminology that might be unfamiliar and alienating to some readers.

Accessibility is an important issue. In particular, there is a need for plain English texts accessible to members of the community one works with, especially in the case of Aboriginal³ communities.

For this study, I met with community officials and school committee members, presenting an oral report on the language survey that I conducted and on language use in the community. In addition, updates on this research and information about the results were broadcast on community radio. I also prepared a written report, translated into Inuktitut, which was produced and distributed by the school board for use in future teacher-training courses. Other aspects of this study, including the theoretical analysis it offers, have been more difficult to present in a form accessible to a general audience. Nevertheless, this material could and should be presented in plain English in future work.

The reviewers also raise some contextual and methodological concerns about the study. One important concern is raised by Downs. He says that in stressing the uniqueness of the community that I worked with (its "historical specificity"), I limit the "direct applicability" of my results to other communities and regions. The community's uniqueness is grounded in the fact that 1) four languages are spoken there despite a population of less than 1,500 people; 2) it is geographically isolated, not yet linked by roads or swamped by outsiders; and 3) it is situated in Quebec, where it has been shaped by regional concerns with language and politics, including a concern with the maintenance of the French language, part of a movement for increased Quebec autonomy within Canada. What was significant was that Inuktitut has thrived in this community as a language of everyday use, and that little, if any, code-switching was observed. Moreover, I felt that it was important to emphasize the circumstances of this community in order to avoid the temptation to draw general conclusions about Inuktitut use across Inuit communities, where circumstances might be different. Nevertheless, comparing one community with others and broadening the context to include the circumpolar region, could provide many useful insights and is an important goal for future research.

Another important point about the contextualization of the study, which Schnepel raises, is that more details about the current political leadership and ongoing negotiations for increased regional autonomy would have been of interest. However, my sense is that a more detailed account of the ever-changing political situation was not crucial to this particular study, which already described some of the political processes at play. In general, writing about current political debates and issues poses a problem for academic writing – namely, that the likelihood is that the situation will change as the work goes to press. Despite this caveat, a more detailed account of the political processes for increased autonomy involving negotiations between Aboriginal groups and representatives from the provincial, territorial, and federal governments in Canada, and the place of language and culture in these negotiations, is important and worthy of independent investigation.

Another important concern raised by the reviewers involves limitations in data collection. One difficulty, described in particular by Van Horn, is the limited number of examples of language use in order to produce a comprehensive ethnography of speaking. The reasons behind this are largely practical. My original study focused on contextualizing the research site and providing an understanding of why indigenous language use was important to the Inuit in this community in the first place. Part of this study involved a description and an analysis of how language was actually used. Given this scope, space considerations constrained the actual number of examples that could be printed.

That said, it is important to recognize some other points about language use relevant to this work. As mentioned above, there was virtually no code-switching in the community at the time of my study. Interaction was governed by a more general rule that Inuktitut speakers always used Inuktitut with each other, French speakers always used French, and English was used as *lingua franca* and in most encounters when people were not sure whether the interlocutor spoke Inuktitut or French. There were, in fact, very few data recorded because there were few salient examples of language use that broke these patterns of interaction. Moreover, those examples that were cited were taken to be “representative” of cross-linguistic encounters.

In view of these points, it would have still been useful to have more recorded interactions between people when they did meet and talk, especially to

document the use of languages across domains, taking gender and age group into account. This would have added greatly to the corpus of examples of language use and a richer, more nuanced analysis. However, it should also be noted that recording Inuktitut usage in the family, home, and community encounters and in the school and other workplaces was not the focus of the study and that this endeavor would have constituted another type of investigation. This would have involved not only a more in-depth linguistic analysis, but also greater methodological challenges. Concerning the latter, recording the encounters could have proved problematic, requiring the permission of participants prior to recording and finding spontaneity in the midst of this. Here one might have been faced with the “observer’s paradox” noted by Labov (1972) in his early work; the presence of a recorder might have reduced the naturalness of the talk and hence the spontaneity of the language produced. What is more, it is difficult to assess which examples would have been noteworthy or important to record, given the range of language use across domains and in all aspects of daily interaction.

Of course, a greater fluency in Inuktitut on my part would have greatly facilitated this type of data collection. Again, practical constraints prevented me from achieving fluency in Inuktitut; since English is so widely used as a *lingua franca* in the community, occasions to practice were scarce. In addition, finding someone to devote their time to language teaching was especially difficult. With more time and a different language-learning environment, this limitation could have been more easily overcome.

Ethnographies, especially those conducted in Aboriginal communities, are fraught with political, social, and practical constraints. For example, gaining the permission and the trust of local participants takes an immense investment of time and effort. Nevertheless, ethnographic research still offers one of the most valuable means of addressing the socio-cultural meanings and values of language use. It is particularly important in understanding how the language and cultural legacy of a community can be maintained in times of rapid modernization involving increased demands for political autonomy, local institutional control, and equitable integration into a market economy.

Notes

1. New York and Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, A Division of Walter de Gruyter and Company, Berlin,

Germany, 2003. Language, Power, and Social Process Series, Number 8. Series edited by Monica Heller and Richard J. Watts. 281 pages, acknowledgments, 6 chapters, maps, figures, notes, bibliography; appendix, index. Cloth, \$88.00 U.S. Paperback, \$29.95 U.S.

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3. "Aboriginal," as the term is used in Canada, refers to First Nations groups (status or registered Native Canadians with respect to the federal government), non-status Native Canadians, Métis (people of mixed Native and non-Native ancestry), and Inuit.

References Cited

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