

# *Language, Politics, and Social Interaction in an Inuit Community*<sup>1</sup>

By Donna Patrick<sup>2</sup>

Introduced by Lawrence F. Van Horn<sup>3</sup>

This book is exciting to contemplate on a lively topic. *Language, Politics and Social Interaction in an Inuit Community* is the 2003 book version of Donna Patrick's 1998 Ph.D. dissertation, "Language, Power, and Ethnicity in an Arctic Quebec Community." The book fits well in hand, is logically organized and attractively presented, and invites perusal.

Donna Patrick's work raises very important questions about the conditions favoring the maintenance of indigenous languages versus their shifting to another language, often a European one associated with political and economic dominance. This situation has been especially true regarding the native peoples of North America whose

nearly 300 distinct, mutually unintelligible languages . . . known to have been spoken north of the Rio Grande before the arrival of Europeans (Mithun 1999:1) . . . are disappearing at a rapid rate (Mithun 1999:xi) . . . [because] it is a sad fact that the Native [North] American languages that survive today continue to be endangered (Jeanne 1996:333).

Patrick cites Marianne Mithun's 300 figure above of Native North American indigenous languages (p. 3) and fortunately reports that the Inuktitut language seems to be holding its own and surviving in the fascinating multi-lingual settlement/community of Kuujjuarapik. Children are learning Inuktitut; young people are using it. Kuujjuarapik, also known as Great Whale River, sits at the confluence of the Great Whale River and the eastern coast of Hudson Bay in Arctic Quebec. As a community it controls the four languages of Inuktitut, Cree, French, and English.

My fellow reviewers and esteemed anthropological colleagues with whom I have worked individually, Ellen Schnepel and Michael Downs, have covered the big picture, so to speak, of Donna Patrick's book. They intriguingly describe and critique the various contexts of history, economics, politics, and social and cultural identities presented by the author that relate to how the four languages have interacted and continue to interact as people use them in different ways for different purposes. My particular interest in the book is the ethnography of speaking, which in this case would be the description and analysis of instances of

how the residents of Kuujjuarapik choose to use and switch back and forth among Inuktitut, Cree, French, and English.

The author starts out nicely, setting the stage for what I thought would be an ethnography-of-speaking approach later in the book. She does so at the beginning of Chapter 2 on contextualizing the research site in her brief but apt description of what she calls the "small airport waiting room" (p. 21) at Kuujjuarapik where all four languages may be heard as people readily switch from one language to another. As one can imagine, we learn that the business of engaging a flight can be done in French or English while that of furthering friendship, as people who know each other come and go at the airport, is done in Inuktitut or Cree, apparently depending upon one's ethnic identity. The author, as might be expected, goes into more detail in Chapter 5 on the ethnography of language use.

Most of the information discussed in Chapter 5 seemingly stems from the author's language survey. Eighty-nine Inuit out of "250 Inuit over the age of 18" (p. 167) in the subject community completed a self-reporting questionnaire on how and where they use each of the four languages and on their relative spoken and written proficiency. My understanding is that the language-survey findings are generally supported by the author's observations during her ethnographic fieldwork (p. 165). She does, however, note that the language-survey method "has obvious drawbacks given that it reports what people claim to do with language, but not necessarily what they actually do in practice" (p. 153).

Yet Patrick does not take the opportunity to share and present an ample sample of what presumably should be a rich body of ethnography-of-speaking instances derived from her participant-observer fieldwork based on the community's ambient knowledge in which people in Kuujjuarapik choose and switch languages. This methodology, of course, would give voice to anthropological/sociolinguistic hypotheses about identifying language domains per language. I could find only one such description, in which the author describes and analyzes the choice of a 16-year-old youth to use English with his 8-year-old brother in their house in front of their grandfather "who

understood little English. . . . [T]he older boy gave instructions to his brother to buy him a soft drink at the corner store” (p. 184).

In every other case of this type the author witnessed, “such a request was made in Inuktitut” (p. 184). This situation suggests the home as a domain of Inuktitut, as Patrick says, for “all household and other [related] matters” in the home” (p. 184). Another language like English or French could be used in the home and elsewhere “to exclude others” (p. 184) when someone like a grandfather may not approve of a youth in the household who, as an older brother, might be viewed as taking advantage of his younger brother to do the older brother’s bidding. Older age associated with the grandfather’s lack of English proficiency is an obvious variable here in the ability of language choice to establish the precept that English could function in an exclusionary way or domain in relation to some monolingual Inuktitut speakers. Presumably, any of the four languages could be used in an exclusionary way depending on who is present in various social situations.

Gender can be another variable when access to language domains is considered, such as with English as a language of certain dominant-society workplaces, or similarly French, or Inuktitut or Cree in traditional workplaces, including subsistence pursuits. The author suggests that in her survey on the use of the four languages, “gender did not prove to be a significant factor in the survey results” (p. 167). But Patrick goes on to say “that a more in-depth analysis of gender differences . . . one that focuses on the use of language in various domains . . . may ultimately be necessary to determine the role of gender here” (p. 167).

Here Patrick seems to be advocating an ethnography-of-speaking approach. I would applaud this approach because describing and analyzing such instances constitute building blocks to identifying patterns of language-use practices and theories of language maintenance or shift. Since what is missing in Chapter 5 is a rich descriptive and analytical body of ethnography-of-speaking instances, as mentioned above, the ethnography-of-speaking approach would be especially useful when Patrick “explores what happens at the micro-level of day-to-day interaction”(p. 163), as Chapter 5 purports to do. In a revised edition, I would strongly recommend such inclusion.

On the picayune side, the transition from dissertation to book is not entirely successful. In

places the book exhibits a somewhat stilted pace that regrettably is characteristic of some dissertations. Certain redundant passages still remain characteristic of a trend in dissertations to overwrite by writing too much to make sure that all relevant subjects are included in the discussion and analysis of the research topic. The book could have been made more readable by carefully looking for redundancies and condensing or deleting them. In so doing, the author might have employed a more dynamic style. After all, language is dynamic, language use is dynamic, and the variables determining multilingualism and its continuance are dynamic.

There is some careless editing. In the first image we see of the subject Inuit community, it is spelled “Kuujjuarapik” (p.v). In the second image, it is spelled “Kuujjuaraapik” (p. vii). On that page (p. vii), the spelling switches to Kuujjuarapik in the third image and back to Kuujjuaraapik in the fourth image. In a sampling of subsequent pages, the name appears more standardized as Kuujjuarapik (pp 3, 5, 8, 11, 17, 20, 21, 50, 81, 92, 93, 153, 156, 160, 202, 243 and so on). The latter form, therefore, must be the preferred orthography.

Further carelessness appears when we go from page viii to page vii (instead of ix), from the end of the “Acknowledgements” to the beginning of the “Contents.” In the phrase “further north” (p. 21), correct usage requires “farther” because geographic distance is the referent, not an intellectual concept that would be appropriate for “further” usage, as in the “further” development of an idea.

While three maps are provided (which are much appreciated), more clarity and better resolution might have been achieved to produce well-delineated maps showing Canada in relation to North America, Quebec Province in relation to Canada, and Kuujjuarapik in relation to Quebec. Since this book is published internationally in Germany, has international implications on language maintenance versus shifting, and is marketed internationally in the United States through the popular bookseller Barnes and Noble, the author might have been more generous by helping readers readily understand the pertinent overall geography as well as the details of site location without having to deal with fuzzy map rendition (p. 245).

Please enjoy the two reviews that follow and the author’s rejoinder. Hopefully, they will ultimately lead you, the reader, to the book itself, which is quite

worthwhile, overall, as an addition to the world's language-maintenance literature and that of the different language domains preserving that maintenance.

#### 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, acknowledgements, six chapters, maps, figures, notes, bibliography; appendix, index. Cloth, \$88.00 U.S. Paperback, \$29.95 U.S.

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