

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

Reviewed by Ellen M. Schnepef³

Language, Politics, and Social Interaction in an Inuit Community is a study of indigenous language maintenance in an Arctic Quebec community, Kuujjuarapik (literally “little big river”), the most southerly Nunavik community on the Hudson Bay coast, where four languages – Inuktitut, Cree, French, and English – are spoken. The Inuit of Arctic Quebec have struggled to survive economically and culturally in a rapidly changing environment in which they have had a limited form of self-government since 1975. The promotion and maintenance of Inuktitut, their native language, through language policy and Inuit control over institutions, have played a major role in this struggle. The central argument of the book is that in order to understand the present-day vitality of Inuktitut, one must look at the wider historical, political, and economic processes and their relationship to everyday language practices at the micro-level of interaction.

In Chapter 1, Patrick places the discourse of language survival within the movement for increased political autonomy of First Nations within Canada and then presents the research methodology and theoretical assumptions of her 1993-1994 fieldwork. Chapter 2 contextualizes the research site, Great Whale River/Poste-de-la-Baleine/Kuujjuarapik, while placing it within the larger framework of aboriginal relations in Canada. The author provides background information about the community, the wider area of northern Quebec, and Nunavut, the Inuit territory to the north and west of Quebec which achieved self-governance within the Canadian federal state in 1999. Kuujjuarapik is home to several different ethnic groups: two Native Canadian groups, the Inuit and the Cree, who are linked through a common historical relationship with the trading post at Great Whale and who are roughly equal in number at 500 each; and non-Native residents of French-speakers and English-speakers who hold higher-paying, white-collar jobs but are largely transient, comprising about 10 percent of the 1,100 inhabitants. The community is divided residentially, socially, ethnically, and linguistically into two worlds: indigenous and “White” (p. 24).

Chapter 3 traces the colonial history of Arctic Quebec from 1610 to 1975, detailing the political and economic shifts in the region and the economic and cultural consequences for the Inuit. The story follows

the history of contact, colonization, and resistance – the founding of the Hudson’s Bay Company (in 1670), trade relations between the Inuit and Europeans, the role of missionaries in the 19th century in the spread of Christianity (often through Inuktitut literacy), the collapse of the fur trade in the 1930s, and the post-World War II transition to settled life in Kuujjuarapik as a result of the construction of an army base, large-scale introduction of wage labor, and the influx of English- and French-speaking workers. Included in this chapter is an analysis of a variety of texts (i.e., explorer tales, trader records, missionary diaries, and Inuit life histories), which are used to frame and represent both Inuit and Europeans over time and to show how ethnic images have served to legitimize certain political-economic shifts and dominant forms of colonial power.

Chapter 4 examines changing relationships in the latter half of the 20th century as the Quebec government became more involved in the region and took control of key sectors away from the federal government. This section focuses on the development of the dominant and “alternative” (or traditional) linguistic markets in Kuujjuarapik, and in Nunavik more generally, and how they overlap. It investigates the growing importance of French and Inuktitut in the administrative, political, and economic spheres as a result of Quebec nationalism and Inuit mobilization and the resulting competition between these two languages and English in the dominant linguistic marketplace wherein English is the *lingua franca* for all groups and the language of power in both the colonial past and the postcolonial present.

Chapter 5 explores what happens at the micro-level of day-to-day interactions between speakers, how and why Inuit speakers currently use Inuktitut, Cree, English, and French in the community, and the social constraints on using these languages. The results of a language survey of self-reported use conducted among the Inuit, as well as observation and interview data, point to how language proficiency levels and language use in particular age groups mirror the political and economic changes in the region. For example, tribal elders speak Inuktitut and Cree, bi- or trilingual Inuit youth are turning more to English, while few Francophones or Anglophones learn Inuktitut. Language choice thus operates to define social identity and to construct social boundaries between Inuit and non-Natives.

The final chapter sums up the use and social positioning of the four languages in Kuujuarapik. It concludes that Inuktitut will remain strong, based in part on the complex interplay of French and English in the region and on the relation of these two dominant languages to Inuktitut – which remains central to Inuit social, kin, and community relations.

Patrick casts a wide net with a discussion of many topics from a variety of conceptual constructs – political economy and world-systems theory, social structure and social process, language use and practices, language choice and how it is used to negotiate relations of power and solidarity, social networks, ethnic identity and boundary maintenance – any one of which could serve as a detailed study of this Inuit community. At times loaded phrases (e.g., “key sites where symbolic resources are exchanged for material and other symbolic resources,” pp. 166, 181) are not fully explained, and there are unnecessary repetitions of material previously presented.

While the author recognizes that the cultural and symbolic life of the Inuit is crucial to understanding how language varieties are valued by speakers, she states that she has chosen to limit the study to economic and subsistence activities, leaving more detailed investigations of culture and ideology for further investigation (p. 50). However, without some treatment of the Inuktitut language as part of a cultural system, discussion of its vitality in oral traditions, description of its syllabic system, or even transliteration of interviews with Inuit elders, the reader is left without rich ethnographic and linguistic details that would properly contextualize this language study and, in turn, aid in understanding the current promotion of Inuktitut. This weakness may be linked to the fact that Patrick is a “bilingual French and English speaker with limited knowledge of Inuktitut” (p. 182) and a “learner of Inuktitut” (p. 188).

Certain inconsistencies were noted in the text: Was the total number of interviews conducted 36 or 37 (p. 10)? Was the age range 16 or 18 years and older for Inuit in the survey questionnaire (pp. 166-167)? At times Patrick speaks of “three” ethnolinguistic groups or communities (pp. 22, 28) – Inuit, Cree, and non-Native – but later refers to four ethnolinguistic groups (p. 50) because of the four languages present. In light of the complex language and nationalism issues in Quebec, the heterogeneous group of non-Natives would undoubtedly self-identify differently, depending on their dominant language background.

Of particular interest in the study is how the use of French as a language of instruction in Quebec schools sparked the idea that Inuktitut could become a language of instruction in the early 1960s, and therefore how the provincial nationalism of Quebec affects local aboriginal movements. Also, this reviewer would like to know more about the emerging Inuit nationalist movement: What are its goals and ideology? Who are its leaders? What kinds of cleavages or dissent exist in the Inuit community, and over what issues? As these leaders work simultaneously in two systems but need to remain “authentic,” what are the different ways in which they construct “Inuitness”? What kinds of linguistic choices do they make in the standardization, or modernization, of Inuktitut?

This is a story of shifting political economy and minority-majority relations in the past two centuries in which Inuktitut has survived while the Inuit have accommodated to English as the dominant and second language. The value of the study lies in relating local identities, language choices/use and institutional practices to the larger political forces of European Canadian colonization, Anglo-Canadian and Québécois nationalism, and Inuit self-determination. It would be of interest to place this study within the larger body of work on threatened indigenous languages in Latin America or other regions where the presence of two colonial languages might serve as a buffer to the vitality and survival of native languages.

Given that little has been published on the Inuit of this region except for historical and sociological studies, Patrick’s work is a much needed contribution to aboriginal/ indigenous language studies in the Canadian Arctic. Combining historical analysis with an ethnographic study of face-to-face interaction and attitudes toward learning and speaking second and third languages in everyday life, it should be a welcome addition to upper-level undergraduate as well as graduate courses in sociolinguistics, the political economy of language, and Native North American ethnography, historiography, and ethnohistory.

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.

2. Donna Patrick obtained her Ph.D. in sociolinguistics and anthropology from the University of Toronto in 1998. She is an associate professor of Canadian Studies and Sociology and Anthropology at Carleton University, School of Canadian Studies, Dunton Tower 1206, 1125 Colonel By Drive, Ottawa, Ontario (ON K1S 5B6) Canada. She may also be reached by e-mail at dpatrick@ connect.carleton.ca and at 613-520-2600 extension 8070 by telephone.

3. Ellen M. Schnepel received her Ph.D. in applied anthropology from Columbia University in 1990. She is a consulting anthropologist and may be reached at 34 Monroe Place, Apartment 2-B, Brooklyn, NY 11201-2606 USA, at schnepel@att.net by e-mail, or at 718-596-2555 by telephone. She is the author of *In Search of a National Identity: Creole and Politics in Guadeloupe* (Hamburg, Germany: Helmut Buske Verlag, 2004).