

Tusaaji Tusilaartuq: When the Translator Must Be Hard of Hearing

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Abstract: This article examines how translation to and from Inuktitut, the language of the Eastern Canadian Inuit, often compels the translator to create new words or explanatory phrases in the target language, in order to cope with the existing cultural and semantic gaps between most Indigenous languages and languages of wider communication. Moreover, the transcription of Inuktitut into the syllabic script also entails phonetic distortions. The article concludes that some types of translations in Inuktitut are practically useless, but that more Inuktitut oral and written texts should be translated into mainstream languages.

Keywords: Inuktitut, Indigenous language translation, semantic creativity, polysynthesis, syllabic script

Résumé : Cet article traite de la manière dont la traduction vers et à partir de l'inuktitut, la langue des Inuits de l'Arctique oriental canadien, oblige souvent le traducteur à créer de nouveaux mots ou expressions descriptives dans la langue cible, afin de tenir compte des clivages culturels et sémantiques qui existent entre la plupart des langues autochtones et les langues de grande diffusion. En ce qui concerne l'inuktitut, sa transcription en caractères syllabiques entraîne également des distorsions phonétiques. La conclusion de l'article montre que certains types de traduction vers l'inuktitut sont pratiquement inutiles, mais qu'un nombre plus élevé de textes en inuktitut, tant oraux qu'écrits, devrait être traduit en langues véhiculaires.

Mots clés : inuktitut, langues autochtones, traduction, créativité sémantique, polysynthèse, écriture syllabique

Resumo: Este artigo analisa como a tradução *do e para* o inuktitut, a língua dos Inuitas do leste canadense, muitas vezes impele o tradutor a criar novas palavras ou frases explicativas na língua-alvo, a fim de lidar com lacunas culturais e semânticas entre a maioria dos idiomas indígenas e línguas majoritárias. Acrescente-se que a transcrição do inuktitut para a escrita silábica também acarreta distorções fonéticas. O artigo conclui que alguns tipos de traduções em inuktitut são praticamente inúteis e que mais textos orais e escritos em inuktitut deveriam ser traduzidos para as línguas majoritárias.

Palavras-chave: inuktitut, línguas indígenas, tradução, criatividade semântica, polissíntese, escrita silábica

Resumen: En este artículo se analiza la manera en que la traducción desde y hacia el inuktitut, la lengua de los inuit de la región oriental de Canadá, a menudo obliga al traductor a crear nuevas palabras o agregar frases explicativas en la lengua de llegada con el fin de salvar brechas culturales y semánticas que se dan entre la mayoría de los

idiomas indígenas y las lenguas de mayor difusión. Por otra parte, la transcripción del inuktitut a la escritura silábica también conlleva distorsiones fonéticas. En el artículo se concluye que algunos tipos de traducciones al inuktitut son prácticamente inútiles, mientras que hace falta que se traduzcan más textos orales y escritos del inuktitut hacia idiomas de mayor difusión.

Palabras clave: inuktitut, lenguas indígenas, traducción, creatividad semántica, polisíntesis, escritura silábica

Translating to and from an Indigenous language of the Americas (ILA) entails constraints largely unknown to those who have to translate between the continents' four main Euro-American languages—and, for this matter, between many languages of wider communication (LWC). By contrast with English, Spanish, Portuguese and French, ILAs have long been exclusively oral,¹ and it is relatively recently that some have developed a standardized written transcription. More importantly, the nature and form of knowledge originally conveyed by ILAs, as well as the semantic expression of this knowledge, were, and still are in most cases, very different from standard Euro-American intellectual practice. Some ILAs, such as Greenlandic Kalaallisut and, perhaps, Nahuatl, Guarani or Quechua-Aymara, were able to adjust to the expression of Western knowledge, thanks (in the first case at least; see Dorais 190) to a long-standing tradition of literacy and primary/secondary education in the native tongue. But the vast majority of ILAs, especially in North America, still remain primarily adapted to expressing their speakers' environments, cultures and local ways of life, and the transmission of much Western-inspired global knowledge—in school, the media or otherwise—occurs through an LWC.

This semantic gap between ILAs and LWCs often prevents translators from finding direct, word-for-word equivalences between the source and the target of their labour. Of course, such equivalences are also hard to find—or simply inexistent—when translating between a Western Indo-European tongue and any non-Western language.² But in the case of ILAs, the problem is particularly acute when one has to deal with mainstream administrative, technical or scholarly material worded in an LWC. In such cases, the translator must often find a way to describe in the target tongue (i.e., the ILA) the basic tenets (i.e., function, component parts, physical or moral characteristics, etc.) of the source concept, as happens, for instance, in my old *Cassell's New French-English English-French Dictionary*, which translates the noun “highlander” as “*montagnard de l'Écosse*”. Where proper names are concerned, the problem is compounded when the target language uses a graphic system that does not allow for

¹ With the historical exception of some Mid-American languages, such as Maya and Nahuatl (Aztec), which had developed writing systems whose use was restricted to a small caste of specialists.

² Or, for that matter, between any combination of languages. Since this article is primarily concerned with discussing, through an empirical example, some practical challenges linked to translating between an ILA and an LWC, it must leave aside several basic issues familiar to translation studies research, such as foreignization/domestication, translation and minority languages, or post-colonialism. For comparison's sake, Henitiuk provides an excellent account of the problems faced by European translators when they first encountered Japanese, a language semantically and graphically alien to them.

the transliteration of the vowels and consonants in the translated source. The translator (Inuktitut *tusaaji*, ‘listener’) must often act as if she or he is hard of hearing (*tusilaartuq*), constrained to seemingly misinterpreting the immediate meaning or pronunciation of what is said (or written) in the source language, in order to make it more or less understandable to speakers of a widely different form of speech.

In the following pages, I will provide examples of such semantic and phonetic trickery, based on my experience with translating material into and from Eastern Canadian Arctic Inuktitut, a North American Indigenous language spoken by the Inuit and usually written in a syllabic graphic system of its own (usually called ‘syllabics’).³ Most examples will be drawn from two very different texts: 1) the Inuktitut translation and syllabic transliteration of the 2010 *Nunavimmiitunut* (“For those who are in Nunavik”) Bell telephone directory for Arctic Quebec (Bell Canada) and 2) my translation into English of Reverend Eva Keleutak Deer’s autobiographical interview, originally recorded in Inuktitut (Deer). The article will end with some reflections on the impact and usefulness of such translations.⁴

Translating the Phone Book into Inuktitut: Semantic Creativity

Since 1978, Quebec City’s Association Inuksiutiit Katimajiit Inc., a not-for-profit organization devoted to the development and dissemination of knowledge about the culture and language of the Inuit, has been responsible for preparing the Inuktitut syllabic version of Bell Canada’s Nunavik (Arctic Quebec) telephone directory.⁵ This task is carried out by a team of specialists, which, in addition to the author, has included amongst others, Johanne Lévesque, Jacques Grondin and Léa Hiram.⁶ General information on translating and transliterating the directory can be found in Dorais and Grondin.

Translation, properly speaking, mostly concerns the introductory pages of *Nunavimmiitunut*, which deal with customer service, directory assistance, special calls, Bell Smart Touch™ services, privacy issues, business policies, and long-distance calls (including lists of area codes). The “blue pages” (government listings) also require translation, but private and business entries (both of which appear together in the principal section of the directory) involve transliterating proper names into syllabics (see below).

Material in the source languages (English and French) thus generally belongs to the technical and administrative lexicon. For part of this vocabulary, there exist standard Inuktitut equivalents that either belong to the everyday language—e.g., *sivanirpagit*, ‘I ring you’⁷ (“I phone you”)—or to the corpus of specialized words coined by various teams of Inuit translators—e.g., *sukattukuuruti*, ‘that which is used for

³ First devised around 1830 by Wesleyan missionaries for transcribing Ojibway and Cree, syllabics were later (mid-1850s) adapted to the transcription of Inuktitut. Their standardization dates from 1976. On the history of syllabics, see Harper and Lewis and Dorais.

⁴ My most sincere thanks to André Archambault, a professional translator with the federal government, and two anonymous reviewers, who provided me with useful comments on my manuscript.

⁵ Up until 1996, Inuksiutiit was also in charge of the Inuktitut version of the Eastern Arctic (now Nunavut) directory.

⁶ Native speakers of Inuktitut have been involved in specific tasks (e.g., evaluating the directory’s accuracy), although no Inuit organizations or private translators ever appeared interested in managing the whole project. In the present discussion about how the directory is translated into Inuktitut, the reader should keep in mind that this translation would probably be slightly—but not utterly—different if it were done by native speakers.

⁷ Examples are in the Nunavik dialect of Inuktitut.

operating something through something fast' ("fax machine"). But most English or French terms found in the telephone directory do not benefit from an already existing popular or specialized translation. This is why, as mentioned in the preceding section, the translator must often create her/his own words by finding a personal way to describe in the target tongue some characteristics of the source concepts.⁸ Doing that may require more or less acrobatic semantic skills. Let us look at a few examples.

The notion expressed in English by the term "service", ubiquitous in the introductory pages of the directory, is rendered in Inuktitut through the word-base whose meaning seems the nearest: *ikajur-*, "to help". Thus, "customer service" is translated as *ikajuutivut*, 'our [Bell's] means for helping'. If the telephone company is unable to help customers as they think it should, they may contact the Commissioner for Complaints for Telecommunications Services, *naammangittuliriji uqalanirmut* ('the one who deals with things that are not correct concerning the fact of speaking abundantly [phoning]'). If the problem lies with *allasimajuniittut tammanginningat* ('the fact that what is in the written things is not erroneous'), i.e., the accuracy of a directory listing, the customer can simply phone (if she/he speaks English or French, of course) a Bell office, *Pialiup allavinga* ('Pial's place for writing').⁹

Directory Assistance and special calls, *sivanirutiit navvaatauningat ajjigiinngituutillugulu* ('the fact that those used for ringing [i.e., phone numbers] are found, and [phoning] when it is different'), generally allow for a more straightforward translation, since they mostly deal with familiar notions rather than with technical concepts. Examples of such notions include:

- Directory Assistance charges: *navvaatauniup akingit* ('the prices of having it found')
- Busy line confirmation and/or interruption: *aturtaumangaat uqalauti nakatautillugu uqalaniq* ('[verifying] if the telephone is in use [and/or] cutting the phone conversation off at the same time')
- Bell Relay Service: *uqausilirijikkut ikajurtilugit* ('when those who deal with speaking offer their help')

In some cases, however, the translation of instructions for using these devices must require some acrobatics once again. Compare, for instance, the English original and the Inuktitut rendering of the text explaining how Bell Relay Service can be of use to customers with hearing or speech disabilities:

The Bell Relay Service operator is available to assist in placing or receiving calls to/from persons who use a TTY/teletypewriter. VCO (Voice Carry Over) and HCO (Hearing Carry Over) calls. (Bell Canada 8)

⁸ This is a relatively easy feat in a polysynthetic language like Inuktitut, where words are made of several agglutinated elements whose sum may yield a complex meaning (more on this later on). Indeed, where neology is concerned, Inuit translators far prefer creating new composite terms to borrowing words from English or another language (Dorais 151-53).

⁹ In Inuktitut, due to the absence of consonant *b* and vowel *e*, as well as of retroflex *l*, the English name "Bell" is heard—and written in syllabic characters—as *Pial* (*Piali* when followed by a post-base). For more information on phonetic adaptation, see the next section.

Uqausilirijikkuurusilirijimut (Piaras) ikajurtaujujsaujutit uqalagasuarlutit uvva naalagasuarlutit Titiguai/Tilitaip aturlugu. Visiumillu H-siumillu aturtilutit ikajurrunnamijuq.

'You might be helped by the person who deals with the fact of going through the telephone people [i.e., Bell Canada's operator] (P[ial] R[elay] S[ervice]), when you try to place a phone call or to listen [to a call] while using a TTY/Teletype. [This person] can also help when you use VCO and HCO'.

The respective meanings of VCO ('one with hearing problems can talk to anyone') and HCO ('one with speech problems can listen to anyone') are explained later on in the directory, in both English and Inuktitut.¹⁰ But readers of the Inuktitut version may find it difficult to understand what a *Titiguai/Tilitaip* is exactly.

Bell Smart Touch™ services—*isumatsiarijait Pialikkunut* ('those that are well thought by the Bell people')—offer a particularly interesting semantic challenge to translators. They consist in very concrete and precise commands for setting up various services (Call Answer, Call Display, etc.), but Inuktitut lacks many of the words needed for translating these commands literally. Descriptive and, perhaps, awkward explanatory lexemes and phrases must therefore be forged. Let me give one typical example, from the opening instructions for Call Forwarding (*asianuurtilugu uqalaniq*, 'when phoning is sent to someone else'):

Dial *72. Listen for three beeps followed by dial tone. Dial the phone number to which your calls are to be forwarded. If the person answers, keep the line open for at least 5 seconds to establish the service. (Bell Canada 19)

**72 sivanirlugu. Pipilajunik pingasunik sivanirmilu tusarlutit. Sivaniruti kajusivigigumajait sivanirlugu. Kiujuqatuarpat sikuntinik tallimanik uqalalutit asianuurtilugu uqalaniq aturtauvigiqulugu.*

'Ring [i.e., dial] *72. Hear three entities saying "peepee" and a ring tone. Dial the phone number of the place you want to reach. If only there is an answerer, speak for five seconds, thus enabling that you have the object of phoning being sent to someone else'.

All of the preceding examples give an idea of the creativity required from translators in the absence of a standardized lexicon related to the more strictly technical part of their translation. One obvious question that will be discussed later on is up to what point are such translations really understandable to native speakers.

Transcribing into Syllabics: Forced Hardness of Hearing

When Inuktitut is the target language, the problem of semantic understandability is often compounded by the fact that the use of syllabic characters, with their limited range of vowels and consonants, entails phonetic transformations that can carry words, proper names in particular, very far from their original pronunciation. In Nunavik and eastern Nunavut, syllabics constitute the default writing system for Inuktitut. Introduced among the Inuit some 160 years ago (see footnote 3) and officially standardized in 1976

¹⁰ These meanings look mistaken (would it not be the person with a hearing disability who should be helped with listening, and vice versa?), but this is how they appear in the 2010 *Nunavimmiitunut* directory (Bell Canada 8).

by the national Inuit organization—Inuit Tapirisat of Canada (ITC), now Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami—this system enables speakers to transcribe their language as it is pronounced.¹¹ In contrast with the alphabet, written symbols represent whole syllables—a consonant plus a vowel or a vowel standing alone—rather than single phones.¹² Each syllable is always symbolized by the same grapheme. Syllabic symbols can take three different positions according to the vowel (*i*, *u*, *a*) included in the syllable they represent.¹³ Each series of three symbols corresponds to syllables starting with one of the thirteen to fifteen consonants in use in the various local forms of Inuktitut, and there is one more series for vowels that stand alone.¹⁴ For example, the symbols \wedge , \triangleright and \triangleleft respectively read *pi*, *pu* and *pa*, while Δ stands for *i* (and for *u* when pointing right and for *a* when pointing left). The word-base $\triangleleft \Delta$ (“to stay alone at home”) is, thus, read *pai*.¹⁵

As well adapted as they may be to written Inuktitut, syllabics are severely limited when it comes to transcribing other languages, because they can render only thirteen to fifteen consonants (at least one of which does not occur in English)¹⁶ and three vowels. This means that when translators have to transliterate non-Inuit terms into syllabics, they must deliberately become hard of hearing, listening to the source word as if it was pronounced by a monolingual Inuk speaker without any knowledge of a foreign language.

This is exactly what Inuktitut has done since over a century ago, when it borrowed a (small) number of words from English: all of them were fully adapted to Inuit phonetics (Dorais 156-57). This corpus includes common nouns as well as proper names:

- *isipi*: spades (in a deck of cards)
- *puliisi*: police
- *paniuppaaq*: frying pan
- *Miaji*: Mary
- *Alupa*: Albert
- *Ripika* or *Ulipika*: Rebecca

Nowadays, however, in an era when all Canadian Inuit have been schooled in English since the 1960s,¹⁷ newly borrowed—or surreptitiously inserted into Inuktitut conversations—English common nouns and proper names are generally pronounced as they are in their source language. However, this does not resolve the problem of transcribing them in syllabics when asked to do so. In the *Nunavimmiitunut* telephone directory, this problem mostly prevails in two separate places: the list of long-distance area codes in the introductory section (Bell Canada 11-12) and the “white pages” of personal and business listings. In both instances, the final results of such transcriptions

¹¹ ITC also adopted an alphabetical transcription of Inuktitut, strictly parallel to the syllabic standard.

¹² Diacritic symbols of a smaller size are used for representing syllable-final consonants, while long vowels, which are phonemic in Inuktitut, are marked by a dot over the syllable within which they occur.

¹³ In Nunavik, a fourth position (*ai*) is in use.

¹⁴ Symbol *H* was also added in 1976, to represent word-initial H in English proper names.

¹⁵ In Nunavik, *pai*- is written *v*.

¹⁶ This is the voiceless uvular stop *q*. Inuktitut *r* [ʀ] and *g* [ɣ] are sometimes used for transcribing English *r* [ʀ] and *g* [g], although their pronunciation is not the same in the two languages.

¹⁷ In Nunavik, some children are schooled in French, although they easily manage to learn English.

often yield state, city, individual and business names whose written version is very different from their original pronunciation. Here are some examples:

- Place names
 - *Saskatsiguan*: Saskatchewan
 - *Purinsituart*: Prince Edward [Island]
 - *Vulurita*: Florida
 - *Kalumpia Tistirikt*: District of Columbia
 - *Junaitat Kingtam*: United Kingdom¹⁸
 - *Kirimspi*: Grimsby (Ontario)
 - *Tituruit*: Detroit (Michigan)
 - *Uatavurt*: Waterford (Ireland)

- Individual and business names
 - *Sinupal, Pita*: Snowball, Peter
 - *Sitiril, Tapaliu*:¹⁹ Zdrill, W
 - *Kuavurt, Pirnatit*: Crawford, Bernadette
 - *Saitkurua, Virmi*: Sainte-Croix, Firmin
 - *Turamlai, Numa*: Tremblay, Normand
 - *Hili-Kupaik*: Heli-Quebec Ltd

Are translations and transcriptions found in documents such as the *Nunavimmiitunut* directory understandable to Inuit readers? Not always. If, for instance, some technical instructions based on notions and activities shared by both the contemporary globalized system of knowledge conveyed by English as well as by the traditional Inuit culture in which Inuktitut is semantically grounded should be easily understood, more idiosyncratic formulations created by imaginative translators might not. Where transcription is concerned, if some syllabic transliterations of proper names whose phonetics are close to that of Inuktitut are not problematic (e.g., *Sauti Arapia* for “Saudi Arabia”), many others are unintelligible. Jaypeetee Arnakak, an Inuk linguist, translator and educator from Nunavut, suggests that in order to increase intelligibility, when someone is translating a text into Inuktitut syllabics, she/he should insert the alphabetical spelling of foreign proper names besides their syllabic rendering (Arnakak 69). But, of course, this is impossible (and useless, as we shall see in the conclusion) with the Nunavik telephone directory, where French, English and Inuktitut transcriptions are found under the same cover, the purported role of syllabics being to provide Inuit customers with a graphic space devoid of “foreign” written symbols.

Translating from Inuktitut: Turning a Partially Deaf Ear to the Text

Challenges linked to translating from Inuktitut into English—or another LWC—are somewhat different from those discussed above. Because Inuit oral narratives, as

¹⁸ In the ITC alphabetical standard, word-initial or inter-vocalic *j* is pronounced “y”.

¹⁹ In the absence of any syllabic symbol for *W*, this letter is transcribed by approximating the pronunciation of the word “double-U”.

well as the very limited amount of available material originally written in Inuktitut,²⁰ generally deal with environmental, human and spiritual experiences in the Arctic, they do not require from translators the same kind of semantic creativity called for when rendering relatively complex and often culturally irrelevant technical and administrative stuff originally written in a majority language. However, this is not to say that Inuktitut translates easily. Many of its words express notions and concepts that have no direct equivalent in English or French.

One obvious and famous case is that of the “Eskimo words for snow” (L. Martin). Are there 22, 52 or 102 of them? Several authors (e.g., Pullum; Steckley) have denounced the belief, common among anthropologists and linguists, that the Inuit snow lexicon is an example of how a language perfectly reflects the culture of its speakers, a result of not verifying up to what point such an example is based on accurate data. In Nunavik Inuktitut, for instance, there are only seven words whose unique function is to denote one or another form or condition of snow (e.g., *qanik*, ‘falling snow’; *aputi*, ‘snow on the ground’; *aniu*, ‘snow for making water’). However, Inuit are able to distinguish between at least twenty-five different snow conditions (Dorais 135-36), expressed by way of dedicated terms (see *qanik* above) or through semantically more encompassing lexemes, whose meaning denotes snow when used in specific contexts (e.g., *illusaq*, ‘material for a house’, a word that in the proper context may be translated as ‘snow that is fit for building a snow house’).²¹

Inuit words that must be translated by a descriptive phrase rather than a single term, because they have no literal English equivalent, belong to various domains: traditional technology, zoology, anatomy, feelings, kinship, cosmology, etc. Here are a few examples:

- *pituk*: V-shaped rope upon which a dog team’s harness lines are attached
- *tarqaq*: string set across the deck of a kayak for holding hunting gear in place
- *nurraq*: young caribou less than a year old
- *mattaq*: edible derm of a narwhal or beluga whale
- *kakkiviaq*: sub-nasal or nasolabial groove
- *iliranartuq*: she/he (or someone who) inspires respect mixed with some fear
- *najagiik*: a group of two persons comprising a sister and her brother
- *sila*: air, weather, intellect (with its bubble of air from a person’s day of birth)²²

For sure, individuals—the non-Inuit ones at least—who translate from Inuktitut have the impression of standing on firmer ground than when doing the reverse. Even if their translations often look like dictionary definitions, they do not have to create new composite words as they do when having to cope with the absence of a standardized Inuktitut lexicon in one or another technical field. But here again, for readers who do not already know something about Inuit culture, perusing English translations of Inuktitut texts dealing with that culture can be almost as confusing—because of the recurring

²⁰ Published materials by Canadian Inuit authors writing in their native language include texts by Ajaruaq, Immaroitok, Markoosie, Nappaaluk, Nuligak, Owingajak and Qumaq. For a recent overview of Inuit literature, see K. Martin.

²¹ In other contexts, *illusaq* might be used to speak about building materials, such as bricks, plywood, etc.

²² For more information on the cosmological concept of *sila*, see Saladin d’Anglure.

necessity of defining untranslatable Inuit concepts—as reading the *Nunavimmiitunut* syllabic directory.

This brings us to the core difference between translating into and from Inuktitut. In contrast with English or French, Inuktitut is a polysynthetic language in which words are constructed out of various linguistic elements (bases, post-bases, grammatical endings) as the conversation—or translation—goes on (e.g., *tasir-jua-raalum-mu-u-si-junga*, ‘lake-big-very-toward-go-starting-I’, “I start going to the very big lake”). A single word is, thus, liable to contain much more semantic information than an English term, a fact that explains why English-to-Inuktitut translators are often confronted with the task of forging fully-fledged lexemes rather than just defining in several common words what an unfamiliar notion actually means.

The semantic richness of composite Inuktitut words may impede translators from rendering their full meaning into readable English or French. Some polysynthetic lexemes brim with so many nuances that translating them literally would yield unpalatable and barely understandable results in the target language. The translator must, then, turn a partially deaf ear to the translated text, deliberately giving up translating some linguistic elements included in Inuktitut words or, at least, giving them a translated form relatively distant from their literal meaning.

In 2013, I tape-recorded the autobiography of Reverend Eva Keleutak Deer, minister of the Full Gospel Church (and mayor of her home village) in Quaqtaq, Nunavik. I transcribed this oral text in the Nunavik version of the ITC alphabetical standard orthography, before translating it into English and French and having it published under book form (Deer). While doing so, I rapidly discovered that, as I just mentioned, my translation would have to leave aside several elements of the Inuktitut narrative. The basic meaning of the text did not pose real semantic problems, though. Reverend Deer’s life experiences occurred in contemporary times (she was born in 1946) and her narrative recounts going to school, living in Montreal and Ottawa and returning to Quaqtaq to work as an educator, community leader and church minister. Thus, the text deals only occasionally with traditional Inuit culture, and when I was interviewing her, Deer was kind enough to volunteer the English translation of some specialized terms (e.g., “prophet” or “miracle”) that she felt I might (and often did) ignore.

The problem with a more literal rendering of the narrative lay with the subtle nuances Reverend Deer introduced in her discourse. Here are some examples; sentences in Inuktitut are followed by their literal (slashes show which parts of the sentence correspond to each Inuit word), corrected (i.e., more readable in English) and final (the one found in the published book) translations:

- *Taima ilinniavik sanajaulaursimajuviniujutsaulirmat* (Deer 65)
Then/the school/is now about to reach the point of having already been built
We are now coming to the point that a school had been built
A Federal day school opened (Deer 24)
- *Taikani atlavimmi sitamaurquutalaursimajut ikkua* (Deer 67)
There/in the office/they probably had got four of them/those ones
There at the office, there probably were four people
There were four people working there [at the office] (Deer 26)

- *Asuilaak, katsungaittupaujaaluummappaq* (Deer 71)
Of course/it looks a lot extremely exciting to the utmost
Of course, how extremely exciting was it
Of course, it was so exciting (Deer 29)
- *Ajugaitliutupaaluulaursimagiamik aulajjunga avaalaqialimmuuriurama* (Deer 65)
The fact that it was very stunning to the utmost/I remember/when I first went to the bush
I remember that it was really stunning for me to travel for the first time in the bush
I remember that it was really stunning for me to travel in the bush for the first time (Deer 23)

These examples show how it is almost impossible to convey into English (or French, for this matter) the full meaning of composite Inuktitut words. As is often the case when practicing the art of translating, several nuances must be left out of any readable translation, and it can only be hoped that the deaf ear of the translator will leave enough of the original meaning so as not to completely betray the translated discourse.

Conclusion

In the preceding pages, we saw that there exists a semantic and linguistic gap between Inuktitut and English. Several notions and concepts pertaining to contemporary globalized technology and scholarly knowledge have not yet received standardized appellations in Inuktitut and must be translated through approximations devised by the translator, who then appears as if she or he had difficulties hearing what was exactly said in the source language. The problem worsens when non-Inuit proper names have to be transliterated in the syllabic script, whose limited number of vowels and consonants compels the transcriber to knowingly distort the original pronunciation of such names.

Vice versa, translation from Inuktitut often requires that words stemming from traditional Inuit culture and environment be rendered by ethnographic or geographic definitions rather than by literal English equivalents. Moreover, the polysynthetic structure of Inuktitut enables it to include in a single term many semantic and grammatical nuances that cannot be translated in their entirety if the English text is to be readable. Such discrepancies between Inuktitut and English are probably representative of the problems affecting translation between most Indigenous languages of the Americas and languages of wider communication.

In such circumstances, are these translations even useful? In Canada and the United States, where almost all individuals of Indigenous ancestry are schooled in English—or French, in Quebec—and speak it with some degree of fluency,²³ should

²³ In Nunavik and eastern Nunavut, two regions where Inuktitut is still transmitted to children, kindergarten and grades one to three are usually taught in the Indigenous language, but from grade four onward, English—or French in some Nunavik classes—becomes the unique teaching medium (except for occasional classes on traditional

time and money be devoted to subsidizing translators whose work cannot escape being approximate? In my opinion, the answer differs according to the target language.

When this target is Inuktitut, I am convinced that translating technical material such as the telephone directory is perfectly useless from a linguistic standpoint. As we saw, these translations are often unintelligible. The vast majority of Inuit customers who want, for instance, to use the Call Forwarding Smart Touch™ service or know the phone number of W. Zdrill are able to consult the English–French section of the directory. The few who cannot may ask a bilingual relative or friend to explain to them how to proceed. As a matter of fact, the primary usefulness of the Inuktitut syllabic section of the telephone directory—as of most other technical and administrative translations—is to symbolize the fact that Inuit are different from mainstream Canadians because of their original language, culture and history and that, for this reason, they have the right to decide for themselves on matters concerning their Indigenous way of life and native territories. This type of translation thus has to do with identity and politics rather than information properly speaking. Its sociological importance should not be underestimated, but its informative value is almost nil.

This does not mean that translating into Inuktitut is not needed. However, instead of technical material, what Inuit speakers—children and teenagers in particular—really need is recreational and informative texts dealing with what interests them. In Greenland, hundreds of books in the local Kalaallisut Inuit language—written by local authors or translated from foreign tongues—have been published over the last one hundred years. It may be too late to do likewise among Canadian Inuit, but initiatives such as Jaypeetee Arnakak’s Inuktitut translation of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s *The Little Prince* (Arnakak 68-69) or the establishment in 2006 of a multilingual (Inuktitut–English–French) publishing house in Iqaluit (www.inhabitmedia.com) are most welcome.

Where translation from Inuktitut is concerned, it must be encouraged by all means, in spite of the unavoidable imperfections mentioned above. Very few oral or written documents produced by Canadian Inuit in their language—and by speakers of other Indigenous tongues—are available in English or French.²⁴ In a troubled world, where we often question our identities and futures, listening to what Indigenous languages and those who speak them have to say about life, society and the environment could indeed be extremely enriching to the mind.

culture), up to the end of high school. This means that the level of Inuktitut learned in the classroom does not go beyond that of grade two or three, or seven- to eight-year-old students.

²⁴ Three series (now discontinued) of bilingual (Inuktitut–English) books published by Nunavut Arctic College in Iqaluit constitute notable exceptions: *Interviewing Inuit Elders*, *Inuit Perspectives on the 20th Century*, and *Memory and History in Nunavut* (catalogue available from www.arcticcollege.ca).

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