

# **Have Lesser Used Languages a Chance in Canada and Europe?**

## **Language Status and Place Names Among Inuit and Sámi.**

Ludger Müller-Wille\*  
Department of Geography  
McGill University  
Montréal (Québec)  
H3A 2K6 Canada

### **Abstract**

Both Inuit and Sámi have experienced the expansion of colonial and immigrant populations from the south into their original territories in Arctic Canada and northernmost Europe. These historical processes have resulted among other matters in the superimposition and often displacement of their aboriginal toponymies by other languages and their place names. This paper traces the recent efforts by Inuit and Sámi to counteract this process and enhance the development of their toponymies as part of their cultural and linguistic self-determination to maintain a functional space for their languages within a multilingual context. Practical steps which have been taken towards such goals are presented and analyzed.

### **Socio-linguistic Conditions and Toponymies**

The year 2001 was declared by the Council of Europe as the European Year of Languages to raise the awareness of and attention to the linguistic conditions of more than 40 million people living as minorities in Europe who use languages other than the official national languages recognized by the European Union or the Council of Europe. In turn, Canada, bilingual on the federal level since 1969, stresses its inherent cultural diversity as well as linguistic richness with many languages, both aboriginal and immigrant, used throughout the country.

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In this context, I therefore like to relate the situation of lesser used languages and their chances of survival in Europe with similar circumstances and issues in Canada. For this purpose, I have chosen the examples of the Inuit in arctic Canada and the Sámi

in northernmost Europe, particularly in Finland, and the current status of their languages in relation to cultural self-determination and linguistic enhancement as lesser used languages.

Both Inuit and Sámi, the aboriginal peoples in northernmost North America and Europe respectively, have experienced the historical expansion of colonial interests and immigrant populations and their cultures and languages into their original territories (cf. Dorais 1996; Aikio, S. 1992). These historical processes have resulted in their political and socio-economic inclusion, if not necessarily cultural integration into central nation-states which are Denmark, Canada, the USA and the Russian Federation for the Inuit and Norway, Sweden, Finland and again the Russian Federation for the Sámi. Furthermore, these historical developments have also caused, among other matters and conditions, the superimposition of dominant national languages, also referred as 'link languages' (Kloss 1967) such as Finnish, Norwegian, Swedish, Russian, English and French on one side and the displacement of the aboriginal languages of the Inuit and Sámi on the other side.

Next to the general situation and status of aboriginal and/or lesser used languages (cf. European Bureau for Lesser-Used Languages 2001), I like to focus on the issues of aboriginal toponymies or place name systems within these national, multicultural and multilingual settings which exist both in Canada and Europe. Toponymies are chosen because they represent a specialized knowledge and vocabulary expressing the intense human environmental interactions in specific geographical areas (Müller-Wille 2000). I will trace the recent efforts made by both Inuit and Sámi to counteract the process of loss of geographical knowledge and linguistic alienation, i. e. the establishment of introduced foreign non-Inuit or non-Sámi geographic names. These efforts have enhanced the maintenance and development of their aboriginal toponymies within their own functional spatial networks in the circumpolar north.

These strategies of cultural and linguistic self-determination developed by speakers of lesser used languages have to be seen within the context of current legal and political conditions within the central states; in Canada on the federal, provincial and territorial levels, in Finland in relation to the centrally governed state, and finally in the European Union under the umbrella of international conventions such as the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages (Council of Europe 1992) and the European Bureau of Lesser Used Languages (EBUL) founded by in the European Union in 1981.

Furthermore, I will briefly outline some practical steps of implementations in each situation which will show both positive and negative aspects of attaining the goal of continued language maintenance and retention for 'smaller languages' as part and parcel of the permanent linguistic competition in a globalized world. This competition is increasing among the 6500 languages used currently on the globe. Fewer than 500 languages are used in education and it is anticipated that up to 90% of the oral

languages might disappear within the next 100 years because the average language has fewer than 5000 speakers today (Krauss 1992). UNESCO estimates that, in order to continue and function in the future, a language needs at least 100,000 active speakers (Bjelac-Babic 2000). This negative projection by sociolinguists does, however, coincide with an increase in dedicated efforts to develop and maintain these lesser used languages by their bearers and users who, such as the Inuit and Sámi, number only in the thousands and even few hundreds. They are therefore at odds with the powerful position of 'larger' or national state languages which have a considerable apparatus for their future at their disposal (cf. Cornillie 2000, Skutnabb-Kangas 2000).

### **Inuit, Language and Toponymy in Arctic Canada**

The Inuit (Yuit, Inupiat) live in far eastern Russian Siberia, Alaska, Canada, and Greenland and number between 120,000 and 150,000 people. In Canada, they reside in the Northwest Territories, Nunavut Territory, along the coast of Nunavik (Québec) and of Labrador (Newfoundland-Labrador). By the mid-1990s, an increasing number of Inuit (17% of all Canadian Inuit) lived permanently and temporarily in southern urban centers such as in Toronto (1991 - 1,895), Edmonton (840), Montreal (775) as well as in Ottawa, Winnipeg and Halifax with figures between 300 and 700 (Kishigami 1999).

In 1991, the census indicated that there were about 49,000 Inuit living in Canada, i.e. people who defined themselves as such (Dorais 1996: 27). According to Dorais speakers of Inuit languages as a first learned language counted for 23,540 (57%) individuals who retained these languages. There are some variations in language retention regionally for 1991, i.e. (old) Northwest Territories (NWT) - 16,520 (82%), Nunavik - 6,535 (96%), and Labrador - 485 (34%). Clearly, by the 1990s, Inuit languages had been lesser-used languages in the overall linguistic context (Dorais 1996: 218ff.).

For the Inuit in the circumpolar North, language contact has existed with other southern aboriginal languages for time immemorial such as with the Algonquian (Cree) languages in the east, the Athapaskan (Dene) and other Siberian languages in the west. With Indo-European languages, contact has occurred in various areas over the past few hundred years and has been particularly intense since the 20th century and, by the 21st century, has resulted in progressive bilingualism (Dorais 1996: 218; Nowak 2001) meaning practically all Inuit, with exceptions, know and use one of the introduced colonial or link languages such as Danish, English, French, and Russian depending on the region. Written recordings of Inuit languages were first established by Moravian missionaries in Latin orthography during the 18th century and in the late 19th century in syllabics introduced by Anglican missionaries (Dorais 1996: 181ff.).

In Canada since the 1970s, the process of modern native land

claims has resulted in a number of agreements negotiated between aboriginal peoples and the Canadian State over land, resources and specific rights such as to education, health services, and even, in some cases, language protection. Although an Aboriginal Languages Act such as the federal Canadian Official Languages Act for securing English and French has been contemplated in Canada. Such proposals have not resulted in strong legislation to enhance the position and acceptance of aboriginal languages in Canada. Still there are situations in some jurisdictional territories in which aboriginal languages have obtained legal status within the public domain

For Inuit languages such as Inuktituk in the Eastern Canadian Arctic and Inuinnaqtun in the Western Arctic their legal recognition and status was tied to the expanding dominance of English and then to the introduction of French as an additional official language in federal territories. The following cases serve only as examples of Inuit languages having received legal and administrative status (cf. Dorais 1996: 236ff.).

1) For Inuit in Nunavik (Québec), under the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement (law since 1977), Inuktituk was legally secured in the public domain including schools with the choice of either English and French as the second language (Dorais 1996: 250).

2) In 1984 in the old NWT, next to English and French as territorial languages, the recognition of Inuktituk and five Athapaskan languages as official languages (Dorais 1996: 246). This status is continued for Inuktituk and Inuinnaqtun in the Nunavut Territory established in April 1999, however, major issues around language policies have emerged dealing with orthographies and education (Harper 2000).

Although legal status now exists for Inuit languages, the establishment of the necessary apparatus to support a language in education, administration and public life is not fully in place -- a prerequisite to counteract language displacement and to provide for linguistic survival (cf. Skutnabb-Kangas 2000). Here place names can be taken as indicators of language development because they are seen, in many cases as by the Inuit, as a priority to preserve knowledge of the land as well as to have a tool for efficient search and rescue operations (Müller-Wille, ed. 1987; Müller-Wille 2000).

In the Nunavut Agreement place names are mentioned stating that the original, i.e. Inuit toponymy or place name system is fully recognized (Müller-Wille 2000). The Nunavut Ministry of Culture, Language, Elders and Youth has the mandate to preserve and enhance place names of Inuit heritage through its office of the territorial toponymist. However, by 2001, not much has happened officially in this respect (Peplinski 2001) although major toponymic projects have been carried out throughout Nunavut (cf. Collignon 1996).

In Nunavik, going back to 1981, the then Northern Quebec Inuit

Elders Conference passed a resolution to document all Inuit place names. This process was also part of the legal officialization of aboriginal place names initiated by the provincial Commission de toponymie du Québec under Québec's Charter of the French Language of 1977 (Müller-Wille, ed. 1987).

In 1981, a joint toponymic research project, called Nuna-Top, was negotiated by the Northern Québec Inuit Elders Conference through Avataq Cultural Institute and the author with Indigenous Names Surveys (McGill University). The project went through the following stages to document, secure and publish all known Inuit place names throughout the region by conducting surveys locally and including the integration of existing archival collections.

- 1) Toponymic surveys in all Inuit communities throughout Nunavik, conducted by trained Inuit researchers in full cooperation with local communities and their experts; these surveys occurred in 1982 and mainly in 1984 with reviews and re-evaluations in specific communities in the early 1990s;
- 2) Establishment of Inuit toponymy as the aboriginal and original place name system throughout the territory of Inuit land-use and occupancy in the northern regions of the Québec-Labrador Peninsula later to be named NUNAVIK based on a referendum in late 1986 (Müller-Wille, ed. 1987: 39); this latter action was in fact a geographical construct of regional identity;
- 3) Publication of the gazetteer of Inuit place names in Nunavik (Müller-Wille 1987) parallel to the public, government gazetteer in Québec (Commission 1987). This gazetteer includes all collected Inuit place names, some 8,000, alphabetically (in Latin orthography and syllabics) and sorted by community regions.
- 4) Publication of an Inuit place names map series (1:50,000 and 1:100,00) based on the national topographic map series, however, with Inuit place names and their geographical extant superimposed in color. Each map includes explanatory texts and the listing of all place names in an index which is linked to the gazetteer to be used in tandem (Müller-Wille, ed. 1991-95). Between 1991 and 1995 26 maps were published and distributed to all households in the region covered; after 1995 Avataq Cultural Institute has continued the map series under the same title.

Through these efforts the Inuit of Nunavik in Québec have succeeded to document and provide a visible space for their own aboriginal toponymy separately from the public Québec toponymy which is guided by the principle to represent the French cultural character of the region. However, about one quarter of the Inuit place names collected has been legally officialized by the Province of Québec. Thus these names appear as 'approved' in the governmental gazetteer and publications as well as on provincial

and federal maps.

This undertaking has strengthened the reiteration of indigenous geographical knowledge. These various Inuit publications are a tool to communicate and teach place names to the younger generation which was not anymore safeguarded through oral generational transfer. However, toponymic work as linguistic development have to be seen as a continuum in cultural self-determination requiring strong commitment internally and externally. Related policies issues and linguistic strategies are still very much debated among concerned individuals and responsible institutions how retention rates can be easier maintained or even expanded to counteract linguistic pressures by majority, i.e. link languages (Müller-Wille 2000).

### **Sámi, Language and Toponymy in Northernmost Finland**

The Sámi, between 75,000 and up to 150,000 people depending on the sources, live today as the aboriginal people and as minorities in Sápmi in the northernmost parts of Norway (40,000) Sweden (15 to 25,000), Finland (7,000) and Russia (2,000, Kola Peninsula) (Haetta 1996). Since the early 1990s, they are legally recognized as the aboriginal people in the constitutions of Finland and Norway (not in Sweden and Russia) and furthermore also by the European Union since Finland and Sweden became members in 1995.

Sámi speak a number of different languages which are seen as part of the Finno-Ugric language family including also Finnish, Estonian and Hungarian languages (Sammallahti 1998). Language contact with other languages - Finnish, Norwegian, Swedish and Russian - has been intense over long periods of time and has influenced Sámi languages in many ways, however, Sámi has had its linguistic impact on these neighboring languages as well (Aikio, A. 2000).

In the late 1990s, of the more than 7,000 people registered as Sámi in Finland, 4,000 lived in the Sámi Home Region in the northernmost municipalities and 3,000 mainly in major urban centers outside that region such as Helsinki, Oulu and Rovaniemi as well as in other countries. There are three Sámi languages used and spoken in Finland - Northern Sámi with 1,800 speakers in 1995, Inari and Skolt Sámi with each 400 speakers. Due to strong assimilation policies by the Finnish majority and its authorities till the early 1970s, the retention rate for Sámi languages has continuously decreased and has reached a linguistic crisis in 2001. This clearly indicates rapid language displacement by both internal and external forces. Thus, in Finland today, more than half of the Sámi know and use Finnish as their first language and 25% Northern Sámi. The remaining Sámi speakers use Inari and Skolt Sámi (Aikio-Puoskari 1998, 2001).

Politically, Sámi have fought for their rights as an aboriginal people and minority within the Nordic countries since the early 20th century. Since the mid-1950s the Nordic states have gradually accommodated Sámi demands and needs by recognizing

organizations and finally establishing Sámi Parliaments in Finland (in 1972, reconstituted in 1996), Norway (in 1988) and Sweden (1993). In the early 1990s, in both Finland and Norway, laws and regulations were passed to deal with the legal status of Sámi languages. In Finland, this law and its regulations were enacted in September 1991 and became active as of January 1992 (Finland 1991). It stipulates the right and scope of the use of Sámi languages with and by state authorities in the Sámi Home Region and in some circumstance on the national level. However, Sámi languages are treated as local languages inferior in their status and protection to the national (and now European Union) languages, Finnish or Swedish, latter one used by around 5% of Finland's population (cf. Aikio-Puoskari & Pentikäinen 2001).

The Republic of Finland, already a bi-national and bi-lingual state - Finnish and Swedish -, has had both positive and negative experiences to deal with linguistic diversity publicly and legally. The Republic passed its first language law in 1922 to deal with its two declared national languages, Finnish and Swedish. This law has gone through some revisions over time and is currently under complete review for a new proposal to be enacted by 2004. This review does not include Sámi and other minority languages and their position (Finland 2001a; cf. Aikio-Puoskari & Pentikäinen 2001). Furthermore in the political realm, Sámi land ownership rights are currently a focal point in Finland in the relations between the Sámi and the Finnish state (Finland 2001b).

Until the 1970s, Sámi toponymic representation in their home regions in northernmost Europe occurred through local oral tradition and in writing solely through academic and scientific channels in the fields of ethnology and linguistics which stressed the documentation of multicultural and multilingual diversity. Through extensive place name surveys, also for a long time a requirement for students of Finnish language and literature, Finland has accumulated a vast toponymic archive, now housed in the Name Office of the Research Center for Domestic Languages in Helsinki (Närhi 1990). In 2001, this archive contains records of almost 11,000 place names for the three Sámi languages used in Sápmi in northern Finland (KOTUS 2001) which exist parallel with Finnish place names used in the same region.

Maps produced by the Finnish Lands and Surveys Office for the Sámi regions did from the beginning also include Sámi place names, however, not in a systematic way representing the complete Sámi place name system known and used locally. Matters changed when Finland along with other Nordic countries formulated and supported resolutions on the inclusion of indigenous place names such as Sámi names in national toponymies at the meeting of the UN Working Group on the Standardization of Geographical Names in 1989 (Kerfoot 1989: 6)). This international context and the Sámi language law and regulations of 1992 resulted, for example, in the practice by the Finnish Highway Department to include Sámi place names on public road signs in the Sámi Region with the Finnish name usually first and the Sámi second with exceptions in areas with a Sámi majority (Aikio, S. 2001).

Furthermore, the Domestic Language Research Center with its Sámi Language Section was charged to review all archived Sámi place names, weed out linguistic and geographical mistakes and, if needed, engage in surveys to update all toponymic information for the inclusion on bi-lingual, i.e. Finnish-Sámi maps of the national topographical map series, 1:50,000 and any other scales product by the Finnish Lands and Surveys Office (e.g., Topografikunta - Topografagoddi 2000; Aikio, S. 2001). These colored maps display both languages, Finnish and Sámi, at the same level and with the same exposure using as an identifier a reindeer head as a recognizable symbol related to the local environment, people and their culture.

On these official maps, Sámi place name have now become part of the public space such as, where applicable, Swedish place name in Finland. Still, when there is a Finnish place name, in most cases a translation or derivative from the original Sámi designation, it is put first followed by the Sámi place name. Thus supremacy is still afforded to Finnish as the national and majority language. On the other hand, all map information, explanatory texts and legends are in both languages.

The case of the Sámi and their place name system shows that cultural and linguistic diversity under circumstances of minority-majority relations have converged through official references such as maps to represent this diversity jointly. These are welcome steps of progress towards achieving a balance for minority and majority needs to overcome discrimination and involuntary assimilation and displacement of culture and language.

### **Can Lesser Used Languages Survive?**

In conclusion the question needs to be ask: what can these examples tell us about the chances of survival of lesser used languages? In this respect I would to make three points.

- 1) In today's world Lesser-used languages have to defend their position constantly to avoid displacement or, as Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) says, 'linguacide'. It is apparent that lesser-used languages face constant crises in their applicability.
- 2) The level of linguistic security varies from region to region. For example, in Canada, the position of aboriginal languages is very weak. The political will to establish an 'Official Aboriginal Languages Act' is not really in sight. Speakers and users of aboriginal languages, i.e. from different language families, numbered not more than 140,000 in 1981 and in 1996 only some 208,000 or around 0.6% of the Canadian population (Hecht 2001). In Europe efforts point in the direction of a political will to support lesser-used languages through conventions, facilities and funds (cf. EBUL 2001).
- 3) The last point, one does detect a process of regionalization

and a strengthening of regional identity in Europe through language as well. Still, there is a sense of a linguistic crisis which will lead to the disappearance of languages. Clearly, linguistic survival is dependent on speakers and the generational transfer of languages as well as to the economics of language maintenance as the European Union and bi- or multi-lingual states know very well.

In general, there are basic philosophical principles at stake that point to common heritage and greater unity among different peoples. Within this context, language is a major element of human expressions and thus protection is warranted to support and maintain the attainment of balanced equality among languages be they used by few or many.

#### **Note:**

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