

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

By Donna Patrick²

Reviewed by Michael A. Downs³

This book is intended to address “the question of how minority languages persist, despite the political and economic pressures of dominant colonial languages” (p. 3). The study focuses on the Inuit community of Kuujjuarapik on the eastern shore of Hudson Bay in Arctic Quebec (also known as Nunavik), Canada. While south of the Arctic Circle, this community falls within the Arctic under either common treeline or isotherm definitions. Four languages are spoken in this settlement: Inuktitut, Cree, French, and English. Use patterns have changed over time, providing a dynamic context for the issues explored in the book. Indeed, the settlement glossed as Great Whale River in English or Poste-de-la-Baleine in French encompasses two officially distinct jurisdictions – Kuujjuarapik and the predominantly Cree community of Whapmagostui immediately inland of Kuujjuarapik – as well as an interstitial area populated largely by non-Native residents straddling the two jurisdictions.

Here is the central argument of the book: To understand the continuing vitality of Inuktitut in the present general context of diminishing use of aboriginal languages, “we need to look at the wider historical, political, and economic processes, and their relation to everyday language practices at the micro-level of interaction” (p. 4). To this end, the study combines a historical analysis with ethnographic information on everyday linguistic interaction in the community. The book is organized into six chapters, as follows.

Chapter 1, “Language use in Arctic Quebec: Towards a political economic analysis,” provides an overview of the linguistic context of Nunavik, a portion of northern Quebec where a limited form of self-government was established in 1975 by the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement. It also discusses the broader context of indigenous language retention and historical, political, and economic processes in the north, giving the methodological approach and the underlying theoretical assumptions that drive the analysis. As with virtually all contemporary Arctic research, this study was conducted in collaboration with a local indigenous institution, in this case the Inuit-run Kativik School Board, with primary information emerging from documentation of observational data and interviews with a cross-section of 37 of the community’s 1,100 residents. Secondary data were

garnered from previously published interviews as well as a variety of other historical sources. The study’s theoretical structure builds upon the concepts of “cultural capital,” “symbolic domination,” and “linguistic marketplace,” with the metaphor of the market being woven through much of the work to address research questions such as “what does speaking Inuktitut, Cree, French, or English ‘buy’ an individual in terms of valued resources within the community, and how are these resources distributed?” (p. 19).

Chapter 2, “Contextualizing the research site,” supplies background about the community and the region and provides a summary of historic social trends in aboriginal relations in Canada. Great Whale River is described as “utterly unique sociolinguistically, politically, and economically” (p. 21), which simultaneously makes it a rich context for the examination of language use, retention patterns, and associated sociocultural features and potentially limits the direct applicability of this case study to other communities and regions. The summary of geographical and social space in the community provides a solid sense of place, and the discussion of aboriginal politics in Canada and the region lays a good foundation for a number of discussions in subsequent chapters (and is especially useful for readers more attuned to the history and politics of the American Arctic than the Canadian Arctic).

Chapter 3, “History and representation of the Hudson Bay Inuit, 1610-1975,” describes the colonial history of what is now northern Quebec, including political and economic shifts that have served to structure the contemporary community and social structure, including the construction of ideas regarding ethnicity. The analysis includes an examination of political economic shifts, based on world-system theory, and an examination of the “production, distribution, and consequences of the legitimating ideologies that accompanied the process of colonization and European Canadian expansion into northern Quebec” (p. 97). Direct quotes from historic documents and contemporary interviews with elders are particularly valuable in illustrating the importance of language and ethnicity both in colonization and the resistance to colonization. Indeed, as is often the case, liberal use of direct quotes provides a resource to the

reader that is of value in understanding local life beyond their immediate use in the text.

Chapter 4, “Language, power, and Inuit mobilization,” examines the political economy of Nunavik and the influence of increased contact between locals and outsiders and intensified relations with Western institutions toward the end of the 20th century. In attempting to answer the basic question of “how is one minority language – namely Inuktitut – maintained in a complex multilingual community” (p. 99), the focus of this chapter is on the evolving relationships between the “dominant and ‘alternative’ linguistic markets” in Nunavik. Of central importance is the notion that the social conditions – the market – under which a language is valued must be preserved in order to preserve the language itself. In recent years, the importance of both French and Inuktitut have grown in administrative, political, and economic settings, whereas English retains a dominant position as the common language for interactions between groups on many different levels. The simultaneous growth of importance of Inuktitut in political economic settings, and its continued use in the context of a subsistence-based way of life, is seen as key to its continuity despite the increased importance of French, the continuing dominance of English, and their primary role in the upgrades of the local educational system. As in the previous chapter, this discussion also benefits from extensive use of direct quotations, in this case to illustrate relational issues from various perspectives in the shifting linguistic landscape. Non-Canadian readers will particularly benefit from the discussion of the politics of Québécois nationalism and French language use, which provides a unique perspective on dominant and minority language issues. Another issue of considerable interest to outside readers is the economic institutionalization of traditional practices under the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement. For example, financial compensation from the agreement was put into programs that continue to support a number of full-time hunters, ensuring access to monetary resources for those engaged in traditional subsistence activities and a supply of traditional foodstuffs to the community. In terms of language use, these are primary social conditions for the use of Inuktitut, and one more piece of an interlocking framework that supports linguistic continuity.

Chapter 5, “Ethnography of language use,” utilizes the results of a language survey to provide a perspective on language proficiency and observational and interview data to discuss contemporary day-to-day uses of Inuktitut, Cree, French, and English by Inuit

residents of Kuujuarapik. Language proficiency by age group is characterized and tied to political and economic changes in the region. Language use patterns are seen as being involved in the construction of social identity and maintenance of ethnic group boundaries, and in defining and controlling the cultural, social, and economic value of other material and symbolic resources. Inuktitut and English are dominant languages of the community, with French seen as being in a transitional position. The use of French is gaining as younger people are more exposed to the language through school and work experiences from the late 1970s on. Inuit use of the Cree language, typically associated with traditional activities undertaken in common between Inuit and Cree residents of the area, tends to be concentrated among older residents. Inuit use of Cree is thus less prominent than in the past. The discussion of social networks within the three communities that make up the larger settlement of Great Whale River is well done, and the discussion of the relationship between social networks and boundary-defining language practices gives the reader more insight on life on the ground in the community.

Chapter 6, “Summary and conclusions,” synthesizes the preceding chapters and examines the intersection of political, social, economic, and linguistic factors that make Great Whale River an optimum setting for the consideration of issues related to language retention or loss over time. Ultimately, Inuktitut language maintenance is seen as linked to its role in local social networks, cultural practices and local ideologies, Inuit political mobilization, and the local subsistence economy as well as some aspects of the local wage economy. The value of this work is found in the weaving of these threads into a coherent pattern.

As for addressing the central question of how minority languages persist despite political and economic pressures of dominant colonial languages, the book successfully provides the type of insight that comes from a well-executed and focused case study. The specific historical processes and political, economic, and linguistic contexts are well described.

One suggestion for improvement of the work would be inclusion of better maps to allow the reader to appreciate the spatial aspects of regional context, settlement patterns, and language distribution areas. This would be helpful in tracking the macro patterns discussed in the early chapters. On the micro-scale, inclusion of at least some context-setting photographs would help enrich the sense of place for readers, especially those unfamiliar with the region. A

treatment of the relationship of the peoples of the study region to the greater Inuit and Inupiat (if not circumpolar) political, economic, social, and cultural contexts might also have been of benefit, to the degree that such interactions influence local life. This would apply to small-scale as well as large-scale issues, such as the frequency of migration between communities.

In terms of generalizing the insights gained in Great Whale River, an emphasis on the larger Arctic context would seem important. One of the primary defining features of the Arctic, in terms of language retention as well as other sociocultural aspects of everyday life, is that much of it is “at the edge” with respect to large-scale population movements and settlement patterns. With notable localized exceptions, the area has not seen the demographic swamping of indigenous populations by outsiders that is common in many other areas of North America. In at least some areas of the Arctic, it would appear that there is retention of a “critical mass” of speakers and sufficient isolation and/or social cohesion to facilitate linguistic continuity in a manner that is significantly different than what has been experienced elsewhere. Even in places as seemingly isolated as the Arctic, however, the ever-increasing presence is remarkable of outside linguistic influences, including radio, satellite television, recorded music, DVDs, and the Internet.

The terminology used in the book seems a bit stilted at times, but this situation likely results from the difficult task of simplifying complex materials and does not take away from the success of the work. The term “minority” language, and the implications for language maintenance, would seem to have a different connotation in a region where speakers of the minority language are a numeric majority of the population. Further, impacts of “colonialization” are difficult to generalize from a specific experience, given the very different nature of the experience in different parts of North America and the dynamic nature of the experience, including different degrees of success over time in obtaining or maintaining local autonomy while simultaneously becoming a politically powerful entity inside, rather than outside, a federal system. The pervasive “market” metaphor is useful in communicating the central tenants of the thesis of the work, but it is outshone by the utility of the actual description and conveyance of aspects of everyday language use and the understanding of how the system works on the ground.

Overall, this book represents a significant contribution to the important work of understanding indigenous language preservation, especially through the ties of language to broader social contexts. This has important consequences for policy-making directed toward maintenance of socially important activities and preservation of a way of life. This work is particularly useful for students of Arctic life, as well as those interested in more general issues regarding preservation of indigenous languages. The book also specifically provides a useful comparative case study involving the Canadian Arctic for those who are familiar with the sociocultural issues surrounding language retention in the American Arctic.

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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