

Ikjarutit: Delivering Legislative Library Services in Aboriginal Languages (Nunavut, Canada)

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Abstract: Nunavut Territory came into existence April 1, 1999. From the outset it was seen as a chance to shape institutions to preserve Inuit language, culture and tradition. No other Canadian province or territory has a majority of people speaking a single aboriginal language and it is a goal of the Government of Nunavut that by 2020 Inuktitut will be the working language of government. In this environment, the Legislative Library works to build collections, deliver services and develop staff competencies in Inuktitut language and library skills.

The territory of Nunavut is Canada's eastern and central Arctic region. It has a population of approximately 29,000, 84% of whom are Inuit¹, one of Canada's first peoples. The 2006 Canadian census statistics on aboriginal languages show that 91% of Inuit in Nunavut can converse in Inuktitut and for 83% of Inuit it is their mother tongue. Fully 15% are unilingual Inuktitut speaking but younger generations use English as their first or second language.

Nunavut, which means "Our Land", existed as the hope and dream of many Inuit who negotiated through the 1970s and 1980s with the Canadian government for the *Nunavut Land Claims Agreement* (NLCA). When the Final Agreement was signed, the NLCA covered one-fifth of the Canadian land mass and was the largest land claim negotiated with the Inuit. In 1993 the Canadian Parliament passed the *Nunavut Land Claims Agreement Act* and the *Nunavut Act* which created the territory of Nunavut and provided for its government's powers and responsibilities.

From the outset, the implementation of Nunavut was seen as a chance to shape institutions that preserved Inuit language, culture and tradition. In 1999, the new Government of Nunavut (GN) established its guiding principles which reflect Inuit societal values. It has promoted the use and strengthening of Inuktitut as a core element to maximize citizen participation, provide access to programs and enfranchise the Inuit population. One of the GN's goals for 2020 as set out in the policy document *Pinasuaqtavut*, states "Inuktitut, in all its forms, will be the working language of the Government of Nunavut."

The phrase "Inuktitut in all its forms" recognizes two key factors. First, there are 7 regional dialects and 17 sub-dialects in the Inuktitut language exclusive to

¹ known as Eskimos in some Arctic regions.

Nunavut² but no dialect has been accepted and established as the standard for formal oral and written communication as has been done in Greenland. The western dialect is called Inuinnaqtun and there is a debate among linguists as to whether it is a dialect of Inuktitut or a separate language. Secondly, there are two writing systems. In the eastern regions of the territory Inuktitut is written in syllabics which have a resemblance to Pitman short hand, while in the western part of the territory Roman orthography is used. For purposes of this paper the term Inuktitut includes all dialects and orthographies.

The goal of making Inuktitut the working language of the Government of Nunavut is a significant shift from the current reality where English is the lingua franca and the majority of government workers do not have a proficiency in spoken and written Inuktitut. The affirmative action hiring policy, which is governed by Article 23 of the NLCA, aims to increase the number of Inuit working in the GN to 84% of the workforce and an emphasis on providing training opportunities will ensure they are full participants through all levels of the bureaucracy from senior management to clerical staff. Inuktitut classes are offered both to employees whose first language is Inuktitut to enhance their proficiency in governance and job related terminology, and as a second language for employees to develop basic Inuktitut skills. The Premier has now made it a requirement that all Deputy Ministers have a working knowledge of Inuktitut.

The Office of the Legislative Assembly of Nunavut (OLA) reflects the linguistic diversity of Nunavut in its staff. Our office provides a range of services to Members and the public in Nunavut's four official languages. Advertisements, notices and press releases are published in Inuktitut, English, Inuinnaqtun and French. Official Legislative Assembly documents are available in up to four languages as appropriate and the Hansard is bilingual Inuktitut / English.

Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) have the right to use any official language in the proceedings of the Assembly. Interpretation services are provided for all sittings of the House, caucus and standing committee meetings. The provision of interpretation services is critical to the full participation of all MLAs in performing their duties; in the first Assembly a number of MLAs were unilingual Inuktitut speakers and in both the first and second Assemblies there have been several unilingual English-speaking Members. In addition OLA staff members with bilingual capabilities are available to assist MLAs.

Research and library services in the OLA are delivered to slightly different communities. Our Assembly operates in a consensus government so we do not have political parties and party caucus researchers as in many Westminster-style governments; hence staff in both services are "front line" in information delivery. The Research Division serves the Regular MLAs directly while the Legislative Library serves all MLAs, their staff, GN employees and the public.

² Nunavut Implementaion Commission. Nunavut Language Policy Conference: report and recommendations (Iqaluit, 1998)

We face challenges in providing our Legislative Library services but it is important to frame the challenges we have in the broader context of Nunavut. Put very briefly, our infrastructure costs are high and what we have is often stretched to full capacity. Our literacy rates in English are the lowest in Canada, our school drop-out rate is 75% and “the supply of qualified Inuit is exhausted”.³ There are few Inuit with professional credentials for the positions that require them (doctors, engineers, accountants, librarians) and many struggle with personal situations and issues that make study and training for specialized jobs a challenge.

The Legislative Library needs to have staff with good written and oral Inuktitut and English language capability to provide service. In our 2- person library, the Legislative Librarian position has been filled by a credentialed librarian since it was created in 1998 and none of the incumbents has had a facility in Inuktitut. By default, the library technician position has therefore been staffed looking more for Inuktitut language capability and general experience than for the ability to meet the library technician skills listed in the job description. Considerable on-the-job training is required to familiarize the incumbents with basic library procedures, terminology and concepts.

Providing library technician training would seem the logical next step but programs available in southern Canada usually require a high school certificate. High school education was not available to many Inuit employees and also grade achievement is not an indicator of the level of English literacy required for the course material. So we look for ways to build skills and confidence in-house and supplement this with courses offered locally which pertain to the job. However, the library has often been left with operational gaps, particularly in cataloguing and our capacity for new projects is limited.

For many new libraries it is a difficult decision to select an integrated library system (ILS), but in 1999, when the Legislative Librarian began to explore options for an ILS that could accommodate Inuktitut syllabics, such a thing did not exist. Many of the available systems at that time did not support Unicode at all and it was not until Unicode 3.0 was published in 2000 that Canadian aboriginal syllabics became part of the international standards. As far as we are aware, we were the first organization to implement a real Inuktitut-capable system in Unicode.⁴ The Library’s requirements pushed the foundation development of Inuktitut technology for the government. GN Informatics and Multilingual E-Data Solutions developed the conversion utility and after the VTLIS information system was selected in 2001 the Unicode based fonts Pigiarniq (GN standard) and Uqammaq were created and Unicode multilingual websites which supported syllabics followed.

³ Berger, Thomas R. Nunavut Land Claims Agreement Implementation Contract Negotiations for the Second Planning Period 2003-2013: Conciliator’s Final Report (2006) p. iii

⁴ Personal communication Gavin Nesbitt, former Management Systems Coordinator, Legislative Assembly of Nunavut, April 2008.

The Legislative Librarian's leadership paved the way for Nunavut Arctic College, GN Department of Justice and Nunavut Public Library Services to become partners after the VTLS system was selected. We continue to share expertise and solve problems together.

As of late 2001 we had the technical capacity to create MARC Inuktitut catalogue records in our Virtua database but not the combination of language facility and cataloguing expertise. This changed in 2004 when library technician Carol Rigby was contracted.⁵ She is a northern resident with a facility in Inuktitut and many years of cataloguing experience. In subsequent years, the Legislative library has adopted multilingual cataloguing standards and has led the way for Inuktitut cataloguing. The four VTLS partners worked with the Department of Culture, Language, Elders and Youth to create a territorial standard wordlist of cataloguing terminology in Inuktitut; this allows for easy copy cataloguing. Our policy is to create Inuktitut records only for documents printed in Inuktitut. For GN departments and agencies we use the Inuktitut form they have established as our authority but the Inuktitut name authority files and alternate title tracings reflect the vagaries of not having a standard written language. We have to be inclusive to provide the best search access.

That said, there are two significant gaps in our Inuktitut access. First, we do not have Inuktitut subject headings. There has been discussion in the past by language experts about developing an Inuktitut thesaurus but what we have at present is Asuilaak Living Dictionary <http://www.livingdictionary.com/> and a very politically sensitive environ around language issues. Second, our catalogue web pages are only in English; we have been waiting on translation to Inuktitut, Inuinnaqtun and French for some time.

It will likely be evident that we have all library signage in our four official languages with the Inuktitut majority language taking precedence. Approximately 8% of our collection is in Inuktitut based on analysis of cataloguing records to date. The majority of the Inuktitut materials will be GN and Legislative Assembly documents; very few federal documents are printed in Inuktitut. We display our materials in all languages and have a single integrated print collection. When items are produced in a flip format Inuktitut/English we have two copies processed so that each language has a prominent cover. We keep electronic documents and audio-visual materials in as many official languages as available.

The majority of our information requests at the Legislative Library are made in English and usually for information that is not available in Inuktitut. However, a service to an MLA such as finding an out-of-print book with a personal connection or purchasing a topographical map for express delivery to their

⁵ For more details see Rigby, C. and R. Patterson. Providing catalogue services in a multilingual, multiscript environment: the experience of Nunavut's library partnership in *Libraries without borders: Navigating towards global understanding* (IFLA Quebec City National Committee, 2008)

constituency office very quickly filters through the ranks and we are happy to oblige. There are also occasional three-way conversations when an Inuktitut speaking client is relaying their request to the library technician who requires reference help from the librarian – an imperfect process not without its misses and humour but often successful.

We look forward and are working to the day when the library technician and the librarian will both converse with the client in Inuktitut and have all the skills required for the functions of their positions. It will be critical also that information retrieval from historical and current Inuktitut resources is easy and well developed; there are superb Inuit history and culture resources such as *Inuktitut* magazine and the Igloodik Oral History project out there, just awaiting the magic of digitization and an Inuktitut Google search engine. There is also a catalogue awaiting Inuktitut subject headings!