

## Chapter 29

# A Pedagogical Corpus to Support a Language Teaching Curriculum to Revitalize an Endangered Language: The Case of Labrador Inuttitut

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### **ABSTRACT**

*An obstacle to revitalizing an endangered language is the shortage of authentic speech samples for learners to use as models. Digital recordings of community elders performing traditional chores and special rituals or narrating legends and myths are often made to overcome this obstacle. These recordings, however, contain speech that lacks the crucial features of conversational speech that make them appropriate instructional models. Effective model utterances should be short, have a stand-alone format, and have similar structures to utterances used in everyday transactions, which must be labeled and tagged and organized into a searchable corpus. To date, however, no such corpus exists for indigenous languages, and compiling one is an enormous task. To provide native speech models for adult Labrador Inuit learning their endangered language, Inuttitut, the authors explored the feasibility of building a specialized corpus potentially useful for aiding classroom instruction, using an internationally recognized open-source search and retrieval system called Topic Maps to create its database.*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Globalization has forced indigenous groups worldwide to protect their languages from demise due to the rapid spread of major languages like English (Crystal, 1997; Austin & Sallabank, 2011). The rapid extinction of minority languages in the world today is unprecedented (Crystal, 1997, Nettle & Romaine, 2000, Austin & Sallabank, 2011). In Canada, for example, of the fifty or so indigenous languages spoken today, only three are predicted to survive: Inuktitut, Cree, and Ojibway (Sarkar & Metallic, 2009; St. Hilaire, 2005). In order to ensure that their language survive, indigenous groups worldwide have stepped up efforts to preserve their language by creating dictionaries, analyzing its grammar, and/or teaching it to revive its role as a tool for communication and as a symbol of group identity (Austin & Sallabank, 2011, Chartrand, 1987, Holm & Holm, 1996).

This paper describes the efforts of the Inuit, an aboriginal group in Newfoundland and Labrador, to accomplish the above goals with respect to their language, Inuttitut.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Revitalizing Inuttitut**

Inuttitut is the official name of the variety of Inuktitut spoken by the Inuit in the coastal communities in Labrador (Andersen, 2010; Dorais, 2010, Tanner, 1998). Rooted in influences different from those that shaped others (e.g., contact with Moravian missionaries in the 18<sup>th</sup> century who preserved the language, and with other European settlers in Newfoundland), Inuttitut differs from other varieties of Inuktitut (Crowe, 1991; Patrick, 2003) in that it uses the Latin script for its writing system instead of syllabics (Johns & Mazurkewich, 2001, McGrath, 1992, Tanner, 1998). Although once spoken by a robust group of speakers consisting of the *Inuit*, the Kablunangâjuit (descendants of Inuit who intermarried with European settlers) it is now spoken natively by only a small, rapidly dwindling group of elders. In its present state it is considered “severely endangered” (UNESCO language vitality and Endangerment Framework) and is rated at Stage 7 in Fishman’s (1991) eight-stage path towards endangerment or Stage 3 in Dixon’s (1991) five-stage classification chart. Today, most adult Inuit and Kablunangâjuit no longer speak it at home, the result of systematic government suppression of its use in residential schools and current government policies insisting that English or French be sole medium of instruction in the school system. These inhibiting efforts, together with intensive exposure to English have, through the years, eroded the Inuit’s ability to speak their language. Now, most speak English as their mother tongue, with only a passive understanding of how it works (Sherkina-Leiber, 2011), and some ability to use a few routinized phrases in their language.

After the Inuit’s successful land claims settlement with the Canadian government and the provincial government of Newfoundland and Labrador in 2003, however, Inuttitut became the object of aggressive revitalization effort. At its installation as guardian of the settled lands, the Nunatsiavut Government confirmed Inuit language and culture preservation as a high priority (Andersen, 2010; Andersen & Johns 2005). In 2009, through the Torngâsok Cultural Centre, it organized a five-person curriculum development team to develop the Labrador Inuttitut Training Program (LITP) to teach Inuttitut to adults. Curriculum development and materials development to support the curriculum are completed, with many modules already pilot-tested for suitability for adult learners (Gatbonton, 2013; Gatbonton, White, Andersen,

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