Making the most out of the past: Retrieving and archiving old records of the Innu language

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Overview

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Algonquian languages have a relatively long tradition of linguistic and cultural documentation, as compared to other indigenous languages. (e.g. Sapir 1921, Bloomfield 1946)

“Over the twentieth century, as more became known about the languages, as linguistic theory advanced, and as the discipline of linguistics became institutionalized in academic departments, the study of North American languages expanded as well. A wealth of grammars, dictionaries, and texts appeared, many by students of Boas and Sapir and by students of theirs, especially those of Mary Haas at Berkeley.” (Mithun 1999:9)

This talk addresses the issues related to retrieving and digitizing of a large body of existing linguistic materials, and making old language records available for the benefit of the communities.
Indigenous languages in Canada, and worldwide, are threatened with extinction in the coming decades.

Of the 11 indigenous languages spoken in Quebec before contact with colonizers, two are now extinct (Huron and Malecite), one is critically endangered (Abenaki), three are highly threatened (Mohawk, Micmac, Algonquin), and the five others (Innu, Atikamekw, Cree, Naskapi and Inuktitut) although better preserved, present severe signs of weakening.
Indigenous languages of Quebec and Labrador

- Inuit
- Cree
- Algonquian
- Atikamekw
- Abenaki
- Malecite
- Micmac
- Naskapi
- Innu
- Huron-Wendat
- Mohawk

Map showing the distribution of these languages.
Innu is spoken roughly by 13,000 speakers, scattered in 11 communities, 10 in Quebec, and one (Sheshashit) in Labrador.

It has been the subject of intensive grammatical and sociolinguistic analysis by Lynn Drapeau over the past thirty years. (see e.g. Drapeau, in press)

There is no suitable linguistic documentation of the language to insure its conservation and preservation. (see Lambert-Brétière 2011)
Documentation and description of Innu

• *The Innu Language Documentation Project*, funded by a grant to Lynn Drapeau from SSHRCC.

• Objectives:
  – To document and describe the Innu language;
  – To insure its long term conservation by providing access to a large corpus of transcribed and annotated oral recordings in formats exploitable by both the speakers and the specialists;
  – To support the speakers of Innu in their efforts and desire to maintain and promote their language.
PHASE 1 of the project is centered on developing tools for digitizing, accessing, analyzing and archiving the corpus of oral recordings.

The initial corpus comprises narratives by monolingual speakers recorded by Lynn Drapeau in the community of Pessamit in the 1970s and 1980s.

Mainly legends and free conversations centred around interviewees’ life stories.
Documentation and description of Innu

• Transcription in Innu and translation in French undertaken by native Innu speakers from the same community.

• Difficulties encountered with terminology used to talk about traditional way of life:
  – Traditional activities have been supplanted by modern way of life.
  – Terminology in traditional knowledge is very specific.
Place names:

Context: The interviewee talks about where she was born, the hinterland, in a place called “Pipmuacan Lake”:

1-Tan eshinikatet shakaikan nituss?
2-Pipimuakan

1-Pipimuakan. Tanite itetshe tshipa takuan?
   Pipimuakan, Pipimuakan.

2-Anite itetshe takuan e.
1-Portneuf a?
2-Eshe, ai, kalapua, ait.
1-Labrieville?
2-Labrieville nete ushte.
1-Ushte a?
2-Eshe, Labrieville ne ut pushinanu tshia, ek" nete ushte takuan.
1-Eukuan, ekute nete ushte?

What is the name of the lake, auntie?

Pipmuacan.

Pipmuacan. Where is this lake?

Pipmuacan, Pipmuacan

It is located over there.

At Portneuf?

Yes, euh, of course, euh.

Labrieville?

Farther than Labrieville.

Farther?

Yes, we depart from Labrieville you know,

but it is farther away.

Really, it is farther away?
Documentation and description of Innu
Medicinal knowledge:

Patush nelu matshi-natukulnaput katshi akutitakanlit tshia, nelu utitshi, eukuan ekue milualit.

Translation given by Innu translator:

“It is only after that we soaked his hand in a liquid poison, you know, and it healed”

Targeted meaning:

“After we soaked it in a disinfectant, you know, his hand, then it healed.”

matshi ‘bad, strong’; natukulnapui ‘infusion of medicinal plant, herbal tea, bleach’
Ecological knowledge:

*Pate takuana ne ashinit takuana, miam ne ulakan-mashkushu ka-ishinakuanuani tshia.*

Translation given by Innu translator:

“For example there is a rock that looks like *ulakan-mashkushu* you know.”

Targeted meaning:

“For example, it is found on a rock, it looks like a *fern*.”
Traditional knowledge:

*Nimitshiminan uil takuan nete, netehe an ka nakatakanit netehe, lushkuauat, teshipitakan nete takuan.*

Translation given by Innu translator:

“There we had food, the place that we left behind, there, some flour, there was a *scaffolding* there.”

Targeted meaning:

“We had food over there, left behind over there, some flour, there was a *cache* there.”
Transmitting traditional knowledge

• On-going acculturation: from fur hunting up to the 1950’s to modern way of life within a welfare state.

• The linguistic correlates in Fourth World settings (Rigsby 1987) are language shift in some communities, first language attrition in others.

• Within a single generation, the language associated with travel journeys, navigational routes, hunting and fishing practices, etc., has been partly lost, and one expects that within the next generation, it will be nearly or even completely lost.
Transmitting traditional knowledge

• The Innu people have undergone great changes over the last 50 years:
  – they have become increasingly integrated into the global economy
  – formal education and employment are priorities for the younger generations

• Nonetheless, Elders and language activists stress the importance of maintaining ties to the Innu traditional way of life of their hunter-gatherer forefathers.
Turning old into new

• Older, monolingual native-speaking Elders as principal knowledge keepers.

• The language associated with traditional knowledge is increasingly threatened as the older generations of monolinguals pass away.

• Archiving as a way to taking over this role.
Turning old into new

• Recover, retrieve and digitize old records of the Innu language.
  – Part of this enterprise has already been undertaken by the Tshakapesh Institute.
  – Their archive (classical) contains cassette and reel-tape recordings.
  – Some have been digitized (mainly legends); many still in need of digitization.

• Transcribe and translate before it is too late.
Archiving: challenges

• Long tradition of description:
  – Dictionaries:
    • Fabvre and Silvy (17th c.); Laure (18th c.); Lemoine (1901)
    • Drapeau (1991)
    • Innu-English-French online dictionary (even an app!)
  – Linguistic Atlas (dialectology)
  – Grammar (Drapeau, In press)
• Attempts at documenting are made through websites and virtual museums, but the documentation is fragmentary and dispersed.
• There is no open archive in Canada.
Archiving: challenges

- **Pepamuteiati nitassinat**: As we walk across our land
- **Documents Innu place names in Labrador**
  - “Users of this website should note that there were many names in the old databases that we could not validate because no one knew what they meant, or else we could not be sure what mountain, lake, river or marsh they label. Trying to figure out what these names mean and what they label was next to impossible because the Elders who provided them in the first place have passed away, and can no longer be consulted. Sadly, these names may be lost forever in the mists of time.”
Archiving: challenges

- **Nametau innu**: “Memory and knowledge of Nitassinan, a website dedicated to the Innu nation in which elders pass on their skills and knowledge to younger generations.”
  - Main objective is to document cultural heritage, not the language used to talk about it.
  - It comprises a **glossary**, but words are not in context.
  - Reflects only the Eastern dialects.
Archiving: challenges

Where to archive?

• National level?
  – Museums (Canadian Museum of Civilization, Virtual Museum of Canada, Library and Archives Canada)

• Provincial level?
  – BANQ (Quebec National Archives Library)
  – Universities

• Indigenous nation level?
  – Indigenous cultural institute (Innu, Cree, Atikamekw)

• Community level?
  – Community museums (fragile, low financing)
- Palatalisation: L-dialects and N-dialects. Only ‘n’ in standard orthography.

(Source: www.innu-aimun.ca)
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For *linguistic* and *political* reasons: Matsheuiatsh and Sheshatshit are not members of the Tshakapesh Institute!

(Source: www.innu-aimun.ca)
Archiving: challenges

• Surprisingly, the archive at the Tshakapesh Institute contains documents in Mohawk, an Iroquoian language, and documents in other Algonquian languages like Atikamekw.

• Neutral organism, out of reach of local politics.

• Stakeholders must be involved in the development of the archive.
Involving the stakeholders

- Decisions on the grammatical annotations of the texts
- Elaboration of an annotation manual (in French)
- Elaboration of training sessions for the use of softwares (Transcriber, Toolbox)
- Identification of possible curators for the collection
- Rules of accessibility
- Guidelines for the documentation of indigenous languages of Quebec, and Canada
- Links with the scientific community

- Agreement with the Innu community of Betsiamites
- Decisions on the diffusion of the collection (accessibility)
- Decisions on the format of the diffusion (whole/part)
- Opinions on the training sessions
- Identification of the specific needs in terms of documentation
- Proposition for archiving options
- Evaluation of the training sessions and feedback
Tshinashkumitinau katshi natutuiek u!