

**This case was written by Lance Grigg for the purpose of entering the 1995
Aboriginal Management Case Writing Competition.**

**TITLE: A QUESTION OF LANGUAGE: The Problem of Selecting a
Language for the Government of Nanavut**

THE PROBLEM

The new territory, Nunavut, will be a reality on April 1, 1999. Nunavut will have all the rights and responsibilities due to a territory in Canada. It will have control over its health care, education, public service, housing, etc. Its capitol will either be in Iqaluit Cambridge Bay or Rankin Inlet. Presently, many believe Rankin Inlet will be chosen as the capitol of Nunavut.

The issue this case study wants to describe is the problem of selecting an official language for Nunavut – a language which the laws and statutes of Nunavut are to be written in. There are a variety of dialects within the Inuktitut language, and the fact that these dialects are even different within communities as well; as many as five different ones in some communities, selecting an official an official language for Nunavut will be difficult.

The problem is exacerbated by the developing dialects within Inuktitut coming from young Inuit. Teenage Inuit are starting to develop their own dialects and they are significantly different from the Inuktitut spoken by their parents. For example, many young people in Baker Lake, N.W.T., have created their own slang which is difficult for their parents to understand. Significantly, many older Inuit in Baker Lake do not speak enough English to understand their own children and grandchildren. Some teenage Inuit, therefore do not have enough traditional Inuktitut to understand their parents and their parents do not have enough English to understand their children.

Some have suggested to arbitrarily designate one dialect as the official language for Nunavut. Others have argued that the capitol's dialect should be the one chosen since the daily operations of government will be carried out in that dialect. Still some have suggested that English be the official language of the new territory since this would make all the laws and statutes for Nunavut available to anyone who spoke English. All these opinions have been the subject of much debate over the last year without any resolution in sight.

RELEVANT INFORMATION

Citing extracts from the document "Footprints in New Snow", a recent press release from the Nunavut Implementation Commission (N.I.C.)([Footnote 1](#)) states that all "law making

authority be concentrated at the Nunavut and community levels and the number of advisory agencies be reduced. [\(Footnote 2\)](#) In order to avoid what N.I.C. members call the "Yellowknife Experience" (wherein all the powers are centralized in one community) efforts are being made to ensure that equal representation is afforded to all Inuit in Nunavut. Exactly what structure the commission has in mind that will facilitate such representation is not yet clear, nor does such a structure as yet, exist.

Also, such a structure would have to accommodate the Nunavut goal of decentralization. The press release states that the "Nunavut government be decentralized as much as practicable and new government employment be distributed across Nunavut. [\(Footnote 3\)](#) Many feel that decentralization is necessary, what areas of government are to be decentralized and how those areas are to work with government agencies in other communities remains unclear.

The problem of numerous dialects of Inuktitut becomes more acute when government agencies in different communities communicate in Inuktitut. If departments within the government are to be decentralized, there arises the communication problem among communities with differing dialects. If one common dialect is chosen, the task of educating all government employees in that dialect will be both expensive and time consuming. If a single dialect is used, there arises the problem of legalistic pluralism – of laws being written in a number of dialects. Such an option is itself very expensive. Translators, training of translators, manpower shortages and limited funds make this possibility less attractive.

N.I.C. states that "great emphasis be placed on preparing Nunavut residents to take up Nunavut government jobs and a number of new training initiatives be introduced. [\(Footnote 4\)](#) Given the problems briefly outlined here, one would think that training in translation would be an initiative to be seriously considered. Presently, there is little if any evidence to suggest that it is under consideration. This is disturbing given that N.I.C. emphasizes that the report "Footprints in New Snow", is "built on solid public consultation. [\(Footnote 5\)](#)

The language issue in Nunavut becomes more pressing since N.I.C. wants Nunavut's first election to take place as soon as possible after April 1, 1999, filling its 16 to 24 seat Nunavut Legislative Assembly. They also want draft rules of procedure to be developed for the Legislative Assembly well in advance of its first sitting. [\(Footnote 6\)](#) Presently, there is no such set of procedures formulated to meet this expectation. Nor is there agreement on what dialect such a set of procedures should be written in. If such an agreement has been reached, the decision has not been made public.

The self-governance of Nunavut's education and health care systems are also affected by the language issue. N.I.C. wants to amalgamate the three existing education and health boards into one: "the three existing regional education boards should be merged into a single Nunavut board and the three existing regional health boards should be wound down." [\(Footnote 7\)](#) Such a merger makes sound financial sense. The communication problem that potentially exists among diverse dialects within Nunavut would have to be

addressed before any merger could ensue. For example, Inuktitut texts in education and nursing care developed in the Baffin area cannot be used in the Keewatin unless they are translated into the local dialect.

Communities such as Arviat and Coral Harbour educate their children only in Inuktitut until Grade 4. Arviat does not allow its kindergarten - Grade 3 level in English. Given the high dropout rates in high schools across the Eastern Arctic, many students end up leaving school with very low literacy rates in English language arts. Given the diversity of dialects and the significant differences among them, the mobility of these dropouts gets restricted to the communities they were raised in.

A linguistic regionalism, therefore, is creeping into Nunavut with each community wanting its fair share of the new government jobs, and the right to use their own dialects. This makes it more difficult to merge boards when individual communities with their own dialects want to use them in the delivery of specific government services. It also makes consensus on the selection of an official language of government increasingly problematic. There is already tension among communities in the Eastern Arctic regarding the location of Nunavut's capitol, and the debate over the territory's official language is not releasing any of that tension.

LANGUAGE GROUPS IN NUNAVUT

Presently, there are approximately seven major Inuktitut dialect groups in the Nunavut Territory: Inuinnaqtun, Natsilik, Kivallirmiutun, Aivilik, North Baffin and South Baffin. Obviously, there are many other dialects in Inuktitut but these are the major ones within Nunavut. These dialects, however, are still developing themselves, and remain in flux. The differences among them already pose a problem and will only become more problematic as time passes.

SUMMARY

Simply, this case study wants to describe a specific and significant problem that a progressive and developing community needs to solve very soon. It is hoped that such exposure may help resolve the issue, and help the residents of Nunavut achieve their goals for April 1, 1999. Consistent with traditional Inuit notions of conflict resolution, this author believes that many heads are better than one. Apologies are made for the brevity of information offered in the case study but any attempt to include all the relevant information would require a book on the matter.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Should Nunavut choose a dialect within Inuktitut or have English as its language of government?
 2. If Inuktitut is chosen, who will select which dialect will become the official dialect for Nunavut?
 3. If a dialect of Inuktitut is to be Nunavut's language of government, and decentralization remains a goal of that government, how will it facilitate effective communication among those government departments whose offices will be in a variety of communities with different dialects?
 4. Will the selection of one dialect over another cause a power struggle to develop within communities in Nunavut?
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FOOTNOTES

1. The Nunavut Implementation Commission is the governing body responsible for the development of the government of Nunavut. The press release here referred to is, to date, the most comprehensive report available concerning the establishment of the Nunavut government. ([Back to top](#))
2. Nunavut Implementation Commission, "Press Release", Accolade, N.W.T., May 25, 1995, p. 1. ([Back to top](#))
3. "Press release", p. 1. ([Back to top](#))
4. "Press release", p. 1. ([Back to top](#))
5. "Press release", p. 3. ([Back to top](#))
6. "Press release", p. 4. ([Back to top](#))
7. "Press release", p. 5. ([Back to top](#))