

Northography

The Inuit agree on a common writing system

A boost to a threatened language group

The 47,000 Inuit who live in Canada's Arctic speak five dialects of Inuktitut and use nine writing systems. The dialects are similar enough that an Inuk from one group can puzzle out what a speaker from another is saying. The writing systems, invented by Christian missionaries starting in the 18th century, are bigger barriers to comprehension. Three use syllabics – characters to represent syllables – rather than the roman alphabet. Both systems can be supplemented with diacritical marks that modify pronunciation and meaning. Communication is difficult and translating textbooks and government documents expensive.

Partly because of these difficulties, Inuktitut, a group of languages spoken by 39,000 Inuit, is giving ground to English. In Nunavut, the northernmost Canadian territory, where most Inuit live, not all schools offer classes in Inuktitut even though the territory has mandated bilingual education by 2020. Most phones and keyboards need extra software to handle syllabics, so young Inuit text and email mainly in English, says Crystal Martin-Lapenskie of the National Inuit Youth Council.

On September 26th Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, the national Inuit organisation, decided to mitigate these difficulties by adopting a unified writing system. Inuktitut Qaliujaaqpait will use combinations of roman letters to represent the sounds in all five dialects. It is a writing system created by Inuit for Inuit, says Natan Obed, the group's president.

Getting to this point was not easy, for the Inuit aim for consensus. A task-force took eight years to achieve it. Elders who grew up with syllabics fretted that the shift to roman letters would erase part of their culture. Linguists had to devise ways to distinguish between sounds, like different ways of pronouncing "r", without using diacritics, which add an extra step in typing. The Inuit in Labrador, who use the roman alphabet, were reluctant to replace their capital "K" with the lower-case "q" used elsewhere. Every sound had to be represented. There could be "no dialect left behind", says Michael Cook, a linguist who worked on the project.

The new writing system will "keep our language strong", says Ms Martin-Lapenskie, but the old ones will not disappear quickly. The Nunatsiaq News, a newspaper that circulates in the eastern Arctic, will continue to use syllabics in its Inuktitut text, says its

editor, Jim Bell. The governments of Nunavut and of Canada, the newspaper's biggest advertisers, still want adverts set in syllabics and in the roman orthography now used for Inuinnaqtun, an official language in the territory. Mr Bell "can foresee a long transition period". In the north, change can come at a glacial pace.

<https://www.economist.com/the-americas/2019/10/03/the-inuit-agree-on-a-common-writing-system>