

THE 31<sup>ST</sup> IN A SERIES OF ARTICLES DEVELOPED FROM REGULAR PUBLIC FORUMS SPONSORED BY THE LESLIE HARRIS CENTRE OF REGIONAL POLICY AND DEVELOPMENT. MEMORIAL PRESENTS FEATURES SPEAKERS FROM MEMORIAL UNIVERSITY WHO ADDRESS ISSUES OF PUBLIC CONCERN IN THE PROVINCE.

# AN INNU DICTIONARY FOR ALL

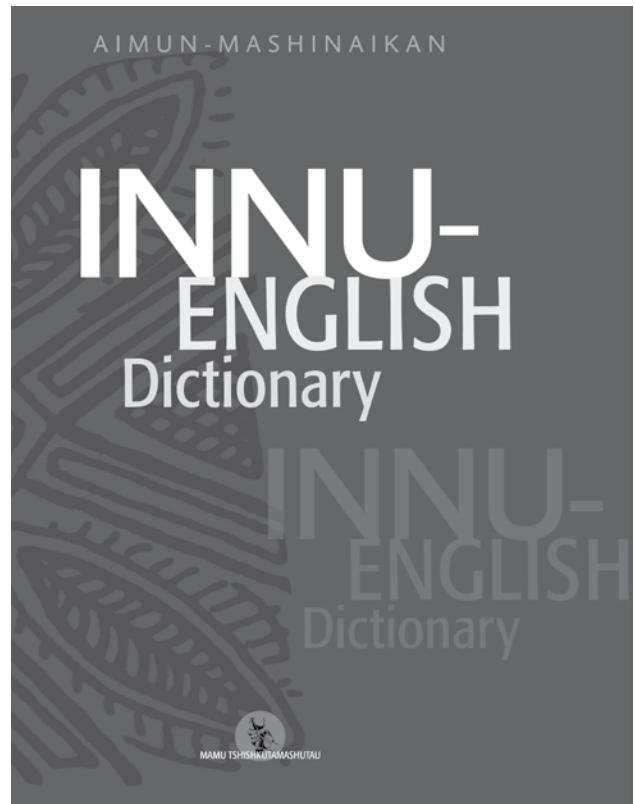
BY DR MARGUERITE MACKENZIE

“So you work with Aboriginal languages – how many words do they have? Can people say the same things as in English?” These are questions that I hear regularly when people learn that I work with the Innu in Labrador to develop resources for their language. The answer can now be found in the newly-published Innu dictionaries.

Over 40 years ago, as a new graduate student, I travelled to northern Quebec to learn about the language of the James Bay Cree. A few years later I began to give courses in the grammatical structure of Cree to speakers who had been asked to teach the language in their communities. After being expected to teach with no training, curriculum, or materials, let alone a classroom, this was the first opportunity for Aboriginal teachers to become professionals. Innu teachers from Labrador heard about the program and decided to attend. As the Innu language (known as Innu-aimun) is closely related to Cree, they joined my class, along with Naskapi teachers from Schefferville.

What are regarded as three languages are in fact dialects of the larger Cree language continuum, and are similar to each other in the same way that French, Italian, and Spanish are descended from the same ancestor language. And, not surprisingly, the student teachers had no trouble discovering that they had relatives in common as well, despite the fact that thousands of miles separated their communities.

But what to teach and what to teach with? No modern grammar or dictionary of any of the dialects existed, there was no standard spelling system, and there were actually two different writing systems: the syllabic one used by Cree and Naskapi, and the alphabetic (roman) one used in Labrador. One of our first tasks as a class was to write a small dictionary, only about five hundred words, for each community. Those were the days of file cards, typewriters, and lots of whiteout. Today we have large dictionaries which are available in print and in electronic form on the internet for East Cree, southern and northern dialects, Quebec Naskapi, and most



recently for Innu spoken in both Labrador and Quebec.

In the intervening years, researchers in Quebec, where the majority of Innu live, worked steadily to provide resources for language teaching, but only in French. The Innu in the two Labrador communities, Sheshatshiu and Davis Inlet (now relocated to Natuashish), were prevented from accessing these materials by not only their use of English as a second language, but also by the bureaucracy of provincial borders.

Then, ten years ago, an opportunity arose to bring together, in a single project, the Innu language dictionary work carried out in a number of separate communities over the previous 30 years. The Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) had recognized the need for large, long-term grants to support partnerships between communities and university researchers. The creation of a Pan-

Innu dictionary, spanning two provinces, a dozen communities, and two second languages was ideal for this. Almost a million dollars in funding was granted from the federal government over a five-year period for language development projects; another \$500,000 of cash and time-release for employees has been contributed by Innu organizations in Labrador and Quebec over the past eight years. In May 2013 the Innu-English, English-Innu and Innu-français books were finally printed.

And they include 27,000 words! We can get by in English for most purposes with a few thousand, and most dictionaries of other Aboriginal languages have documented fewer than 10,000 words. This makes the Innu dictionary one of the most comprehensive in North America.

of bilingual expert speakers of Innu and linguists who had worked with the language for decades was established, and worked with Innu elders, proofreaders, graduate students in linguistics, typists, and computer programmers as needed.

Then came the task of revising the spelling to conform to the recently standardized norm. The large amount of variation in pronunciation among the four main dialect areas meant that no common spelling system for the language was agreed on until the late 1990s. Here are entries for words pronounced differently in separate areas, with a phonetic version provided to assist dictionary users: *atik* ‘caribou’, *kuiishk* ‘straight; properly’, and *nanush(i)u* ‘it is rotten, decomposed, decayed’:

	<i>atik</i> <sup>u</sup>	<i>kuiishk</i> <sup>u</sup>	<i>nanush(i)u</i>
Betsiamites	[tək <sup>w</sup> ]	[kwi:ʃk <sup>w</sup> ]	[ləlʊ:fu]
Uashat (Sept-Îles)	[ti:k <sup>w</sup> , tuk <sup>w</sup> ]	[kwiʃk <sup>w</sup> ]	[nənu:fu]
Lower North Shore	[ati:hk <sup>w</sup> ]	[kwahk <sup>w</sup> ]	[nana:whi:w]
Sheshatshiu	[ti:k <sup>w</sup> ]	[kuʃk <sup>w</sup> ]	[na:nu:ʃi:w]
Natuashish	[ti:h <sup>w</sup> ]	[kuʃk <sup>w</sup> ]	[na:nu:ʃi:w]

And where did these words come from? The *Dictionary of Newfoundland English* used sources which range from 16<sup>th</sup>-century printed books to tape recordings of contemporary Newfoundland speakers. What exists for Innu? Most written documents pertained to the Catholic religion – hymn books and prayer books translated by French missionaries, along with a very few letters by Innu themselves in the late 1700s. There were a few Innu dictionaries compiled by French missionaries from the 1700s and 1800s, and modern bilingual French dictionaries had been produced for the French in 1900, 1980, and 1991 for specific communities, but these were of no use to the Innu in Labrador. As the tradition for compiling dictionaries is to build on previous work, José Mailhot, an ethnolinguist fluent in Innu, and I decided that the time had come to combine the modern dictionaries into a single pan-dialectal work, with translations into both French and English, for use by all Innu.

Such an endeavour needed a large team for the task of combining four modern dictionaries and additional word lists into a single database. An editorial committee

You can see that speakers from Betsiamites use ‘l’ in many words when the sound ‘n’ is used in other communities; those from the Lower North Shore dialect pronounces ‘h’ when ‘sh’ is written; and people from Natuashish often say ‘h’ when ‘k’ is written. Throughout the process, adjustments were continually made as new information was collected from different dialects.

Our editorial team met several times a year for four years in order to make decisions about the final spelling and translation of terms. We continually consulted elders for the nuances of meaning that were slipping away from younger Innu speakers. Speakers who are used to writing as they pronounce are not all ready to embrace the new spelling system, but resistance is slowly giving way as more and more books are published in Innu. After all, it took English several hundred years to achieve the standard spelling system now in use.

The window the vocabulary offers into an ancient and vibrant culture is unparalleled. As a young researcher I chose to improve my ability in Cree and to learn more about the culture by spending three months in a winter

~~utakushit hier~~  
 AIUSHTAKUSHIT } avant-  
 hier  
 mishta-aiushtakushit } SYN  
 avant-  
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 SYN { 0 aiushtakushit } = avant hier  
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 ai-ushtakushit

~~utakushit hier~~  
 AIUSHTAKUSHIT } avant-  
 hier  
 mishta-aiushtakushit } avant  
 avant-hier  
 STD aishi-ushta  
 kushit }  
 ai-ushtakushit } avant-  
 hier  
 aishi- } avant  
 avant-hier  
 aiushi-nipin



The editorial team. Back row: Marguerite Mackenzie, Lynn Drapeau, Yvette Mollen, Anne-Marie Baraby. Front row: Anne-Marie André, José Mailhot, Hélène St-Onge.

bush camp where very little English was spoken. This experience of living from the land, eating what we killed, making snowshoes, paddles and shovels from the nearby trees, setting up our own shelters and heating them with wood from the surrounding bush was invaluable for understanding the context of vocabulary relating to the land, food, animals, hunting, transportation, as well as beliefs and customs. When I later worked with the Naskapi and the Innu, these experiences provided a common ground for discussion of traditional life and the words to describe it, a way of life that is passing increasingly quickly. As an example, a few words for food preparation reveal a deep knowledge and appreciation of all parts of the animal:

*minaputi-shakapuan* - beaver roasted on a string with the meat turned to the inside

*munaimau* - s/he removes the offal from inside a beaver cooked whole (in the oven or on a string)

*papatshikupueu* - s/he collects the grease dripping from beaver roasted with a string

*akatshikuan* - mixture of blood and half-digested caribou food with stringy pieces added and then left to ferment and dry

*uinitsheikan* - mixture of powdered dried meat and raw caribou marrow.

And as you can see from the translations, Innu is a language with no separate words for 'he' and 'she' – one pronoun 'uin' covers both genders, avoiding the whole issue of sexist language.

Has it been worth it? Most certainly. Innu speakers have been asking after the progress of the final version of the dictionary for several years now, and have been

most patient with my promises of 'maybe next winter' or 'maybe next summer' or 'in a few months' or just 'soon.'

What does such a dictionary mean for the Innu? To begin with, it raises the status of the language in the view of the larger society by demonstrating that yes, the language can be and is written, that what can be said in one language can be expressed in another, and that the structure of single words is highly complicated as compared to English. The Innu language, while one of the most healthy Aboriginal in Canada, is nevertheless under serious threat of being replaced by English and French. Although children still learn to speak Innu at home, an increasing number are arriving in kindergarten with more English and less Innu vocabulary.

Innu elders, witnessing massive changes in their communities, are anxious to pass on their knowledge and expertise and have found an opportunity here. The Innu now have a resource that preserves their culture through the documentation of traditional vocabulary and gives the rest of us a glimpse into it. Through the main dictionary and accompanying glossaries of workplace terminology, Innu people working in the education, health, legal and environmental sectors have a tool to refer to when navigating the challenging terrain of bilingual interpretation. Although many more resources are needed, the dictionary will contribute significantly to the education of Innu teachers and students and through them, to keeping their unique culture alive. **NQ**

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