

Language use in Nunavut: a view from the World Englishes paradigm

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This project is an initial examination of language use in Nunavut with respect to the World Englishes theoretical framework. It explores the characteristics of the Three Concentric Circles as defined by Kachru (1990) to explain English language spread and use, and aims to place indigenous languages in the Inner Circle in this characterization. In particular language use in Canada's newest northern territory, Nunavut, is profiled and the following issues examined: do the Inuit in Nunavut share more with speech communities in the Outer Circle than with the current characterization of language use in the Inner Circle?. Consequently, does the World Englishes framework need to be re-examined to take into account the realities of language use and users in indigenous communities of the Inner Circle? Furthermore, are there current approaches to minority/regional languages in Outer Circle countries (Africa is used as a case study here) that can inform discussion around language maintenance and shift for indigenous speech communities in Canada?

1 Introduction

In their discussion of the global spread of English, Kachru and Nelson (2001:13) note that with respect to English-speaking countries "there is seldom if ever a question of any language other than English being used in an extensive sense in any public discourse." However, in Canada, aside from the well-known sociolinguistic situation in Francophone Quebec, another very viable speech community exists in Nunavut, where the Inuit language is a primary means for communicating in both public and private domains.

In the World Englishes research paradigm, Kachru (1990) proposes a sociolinguistic framework for examining the users and uses of English around the world. Within this model, research has focused primarily on the Expanding and Outer Circles, while emerging varieties and uses of English in Inner Circle countries has received less focus (Genée 2010a). Language issues that are critical to indigenous communities in Inner Circle countries, such as the emergence of distinct varieties of English, the impact of English on heritage languages, and the

multilingualism of aboriginal communities, have received little attention (Genee 2010b).

This paper examines language use in the northern Canadian territory of Nunavut within the context of the World Englishes framework. In particular, the following research questions are examined: Firstly, do the Inuit share more with speech communities in Outer Circle countries than their location in an Inner Circle country suggests? Secondly, what are the approaches towards minority/regional languages in Outer Circle countries that can inform discussion in Canada? And finally, can an examination of Nunavut inform research on the WE framework regarding Inner Circle countries? This paper will first examine the main tenets of the World Englishes framework, followed by a brief macro-sociolinguistic overview of language use and current policy in Canada's North. Minority language situations in Outer Circle countries are examined to serve as a comparison, and the paper concludes with initial responses to the research questions and directions for further research.

2 The World Englishes paradigm

In order to place this discussion within the World Englishes model, a brief overview of the main focus points of the paradigm is warranted. Kachru and Nelson (2001) describe two diasporas of the spread of English: the first was the migration of substantial numbers of English speakers from the British Isles to Australasia and North America; the second was the migration of small numbers of English speakers to Africa and Asia. Kachru uses a model of Three Concentric Circles to explain the users and uses that resulted from these two diaspora. The Inner Circle is comprised of the countries where English is the first or dominant language, and is the primary language in media, government, education and culture: United States, Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. The Outer Circle includes those countries where, largely as a result of colonization, English retains a large role in the institutions, education, governance, culture and other nation-wide functions, and has official status: India, Nigeria, Singapore to name a few. In contrast, the Expanding Circle countries are those where English is used in various functions and is widely studied, but for more specific purposes than in the Outer Circle. That is, in Expanding Circle countries in Europe, as well as China, Indonesia, Iran, and Japan for example, English is frequently the language of science and technology research, education and business.

This characterization of Englishes reflects the different uses of the language. The notion of English as the language of 'native speakers' is dismantled in favour of a description of the 'users and uses' of English. This more accurately captures the multitude of varieties of English that emerge as English is a language of many domains, for example, of hip-hop in Korea (Lee 2004), of academia in Germany (Hilgendorf 2005, 2010), business in Japan,

national literature in the Philippines (Miguel Syjuco, 2010 winner of Mann Asian Literary Prize, personal conversation) and many others.

In examining English use in the World Englishes framework, it becomes apparent that, despite Canadian Indigenous communities' location in the Inner Circle, there are key characteristics of language use that they share with Outer Circle speech communities. An examination of language use in Nunavut will allow further examination of this comparison.

3 Language use in Nunavut

Data from the 2006 Census reveal that Inuktitut is one of only three Aboriginal languages in Canada spoken by enough people that long term native-speaker use is likely (along with Cree and Ojibway) (Statistics Canada, 2007). As the only one of these three speech communities to participate in provincial or territorial government in their aboriginal language, the Inuit community deserves unique attention. Currently, only a minority of the Aboriginal population in Canada is able to speak or understand an Aboriginal language. According to 2001 Census data, of the 976,300 people who identified themselves as Aboriginal, 235,000 (24%) reported that they were able to conduct a conversation in an Aboriginal language. These figures are markedly better for Inuit people. However, indigenous language use in the Inuit community is on the decline: in the 2006 census 64% of Inuit in Nunavut reported speaking an Inuit language at home. This is down 10 percentage points from the 74% reporting Inuit language use in the home in the 1996 census (Statistics Canada, 2007).

In 1969 Canadian parliament adopted its first federal Official Languages Act, which declared English and French to be Canada's two official languages, and equal in status. It also set out the rights of Canadians 'to communicate with the federal government and its institutions in their official language of choice' (Canada, 2009:4). This act governed Canada's provinces and territories, including the North West Territories, from whose territory Nunavut was divided. With its creation in 1999, Nunavut carried over all the territorial laws that had applied in the North West Territories, including the Official Languages Act. In June 2009, however, Nunavut's Legislative Assembly, with the approval of the Senate required by the constitution to change its language provisions, adopted its own Official Languages Act, giving the Inuit language (defined as Inuktitut for most of Nunavut, and Inuinnaqtun in some of Nunavut's western communities) the same status as English and French for the purposes of providing territorial government services. In doing so, the five other native languages that had been protected in the Northwest Territories, were no longer official languages. These were Cree, Chipewyan, Dogrib, Gwich'in, and Slavey, cumulatively spoken by less than 1% of the population of Nunavut.

The second key policy in Nunavut is the Inuit Language Protection Act,

which ‘guarantees the right to Inuit Language instruction in Nunavut’s school system and the right to work in the Inuit Language in territorial government institutions’ (Canada, 2009:13). Currently in Nunavut there are four main languages spoken: English, French (a small minority), and the Inuit languages Inuktitut and Inuinnaqtun. However, as reported to the Standing Senate Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs, English is the language of public administration, commerce, and increasingly the home (2009:15). The Inuit Language Protection Act is designed to protect, restore and revitalize the Inuit Language.

The collaborative process that yielded the new Act has been praised by the Standing Senate Committee as a ‘veritable model for language relations in Canada,’ and ‘a new paradigm for official languages in the North’ (2009:18). In the Committee’s view,

[...] in exchange for this surrender of territory [the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement], the Government of Canada committed itself to supporting the Inuit’s rights as an Aboriginal people, including their cultural and linguistic rights. This commitment must be expressed not only through ‘fine words’ but also by providing adequate and sustained financial resources to the citizens of Nunavut and assisting in their efforts to enhance, promote and protect their linguistic heritage. (2009:20)

The Senate Committee’s passing of the amendment and the enactment of the Inuit Language Protection Act have together had broad implications for education in the North. Currently parents have the choice between Inuktitut, English or French as the language of instruction through grade 3, and by 2019 Inuit language instruction will be available for all grades.

These are changes in language policy that attempt to ensure the use of the Inuit languages in formal domains. This supports Kachru and Nelson’s declaration that “the concept of monolithic English as the exponent of culture and communication in all-English-using countries has been a convenient working fiction that is now becoming harder and harder to maintain” (2001:13). Even Inner Circle countries are not monolingual English nations, and Nunavut is challenging this notion of monolingualism as the norm. Through policy that enacts multilingualism as the ‘norm’ in official capacities, as well as educational language policy that establishes full schooling in Inuktitut, Nunavut seeks to establish higher levels of proficiency and greater ranges of use for the Inuit languages.

However, despite these policies, the impact of English on the use of Inuktitut has been well documented (Dorais, 1997 and 2000; Patrick, 2003). Youth responses to a Statistics Canada study show that they are concerned about

language use in informal contexts:

[Inuit youth] expressed concern that as they use and hear English more frequently, they are losing their ability to speak Inuktitut well. Many also report speaking English more than when they were children. At the same time, many youth associate Inuktitut with their identity, traditional knowledge, and culture; for some, losing Inuktitut can affect their sense of belonging, leading to feelings of marginalization and exclusion. While youth are making a concerted effort to use Inuktitut in daily activities, they also identify a need for support through family, community and education, with opportunities to learn, hear and use it. (Statistics Canada, 2007:26)

This statement echoes researchers' concerns that language maintenance and acquisition cannot be accomplished solely through the classroom, and that legislating language policy does not necessarily result in changes to language use (Patrick, 2003; Dorais, 2000; Kamwangamalu, 2010). The question thus remains as to whether the policy initiatives regarding language use in official capacities, as well as educational language policy to establish full schooling in Inuktitut can counteract the opposing forces that lead to continued decrease of use of Inuktitut in the home.

4 Vernacularization in Outer Circle countries

Returning now to the comparison within the World Englishes paradigm, it can be seen that the issues encountered in Nunavut are similar to those in Outer Circle countries. Kamwangamalu (2010) discusses the vernacularization of African languages in the face of English hegemony. He defines vernacularization as the use of indigenous African languages in higher domains such as education, business and government (Kamwangamalu, 2010:1,9). One of the primary barriers to this lies in the structural and ideological favouring of English as the dominant language in Outer Circle countries (and arguably any country given the global use of the language) (Kamwangamalu, 2010).

There have been a variety of theoretical approaches to explain the uses and spread of English within the context of globalization. Phillipson (1992) and Pennycook (2007) posit neo-colonialism as a reason for the continued dominance of English over regional languages. As the term suggests, this approach highlights the continued use of English as a language of the elite by post-colonial rulers, and suggests that they do so in conspiracy to 'keep down' the masses. An alternative view, termed the 'grassroots theory', proposes that the current motivation (importantly not to be equated with historical motivation) that individuals and communities demonstrate for English is economic and pragmatic

(Ager, 2001; Brutt-Griffler, 2002; Wright, 2010). This view considers language users as agents who make informed choices about their language use. The emphasis here lies not in the maintenance or revitalization, or even use, of a heritage language, but rather in the power of the user to best determine the language that serves him/her in a given context.

Kamwangamalu shares Patrick's (2003) concern regarding the mistaken belief that making a heritage language official and a language of instruction in schools will be enough to improve its range and depth of use. Like the authors cited above, Kamwangamalu sees globalization as a major influence in continued colonial language dominance. However, while he suggests that the question of language use in the face of English hegemony needs more attention, he suggests a third alternative, positing that language use needs to be seen through a lens of language economics, not one of neo- or post-colonialism.

Defining language economics as the interplay between linguistics and economic variables, Kamwangamalu (2010) argues that, in Africa, users need to see the economic advantage in their African languages, otherwise the attractions of English will continue to be overwhelming and colonizers' model of the world will continue to influence language policy. In asking how to assign economic value to African languages, Kamwangamalu turns to economic questions of language shift and maintenance. He suggests that ridding African languages of the stigma existing since colonization that indigenous languages are unsuitable for advanced learning, in addition to linking access to employment with certified knowledge of African languages, are critical in improving the economic value of African languages. Nettle and Romain support this approach when they assert: "True development of a political, economic or social nature cannot take place unless there is also development of a linguistic nature" (2000:172).

There are numerous successful case studies of vernacularization: Chinese Mandarin in Singapore (Gupta, 1997); regional official languages in India (Gopinath 2008); Basque in Spain (Le Page, 1997); Welsh and Maori (Edwards, 2004). Kamwangamalu (2010) suggests that regions that have successfully negotiated the vernacularization of their minority language often share one thing in common: they view language as a commodity with an economic value that brings tangible economic benefit to its users.

The question being asked in this paper is: can Nunavut be included in this list? While language policy making Inuktitut and Inuinnaqtun official languages and thus guaranteeing their use in early education, government process and territorial services, will ensure they are alive in the 'imaginary', the actual use and function of the language is decided at the individual level and is driven by the economic value of the language in use.

5 Conclusions and further research

Returning to our research questions, it has been shown that Nunavut does indeed share many significant characteristics of language use in the Outer Circle, represented here as the African context. In summary, the Outer Circle is characterized by English language use in official (formal) domains, while regional languages are used in informal domains: the home, primary school. As we have seen, however, Inuit languages are losing ground in informal uses, despite gaining power in formal use due to policy innovations. Furthermore, language use in the Outer Circle is acutely affected by the global power of English; again this is consistent in Nunavut. Lastly, in both Nunavut and the Outer Circle cases viewed here, language economics plays a large role; it is critical to language users in both regions that the cultural value in their language be matched by economic value so as to ensure its continued use across all domains. The discussion on language economics, globalization and the hegemony of English invites further examination in the context of Nunavut, as these issues impact language use, and influence any success of policy-driven changes. It follows that the issues of language maintenance and the dominance of English are also shared concerns in both regions.

With regards to the theoretical framework of the World Englishes paradigm, I posit that a more in-depth macro-sociolinguistic examination of language use in Nunavut will yield developments in characterizing language use in Inner Circle countries. English use and users in those countries have to date been described as primarily monolingual. As this paper has demonstrated, this portrayal of Inner Circle countries requires a re-examination.

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