

# LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL EVOLUTION IN AN UNYIELDING ENVIRONMENT

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## **Abstract**

The Innu of Labrador stand out among Canadian Amerindian groups in that they are likely the group most recently to come into intense, sustained contact with Euro-Canadians. They demonstrate very high maintenance of their traditional language (Innu-aimun), and their history of administrative relations with the federal and provincial governments is unique in Canada as a result of the terms of Newfoundland and Labrador's confederation with Canada in 1949. Currently, the Innu of Sheshatshu, Labrador, and of its sister community, Natuashish, are undergoing major changes in that (1) negotiations are underway for the Innu to get significantly more control than they have at present over their governance, and (2) plans for the opening of a large new mine promise an unprecedented increase in opportunities for employment for the Innu and others in Labrador. These events invite an examination of the current situation in these communities (with a focus here on Sheshatshu) for implications regarding language and literacy developments in the context of broader community circumstances. In this paper, several centuries of history of the Innu are reviewed with a focus on language, literacy, culture and relations with Euro-Canadians. Then contemporary linguistic, educational and economic data are outlined and a brief comparison is drawn with data from the Innus' neighbours in Labrador, the Inuit. Discussion of this background material centres on the relevance and implications of a theoretical and practical model of indigenous language maintenance and revival for action at the present time as the administrative structure and economic opportunities of the communities change.

## **Background on the Innu of Labrador**

The traditional territory of the Innu (formerly known as the Montagnais) is Labrador, the Lower North Shore of the St. Lawrence east of the Saguenay River, and northwards in Quebec to

MAP



Ungava Bay (see map). According to Mailhot (1997, Ch.1), by the early 1700s, when the first documented contacts between the Innu and Europeans occurred in Labrador, the Innu were mainly living inland, engaged in caribou hunting, with occasional trips to the coast. From that time on, there are records of trading posts being established at numerous places in the interior, as well as along the St. Lawrence coast where concessions and seigniories were granted to officials of New France. The Innu changed their hunting practices somewhat to take advantage of fur trading opportunities at the posts, and travelled among them at various times in the year. As missionaries started arriving to serve employees at the posts and to convert the Aboriginal people, Innu made a point during their regular migrations of going to certain posts when they knew a priest would be there; priests also circulated around the posts to hold missions for the Innu annually. By the 1860s, most Innu had been converted to Christianity at these meetings, which involved religious observances and the teaching of literacy. Father Jean-Baptiste de la Brosse introduced writing in the Innu language (Innu-aimun) after 1769. It is recorded that some families from Sheshatshu had already started to learn to read in 1851. At least one extended family retained a tradition of reading the Innu prayer book. In 1893 even the travelling missions by priests from Quebec to the Innu interior areas ceased, but from 1921 to 1946 the Innu in Sheshatshu and, for a time Davis Inlet, were served by a priest from Newfoundland. Before 1946, some Innu had begun to settle around the post at Sheshatshu and by 1952 missionaries arrived who lived there permanently, spoke Innu-aimun, and arranged for houses, a school and government services for the Innu.

When Mailhot first visited Sheshatshu in 1963 there were only 12 houses, but Innu were coming to live permanently in the village around that time in tents and eventually in houses. The advent of air travel, roads, telephones and electricity as well as compulsory schooling and other government services such as health care soon had a major impact on their former nomadic, hunter-gatherer, fur trader lifestyles. Elected band councils and an Innu political organization (now called the Innu Nation) were initiated in the 1970s. Wage labour gradually became the basis of the economy and hunting is practised less frequently.

Despite all these changes, Mailhot (1997) notes the strong persistence of a number of cultural traits among the Innu such as: affinity

with historical family groups (Ch. 2), sharing of physical resources (p. 69), distribution of favours among kin (pp. 54-55), how significant age of an individual is recognized (p. 79), travelling widely in their former territory (p. 129), naming practices (pp. 96), rules of hospitality (p. 166), and the like. However, these traditional traits come into conflict with their counterparts in Euro-Canadian society with resulting “difficult material circumstances, poverty, inadequate food, alcohol abuse, violence, delinquency, problems with the law, and the erosion of their culture, language, and value system” (Mailhot, 1997, p. 152). In sum, the Innu of Labrador, relative to Aboriginal peoples in most parts of Canada, have been only recently settled in communities and have only since then had schooling and other government services. Thus, the Innu of Labrador, considered by many to be those Aboriginal people in North America least affected by European contact (p.64), are now in the position of having to adjust most quickly.

### **Euro-Canadian Context of the Labrador Innu**

According to the British North America Act (1867) and the Constitution Act (1982) (the national framework for Canada’s governance), administration of Aboriginal matters rests with the federal government while education is a provincial responsibility. Throughout the history of Canada, it has largely been the case that the federal government has taken responsibility for all aspects of administration, including education, for all Aboriginal peoples especially those who live in their traditional areas, mainly on reserves or in other designated communities. However, when Newfoundland and Labrador joined the Canadian federation in 1949, the agreement was that all inhabitants, including those of Aboriginal descent, would be treated the same under provincial jurisdiction, but that the federal government would annually compensate the provincial government for providing services relating to the specific needs of the Aboriginal peoples. Thus, for example, Aboriginal children have been attending schools run by provincial school boards in the past few decades. As noted above, soon after Newfoundland joined Confederation, Innu people started to settle in the community of Sheshatshu after generations of living on the land. In the 1970s, other Innu gradually settled in Natuashish, a community further up the Labrador coast. Currently, most of the approximately 2,500 Innu in Labrador live in Sheshatshu or Natuashish (a smaller number live in other communities), but many

return to the land for various periods during the year. The authorities which have administered these services have not adapted them to take into account these people's specific needs and strengths as Aboriginal people. Reviews of the situation have been strongly critical of the provincial and the federal governments in this regard (Backhouse & McRae, 2002; O'Neill, Andrew, Gregoire & Lee, c.2000; Tanner, Kennedy, McCorquodale & Inglis, 1994). Space does not permit a detailed account of the many complaints about government administration of Aboriginal people in the region.

With respect to the status of the various groups of Aboriginal inhabitants of the new province, the only Aboriginal community on the island of Newfoundland, the Mi'kmaq of Conne River, gained federal band status in 1984, so from then on they had significantly more administrative control over their school as well as other institutions. The Inuit, the other Aboriginal group in Labrador, have just concluded an agreement in principle with the federal government for greater local control over their institutions (Indian and Northern Affairs, Canada, n.d). And, as mentioned above, the Innu are in the midst of negotiations with the province and the federal government for an agreement in which Innu individuals in the communities will gain full Indian status under the federal Indian Act and a reserve will be created at Sheshatshu and at Natuashish.

### **Linguistic, Educational and Economic Circumstances Today**

As part of the process of band and reserve creation for the Innu, data such as those reported on elsewhere in this volume are being gathered to inform the (re)development of all civic institutions. So far, it is clear that the Innu in Labrador are in a position to be envied by the vast majority of Aboriginal people in Canada in that virtually all of them are mother tongue speakers of their traditional language, Innu-aimun. The following Table 1 based on 2001 Canadian census data (Statistics Canada, Aboriginal Population Profiles, retrieved Dec. 17, 2003) indicates the almost complete fluency in Innu-aimun of the populations of Sheshatshu and Davis Inlet (where the people who now live in Natuashish lived in 2001). Please note that the numbers for the Labrador Innu contrast strongly with those for Aboriginal languages among the Canadian Aboriginal population as a whole. It was as recently as in the 1951 census that the Aboriginal language retention figures for all of the Aboriginal peoples in Canada were at about the same levels as the Innu now have (Burnaby & Beaujot, 1986, p. 36).

**Table 1**  
**ABORIGINAL LANGUAGE RETENTION IN ABORIGINAL**  
**POPULATIONS**

(figures in percentages)

	<b>Sheshatshiu</b>	<b>Davis Inlet</b>	<b>All Aboriginals in Canada</b>
Aboriginal language mother tongue	88.0	95.4	20.1
Aboriginal language as home language	87.4	94.5	18.4
Knowledge of aboriginal language	90.7	95.4	24.1

(Source, Statistics Canada, 2001 Census)

Innu children in Labrador are now almost all raised in households where Innu-aimun is spoken as the major language of communication and in a community in which Innu-aimun is the medium of communication for intimate and informal purposes and in some services and workplaces. However, recently there has been concern voiced that a considerable number of the younger children are not speaking Innu-aimun as much any more, but there is little evidence of a corresponding increase in their English skills. But, of the 230 5 to 9-year-olds in Labrador who speak Innu-aimun as a mother tongue, 150 were reported to speak English as well, while 80 were reported to speak neither English nor French. Many adults are bilingual in English but others are monolingual in Innu-aimun; on the 2001 census, 320 (21.3%) of Innu-aimun mother tongue speakers in Labrador reported that they spoke neither English nor French. Among mother tongue speakers of Aboriginal languages as a whole in Canada, only 8% speak neither English nor French. While there is an orthography for the language, very few adults or children have any proficiency in using it and it is not the medium of any active communication. As is common elsewhere, there is tension in the community about orthographic standardization (Burnaby, 1985; Francis & Reyhner, 2002, p. 152).

There has been virtually no accommodation to this linguistic reality on the part of non-Innu who live and work in the community or provide services in the region. A radio station that once broadcast extensively in Innu-aimun no longer does, but there are a few broadcasts in the language. About ten Innu people have been trained as certificated (accredited to teach in the lower grades in their communities) teachers and other Innu work in local health care and band operated services. A number of years ago, there was an attempt to have more Innu control over the school and a system was devised whereby about

half of the school day in the lower grades is taught in Innu-aimun, but there is very little support for the teachers who do this teaching and the school remains a solidly English-medium institution with a small Innu-aimun appendage. Attendance at the school has been reported to be at a shocking 40 per cent for at least a decade. The non-Innu teachers normally do not have training in English as a second language teaching. There have been only a handful of graduates from the high school in the past decade. As indicated below in Table 2, the Innu in Labrador have a much higher percentage of people over the age of 25 with less than high school education compared with other groups (Statistics Canada, 2001 Aboriginal Population Profiles, Sheshatshu, Davis Inlet, Newfoundland and Labrador, and Canada; 2001 Community Profiles, St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador, and Canada, retrieved Dec. 17, 2003).

**Table 2**  
**ADULTS WITH LESS THAN HIGH SCHOOL EDUCATION**  
**Population and Age Group** **% of Adults with less than High School Education**

Aboriginals in Sheshatshu, aged 25+	65.4
Aboriginals in Davis Inlet [now Natuashish], aged 25+	70.0
Aboriginals in Newfoundland and Labrador [inclusive, all groups], aged 25+	40.0
Newfoundland and Labrador [general population], ages 20 to 64	31.7
All Aboriginals in Canada	42.0
All Canada [general population], ages 20 to 64	21.4

(Source, Statistics Canada, 2001 Census)

The small proportion of adults who have achieved high school graduation or more have been greatly in demand for employment, but studies occasioned by the prospect of employment at the new mine suggest that the level of English fluency, literacy in English, and formal education among the adult population is quite low. Since a very high drop out rate and achievement below grade level in the school is the norm, few well-educated young people can be expected to join the labourforce in the near future. While it is tricky to compare groups with differing experience in a wage-labour economy, Table 3 shows labour force participation rates for the Innu in Labrador and others.

**Table 3**  
**LABOUR FORCE PARTICIPATION RATES FOR**  
**LABRADOR INNU AND OTHERS**

<b>Group</b>	<b>% Labour Force Participation</b>
Innu in Sheshatshiu	42.1
Innu in Davis Inlet	40.7
All Newfoundland and Labrador [general population]	57.6
All aboriginals in Canada	61.4
All Canada [general population]	66.4

(Source, Statistics Canada, 2001 Census)

Median total income levels and percentages of income based on government transfer figures as shown in Tables 4 and 5 are compatible with these employment indicators (Statistics Canada, 2001 Aboriginal Population Profiles, Sheshatshu, Davis Inlet, Newfoundland and Labrador, and Canada; 2001 Community Profiles, St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador, and Canada, retrieved Dec. 17, 2003).

**Table 4**  
**MEDIAN TOTAL INCOME FOR POPULATIONS AGED 15+**  
**Group, Over 15 Years**

<b>Group, Over 15 Years</b>	<b>Median Total Income</b>
Sheshatshiu	\$10,421
Davis Inlet	\$14,368
Aboriginals in Newfoundland and Labrador [all]	\$13,034
All Newfoundland and Labrador [general population]	\$16,050
All aboriginals in Canada	\$13,525
All Canada [general population]	\$22,120

(Source, Statistics Canada, 2001 Census)

**Table 5**  
**PERCENT OF INCOME FROM GOVERNMENT TRANSFER**  
**Group, Over 15 Years**

<b>Group, Over 15 Years</b>	<b>% Income from Government Transfer</b>
Sheshatshiu	31.1
Davis Inlet	28.7
Aboriginals in Newfoundland and Labrador [all]	28.0
All Newfoundland and Labrador [general population]	21.2
All aboriginals in Canada	20.8
All Canada [general population]	11.6

(Source: Statistics Canada, 2001 Census)

Overall then, the Innu of Sheshatshu have strong resources in community functions of their language, mainly at the least formal levels, but have not as a group accommodated strongly to the English speaking environment or majority culture which is increasing around them, nor has the majority non-Innu community acknowledged the Innu-aimun



language reality in any significant way. The result is economic, educational and linguistic marginalization of the Innu.

### **Comparison with Language and Literacy Among the Inuit of Labrador**

The information above on the Innu of Labrador cannot help but lead to speculations about reasons for the evolution of recent conditions and strategies to relieve problematic circumstances which have developed. When one learns about ‘exotic’ languages and cultures, even those in our midst, one tends to start focussing on single and simple cause and effect relationships. The importance of literacy in accounting for differences between industrialized Western societies and small, pre-industrial societies of Africa and Asia, for example, was the centre of a great deal of debate in Western academe in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (e.g., Bloomfield, 1933; Graff, 1979; Gray, 1956; Halle, 1969; Havelock, 1976; Kavanaugh & Venezky, 1980; Lado, 1957; Lévi-Strauss, 1964; McLuhan, 1962; Olson, 1977; Scribner & Cole, 1981; Street, 1984). McGrath’s 1984 study of the extensive role of literacy in Inuit languages, which documents elaborate literacy development in Greenland and other significant uses among Inuit elsewhere, provides for the present discussion a useful comparison from the Inuit of Labrador with the experience of the Innu. According to McGrath (1984, p. 22):

Labrador Eskimo [sic] was the first Canadian Inuit dialect to be written. The Moravian missionaries began to establish themselves in Labrador in 1752, and despite the murder of seven of their number on the initial landing, mission stations were soon founded at Nain (1771), Okak (1776) and Hopedale (1782). All the missionaries who went out to Labrador made some progress in speaking and studying the native language [supported by the research and printing facilities of those working on Greenlandic literacy]....

Inuktut, Labrador Eskimo, was first taught at the school in Nain in 1791, and in 1809 the first Labrador Eskimo hymn book was printed. By 1826 the whole New Testament was available in the dialect, and within fifteen years of that, practically all ‘Moravian’ Eskimos could read and write. However, after the turn of the [20<sup>th</sup>] century the use and prestige of the language began to decline drastically and assimilationist trends began to erode the language. As Dorais points out, “teaching did continue, but as it mainly served religious goals, it did not inspire, as it had done in Greenland, any literary venture.” When Newfoundland finally joined Canadian confederation in 1949, the use of Eskimo language curriculum in the schools was suppressed.(p. 22)

For our purposes here, a major question is the extent to which these circumstances, which differed from those of the Innu in certain ways, such as long-term permanent residence of Europeans among the Inuit, significant learning of Inuktitut by these people, centuries of teaching literacy in the language, and a moderate amount of translated literature in the language, made a difference in modern Inuit life in Labrador. In Table 1 above, the Innu of Labrador show a mother tongue Aboriginal language retention figure of from 88 to 95 per cent between Sheshatshu and Davis Inlet. However, in 2001 only 10.5 per cent of Labrador Inuit reported speaking Inuktitut as a mother tongue, 1.8 per cent as a home language, and .6 per cent as having a knowledge of the language (as opposed to being a regular speaker). The Inuit overall in Canada indicate 83 per cent mother tongue speakers of their traditional language, 41.3 per cent as using that language as the home language, and 16.8 per cent has having a knowledge of the language.

In other words, in terms of Aboriginal language retention, the Inuit of Labrador differ markedly from the Innu in Labrador and Inuit in the rest of the country in that they indicate much reduced Aboriginal language use. As for economic indicators, the Innu of Labrador showed a high proportion of adults with less than a high school education (65.4 to 70% in Table 2); the Inuit in Labrador had 39.7 per cent of adults with less than high school, and the national figure among Inuit was 52.8 per cent. Thus the Inuit of Labrador are more highly educated on this factor than the Inuit in the country and even more so than their provincial Innu counterparts.

**Table 6**  
**STATISTICS ON LABRADOR INUIT COMPARED WITH**  
**OTHER GROUPS**

	<b>Labrador Inuit</b>	<b>Canada Inuit</b>	<b>Canada Aboriginal</b>	<b>All Canada</b>
% aboriginal mother tongue	10.5	83.0	20.1	N/A
% aboriginal home language	1.8	41.3	18.4	N/A
% knowing of aboriginal lang.	0.6	16.8	24.1	N/A
Age 15+, less than high school	39.7	52.8	42.0	21.4
% labour force participation	60.2	62.5	61.4	66.4
Median total income, 15+	\$13,148	\$13,699	\$13,525	\$22,120
% income from gov't transfer	26.7	20.3	20.8	11.6

(Source: Statistics Canada, 2001 Census)

This comparison of figures suggests that the Inuit of Labrador have declined in the use of their traditional language more than even the national average for Aboriginals. This situation is deeply regretted in some Labrador communities and various measures are being taken (e.g., a language nest on the New Zealand, Maori model, language classes in the schools) to renew the strength of the language in use. On the other hand, they have surpassed their Inuit counterparts elsewhere in Canada as well as the national Aboriginal rate in the percentage of adults with a high school education. One might think, then, that this educational achievement might translate into higher incomes and lower percentages of people receiving transfer payments in Labrador, but this does not seem to be the case. As an object lesson for explanations of or solutions for the Innu, this Inuit literacy and education story is not clear.

### **Discussion**

What can we say about the situation that the Innu of Labrador now find themselves in? While they clearly have a special advantage in Canada in that they have retained the use of their traditional language at a very high level and maintain many of their cultural values as well, they have gone in half a century from being a well regulated group of communities which sustained themselves economically and socially to two communities suffering deeply from unemployment, poverty, substance abuse and violence. Blaming the victim is an easy way of explaining such situations, but there are many other viable perspectives. My fellow authors in this volume demonstrate how, in a number of ways, Innu people generally have the intellectual acumen and the will to make changes individually and collectively to accommodate the rapid social and economic revolution that has reached them. For my part, I will concentrate here on issues of literacy and language use as pieces in this puzzle.

### *Language and Literacy Factors in Aboriginal Adaptation*

The most striking feature in the Labrador Innu situation seems to be the almost surgical division between the mainstream world and its language on the one hand and the world of the Innu and their language on the other. The Innu have minimal participation educationally, economically or in many other spheres in non-Innu institutions although

they are brought into contact with those institutions because their children are required to attend school and they must use some resources like healthcare and the justice system. Some individuals in the community have gained the bilingualism, education and experience to take jobs and leadership positions in which they negotiate with the non-Innu world on behalf of the community as a whole. The non-Innu community does not seem to feel pressured to accommodate itself to the Innu reality linguistically or in other ways. This kind of standoff could be seen to indicate effective resistance on the part of most Innu, but the cost to them is very high indeed in terms of lack of accessibility to the economic and social advantages of the non-Innu community. The functional language domains can continue to be kept separate for Innu-aimun and English, but only at the expense of the Innu remaining cut off from the mainstream.

In the twentieth century, a remarkable trend disturbing many people is the dwindling and loss of language functions and speakers of many of the world's minority languages (e.g., Krauss, 1991). Joshua Fishman (1991, 2001) has led the crusade in the Western academic world to stem this tide and find ways of maintaining and even reviving minority languages for various real social purposes. In this vein of research with aims towards the support of grass-roots movements to maintain endangered languages, Francis and Reyhner (2002) have added a major contribution through *Language and Literacy Teaching for Indigenous Education: A Bilingual Approach*. Focussing on the world's indigenous languages, particularly those of the Americas, the authors provide a great service to educational practitioners in these fields. Indigenous languages are among the most threatened and neglected languages of the world (Churchill, 1986), and literature describing them much less addressing ways in which they can be supported is scarce. The fact that a large proportion of speakers of these languages live in isolated areas and are often the targets of severe linguistic and other forms of discrimination from majority populations in their home countries has exacerbated efforts to conduct research on them and develop them much less coordinate such work across linguistic, ethnic and international boundaries.

Francis and Reyhner have undertaken to survey a great deal of the scattered literature on the conditions of indigenous languages in the Americas and on research concerning initiatives to support them in various ways, in particular through educational

programs. Their basic conclusion is that Aboriginal peoples do not have to face an either/or choice between their traditional language and national/majority languages. They argue that the best solution is to support the balanced development and use of both minority and majority languages with the expected result not only of a both/and solution but also a significant *additional* achievement in *each* of the languages for academic and other purposes (as in the success of the Rock Point Navajo experience, Rosier & Holm, 1980).

Like Fishman, Francis and Reyhner emphasize the crucial importance of the home and immediate community in successful minority language maintenance, but they also point out that they know of no documented research on positive indigenous language support efforts that have *not* significantly involved the schools. Thus, most of the discussion in their book is on applications in formal educational settings. However, they constantly refer to the wider context of the indigenous languages as a reference point and context for choices in classroom language practices. In addition to detailed discussion of how Aboriginal languages can be used in concert with national languages to benefit children's educational achievement in *both* languages, Francis and Reyhner have adapted Fishman's eight-stage Graded Integrational Disruption Scale (GIDS) "model of the functional diversification of languages" (Fishman, 1991, p. 2) into a four level scale showing the language functions from those of a minority language which is in strong use (stage 4) to those of a language which is almost extinct (stage 1) (Francis & Reyhner, 2002, pp. 34-35).

Despite their remarkably high level of oral fluency in Innu-aimun, in terms of Francis and Reyhner's scale, the Innu of Sheshatshu would only come out about at the middle. At stage 4, the only criteria they would meet would be that of intergenerational transmission (adults teaching children naturally) and to some extent the use of the language in local small business and partially in community organizations such as the band office. All the other criteria concern use of the language effectively and extensively in schools, in higher education, in the workplace, in government offices, and as a flexible diglossic (both languages being used) medium, and these are not met in Sheshatshu. As for stage 3, again, the Innu are strong on intergenerational transmission, but the school criteria for stage 3 are still somewhat out of reach for the Innu. Stage 3 assumes that:

- at higher levels [the indigenous language] is used for instruction in academic subjects;
- schools enjoy a degree of community control, but not complete, most often only incipient;
- [the indigenous language] used as medium of communication among students, and occasionally between teachers and students outside of instructional contexts;
- use in school is still short of widespread communicative functions, [the indigenous language] and [national language] alternate or compete in regard to preference, actual use, conditioned by large numbers of indigenous children who are dominant in [the national language]. (Francis & Reyhner, 2002, p. 34)

In applying this scenario to the Labrador Innu situation, the tragedy is that, while the school is not strong in Innu-aimun factors, it is also very weak in promoting English as well. All the other criteria at stage 3 relate to some degree of functional use of literacy in the indigenous language, which is virtually non-existent in Sheshatshu (e.g, adults writing for interpersonal communications outside of school, reading at least at a limited level, for example, religious uses). Stage 2 describes a community in which, unlike Sheshatshu, the indigenous language is only used by older people. However, the lack of effective presence of the language at the school in Sheshatshu (only the special courses in the lower grades) and the lack of written functions of the language fits the stage 2 descriptions. Also, the focus at stage 2 on the strength of the communication in the language in the presence of older people suggests that this resource is one that Sheshatshu might be well served to capitalized on soon. Stage 1 criteria, fortunately, do not apply since it assumes a situation in which the indigenous language is almost extinct. Thus, the Innu appear to mainly fit at the stage 3 level.

In sum then, in terms of the roles of language use and literacy in both English and Innu-aimun, this movement in research and action regarding minority language strongly recommends a balanced development of both languages in the school setting which reflects community language and literacy development. If properly conducted, such a strategy is expected to improve oral language and literacy learning in both languages and therefore improvements in school achievement. Collaboration or at least some level of give-and-take between national language speakers and indigenous language speakers is essential. The approach makes no claims for impacts beyond the

spheres of language

and literacy functions, but these are essential to all facets of community life.

#### *Lessons Available from the Experience of the Labrador Inuit*

While many interesting factors (e.g., regional economic development, school quality, degree of geographic isolation, previous experience with wage labour, amount of ethnic discrimination, etc.) suggest themselves to account for the diverging linguistic and economic patterns of the Innu and Inuit described above, the point here is mainly that a broad variety of factors are always at play in intercultural contact situations. Clearly, the Moravians were able to make literacy in an Aboriginal language more accessible to the Inuit than the Catholics were to the Innu. Did the fact that the Inuit appear to have spent more time in school-like situations have an impact on later Inuit adaptation to formal schooling? How much valuable experience with literacy did the Inuit (or the Innu) gain from their primarily Christian applications of literacy? Did the Inuit learn indirectly from the literacy practices of the Moravians who lived among them for many years? In all, when interventions are considered, it is crucial that thoughtful, locally grounded solutions be created to suit specific local conditions. Finding such solutions may take a long time and require much research and communication among parties, and the conditions must be understood to be constantly changing.

#### **Conclusions**

All indications in this exploration of the situation of the Innu point towards the need for linguistic and cultural accommodations on both the side of the Innu and that of members of the majority. At the moment, the Innu, as a whole, do not have that access to the majority world in terms that relate to their needs. They could choose to try to go back to previous economic and cultural practices, but Fishman, Reyhner and Francis, and most Innu themselves indicate that this avenue is unlikely to be viable in the present world. A return to the economics of living off the land is no longer an option. The choice then is to live with the status quo or make accommodations in terms of learning English and gaining mainstream educational and work skills. The models of Fishman and Francis and Reyhner suggest both the perils of such accommodation that might befall the Innu in terms of language loss,



but also strategies available to the Innu to offset that risk of loss. For example, stage 2 of Francis and Reyhner's model sketches a situation in which young people no longer speak the language, but it also emphasizes the importance of the role of grandparents and other elders in maintaining the language in periods of stress. Therefore, that resource should be cultivated and cherished now as a bulwark against future need. Also, stages 3 and 4 indicate a number of language functions for the indigenous language which parallel certain functions of oral language and literacy in the mainstream world. The models strongly suggest that the Innu should develop such functions for their language in order to facilitate an accommodation with the mainstream world without overwhelming the existence of the Innu culture, language and perspective.

The current rigid split between the Innu and non-Innu indicates not only resistance or non-action on the part of the Innu to assimilation into the non-Innu system but also a number of substantial barriers on the part of the non-Innu to keep the Innu out. The very least that the mainstream institutions, especially the schools, can do is to present English language through a second language learning approach. The degree to which Innu-aimun is present in the school could be greatly increased through the extensive use of bilingual teacher aides at all school levels, a well organized and supported use of Innu-aimun as a medium of instruction for the early grades and for selected subjects at all levels, the availability of bilingual support for student learning after school, an increase in the amount of written material in Innu-aimun, and a major curriculum strategy to increase the relevance of all subject teaching to the culture of the students. Fishman and Francis and Reyhner have grounded their work in studies which indicate the importance of community involvement and authority at all levels of institutions such as schools (e.g., Churchill, 1986; Rosier & Holm, 1980). Thus, majority culture institutions in Labrador must be prepared to make major concessions to local control over all aspects of their operations. With the expected take-over of control that the Innu are currently negotiating for, the possibilities of, and indeed necessity for a revolution in Innu authority is at hand.

Francis and Reyhner and Fishman intend their models as tools for analysis, and Fishman more than the others anticipates a certain amount of predictability in the relationships between the levels. If Fishman is right, then there is the strong possibility of a very rapid

decline in the use of Innu-aimun if the resources for the language for use in a rich array of functions, including literate functions, are not developed. Fishman, Francis and Reyhner make it clear that they see globalization and accommodation to majority systems as not only inevitable but also beneficial. While valuable lessons can be learned from the experiences of other minority groups, each situation is unique and requires its own solutions and human resources. The true challenge of reversing language shift is to find a balance in language functions and use, a balance which has to be constantly renegotiated, which will support the indigenous culture on the one hand and still permit access to the majority system.

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**Endnote**

1. Because of the categories under which data on aboriginal peoples in Canada are collected for the census, it is difficult to calculate how many children of Innu descent have Innu-aimun or English as a mother tongue.