

November 8, 2005

The Living Dictionary as a Circumpolar Resource

Preserving and Protecting Inuktitut in the Circumpolar Region

The Inuktitut language is a critical building block in the effort to preserve, and promote Inuit culture in the Circumpolar Region. If the language is to become stronger and more widely used, modern technology must be used strategically to achieve this result.

In Greenland, Kalaallisut is strongly established as a working language of Greenlandic society. In Canada, the goal of the Government of Nunavut, as well as in Nunavik, and Labrador is to reach this status. In Russia, the Yupik language is threatened with extinction.

The Living Dictionary represents one effort to address the challenges to making Inuktitut more widely accessible to Inuit, as well as to other people worldwide.

Issues and Challenges

There are a number of factors which create barriers to achieving the goal of increased acceptance of Inuktitut as a principal language in circumpolar society. Some of these factors are external, and cannot be changed. Others could be classed as internal factors, and are more susceptible to change from within.

The chief external factor is the pervasive influence of North American/ English culture and language, disseminated through television, movies, print publications and the Internet. The lifestyle pressures and images to which circumpolar societies are subjected (in particular the youth) make the preservation and expansion of the use of Inuktitut language difficult indeed.

The internal factors which create barriers, include

- ❑ Written Inuktitut employs different writing systems which use both Roman and Syllabics orthographies. Even among those groups using Roman orthography, there are significant differences which make understanding among different Inuktitut speaking groups difficult.
- ❑ There are over 20 different Inuktitut dialects in existence.
- ❑ Lack of a standard language reference for all groups. Each dialect has developed dictionaries and word lists, typically linking Inuktitut to the relevant Western language (English Danish, French, etc.). Because these individual dictionaries are not linked, there are difficulties in establishing commonalities of usage, which could lead to strengthening Inuktitut for all groups.
- ❑ Lack of a recognized and widely accessible forum for developing new terminology which crosses dialectal boundaries, to enable Inuktitut to continue to grow and develop in the modern age.
- ❑ Reliance on print forms of reference material, at a time when the world, and particularly the youth are increasingly receiving information via the computer and the Internet.

The Promise of Technology

Important changes in computers and communications in the past few years offer some potential to address some of these internal pressures, as follows

- ❑ Use of the Internet and electronic mail as a forum for worldwide collaboration and communication, creating a productive environment for discussion and development of new terminology, and providing worldwide access to Inuktitut speakers, students and scholars.
- ❑ Ability to create electronic dictionaries which can be easily searched using a computer;
- ❑ Ability to support different writing systems based on Roman or syllabic scripts equally well, and to transliterate from one to the other;

- ❑ Ability to scan existing paper dictionaries and word lists, convert them to electronic form, and develop electronic linkages among these dictionaries;

Standardization vs. Diversity – a Choice?

The dilemma faced by language groups, including English, is the need for standard usage, to serve a global community of users, and the impact of this standard usage on the richness and diversity of dialects of the language.

Modern computers and the Internet offer the ability to preserve the dialects of a language, as well as provide a forum for development and dissemination of standard usage. Properly used, these new information management tools make the choice more manageable than before.

Living Dictionary Background

The Government of Nunavut, in its attempt to address the challenge, has for the past three years, funded the development of a computer application called Asuilaak – the Living Dictionary.

Asuilaak - The Living Dictionary is an Internet based application (www.livingdictionary.com) which provides a multilingual Dictionary of Inuktitut, English and French terms. It supports both Roman orthography and syllabics. Searches may be selective by dialect, type of term, source, or category. The Living Dictionary is called “living” because it provides the ability for any user to submit words, or comment on existing words, and thus participate in the continuing development of the Inuktitut language.

The Living Dictionary was created as a means for Nunavummiut to preserve and protect their native Inuktitut language in all its forms and dialects. Asuilaak provides a central place where Inuktitut words and their English and French equivalents can be kept and made accessible to other Inuktitut speakers and scholars worldwide. This includes both new terminology, as well as traditional words known to elders.

The Living Dictionary has been in operation since October 2000.

Terminology for the Living Dictionary is drawn from existing print or electronic dictionaries. These dictionaries are converted to electronic form, and, if necessary, reformatted and loaded to the database, and linked with other terms from other dictionaries. Material from several existing dictionaries has been loaded. Over 40,000 terms have been loaded to date, making it a useful resource for translators and students. Some of the words included come from Greenland, Nunavik, Labrador and other Inuktitut speaking regions.

Initially the dictionary was developed to provide access in either ICI Roman Orthography (the standard for Nunavut) or syllabics, but this has been expanded to include Greenlandic and Nunavik orthographies. Information can be stored, searched and displayed in ICI Roman, Greenlandic, and Nunavik orthography, or syllabics.

The Living Dictionary web site has been recognized for its innovative approach to the challenge of language promotion and preservation. The web site was awarded a gold medal at the recent Canadian Federal Government GTEC Federal Distinction Awards ceremony in Ottawa, Canada. This prestigious group, consisting of representatives from the Canadian Federal Government and Canadian technology industries, recognized the Living Dictionary for “Excellence in Innovative Service Delivery”

The technical design and development of Asuilaak makes use of the latest Internet technology and international standards for language use in computers (Unicode). It took into account the great variety of Inuktitut in use, and also the many Western languages with which Inuktitut is linked in different parts of the circumpolar region. As a result of this approach, Asuilaak

- ❑ Can store Inuktitut written in various Roman orthographies or syllabics;
- ❑ Can store information written in English, French, Danish, or Russian;
- ❑ Can identify Inuktitut terms and definitions by dialect;
- ❑ Can link terms and definitions in all languages and Inuktitut dialects;
- ❑ Can provide user instructions in Western languages and Inuktitut.

Recent Activities in the Circumpolar Region

Over the past several months, we have been exploring the possibility of extending the use of the Living Dictionary to other circumpolar countries.

With the support of the Government of Nunavut Department of Executive and Intergovernmental Affairs, we have experimented with the idea of making the Living Dictionary accessible to Kalaallisut users as well. Greenlandic material has been loaded and linked to other terms in the dictionary. We have incorporated a transliteration function which will convert ICI Roman and/or syllabics orthography as used in Nunavut to the standard Roman orthography of Greenland. While this will not fully translate Inuktitut into Greenlandic, it is felt that will make the Inuktitut as used in Nunavut easier to read for Greenlanders. This capability has been tested and made available on the Living Dictionary web site, and the results should be reviewed by Greenlandic language experts to validate its usefulness and suggest improvements which will make it more useful.

In Late October, 2001, Hugh Lloyd of the Government of Nunavut Department of Executive and Intergovernmental Affairs, and Jim Howse, representing the developers of the Living Dictionary spent a week in Greenland. One purpose of this trip was to obtain advice and feedback on our initial attempts to make the dictionary more inclusive for other circumpolar regions.

We held consultations with the following groups and individuals in Nuuk, Greenland to discuss the concepts, demonstrate our software, and ask for their reaction. The text of the presentation used is attached as Appendix A

Consultations

Group	Person
Inuit Circumpolar Conference	Aqqaluk Lynge, President
Ilinniarfissuaq – Teacher’s College	Dorthe Korneliussen, Rektor
Foreign Affairs	Mikaela Engell, Acting Deputy Minister
Education Department	Kununnuaq Fleischer, Head, New Curriculum Development Project
Greenland Language Commission	Kelly Berthelson, Translator/interpreter
Translation Department	Ole Heinrich Director, Translation Services
Publishing House Atuakkiorfik	Henriette Rasmussen, Executive Director
School of Journalism	Mette Holm, Radio Journalism Instructor
University Of Greenland	Karen Langgaard, Assoc. Professor, Linguistics

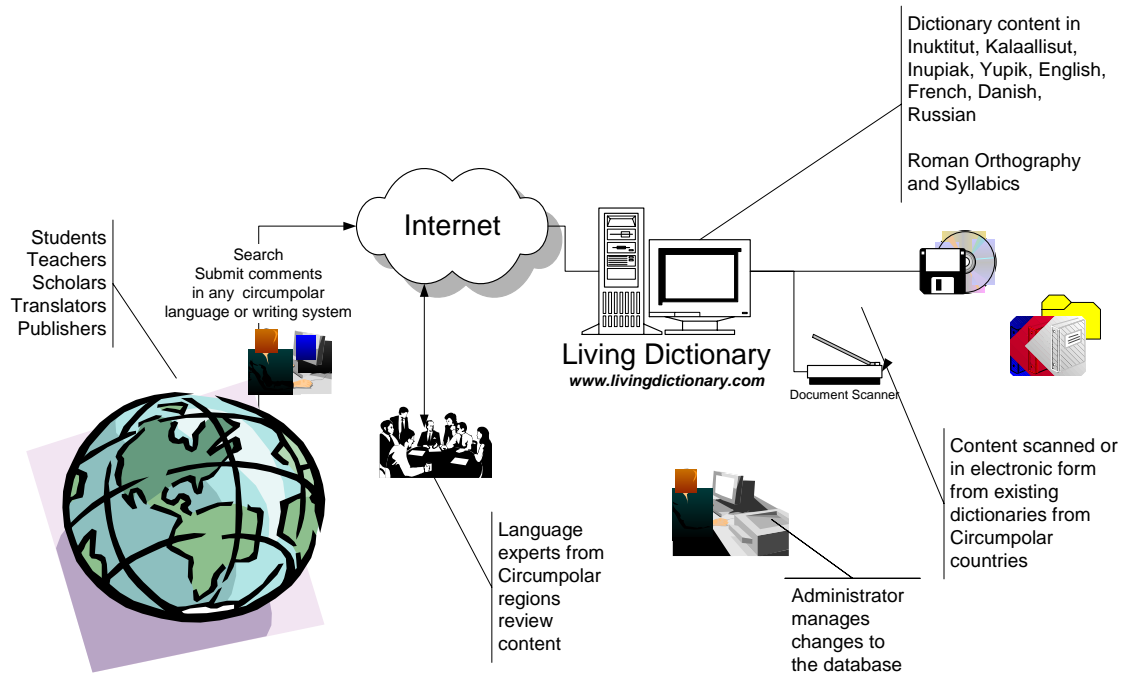
Those people who were interviewed expressed a strong interest in this work, and were very helpful in identifying potential sources of Greenlandic/Danish or Greenlandic/English dictionaries and word lists. The preliminary reaction to the transliteration from ICI Roman to Kalaallisut was positive, but more work needs to be done to validate the usefulness of this capability.

A number of people mentioned the issue of use of syllabics, and it was pointed out that use of the Living Dictionary, which can store and search Roman orthographies and Syllabics equally provides a more level playing field for all Inuktitut speakers to communicate, regardless of the writing system that is used.

The Vision for Asuilaak – the Living Dictionary

The diagram following illustrates the potential for Asuilaak to become a common repository for Inuktitut terms and definitions, as well as a point of linkage to all of the other languages with which Inuktitut is associated in different regions. Presently, the Living Dictionary can work with Roman and Syllabic scripts. Because its underlying design makes use of Unicode, the international computer standard for encoding most of the written languages in the world, this facility can be extended to include the other writing systems in use in the circumpolar region.

The Circumpolar Living Dictionary



Future Development Plans

To realize the vision for the Living Dictionary, it is important that the concept be reviewed and supported by the Circumpolar community.

Should this occur, future activities might include

- Identifying Greenlandic dictionaries for loading into the Living Dictionary along with Danish or English definitions or equivalent terms.
- Linking the Greenlandic terms to existing terms from other dialects
- Development of a Danish and Kalaallisut user interface
- Validating the usefulness of transliteration between ICI Roman and Kalaallisut, and to identify changes which will improve its function
- Working with Inupiak and Yupik language representatives to incorporate their material into the Living Dictionary, using the same general process described for Greenlandic.
- Addition of a capabilities to support and store information in the Aipaitai Nunavik standard for Inuktitut writing.

The Promise of the Circumpolar Living Dictionary

Expanding the Living Dictionary to include Kalaallisut and other forms of Inuktitut can serve to strengthen the Inuktitut language in all its forms.

Identification of language commonalities can lead to development of standard usage for some terminology – an important development if Inuktitut is to keep pace with modern society. At the same time, the diversity of different dialects can be captured and preserved.

The repository of material provides a protected place in which to store older terminology acquired from elders, old word lists, etc. This historic usage forms the base for logical development of the language in the future.

The Living Dictionary environment is democratic and inclusive. All dialects and writing systems are included without prejudice. No group is forced to conform to any other. Because all dialects are linked through common terms in other languages, new opportunities for discovering common usage are created. Through the Internet, the Living Dictionary is potentially accessible to all interested parties. Where this is not practical, printed versions or electronic versions can be created.

Summary

Modern computer and communications technology has placed some powerful new tools at the disposal of the circumpolar organizations concerned with language preservation and promotion. The Living Dictionary is a working example of the potential to bring Inuktitut speakers together, to accommodate their differences, and to celebrate and build upon the common language history.

Appendix A Copy of Presentation

Asuilaak

The Living Dictionary

Inuktitut Dictionary Improvements

Fall 2001

The Living Dictionary

.Project Sponsored by

- Culture, Language, Elders, and Youth
- The Language Commissioner

.Dictionary of Terminology and Phrases

.Multilingual

- Syllabic Inuktitut
- Romanized Inuktitut
- English
- French

.A Central Location for

- Translations
 - Dialectic Variants
 - Commentary on Language Usage
 - Accessible to all Communities
 - Internet based
 - Quality moderated by Language specialists
-

The Living Dictionary

Logging On

- In order to search you need only to click on “Enter as Guest”
- You need to create an account and logon only if you want to communicate with the “Dictionary Administrator” about your suggestions for change.

Making Suggestions

- Users of Asuilaak are encouraged to submit suggestions for additions or changes to the data in Asuilaak.
 - This is how the dictionary can be really alive—growing from the contributions of those who speak and have a knowledge of the language
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Living Dictionary Today

- *Version 1 Operational since Oct 2000*
 - *Located at : www.livingdictionary.com*
 - *Winner of Gold Medal at GTEC October 15, 2001*
 - *Over 30,000 terms loaded*
 - *Linking process underway*
 - *Content*
 - Nunavut Arctic College glossaries—some still in progress
 - Dorais “Igloolik”, “1000 Inuit words”
 - Pond Inlet Dictionary
-

- Enhance material already in Asuilaak
 - Make use of collaborative function to expand terms and definitions
 - ***Improve performance***
 - ***CD version***
-

Future Projects for Nunavut

- ***Correcting loaded data***
 - ***Adding translations to loaded terms***
 - Pond Inlet
 - ***Adding Sound files***
 - ***Adding Diagrams***
 - ***Identifying new word lists and dictionaries***
 - ***Adding interactive teaching aids***
 - Verb paradigms
 - Word games
-

Possible Circumpolar Region Projects

- ***Add Greenlandic Dictionaries***
 - ***Link to English, French, Danish, Syllabics and ICI Roman***
 - ***Add Greenlandic and Danish User Interface***
 - ***Add Inupiaq***
 - ***Add Cyrillic and Yupik***
 - ***Consider support for Ai pai tai for Nunavik***
 - ***Add teaching tools***
 - Word games
 - Word components
-

Circumpolar Benefits

- ***Strengthen Inuktitut in all writing systems and dialects***
 - ***Support English learning in Greenland***
 - ***Make Inuktitut materials accessible to all Inuktitut speakers***
 - ***Provide historical record of language development***
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Issues

- ***ICC participation March 2002***
- ***Regular Greenland Contacts***