

DORAIS, Louis-Jacques, 2010 *The Language of the Inuit: Syntax, semantics and society in the Arctic*, Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 396 pages.

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## Recensions / Book Reviews

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DORAIS, Louis-Jacques

2010 *The Language of the Inuit: Syntax, semantics and society in the Arctic*,  
Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 396 pages.

Anyone who works on the Eskimo-Aleut languages professionally (linguists, translators, language teachers, etc.) should buy this book. Anyone who does research or policy affecting the north should also buy it, even if they study only ice. In addition, I would recommend it to all Canadian families. This book won the 2011 Canada Prize in the Humanities, an outstanding honour and exceptionally rare for a book on the topic of language. The book reaps the benefits of a lifetime of involvement with the language through research, personal experience (Dorais speaks it fluently), and keen interest in the work of others in this area. It is an encyclopaedia of the Inuit language, encompassing everything from language history to dialect differences, grammar, writing systems, statistics of use, and so on. Like any encyclopaedia, it will not tell you everything but will tell you enough to get a basic understanding of a topic and where to read more if you are interested. Ideally this book will soon be available as an e-book because it is difficult to carry a hard-covered book around on northern trips. An e-book would also be searchable.

Louis-Jacques Dorais is Canada's foremost academic authority on the Inuit language, and this book is clearly a labour of love and an example for the future. In it he details as much as possible about the language, at the same time showing that the language has lost a considerable number of speakers in a number of regions over recent decades, a direction which could, but need not, lead to significant loss of the language. The book has a very beautiful cover with a summer ice photo of a family leaving on or coming back from a boat trip near Quaqtaq, Nunavik (Arctic Québec). One might think that this book is quite accessible, looking at the photo and the flap quote from Michael Fortescue stating that it is designed for a "broad audience." Be forewarned, however; the book will be challenging for non-linguists, Inuit and non-Inuit alike. Rather than reading the whole book through from cover to cover, novices should pick and choose topics that either interest them especially or are not difficult for non-specialists. For example, Chapter 9 surveys the current status of the Inuit language through statistics from a number of census sources. This being said, no other book even begins to approximate the wealth of information it contains about one of the Arctic's most internationally known languages.

Unfortunately, the first chapter is not one of the easier ones. Although the title of the book is *The Language of the Inuit*, the first chapter aims to situate the Inuit language within its wider language family (Eskaleut) and to convince the reader that its

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cousin languages (Aleut and Yupik) are systematically similar. A reader not already familiar with an Inuit dialect may not feel prepared to appreciate the similarities between Central Alaskan Yup'ik, a member of the Yupik family, and South Baffin, a member of the Inuit family. In this chapter I encountered an orthographic symbol I had never seen before. This is & which I finally figured out is the italicised version of the ampersand & in some font, possibly Adobe Garamond. & is the symbol used in the Central Arctic (see Table 3 p. 181) to represent the sound of the voiceless lateral fricative [ɬ], which is found in many dialects of the Inuit language. I hope that in the next edition the symbol will be more familiar.

The second chapter discusses the Inuit language family as a whole. The family includes four major dialect groups: Inupiaq, Western Canadian Inuktitun, Eastern Inuktitut, and Greenlandic Kalaallisut. Thus the cover term is “Inuit language,” and not Inuktitut as I sometimes have used, to refer to the family. The chapter goes into the details of dialects within each of the four groups. Dialect differences are discussed in terms of phonology, lexicon, and grammar. Given the settlement into communities of the last half-century, many of these dialect differences may be in the process of disappearing, as the next generation has grown up together in one place. The chapter gives a good introduction to differences that allow one to gauge how western or eastern a speaker is just by listening to speech, e.g., /h/ in the west for eastern /s/. While Dorais persists in classifying the Baker Lake dialect as Eastern Canadian, he agrees that it is likely the result of both western and eastern dialects coming together in one place. As complete as this account is, there is still a need for more fieldwork to investigate grammatical differences across the many dialects that currently exist, and even phonological ones, for example the use of /z/ instead of /j/ in Cape Dorset.

Dorais shows us that only one dialect has a great number of lexical differences from the others. This is East Greenlandic, where entities are believed to have been extensively renamed because of a taboo against using a person's name after his/her death and also against referring to any entity that carries the same name. Despite differences, Dorais makes it clear how similar the dialects are overall. This has always been a strength of Dorais' research, the potential to use these materials for cross-dialect education, an important tool in language maintenance.

In Chapter 3, Dorais uses the Nunavik dialect to illustrate a mini-grammar. He tries to keep the discussion from getting too technical and he consigns sets of inflectional suffixes to appendices at the end of the book, so that they do not overwhelm the reader. Regarding grammatical terminology, Dorais gives his own terms as well as alternate terms used by other linguists. This is very helpful to the general reader. If one is comparing dialects and grammars, use of different terminology can be very confusing.

Chapter 4 discusses the history of the language from a pre-contact perspective. Our knowledge here is informed by archaeology and linguistic reconstruction, where earlier forms of the language are hypothesised based on existing forms. Dorais discusses the Uralo-Siberian hypothesis argued in Fortescue (1998), i.e., there once

was a larger and more ancient language family encompassing Siberian languages, Eskaleut, and Uralic languages. Dorais emphasises that this is a language hypothesis and that genetics are an independent issue.

Chapter 5 deals with early post-contact history. Dorais discusses attempts to transcribe the Inuit language by explorers and others. He looks among these materials for evidence of properties of an older language that can only be reconstructed. Unfortunately, the quality of the transcriptions is frequently unreliable for phonological purposes. The grammar seems very familiar, suggesting little change. We know that Greenlandic Kalaallisut has lost the dual over time yet at the same time we do not know the extent of use of the dual across dialects that still have it. My impression is that its use is usually obligatory where it is possible in the Nunatsiavut dialect (Labrador), but only optional in Qairnirmiut (a Baker Lake dialect). Given that so few languages in the world have a productive dual, this extent of use would be a good thing to find out soon.

Sometimes language change leaves behind relics. In some dialects, only a few words show the older plurals, e.g., *nutaraq* ‘child’; *nutaqqat* ‘children’ instead of the more regularised *nutarait* ‘children.’ We see this even in the English plural *children*, as compared with the regularised plural *parents*. Particularly interesting was the discussion on pp. 121-123 about the fact that phonological change has made certain inflections homophonous. Dorais shows that dialects have changed in different ways in response to the same problem. We might wonder whether these different responses themselves may lead to yet further dialect distinctions.

Chapter 6 deals with some semantic topics and cultural generalisations. Dorais talks about the number of words for snow. His count is around 25—more than in English but not in the hundreds. Dorais also points out that much of Inuktitut is based on binary opposition, which he calls dual; things are X and things that are not X. Finally, he discusses the rich oral literature of Inuktitut, some forms of which seem to have disappeared, e.g., singing duels between men. Yet there are new forms of cultural expression, such as through music and film.

In Chapter 7 Dorais provides an overview of the history of literacy and written literature. Writing systems have long raised challenging issues, with Inuit and linguists discussing which set of symbols is most appropriate. Dorais provides a good overview of the history of writing in the Inuit language and why there are three different writing systems just within Canada. He also points out the effects of different technologies. While syllabics is easy to learn and to write by hand, typewriters and computers initially made it more difficult. The topic of writing systems is an ongoing process, and many Inuit, especially the late and much venerated Jose Kusugak, have long desired a common writing system that would enable them to read each other’s writings.

Dorais does not mention the debate over representation of the uvular nasal sound (N), which is the reflex of uvular /ɾ/ before a nasal consonant in South Baffin. Some Inuit write this sound as ng in syllabics, but this is confusing to non-speakers because it is distinct from the real ng, a velar nasal. Dorais discusses Inuit written literature,

which is rich in Greenland but more rare in Canada. On the other hand, Canadian Inuit have excelled in broadcasting, beginning with IBC (Inuit Broadcasting Corporation) and movies, e.g., *Atanarjuat*.

Chapter 8 is the most depressing. It is about language contact and bilingualism but really describes the Anglicisation of the Arctic. As Dorais points out, the next step must be for the school systems to provide a full range of education in Inuktitut so that there will not be numerous important areas where Inuit are effectively obliged to speak English rather than Inuktitut.

The topic of Chapter 9 is the current status of Inuktitut across the Arctic, especially Inuit Nunaat, the areas in Canada where the language is spoken. Dorais uses census results from Statistics Canada and other sources to probe for changes, all the while reminding the reader that individual statistics are possibly faulty for a number of reasons. Still trends can be gleaned from them. He zeros in on home use of the language as a key indicator. In this chapter Dorais also surveys the political status of the language in different regions. Most Canadians are unaware that in 2008 the Nunavut government passed the Official Languages Act, which makes the Inuit language official along with English and French, and the Inuit Language Protection Act, which affords support for the Inuit language. Dorais suggests that even though much political talk supports the language, there is lack of substantive political action in this area. He concludes that only with genuine political autonomy will language thrive as part of a package of overall socio-economic improvement.

Chapter 10 concludes with some wonderful and thoughtful descriptions of the role of human language in Inuktitut by Taamusi Qumaq (1991), translated by Dorais. Dorais ponders the relation between language, identity, and culture. Can a culture be maintained if the language is lost? Dorais hints that the answer is no. Yet a substantial number of Inuit have already lost their language, especially in the west. Its ultimate fate will probably depend on how Inuktitut-speaking Inuit will interact with English-speaking Inuit.

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EVANS, Michael Robert  
2010 *The Fast Runner: Filming the Legend of Atanarjuat*, Lincoln and London,  
University of Nebraska Press, 162 pages.

*The Fast Runner: Filming the Legend of Atanarjuat* is the first in a series of books titled *Indigenous Films* edited by Randolph Lewis and David Delgado Shorter and published by the University of Nebraska Press. The series addresses other films by or about Native peoples, including *Dances with Wolves*, *Black Robe*, *Pocahantas*, and more. The goal is to support classroom instruction and, more broadly, “to challenge the Eurocentrism that often afflicts the study of cinema, and to initiate conversations about the promises and challenges of indigenous media now emerging around the globe” (p. xi). *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* (released in 2002) was chosen as the subject of the first book in the series not only because of its box office success, but also because it has inspired so many reviews and commentaries by authors, scholars, and film critics.

*Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* is the first feature film of its kind and the first to be entirely in Inuktitut. It is also the first of a trilogy of Canadian films produced by Isuma Igloolik Productions. *Atanarjuat*, directed by Zacharias Kunuk, is based on an Inuit legend that is still retold in the Arctic. The film is set in the Igloolik region of 500 years ago, and jealousy is the motive leading to the high point: a man’s escape from a murderous gang by running alone, naked, and without provisions across the ice. The second film in the trilogy, *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* (2006), also directed by Kunuk, is based on the writings of Danish explorer Knud Rasmussen who visited the Igloolik area with Therkel Mathiassen and Peter Freuchen in 1922. The third film, *Before Tomorrow* (2009), is based on the novel *Før Morgendagen* by Danish author Jørn Riel. Set in 1840, it is about a boy and his grandmother who find the others in their camp dead of disease brought by white men<sup>1</sup>.

Michael Robert Evans, who also wrote a chapter on *The Fast Runner* for his book *Isuma: Inuit Video Art* (2008), tells us much about the film, and readers are likely to wish that he had covered the complete trilogy. *The Fast Runner: Filming the Legend of Atanarjuat* includes such useful materials as a chart showing the film’s characters and family relationships, a pronunciation guide, two maps, a gallery of nine black-and-white photographs, a bibliography, and an index. Chapter One is a short historical background, including the introduction of video into this region and its use as an art form. Chapter Eight describes the founding of Nunavut in order to set the historical context for the development of video as an art form in the north. There is also a comparison with similar developments in video production in Australia. Chapters Three and Four further describe Igloolik Isuma Productions and the lives of its

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<sup>1</sup> All three films are available at <http://www.isuma.tv/fastrunnertrilogy>.