

Labrador Life

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A home for Rigolet Inuktut

story and photos by
Mark Turner and Douglas Warram

Often, articles and reports that address the subject of language loss begin with the same introduction. First, the author will present abstract statistics about the speed at which languages are disappearing across the planet and, second, those statistics are given meaning by a few vague ideas about the cultural knowledge these languages contain.

Such an approach not only reinforces the idea that the global phenomenon of language loss is inevitable, but it suggests that we are powerless to stop it because the types of knowledge embedded in these languages are incompatible with a globalizing world. This is a view we reject. Rigolet Inuktut is disappearing, and it matters.

Depending upon whom you speak with, Rigolet Inuktut is either a dialect or subdialect of Labrador Inuttitut or, to others still, a distinct language from what has been standardized as

Labrador Inuttitut. This last claim is perhaps a difficult one to maintain, as Inuktut, like Tarramiutut spoken in eastern Nunavik or Kalaallisut spoken in Greenland, is largely mutually intelligible with other dialects or languages within the Inuktitut-speaking world.

For those that are familiar with the sounds, but do not speak northern Labrador Inuttitut, Inuktut is immediately audibly distinguished by the presence of a number of sound clusters that one does not normally hear in the other Labrador Inuit communities. Inuktut *nakungmek* 'thank you' becomes *nakum-mek* in the other communities; *Kablunâk* 'non-Inuk' becomes *Kallunâk*; and *tuktuk* 'caribou' becomes *tuttuk*.

In other cases, one finds entirely different words in Inuktut than one finds elsewhere in Labrador. *Sagalikitak*, for example, denotes a butterfly in the Rigolet dialect, where one would almost always hear, in reference to the same creature, *tongn-gaviak* in the other communities.

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language and culture

On the other hand, one can certainly find relatives of *sagalikitak* in far-flung locales (in Greenland, in Kalaallisut, as *taqaleqisaaq*, and in Alaska, in North Slope Iñupiaq, as *taqalakisaq*).

That it is known as *Rigolet Inuktut*, and not merely Inuktut, reveals something about the confinement of the dialect. Rigolet is, itself, something of a misnomer. The last fluent speakers were dispersed throughout Groswater Bay and the eastern end of Lake Melville. Rigolet serves as shorthand to distinguish a region distinct from both Upper Lake Melville and southern Labrador. It is believed that Inuktut was the dialect commonly spoken by Inuit living south of Cape Harrison. However, with the northern encroachment of European settlers along the south coast, and with an established Moravian presence north of Cape Harrison, the Rigolet area came to serve as the home for Inuit that, at the very least, resisted linguistic integration.

As scholars such as Hans Rollmann and Lisa Rankin have made clear, actual contact amongst all groups was more or less consistent since the arrival of Europeans. What is important to recognize is that the speakers of Inuktut insisted on living in spaces that could be perceived, described and lived within according to their own terms.

The speakers of the dialect understood that Inuktut had a particular value relative to the spaces they inhabited. Bucking the current trend, in the face of eighteenth century globalization, Inuktut speakers opted to maintain their dialect, a decision that reveals a great deal about the value of the knowledge embedded



Hubert Palliser



Phyllis Mucko



Susie Norton

within it. It was a dialect that, historically, was used to describe environmental phenomena as far south as the upper north shore of Quebec. Accordingly, it was a dialect well suited to describing the highly varied environmental phenomena of the Rigolet area. Inuktut is shaped by spaces both unique and foreign to the contemporary Inuit experience. If nothing else, the environmental knowledge embedded within Inuktut stands to have significant implications for Inuit living within spaces experiencing complex changes.

In one sense, the decline of Inuktut can be attributed to its speakers' commitment to a life on the land. In the absence of a centrally-located Inuktut-speaking community, no shared written version of the language would take root. And as people either elected or were forced to abandon their lives along the shores of eastern Lake Melville and Groswater Bay during the second half of the twentieth century, there were few opportunities to speak Inuktut in their new homes at Rigolet, the communities of Upper Lake Melville, or in some cases, much further beyond. Linguists such as Louis-Jacques

Dorais and Alana Johns recognized the sharp decline of Inuktut between the 1970s and 1990s. Their important work on the uniqueness of the dialect would help to catalyse local responses. A language committee at Rigolet (InoKatigekuluit) and one at North West River (UKausituKavutinnik utittisigasu-alinnik) were established. In addition to acting as advocates for Inuktut and Inuktitut more generally, both committees engaged in vital Inuktut documentation projects with the assistance of the Nunatsiavut Government's Torngâsok Cultural Centre, recording speakers in audio and video formats. In the absence of written materials, these recordings form the foundation of the surviving record of the dialect.

By the time the Torngâsok Cultural Centre launched its ambitious Rigolet Inuktut Documentation Project in 2011, only three self-identified speakers of the dialect remained: Phyllis Mucko of North West River, Hubert (Hubbard) Palliser of Back Bay and Susie Norton of Kansas City, sister of Inuktut champion and community leader Mary Adams.

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Over the course of five days, the trio met at the Labrador Interpretation Centre at North West River, speaking on a range of subjects facilitated by Bertha Holeiter. The materials generated from this event constitute the bulk of the surviving record. This event would prove timely. In 2012, Phyllis Mucko passed away, followed shortly thereafter by Hubert Palliser.

But language death is a complicated thing. It is not as absolute as we might otherwise think. Even in Rigolet, there remains some understanding of Inuktitut. InoKatigekuluit, for instance, have remained committed to documenting and advocating the dialect. Among other places, their efforts are most apparent in the Inuktitut curriculum at the school, Northern Lights Academy. There are the elders for whom Inuktitut was once the language of home. And then, of course, there are the children of those elders who have picked up words, phrases and expressions through their families. Some sense of Inuktitut remains, however abstract and removed it might be.

Our belief is that these deep roots can be directed towards both safeguarding Inuktitut within the community and, in time, promoting Inuktitut more broadly. The Rigolet Inuktitut Living

Archive Project seeks to achieve these goals by way of a broad coalition. Made up of representatives from the Rigolet Historical Society, the Rigolet Inuit Community Government, My Word: Digital Storytelling and Media Lab, the Torngâsok Cultural Centre and InoKatigekuluit, the project committee is working to develop a comprehensive audio-visual archive of Inuktitut which, in addition to preservation, will be used for education, cultural programming and interpretive purposes. Rather than develop a traditional archive that by its nature tends to be closed, our idea is that the surviving record of Inuktitut can and should be directed towards ends that actively engage people, to promote its use. This does not necessarily mean learning Inuktitut. Instead, it means learning the whole range of things Inuktitut can teach us, whether that comes in the form of descriptions of sea ice conditions or historical attitudes towards the settlement of Rigolet.

Approaching the project as an archive has also allowed for important training opportunities within the community. With the support of the Torngâsok Cultural Centre, in the fall of 2014 Mary Ellen Wright, the Professional Development and Outreach Officer of the Association of Newfoundland and Labrador Archives, travelled to Rigolet to provide basic archival training for each of our community partners. Additional training is set to take place this year. Generous support from the International Grenfell Association has provided the necessary technological infrastructure of a networked archive in place, complete with offsite backup, along with equipment to continue to capture the dialect and to create new audio-visual materials. And Memorial University's Labrador Institute has provided assistance for vital transcription and translation of existing resources.

In the year-and-a-half since we commenced our project, we have made advances in both creating a home for Rigolet and finding ways for Inuktitut to enrich its home. To date, it is work that has taken place largely at an organizational level, in getting our resources to a point where they can be used. Our objective now is to make that work come from Inuktitut itself, from the various types of knowledge embedded in the dialect. It is, ultimately, work bound as much by our imaginations as it is to our ability to listen. †



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