

The Arctic Indigenous Language Initiative: Assessment, Promotion, and Collaboration

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Abstract

An indigenous-driven project, the Arctic Indigenous Language Initiative (AILI), is working to reverse language shift through active engagement and collaboration throughout the circumpolar region. The circumpolar Arctic is undergoing radical climate change and equally radical cultural disruption. Language shift is an integral part of cultural disruption in this region: of the 50 or so indigenous languages spoken in the circumpolar Arctic, current assessments indicate that all but Kalaallisut (West Greenlandic; iso-639 kal) are endangered. Arctic indigenous peoples are perhaps uniquely organized within the world today in a way that potentially empowers them to take action. Their position as permanent participants on the Arctic Council gives them a political voice to leverage change. The trans-national status presents opportunities for collaboration and challenges due to the large geographic distances and the implications of working with and across differing demographics, disparate cultures and political systems. The present paper describes the ongoing status of the AILI and the potential models it provides for indigenous-defined and indigenous-driven language initiatives.

Introduction

While the particulars of any given language situation change from community to community, the general challenges that people face in language revitalization and maintenance are shared by many. These include the difficulties of finding resources (both human and financial); the problems in working with multiple varieties; and managing multiple opinions about how to move forward. Moreover, we often find ourselves striving not only to revitalize a language, but also to combat those very factors which have led to language shift in the first place.

An indigenous-driven project, the Arctic Indigenous Language Initiative (AILI), endeavors to reverse language shift through active engagement and collaboration throughout the circumpolar region. Arctic indigenous peoples are perhaps uniquely organized within the world today in a way that potentially empowers them to take action. The eight Arctic nation states are organized into the Arctic Council, an intergovernmental political council consisting of the eight member states (Canada, Denmark (including Greenland and the Faroe Islands), Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russian Federation, Sweden, and the United States). The Arctic Council includes the *Permanent Participants*, the six indigenous organizations which represent Arctic peoples: Aleut International Association; the Arctic Athabaskan Council; Gwich'in Council International; the Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC); the Saami Council; and the Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North (RAIPON).

The AILI is defined and determined by the *Permanent Participants*, stemming from 2008 when they convened to establish an action plan. This meeting laid the foundation of the AILA, a collaborative effort between researchers, representatives from Arctic Indigenous organizations and Arctic governments, language activists, and policy makers. While the long-term goal is to achieve vitality and sustainability for Arctic indigenous languages, the first measures center around assessment in three key areas: (1) Arctic language policy; (2) language pedagogy and education; and (3) language vitality.

The present paper outlines the project as a whole and provides specific information about how the group is addressing the following concerns and goals: the creation of indigenously defined assessment metrics; the establishment of feedback mechanisms from the community, including community-based (peer) review of findings; the role of academic linguists and community members; the mechanisms for creating policy changes at all levels; and the measures planned to turn the findings of the assessment teams into action to promote Arctic indigenous language vitality.

Background

In 2008 in Tromsø the Permanent Participants of the Arctic Council convened to discuss the issues of indigenous language vitality. This was the first meeting ever called by the Permanent Participants themselves, and that fact alone underscores the importance of language to Arctic indigenous peoples. The meeting resulted in a report to the Arctic Council with requests for support for a variety of initiatives to bolster the

vitality of Arctic indigenous languages and cultures (Tulloch 2012).

In response to a request from the Arctic Council for more information and for more focused requests, a second group was convened in Ottawa in June 2012. This meeting, the *Arctic Languages Vitality Workshop*, included researchers, representatives from Arctic Indigenous organizations and Arctic governments, language activists, and policy makers. The overarching goal of the Workshop was to set a plan for indigenous-driven initiatives on Arctic Language Vitality. Although the long-term goals are to achieve vitality and sustainability for Arctic indigenous languages, an intermediate goal was established to have a fuller report ready for the Arctic Council meeting in 2014.

Specifically, the Workshop addressed the following areas (adapted from Tulloch 2012):

1. *Networking and Collaboration*

- Share existing research, policy and practice
- Discuss best practices in collaborative community-based research in Arctic contexts
- Establish parameters for effective inter-agency and international collaboration

2. *Framework for Assessing Vitality*

- Develop a shared, indigenous-driven and academically-grounded framework and method(s) for assessing and documenting the vitality of each Arctic indigenous language
- Identify areas for in-depth case studies of language vitality in the Arctic and its contributing factors

3. *Communicating and Sharing Data*

- Plan for the dissemination of reliable and comparable data for the status of all Arctic languages in a centralized, accessible format
- Facilitate local, regional, and international sharing of best practices in addressing Arctic indigenous language vitality

Several key points become clear from this summary. The project is first and foremost defined as an indigenous-driven initiative, formulated on indigenous terms. At the same time, the participants view collaboration with multiple partners and defined in multiple ways, as central to the success of the project. Such collaborations include partnerships with academic (and often non-indigenous) linguists, policy makers and political leaders. Second, the work is founded on a commitment to indigenous-driven and academically-rigorous methods, metrics and approaches. For an outsider like myself, this raises several questions. What does it mean to be indigenously defined? How can these two aspects—indigenous values and broad collaborations—come together without conflict? How

do indigenously defined metrics combine with Western science? In the remainder of the paper I explore these questions, along with the opportunities and challenges they bring. But first it is important to have a better understanding of the overall project.

Project Design

The scope of this project is breath-taking: it encompasses the circumpolar Arctic, eight nation states, and some fifty or so indigenous languages. The circumpolar Arctic is defined differently by different parties; in its narrowest definition, it consists of the region north of the Arctic Circle (66°33'44" N); more broadly it includes those areas north of the tree line in the Northern Hemisphere. It is a vast area surrounding the North Pole, consisting primarily of the frozen Arctic Ocean, the Arctic land masses include islands and the northern parts of the European, Asian, and North American continents. Its total area is 14,056 million km² (or 5.4 million mi²), again, made up largely of frozen ocean. This region is one of the most sparsely populated areas on the planet, and yet it is home to a large number of different indigenous groups, varying in population size from quite small (as in the Itelmen of Siberia, with perhaps 80 speakers from a total estimated population of 3200, 2010 All-Russian Census) to quite large (as the Inuit, who total approximately 120,000 across the Arctic). Overall vitality of the languages varies as well, and the parameters of this vitality, the factors involved in increased or decreased vitality, are at the heart of the project. In the Arctic, language is a recognized factor in overall well-being and thus language vitality is recognized to be an essential component of overall well-being.

The overall governance of the project is important as it is designed to ensure that it is an indigenous project, based on broad consultation throughout the Arctic, but still able to move forward and make decisions. At the request of the Arctic Council, ICC Canada is responsible for managing the project, with President Duane Smith overseeing the initiative. The Steering Committee is advisory to the President. It is chaired by Carl Chr. Olsen, puju, of ICC Greenland and a member of the Sustainable Development Working Group of the Arctic Council, and consists of representatives from each of the Permanent Participants: Sally Swetzof (Aleut International Association); Colleen Henry (Arctic Athabaskan Council); Grant Sullivan (Gwich'in Council International); Vera Metcalf (Inuit Circumpolar Council); Fenya AAAA (Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North); and Gunn-Britt Retter (Saami Council). As project coordinator, I report to ICC Canada President Duane Smith and also keep the Steering Committee informed of progress in the committee work, and consult with them as needed. The organization here underscores the

importance of consultation and collaboration at every stage of the project. Success depends on close working relationships, open communication, commitment to the project's goals, and a large measure of trust and respect.

It is important to keep in mind the larger goal of this initiative is to promote the vitality of Arctic indigenous languages. In some instances this means revitalizing the language and in others it means adding measures for maintenance, depending on the overall vitality of the language. But how to decide? As a result of intensive discussion in Tromsø, the group identified three initial areas to focus their energies, all centered around assessment. The rationale here was clear: in order to bolster vitality, one needs first to understand the current status of each language. This was broken up into three overlapping categories: vitality assessment; language policy and planning; and teaching materials and language acquisition. The initial steps for each committee center around assessment of existing resources, materials and speakers, but and the first years of the project are focused on this effort. Each committee elected a chair or co-chairs. Indigenous participants and a few non-indigenous researchers (like myself) are currently working to establish a specific set of goals and strategies for moving forward. These will be presented as a set of recommendations to the Project Steering Committee, who will ultimately make recommendations to ICC Canada President Duane Smith.

All work on the project is founded on the basic principle that the initiative must be indigenously driven; its goals and parameters indigenously defined; and all work must be conducted according to indigenous principles. At the same time the Permanent Participants recognize the need to engage linguists (both indigenous and not); they see the need for expertise in language. The involvement of policy makers and political leaders is equally important. These two core principles have the potential to be in conflict with one another and are the focus of the next two sections.

Collaborations

There are multiple levels of collaborations in this project. First and foremost is the pan-Arctic Indigenous collaboration among speakers of the same and different languages, living in different geographic regions. These people live in eight nation states, all represented in the Arctic Council, and thus live under and with very different political systems.

Collaboration with policy makers and political leaders is seen as integral to the success of the project. The Policy Committee, which is currently in the process of collecting information about existing language policies, at all levels, from international to national to local. The next step is to synthesis the information in order to make it possible to evaluate it, and then the plan is to present recommendations to the Arctic Circle. The rationale is to leverage the Arctic Council to put

pressure on/to get the governments of each Arctic state to implement and enforce language policies that promote Arctic indigenous language vitality. Engaging policy makers during the process is important to foster their commitment to the goals of the project. It is not, however, surprising to see that political leaders in different parts of the world have to date responded differently to the project.

Principles & Parameters

Background discussion in the workshops identified the following parameters and principles for AILI:

1. Development, implementation and reporting of the assessment must be indigenous-driven.
2. The level at which assessment is done (language, dialect, community) must be relevant to speakers and community members as well as to policy developers and programmers.
3. There is need for a framework that can account for vitality at the higher ends of the spectrum
4. Assessment must be based on indigenous or community-defined factors; see *Vitality Assessment Metrics* (below).
5. Assessment must allow for the dynamic nature of languages – new vocabulary, new domains, changing with different influences, youth and elders use it differently, etc.
6. Assessment mechanisms must account for revitalization (i.e. increases in vitality) as well as shift and loss (decreases in vitality).
7. Assessment should take into account impacts and influences on language and of language on well-being.
8. Terminology in assessments must be clearly defined (For example, if a speaker is assessed as being “conversant” in a language, what does that mean?)
9. Community members must have opportunities to provide input into assessments and to peer review findings
10. Assessment protocols should balance the desire for details to account for complex communities with the desire for a snapshot view of vitality in each community across the Arctic.

Vitality Assessment Metrics

At the core of the assessment process is the assessment of language vitality. This is not a new idea, and yet the difference here is that such vitality is to be defined on indigenous principles and measured by indigenously defined metrics. What does that look like? We are in the process of establishing consensus on these issues. We see the need for both qualitative and quantitative assessment data. Quantitative data on language vitality is currently available in a number of formats, collected

by a variety of compilers with different methodologies, metrics and aimed at different audiences. The two most widely used databases are the *Ethnologue* (Lewis, 2013) and UNESCO's *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger* (Moseley, 2010). The *Atlas* ranks languages on a five-point scale (extinct/critically endangered/severely endangered/definitely endangered/vulnerable) and provides brief information about resources on the language. The most recent edition of the *Ethnologue* greatly expands the assessment metrics in a number of ways. Specifically, it includes a category of rising vitality, to take into account languages undergoing revitalization; a category for official recognition (e.g. statutory vs. de facto recognition at varying levels); and notably includes a metric for "special status," which encompasses such categories as: (1) *dispersed*, which would be applied to diasporic or immigrant languages, used in one region in all domains and not promoted in the region where some speakers live; and (2) *second language only*, for a language that is no longer a language of primary communication.

The *Catalogue of Endangered Languages* (Campbell et al., 2013), currently under construction, ranks languages on five levels of endangerment (critically endangered / severely endangered / endangered / threatened / vulnerable / safe) with extinction occupying a separate category and not included. Assessment of level of endangerment is determined on the basis of a combination of four weighted factors: intergenerational transmission, absolute number of speaker, speaker trends, and domains of use, with intergenerational transmission weighted twice as much as each of the other factors. One of the more innovative aspects of the *Catalogue* is that it also calculates the certainty of the assessment, based on the number of factors that are known and entered into the calculation of endangerment level. This is a solid first step in flagging languages for which more information is needed. At the same time, this measure does not take into account the reliability or accuracy of existing information.

There are some analyses specific to the Arctic. The *Arctic Biodiversity Assessment* report contains a chapter devoted to *Linguistic Diversity* (Barry et al., 2013) which compiles existing data on Arctic Indigenous language vitality based primarily on census data. This particular report is based on the most current data available and presents the Arctic as a whole. Census data is notoriously problematic, yet at present it is the most reliable data available. Basing her analysis on a combination of data from Statistics Canada and other sources, Norris (2013) compiles more nuanced data on Canada and provides what is currently the most comprehensive overview of Arctic Indigenous language vitality for a single, specific region.

All of these databases are essentially quantitative in nature. Even when they take into account the impact of

different factors, they essentially reduce vitality to a single figure or set of figures. This synthesis, perhaps necessary for reasons of presentation, oversimplifies great complexity. Hill (2002) presents compelling arguments against enumeration. But in my experience, the Indigenous participants of AILI do want numerical data, but they want better (more accurate, more up-to-date, more nuanced) and different, qualitative data. For the circumpolar Arctic, the quality of census data varies greatly from region to region. For example, there is general consensus that the Canadian data are generally reliable, while the data from the Russian Federation less so. Moreover, speaker counts are based on self-reporting of fluency, and such self-assessment does not provide an accurate picture of language proficiency.

To the best of my knowledge, none of the existing databases rely on indigenous metrics. But what do such metrics look like? To date, AILI participants envision that a thorough survey of Arctic indigenous language vitality will include what they call a *profile* for each language. Recognizing variation within and across speaker groups (villages, households, communities), AILI hopes to collect as much data about this variation as possible. An ideal *language profile* includes the following information, both quantitative and qualitative, in a multi-faceted analysis:

Language Profile:

1. *Language vitality*: assessment of language vitality involves the development of an indigenously defined tool to be piloted and fine-tuned over the course of the initial phases of the project, collecting quantitative demographic data and qualitative data as outlined in this section. Specific key areas are:

proficiency: assessment of language proficiency of individual speakers with regard to different domains, different settings; proficiency levels should be defined according to indigenous measures, with locally developed tools, and should be discussed in transparent, understandable terminology

language networks: obtaining knowledge about the networks of use of a language as an important step to bolstering existing networks and creating new ones

multilingualism: many households are multilingual (often using more than one indigenous language), there is very little hard data on this aspect of the ecology of Arctic indigenous languages.

2. *Attitudes*: assessment of attitudes at all geopolitical and social levels (international, national, regional, local, individual); at all generations; attitudes of different social sectors (speakers and non-speakers, indigenous and not, with specific information about

language attitudes: toward the indigenous language(s), the national language(s), and any other language(s) of wider communication; attitudes of all

parties about the target (indigenous) language, including attitudes toward standardization and other language survival strategies

policy attitudes: toward language policies specifically, education policies more general, and attitudes toward government

cultural attitudes: toward the participation in indigenous culture events and activities

3. *Language acquisition resources:* the goal is to create a study of how Arctic languages are taught and learned. An important aspect of this study is the goal to not centralize the work, but rather collect fine-grained data about differing practices in differing regions. This assessment should include information about:

pedagogies and realities: how languages are taught, models of instruction; with an assessment of state of knowledge of teaching and learning

aspects of formal education: daycares; preschools, daycares, schools, number of contact hours, levels in the school

teacher qualifications: teacher training programs, models; fluency in the target language

pedagogical materials: existence of materials and materials development

reference materials: dictionaries, reference grammars, digital materials

Finally, an important aspect of AILI is the peer-review system. AILI participants feel strongly that assessment evaluations should be subject to peer-review, i.e. review by the communities which have participated in the assessment process. This goes far beyond the idea of giving back to participants; rather, it places the review process directly in their control.

Policy & Planning

A central consideration of the project is to engage political leaders and policy makers to affect changes in language policy that will foster the use of indigenous languages. This is not to suggest that the participants believe that language policy in and of itself will change language vitality; there is widespread recognition that it is just one of a number of necessary measures. As Romaine (2002, 204) points out, "...without additional measures to support teacher training, materials development, and a variety of other enabling factors, policy statements which merely permit, encourage, or recommend the use of a language in education or in other domains of public life cannot be very effective."

At present, there are several international instruments which fall into the category of recommendations or encouragement: the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, Article 13 (United Nations 2007); UNESCO's *Convention for the*

Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (UNESCO 2003), and *ILO Convention No. 169* (International Labour Organization 1989) all guarantee the right of indigenous peoples to the use of their indigenous language, including education in that language. But none of these measures is enforceable.

Some Arctic regions currently have more local legislation in place which at least theoretically enables them to promote their indigenous language(s). The project is currently in the throes of collecting such policies and examining which are effective, which are not. Some policies operate at the national level, as in Greenland, where the institution of Self Government on 21 June 2009 included language legislation, although many details have yet to be worked out. The existence of a language policy does not mean that it will have much impact: both Norway and Sweden have Sámi language policies but preliminary analyses suggest that they differ in terms of actual effect. Other policies operate on a more regional level, such as the Nunavut Official Languages Act and the Inuit Languages Protection Act (passed in 2008) or Senate Bill 130 in the State of Alaska (US). There are language policies in place throughout the Arctic, and yet language shift continues unabated. One goal is to determine which kinds of policies are effective and useful, and which detrimental. It has been pointed out by many (e.g. Romaine, 2002 and Sallabank, 2011) that the absence of a language policy is generally not a benign state vis-à-vis endangered indigenous languages; the absence of a policy that specifically promotes them is in fact a policy which fosters language shift and loss.

Yet one of the challenges in evaluating existing language policies is that so many different variables are involved in every situation that it is nearly impossible to determine if the success (or failure) of a language program is the result of a policy or not. Before attempting to assess the efficacy of such policies, however, a basic first step is to ascertain which policies exist where. Thus at present, the AILI Policy Committee is in the process of gathering information on existing language policies at all levels, from international to village. Ultimately the goal is to leverage the power of the Arctic Council to advocate for language policies which are not only supportive of indigenous languages but also carry the resources (financial, legislative) to be enforced. Sallabank (2011) distinguishes between *language policy*—a top-down, official policy toward languages, with principles, positions and strategies—from *language planning*—bottom-up, grass-roots measures with concrete measures and practices, noting that the distinction between the two is not absolute. This captures the spirit of the AILI program: using grass-roots measures to affect language change on the ground, while simultaneously creating an atmosphere that is hospitable to the use of indigenous languages. There is widespread recognition that the two must proceed hand-in-hand. Language planning initiatives, in the absence

of legal support, can quickly be dismantled. By the same token, positive language policies are vacuous without the work on the ground to promote language use.

What is innovative about AILI's approach to language policy is the commitment of participants to engage and collaborate with policy makers from the onset of the project. Political representatives from various Arctic nations attended the Tromsø and Ottawa workshops, and the Chair of the Steering Committee (Carl Christien Olsen, puju) regularly reports on the progress of AILI to the Sustainable Development Working Group of the Arctic Council.

Challenges & Opportunities

The magnitude of the task at hand is overwhelming. A comprehensive assessment of each individual Arctic language as outlined here is an enormous undertaking, and there are a number of challenges to seeing this project to completion. They can be divided into the following three categories: time, people and resources.

Time pressures

On one level, time is of the essence for a number of independent reasons. First and foremost is the very basic fact that language shift is occurring very rapidly in many parts of the Arctic, at least anecdotally. Rapid language shift is generally defined as shift that occurs across a single generation; it would seem fair to say that the current situation in the Arctic suggests that such rapid shift is more widespread than previously known, and possibly more accelerated than anticipated, as speakers seem to be abandoning their languages within the course of just a few years.

At the same time, conducting a comprehensive assessment is itself a prolonged task, and the vitality assessment is just an important first step toward the actual goal of this initiative: promoting and sustaining use of the indigenous languages. We are aware of the race against the clock, while being mindful of the time it takes to do the work properly.

Human resources & collaborations

One of the strengths of this project is that the work centers around deep collaborations between indigenous participants, community leaders, academic linguists, and policy makers. Much has been written by linguists, for linguists, about the challenges of being an outsider and ethical work processes (see, for example, Dwyer, 2010 or Rice, 2006). These discussions center around ethical considerations of the linguist. There are, however, several purely logistical challenges that are often overlooked and which have been important in forging Arctic collaborations. First, there are great differences in work compensation and work expectations. Many of the indigenous collaborators are either salaried

employees, working for their local governments or tribes, and work regular hours, take regular vacations, and so on. At the same time, even more indigenous participants have no obvious source of income, or no income related to the project, and need to be paid to do any work. Projects like AILI generally do not have obvious sources of income, and what money can be brought into the project generally goes to the development of materials, meetings, and In contrast, academic linguists are paid by their home institutions, usually universities, to conduct research. They tend to not need salary, or at most need summer salary, but the base assumption is that the university is paying the academic a salary so as to conduct research. As an academic I often squeeze in my research after my teaching, in the evenings, on weekends, or during time which for non-academics counts as vacations. That is, we work precisely during the time that other people have designated as non-work time. The situation is exasperated by the fact that many non-academics take long summer vacations, which is precisely the time when academics are free to conduct research. By the same token, university-based linguists tend to be completely inaccessible at key times of the year according to the academic calendar: at the beginning and ends of terms and, critically, at the end of the academic year, right when non-academics want to storm a project before they leave for summer vacation. The demands on my schedule from my university and students have surprised and dismayed my collaborators more than once.

Finally, expectations about what counts as scholarship and what counts as results differ tremendously between these groups. Policy makers want reports; academics want peer-reviewed publications; indigenous participants want educational materials. Collaborative work results in multi-authored works of any kind; many of the AILI reports are produced without any indication of authorship. But academic linguists—and the administrators who oversee their salaries and promotion—want and need “credit” for the work they have done. Of course I am oversimplifying the situation, but these are clear patterns.

Resources

Human resources are critical to the success of this project, and commitment at the ground level to learn, speak, and teach the indigenous languages is a central concern. Financial resources are equally vital: funding is needed to create, test, disseminate pedagogical materials; to train teachers; to share best practices. For many participants it has been very helpful to share past experiences, both unhappy memories and successes, in order to be able to heal from a painful past and move forward to revitalize and promote indigenous languages and culture. Many of these costs are well-known to people engaged in revitalization projects elsewhere.

What distinguishes this initiative is its circumpolar aspect: language communities throughout the Arctic are engaged and, as discussed here, their engagement is crucial to the overall conceptualization of the project. Moreover, the shared Arctic experience is a source of energy and synergy for many. Connecting people in the Arctic is expensive, whether in person or virtually. For live meetings to take place, there are great distances to traverse. Travel is expensive, lodging is expensive. Yet virtual connections can also be cost-prohibitive. Internet access is unknown in many parts of the Arctic, and those speakers whose knowledge of a language is the most robust are often the least likely to own computers.

Conclusion

What is generally called *Community-Based Research* (Czaykowska-Higgins, 2009) has arguably become the politically correct research model for linguistic research on endangered languages, if not all languages. The AILI project goes at least one step beyond that model: it is not community-based but indigenous-initiated and indigenous-driven. Although the Arctic indigenous languages represent a number of genetically and typologically diverse languages spanning equally diverse political systems, they have much in common by virtue of living in the Arctic. Their union as Permanent Participants of the Arctic Council situates them in a strong position to lobby for their rights. There is a strong sense among the Permanent Participants that there is strength in numbers, and that by virtue of their collective .

AILI is founded on a model committed to deep collaborations of an international scale: collaborations with different Arctic indigenous peoples, with non-indigenous academic researchers, and with policy makers and planners. It provides a potential model for other groups, not only to leverage their combined forces to affect change, but also as a collaborative method to combine the best practices and diverse expertise of different parties and stakeholders to promote language vitality.

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