

Language attitudes and use of the Sheshatshiu Innu: Preliminary findings^{*}

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The Innu of Labrador are one of an increasingly few number of Aboriginal groups in which children learn an Aboriginal language at home and enter school speaking little to no English. Research on language attitudes and use in other Canadian Aboriginal communities shows that most Aboriginal languages are declining and that the majority of these languages are regarded as less prestigious than the majority language. A survey was administered in Fall 2004 to determine if this is the case in the Innu community at Sheshatshiu, Labrador. Preliminary analysis indicates that Innu-aimun (their language) is deeply valued by the majority of the community, despite recognition of the utility of English and of the possibility of community-wide language loss. Also, approximately half of the participants were aware of language change, and of these most viewed this change negatively. Overall, the Sheshatshiu Innu have definite opinions about their language and its use, indicating that it is a valuable and vital part of the community.

1. Introduction

It is a well-attested fact that Aboriginal languages are in danger of being lost. In 1992, Michael Krauss estimated that, of the Native North American languages still spoken, 80 percent are moribund, meaning that they are no longer being learned as a first language by children. Foster (1982) presents an equally grim outlook arguing that, in Canada, there are only three Aboriginal languages that have an excellent chance of survival—Cree, Ojibwe and Inuktitut. This prognosis is supported by data from the 1991 Canadian census, which revealed that of the total population with Aboriginal origins, only 17 percent claimed to speak an Aboriginal language as their first language and only 11 percent spoke an Aboriginal language at home (Drapeau 1996). Since these facts have come to light many Aboriginal communities, both here and abroad, are attempting to revitalize and maintain their language, through language planning and education initiatives. The Innu of Sheshatshiu are one such group.

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2. The Sheshatshiu Innu

Sheshatshiu is a community in southern Labrador, approximately 20 miles northeast of Goose Bay. There are approximately 1200 speakers of the language Innu-aimun (formerly known as Montagnais¹) in the community, of all ages. Most people are bilingual, speaking both Innu-aimun and English; however, elders tend to be monolingual speaking only Innu-aimun. Currently, children still learn Innu-aimun at home but are educated primarily in English.

Historically, the Labrador Innu have always been a nomadic people, traveling over large areas of land, wintering inland and summering on the coast. The settlement at Sheshatshiu was established as a year-round residence in the 1960s; before this, the Innu only summered in the area. Part of the settlement process involved putting children into the educational system, causing dramatic shifts to the Innu lifestyle. This meant that many people were unable to continue hunting and trapping as their custom and had to find alternative means of sustenance. Government-built housing was provided and by 1968, the “majority of the population [had] made this their year-round base” (Schuurman 1994:41). In the mid-1970s, the Innu started to become politically active and they are currently trying to gain control over their land and education, negotiating with the Canadian government for their autonomy in order to institute Innu-language curriculum under an Innu Education Authority (IEA). Part of this initiative is a broad survey looking at a variety of language-related topics/concerns, including the community’s attitudes toward both Innu-aimun and English, and how the two languages are used. As such, the Sheshatshiu questionnaire was administered in the fall of 2004 in the hopes of providing a baseline description of the state and status of Sheshatshiu-aimun.

3. Hypotheses

Hypotheses for this research were developed based on data collected from similar surveys in other Canadian Aboriginal communities.² This section will concern itself with only the hypotheses relevant to the data discussed in Section 6.0, detailed below:

- i. Elders will be more concerned with the state of the language while young adults will be the least concerned.
- ii. Innu-aimun will be regarded as more important/prestigious than English by elders but the majority of the population will view English as the prestige language.
- iii. The community will be concerned about the state of their language and will realize that it is in decline.
- iv. The community will be aware of language change, especially vocabulary loss, and view it in a negative light.

¹ Innu-aimun is part of the Cree-Montagnais-Naskapi language family.

² See, for example, Oudin (1993), Satchdev (1998), Taylor et al. (1993) and Mazurkewich (1991).

4. Methodology

The questionnaire

There are a variety of strategies for measuring language attitudes, one of the most common being the questionnaire (Agheyisi and Fishman 1970). In the Sheshatshiu questionnaire, closed questions (questions that have a fixed number of responses) were used as the primary means of data gathering, with the occasional open question for elaboration. This was done to be consistent and allow for comparison with the surveys upon which the Sheshatshiu survey was based (Drapeau's 1991 survey of the Betsiamites Innu and Papen's 2002 survey of the Atikamekw of Quebec), to facilitate analysis and to control the scope of the questionnaire.

The primary measurement for the closed questions on the survey was a five-point Likert scale, a form of measurement in which subjects are asked to "agree or disagree with a sample of propositions about beliefs, evaluations and actions held by an individual" (Bradburn et al 2004:126). The following example shows a question from the Sheshatshiu survey:

How important is Innu-aimun to you?

Tshimishta ishpiteniten a innu-aimun tshin?

very important	important	neither important nor unimportant	not really important	not at all important
<i>tshitshue</i>	<i>ishpitenitakun</i>	<i>apu tshekuan itenitaman</i>	<i>apu shuk</i>	<i>mauat nasht</i>

The questionnaire consisted of 103 questions, and was administered in the fall of 2004 by two "inside interviewers"—bilingual members of the community, one male and one female, both in their twenties. Participants were made aware of the purpose of this study, stressing that it was *descriptive* rather than evaluative, and were guaranteed anonymity. In total, 130 members of the community were surveyed; the final sample was comprised of 129 participants.³ This final group consisted of a fairly equal number of men and women over the age of 19 (72 females and 57 males) with varying socioeconomic backgrounds.

Data analysis

In order to perform statistic analyses, the responses were enumerated. For example (1), above, the response choices were coded as follows: "very important" was coded as "1"; "important" as "2"; "neither important nor unimportant" as "3"; "not really important" as "4"; and "not at all important" as "5".

The following indicators have been considered since they have proven to be significant in other studies in these fields: age, gender, level of education and occupation.⁴ The age variable was divided into six categories: 19-28; 29-38; 39-48; 49-58; 59-68; and 69+, the

³ One survey was not used because the respondent was not fluent in Innu-aimun, one of the criteria for participation.

⁴ Participants were asked for this type of personal information in the first section of the questionnaire.

elders.⁵ Gender was divided into two categories: male and female. Level of education was divided into thirteen categories: never in school; began primary/elementary; finished primary/elementary; began high school; finished high school; began adult basic education (ABE); finished ABE; began university; finished university; began training; finished training; and other. The occupation variable consists of seven categories: seasonal worker/manual labour; office worker/clerk; human services/home care worker; homemaker; businessperson/politician; educator; and unemployed. It should be noted that many of the older participants selected “unemployed”, possibly because it was the best fit; there should have been a category marked “elder” or “unwaged”; however, it was not included because neither the Drapeau nor the Papen survey had this type of option.

For this study, statistical analysis was conducted using SPSS (Version 11 for Mac OS X), with a traditional baseline for significance of $p < 0.05$. Analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were performed upon the data, as well as correlations and Tukey HSD post hoc tests.

5. Preliminary findings

In this section, specific questions from the Sheshatshiu survey will be discussed. For each item, a table is included directly below the question showing the response choices and their codes on the left, followed by the number of participants who selected each response and the corresponding percentage based on number of responses to each question.

Question 40: As a rule, in daily life, what language do you use?

Responses to this question clearly indicate that Innu-aimun is the language of the community, with approximately three-quarters of the sample using Innu-aimun on a regular basis in their daily life.

<u>Code</u>		<u>Number</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
(1)	<i>always Innu</i>	45	35.2
(2)	<i>mostly Innu</i>	55	43.0
(3)	<i>sometimes Innu/sometimes English</i>	22	17.2
(4)	<i>mostly English</i>	4	3.1
(5)	<i>always English</i>	2	1.6
	<i>Total</i>	128	100.0

All of the variables were significant for this question, with age and education being the most significant ($p < 0.001$ for both). For the age variable, the older generations (participants ages 59+) selecting almost exclusively “always Innu” and middle generations (participants ages 39-58) selecting primarily “mostly Innu” and “always Innu”. Conversely, participants ages 19-28 selected mostly “sometimes Innu/sometimes English”. Occupation was also significant ($p = 0.002$) but gender was not ($p > 0.05$). The two participants who answered “always English” were female human services/home care workers between ages 29-48.

Question 78: How important is Innu-aimun to you?

⁵ Participants were required to be at least 19 years of age because that is the age of majority in Newfoundland and Labrador.

Given that the majority of the community uses Innu-aimun as their language of daily life, it is unsurprising that an overwhelming majority of respondents (88.3 percent) replied that Innu-aimun was “very important”. In fact, not a single participant selected “not really important” or “not at all important” as their answer.

<u>Code</u>		<u>Number</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
(1)	<i>very important</i>	113	88.3
(2)	<i>important</i>	13	10.9
(3)	<i>neither important nor unimportant</i>	2	1.6
(4)	<i>not really important</i>	0	0
(5)	<i>not at all important</i>	0	0
	<i>Total</i>	129	100.0

In this instance, only one of the indicators was significant, even though “very important” was consistently selected by the majority of participants—age ($p < 0.001$); gender, level of education and occupation were not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$ for all three variables). The two people who selected “neither important nor unimportant” were both males under age 39. These results clearly illustrate that Innu-aimun has importance and prestige for the entire community, rather than solely with elders, as was hypothesized.

Question 88: Do you think it is important to speak English well?

As a follow-up to the previous question, participants were asked to rank the importance of the English language. The results show that the vast majority of participants (87.6 percent) believed that it is either important or very important to speak English well. This is in keeping with the second hypothesis—that English would be viewed as the prestige language.

<u>Code</u>		<u>Number</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
(1)	<i>very important</i>	46	35.7
(2)	<i>important</i>	67	51.9
(3)	<i>neither important nor unimportant</i>	8	6.2
(4)	<i>not really important</i>	5	3.9
(5)	<i>not at all important</i>	3	2.3
	<i>Total</i>	129	100.0

Age was the most significant variable ($p < 0.001$) since the majority of the participants who selected “not really important” or “not at all important” were older members of the community; only one person under age 49 thought that it was not really important to speak English well. Education was also quite significant ($p = 0.005$) in that everyone who had finished high school/ABE or higher selected either “very important” or “important”. That both of these variables are significant is unsurprising because there is a correlation between education and age. Older generations do not place as much value on English because they have rarely, if ever, used it in daily life and all of the elders (ages 69+) surveyed have never been in school; only one of the participants ages 59-68 has gone further than primary/elementary school. Conversely, the majority of younger participants selected either “very important” (ages 19-28) or “important” (ages 29-38), possibly due to the fact that they

have been educated in English-language schools and are seeking employment or are involved with organizations from outside of the community. Finally, gender and occupation were not significant ($p > 0.05$).

Question 90: In your opinion which language is most important for an Innu person?

Given the results of the two previous questions, the following results were expected—the entire community values Innu-aimun while the younger generations have realized the utility and importance of speaking English in Labrador, probably due to the fact that education and employment outside of the community are available primarily in English. These results do not support the second hypothesis—that English would be viewed as more prestigious by most of the community, excepting the elders.

<u>Code</u>		<u>Number</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
(1)	<i>especially Innu</i>	33	25.6
(2)	<i>especially English</i>	2	1.6
(3)	<i>both equally</i>	94	72.9
	<i>Total</i>	129	100.0

For this question, the mean was 2.47 with a standard deviation of 0.876. Once again, age and level of education were the significant variables ($p < 0.001$ for both), demonstrating the age~education correlation: those participants who had never had formal education tend to be older and selected “especially Innu” while those with more education tended to be younger speakers, with the majority in each of these educational category selecting “both equally”. The two participants who selected “especially English” were both males ages 19-28 who had completed ABE or began university; this falls in line with the hypothesis that younger participants with more education would have a greater use for English than elders. Gender and occupation were not significant ($p > 0.05$).

Question 60: Do you think it likely that the Innu language will be lost in Sheshatshiu?

One of the hypotheses proposed for this research was that the Innu would be aware of the decline of use of their language. The results for this question show that only 10.1 percent of the sample think it very likely that their language will be lost while nearly half (48.1 percent) acknowledge the possibility of language loss. The remaining third (33.3 percent) think it unlikely that Innu-aimun will be lost in Sheshatshiu.

<u>Code</u>		<u>Number</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
(1)	<i>very likely</i>	13	10.1
(2)	<i>not very likely</i>	11	8.5
(3)	<i>maybe</i>	62	48.1
(4)	<i>probably not</i>	11	8.5
(5)	<i>not at all likely</i>	32	24.8
	<i>Total</i>	129	100.0

This was one of the questions with the greatest variability in responses. Age was once again the only significant variable ($p = 0.001$), with the majority of participants from middle and older generations (39+) selected “maybe”. The majority of participants ages 29-38 were less likely to acknowledge the possibility of language loss, selecting “not at all likely” while the majority of the youngest age group (19-28) was split evenly, responding either “maybe” or “not at all likely”. Level of education, occupation and gender were not significant ($p > 0.5$).

Question 82: Do you think the Innu language in Sheshatshiu is changing or not?

As the table below indicates, just over half of the participants thought that Innu-aimun was changing in some way while approximately one fifth of the group did not realize that their language was undergoing any kind of shift or change. Notably, almost one third of the sample did not have a definitive opinion about whether or not their language was changing.

<u>Code</u>		<u>Number</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
(0)	<i>no</i>	27	20.9
(1)	<i>yes</i>	66	51.2
(2)	<i>I don't know</i>	36	27.9
	<i>Total</i>	129	100.0

Age was again the most significant indicator ($p < 0.001$), with the majority of participants ages 19-28 selected “I don’t know” and the majority of the older generations (59+) overwhelmingly selected “yes”. Interestingly, the majority of participants ages 49-58 selected “I don’t know”. Level of education was also very significant ($p = 0.009$), supporting the age~education correlation. Gender and occupation were not significant ($p > 0.05$).

Question 83: If yes, what do you think about these changes?

This question asked the participants who answered “yes” to the previous question to assess the changes they see in their language. The majority of this group (83.4 percent) considered the changes in their language to be negative, selecting either “bad” or “very bad”. Only two of the sixty-six participants, one from the 29-38 age group and the other from the 39-48 group, believed that the changes were positive.

<u>Code</u>		<u>Number</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
(1)	<i>very good</i>	2	3.0
(2)	<i>good</i>	0	0.0
(3)	<i>neither good nor bad</i>	9	13.6
(4)	<i>bad</i>	25	37.9
(5)	<i>very bad</i>	30	45.5
	<i>Total</i>	66	100.0

Once more, age was highly significant ($p < 0.001$)—older generations viewed language change as “bad” or “very bad”, with the majority selecting “very bad” while the younger generations (ages 19-38) were less definite, with the majority in both age categories (19-28 and 29-38) selecting “neither good nor bad”. Also, the two participants who selected “very good” were ages 29-48. Level of education was also quite significant ($p = 0.008$), offering further support for the age~education correlation. Occupation was somewhat significant ($p = 0.020$) while gender was not at all significant ($p > 0.05$).

*Question 57: Do you feel that there are types of words being lost, such as words to do with the country?*⁶

This question was interesting because nearly half the sample group said that they feel certain types of words are being lost, corresponding well with the results for the language change question discussed above (Question 82), where half of the sample said they felt their language was changing.

<u>Code</u>		<u>Number</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
(0)	<i>no</i>	13	10.2
(1)	<i>yes</i>	61	47.6
(2)	<i>somewhat</i>	18	14.1
(3)	<i>I don't know</i>	36	28.1
	<i>Total</i>	128	100.0

Age was the significant indicator ($p < 0.001$)—the older generations overwhelmingly selected “yes” and account for almost half (42.6 percent) of the participants who selected this response while the youngest generation (ages 19-28) selected primarily “I don’t know”. Education was also significant ($p = 0.013$), again demonstrating the correlation between these two variables. Occupation and gender were again statistically insignificant ($p > 0.05$).

This question was paired with an open answer question, “What kinds of words are not known today?” The answers tend to deal primarily with life in the country, as expected, with participants citing tools, animal names and parts, plants, trees and parts of the tent as words they feel are being lost.

6. Concluding remarks

⁶ The wording of this question may seem leading because it gives country/bush words as an example; however, prior to the administration of the survey, many of the Sheshatshiu Innu shared that they felt these were the words being lost.

Preliminary research indicates that Innu-aimun is still very viable in Sheshatshiu, that the community feels strongly about its use and maintenance and that approximately half of the participants are aware of language change, especially loss of lexical items. English is regarded as useful but not necessarily more important than Innu-aimun; in fact, the two languages are considered equally important. This can probably be attributed to the fact the Innu-aimun is the language of the community but English is spoken in the surrounding area and is the language used in education and business. There is a correlation between age and education that appears continually in the data, where older generations, who have never had formal schooling, find English less important, notice that Innu-aimun is changing. These participants view these changes as negative. Younger generations, however, view Innu-aimun and English as equally important and are less aware of the changes Innu-aimun has undergone and is undergoing. The two other variables considered—gender and occupation—were not significant for any of the questions discussed. While other indicators, such as age of L2 acquisition, bilingual ability and time away from the community, may prove useful (and will be considered), at least one trend is clear—for certain language issues, there is a clear divide between older and younger generations.

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