

Words of the Inuit

A Semantic Stroll
through a
Northern Culture

Louis-Jacques Dorais



Words of the Inuit

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Culture

LOUIS-JACQUES DORAIS



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Preface © Lisa Koperqualuk

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Preface

BY LISA KOPERQUALUK

There are so few non-Inuit able to communicate in my language that each time I converse with one who speaks Inuktitut I am usually doubly impressed. With the linguistic structure of our language being so different from English and French, we understand the challenge non-Inuit face when learning Inuktitut. Louis-Jacques Dorais is probably the only ethnolinguist/anthropologist who has such a deep understanding of the Inuit language. He has dedicated most of his life to studying Canadian Inuktitut and teaching it to many students wishing to gain a glimpse of our world and better understand our culture. As I read through Louis-Jacques's book, I see that it brings to light our culture and world view through a stroll among our words and concepts.

When I first met him in the 1980s, Louis-Jacques was assisting the Kativik School Board on a linguistic project related to Inuktitut teaching. Little did I know that one day he would become my director for graduate studies at Laval University in Quebec City. I began my graduate studies with confidence that I would have exemplary guidance, for he knew the Inuit communities in Nunavik and their history, and had delved into our language for a long time.

Even now, I turn to him when I have a question about a specific word. For example, for a chapter in a book about the first bowhead whale hunt in 100 years in Nunavik, published by Avataq Cultural Institute, I needed an explanation for why *arvik* (bowhead whale) ended with a *k*, while in Nunavut it was spelled *arviq*, ending with guttural sound *q*. I had to find the justification of why, in Nunavik, we said it that way, so that readers of other dialects would not regard it as a mistake. It is interesting and also good to know how our language travelled and to see the path in which its pronunciation evolved, and to have the explanations that help us understand how that happens.

Oftentimes, an Inuk will be told by a parent or someone important in their lives as a way of encouragement, "*Kajusigit!*" which basically means "Continue" or "Don't give up!" When my grandfather told me this after I had

recounted some particular struggle, I took it simply to mean, “Keep on going, carry on.” Somehow, at that time, his words did not seem like particularly strong encouragement. Our elders in Nunavik and elsewhere use this expression when they really wish to encourage someone not to give up on whatever their endeavour might be. It seems that the deeper meaning, which my grandfather probably understood when he said it to me, really suggests, “Be strong, persevere.” I think both my examples above answer Louis-Jacques’s question of up to what point are etymological studies really significant and socially useful, for understanding the origins of our words is immensely helpful, particularly for those whose work has to do with Inuktitut and/or writing.

This book can be read likewise by an Inuktitut speaker, as well as by a learner or non-Inuktitut speaker, and all will be enriched by it. So much more can be learned about our way of thinking by analyzing Inuktitut in the way Louis-Jacques demonstrates. The study of Inuktitut rests not only in understanding its linguistic structure; a deeper study of our language reveals much more about the Inuit world view. It is this ethnolinguistic approach that brings about very interesting instances where our perception of the world can be better understood.

The chapter dealing with *sila* and *nuna* thus reveals the true meaning of these Inuit concepts to the reader. The word *sila* itself captures different layers of meaning, such as the one of the “cosmological regulator” of the universe, *Silaup Inua*, which I enjoyed learning of when I first was introduced to this distinct Inuit concept. And then there are internal and external *sila*, and their link to a person’s mental capacity, wherein a wise and reasonable person is full of *sila*, is *silatujuq*. Louis-Jacques allows us to meander thoughtfully through the path he uncovers, layer by layer revealing this and other Inuit concepts such as *nuna*, earth or land.

Like many other Indigenous languages, we are at a crossroads where many in our communities are seeing our languages slowly deteriorating. We need to make decisions on protecting our language. Work is being done in our institutions to help protect our language, such as with the Inuktitut Language Commission and the Inuktitut language authorities in Inuit Nunangat; but these efforts go hand-in-hand with knowledge of linguistics and semantic understandings of Inuktitut. *Words of the Inuit* is definitely a resource that must become part of every library in Inuit Nunangat and all schools teaching Inuktitut and Inuit culture and history.

Acknowledgements

For several years, I had entertained the idea of delving more or less systematically into the meanings of Inuit words, in order to decipher the underlying significations many of them hid behind their immediate meaning. Besides anticipating the sheer pleasure of researching a fascinating area of Arctic Indigenous semantics, I wished to bring to light some of the symbolic images underlying Inuktitut, as well as other Inuit languages and dialects.

Many of these images are embedded in words dating back two or three millennia, when the ancestors of all modern Inuit and Yupik groups spoke the same language, called Proto-Eskimo by linguists. Because of changes in pronunciation and meaning that occurred over time, the relationship between these predecessor terms—and the images they convey—and current Inuit words is now obscure to a majority of people. However, there exist linguistic techniques for recovering the links between past and present language. My guess was that if Inuit speakers were made aware of the buried richness—accessed through linguistic analysis—of the words they commonly use, it could support their efforts to reconnect with an identity often undermined by the overwhelming and often brutal influence of the contemporary globalizing world.

My project began to materialize in 2015 when, after three years of retirement, I was asked by former colleagues at Université Laval's Department of Anthropology to teach a one-time semester course on the relationship between Inuit language and culture. In order to set up this course, I had to elicit the words that seemed the most culturally significant for speakers of Inuktitut and begin to look for their basic meanings and context of use. This left me with lexical materials that I started to put into book form in early 2017. From the beginning, I settled upon the title *Words of the Inuit*, inspired by my ethnolinguist colleague John Steckley's book *Words of the Huron*, a thorough description and analysis of the Huron-Wendat lexicon. Between 2007 and 2012, John and I had collaborated with the Wendake

First Nation of Quebec on a project aimed at revitalizing the then-dormant Wendat language, in order, so the Wendake people said, to strengthen their identity through using their ancestors' words (Dorais 2014).

The subtitle to this book (*A Semantic Stroll*) came later on, when I realized that instead of being formatted as a dictionary or a handbook, my work would consist in leisurely, albeit structured, intellectual explorations of words and meanings. Due to the subject matter—lexical and semantic analyses and reconstructions that often could be only tentative—what mattered most was the plausible underlying significations elicited through words, rather than the phonetic and morphological details of one or another specific term. Once again, my primary goal was to provide Inuit—as well as interested non-Inuit readers, of course—with the semantic raw materials that would allow them an in-depth reflection on the richness of their linguistic and cultural heritage and identity.

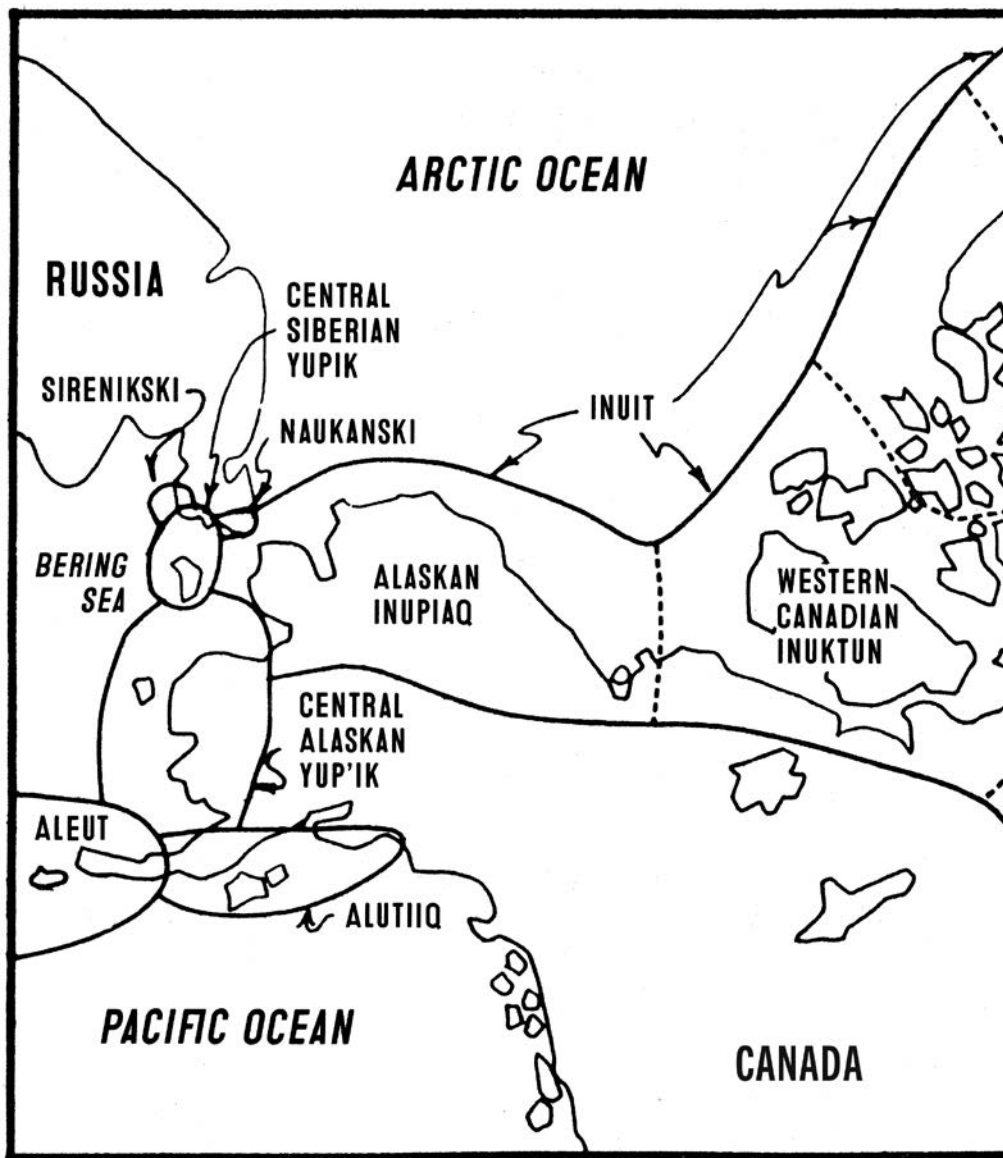
This book results from my involvement of over fifty years with Inuit as a researcher, *inuuaqati* (companion), and *tiguaq* (adopted relative). I owe a special debt to the people of Quaqtaq, a small community of northeastern Nunavik (Arctic Quebec), who welcomed me for the first time in 1965, when I was a twenty-year-old anthropology student (see Introduction). They taught me their language and their way of life, and literally educated the child I then was, completely ignorant of how an *inuusuttuq* (young adult; literally, “one striving to become a human being”) should behave. I am also grateful to those Inuit who later in my life helped me to increase my knowledge of their *uqausiit* (words) and *piusiit* (customs), as well as to the organizations that funded my research over the years, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada in particular. To all of them, “*Nakurmiimarialutuinnaq*” — “Genuine, big, and complete thanks.”

Many thanks, too, to the colleagues whose insights on Inuit and other Indigenous societies helped refine my intellectual outlook. Regarding the present book, Professors Bernard Saladin d'Anglure, Frédéric Laugrand, and Christopher Trott, as well as two anonymous reviewers, must be specially thanked for their insightful suggestions. Chris Trott in particular accompanied me through the entire creative process, from the initial book proposal to the final editing steps, when a fine publishing team (including Jill McConkey, Glenn Bergen, and freelance copyeditor Maureen Epp) took over at the University of Manitoba Press. And last but not least, a big *nakurmiik* to Lisa

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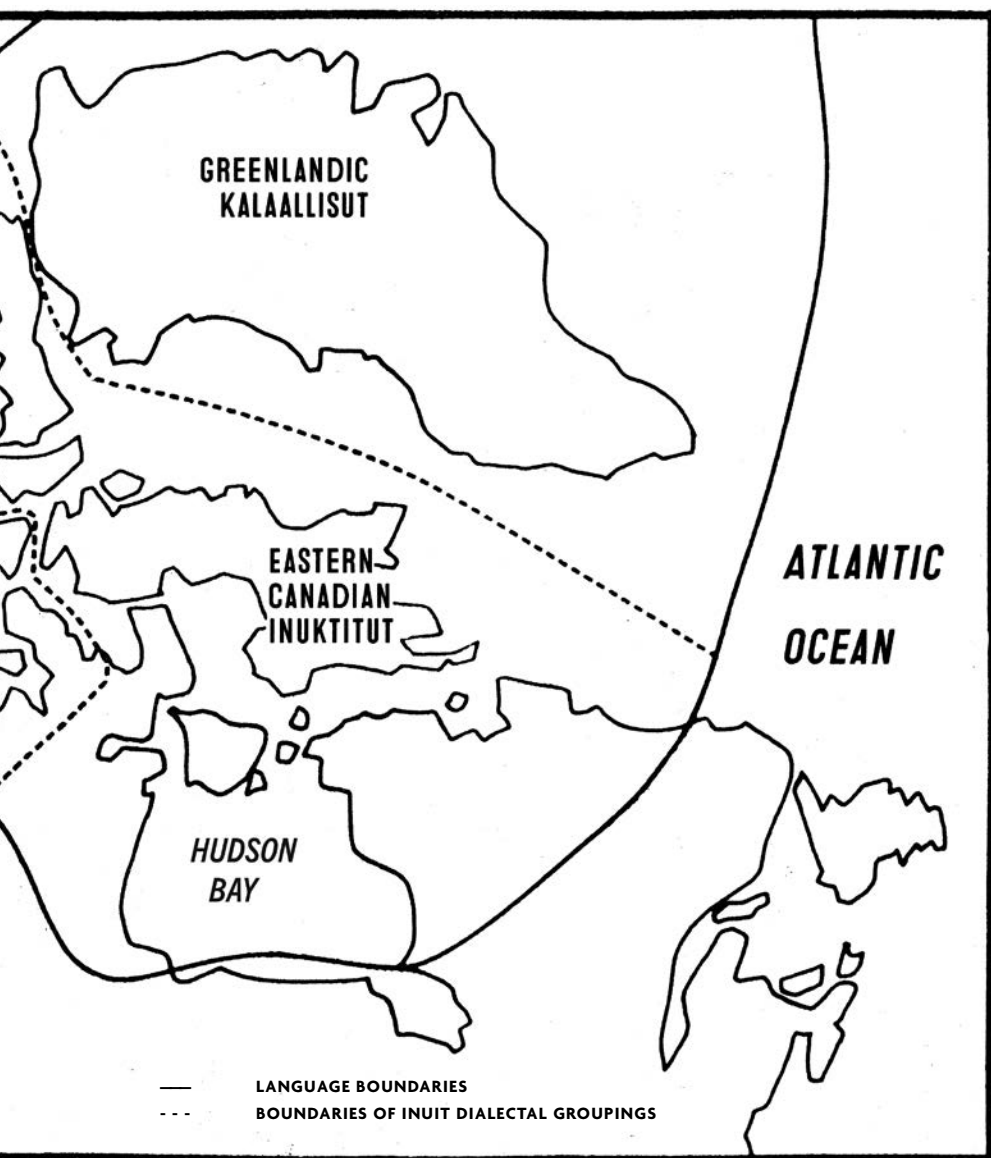
Koperqualuk, a first-rate intellectual, activist, and educator from Nunavik, who kindly agreed to add a preface to my book.

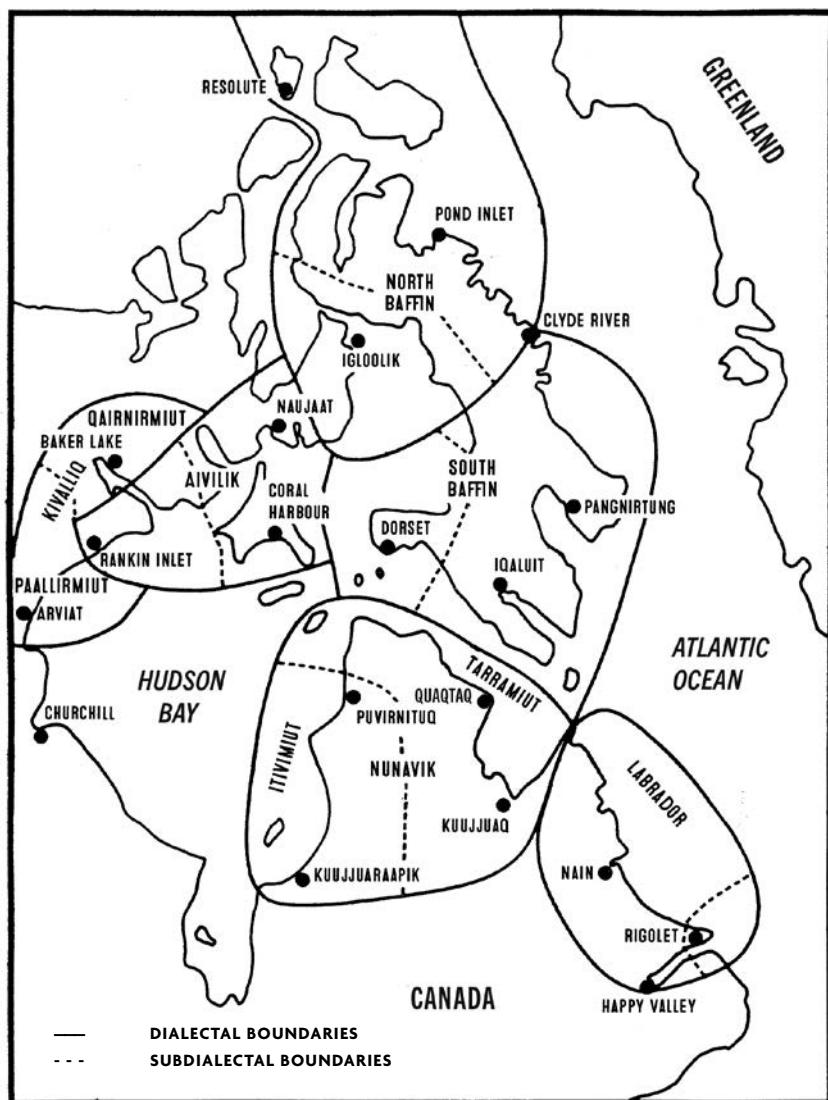
Finally, almost five decades ago I had the chance to meet and marry a young Vietnamese woman who introduced me to East Asian civilization, a very different world from that of Inuit but at the same time, strangely similar on some points—the fact, for instance, that like humans and animals, souls and spirits belong to nature (Dorais 2007). This explains why a number of brief comparisons between Inuit and Vietnamese language and culture are found throughout the book.



Map 1. The Eskimo-Aleut World

Adapted from Dorais 2017a, 9, with permission from NAC Media.





Map 2. Eastern Canadian Inuktitut

Adapted from Dorais 2017a, 133, with permission from NAC Media.

Words from the Past: A Stroll Through Inuit Semantics

Uqartuq—Inuk sulinirarsuni isumaminik uqatuarami tagga uqartuq piujumik piunngitumilluuniit.

He/she talks—Because a person, affirming that he/she is truthful, always speaks his/her own idea, thus this person says something good or bad.¹

TAAMUSI QUMAQ (1991, 101)

This book is about a fascinating language whose speakers are considered to be truthful, even while using words that may hide an underlying meaning. I first encountered this language over fifty years ago, when I started spending summers in the Arctic as a young undergraduate student in anthropology at the Université de Montréal. In 1965 and 1966, I was given the opportunity to conduct fieldwork for my upcoming M.A. thesis (on Inuit community organization) in Quaqtuq, a small village of 100 people or so, in northeastern Nunavik (Arctic Quebec; see Map 2).² All residents were Inuit, except for a Belgian Catholic missionary and a teacher from Saskatchewan who was away on his summer vacation during most of my visits.

At that time, only one Quaqtuq adult spoke any English—acquired during a three-year stay at a southern Canadian hospital—although several children had started learning it in the government school, established there in 1960. This is why, at first, I spent most of my days with the kids, walking through the village and entering their homes with them. Their parents treated me as a big child, and they were right to do so because I was completely incompetent in their language and culture. Despite my initial ignorance, however, this first summer in Quaqtuq (May–September 1965), which included a one-month stay at the nearby hunting camp of Airartuuq, allowed me to participate as

best I could in the daily life of the local people, asking “*Suna una*”—“What is this?” as often as I could, in order to learn as many words as possible. But by the end of the summer, I was still unable to speak Inuktitut.

On my way to Quaqtaq, I had stopped in Kuujjuaq to meet with Father Lucien Schneider, who had been working for several years at compiling a dictionary and writing a grammar of the Nunavik dialect. When I returned to Montreal, Father Schneider obligingly gave me a stencilled draft copy of his grammar. With this in hand, and with the help of a basic dictionary of the western Hudson Bay dialect—which included a list of the syllabic writing characters—published in Ottawa ten years earlier by Father Arthur Thibert, I started to write letters in Inuktitut to Inuit patients being treated for tuberculosis at the Roberval sanatorium, north of Quebec City. On average, I was able to send six or seven different letters every Monday and received answers from my correspondents by the end of the same week. In early January, one of them wrote, “Your first letters did not make any sense, but now, I am starting to understand you.”

This is how I learned Inuktitut. When I returned to Quaqtaq in May 1966, someone asked me, “How come when you left for Montreal last fall, you did not speak our tongue, but after a winter down South, you are almost fluent?” I had now mastered the basic grammar of the language, but I needed to greatly increase my vocabulary. This was the beginning of a lifelong involvement with Inuit and their language. My doctoral research on the words used by Nunavik and Labrador Inuit for designating a number of objects introduced by *Qallunaat* (people of European origin or descent), as well as subsequent projects conducted during forty years of teaching at Université Laval in Quebec City—including an introductory course in spoken Inuktitut I taught almost yearly—gave me the opportunity to visit a large number of Inuit communities, among them Quaqtaq, where I had acquired an adoptive family who welcomed me to their home every time I went back.

Surface Meaning and Underlying Signification

One aspect of Inuktitut I found particularly striking was the fact that in contrast with languages like English or my native French, many Inuit words could be understood in two different ways. Behind their immediate meaning—the name of the thing, person, idea, or event they were meant to denote—hid, so to speak, a second signification, an underlying definition of or

comment on the object or concept being designated. This hidden meaning became apparent when analyzing the linguistic components of the words.

For example, soapstone, the raw material from which many pieces of Inuit art are carved, is called *qullisajaq* in Nunavik.³ This word can be analyzed as follows:

qulli(q)-(t)sa(q)-jaq⁴

seal-oil lamp – that can be used for – piece of

“a piece of something that can be used for [making] a seal-oil lamp”

Indeed, before the advent of kerosene and later, electricity, Inuit cooked their meals, lit their homes, and heated their igloos and tents with seal-oil lamps made out of soapstone. Hence the name given to this material.

Here is another example. The words *piujuq* and *piunngituq* mean “good” and “bad,” respectively.⁵ But they may also be understood as follows:

pi-u-juq

thing – to be – he/she/it

“he/she/it is something”

pi-u-nngi(t)-tuq

thing – to be – not – he/she/it

“he/she/it is not something”

This suggests that at some underlying level of Inuit semantics (semantics refers to the meanings expressed through words, word-parts, and grammar), the concepts of “good” and “bad” are understood as an opposition between “being” and “not being.” The mere fact of existing would be considered good, while non-existence would be equated with evil.⁶ It may therefore be surmised that since *piujuq* and *piunngituq* can be understood both ways, there exists, at a deep semantic level, a link between the two sets of meanings these words convey.

Of course, this is only speculation. Inuit speakers are usually not aware at first of such an equivalency between being and being good, even though they are perfectly capable of recognizing the component parts of their language

and of undertaking a practical analysis of the rules for combining them. This shows up, for instance, when they create words for new concepts, as will be seen shortly. However, as with speakers of any other language, very few individuals know the underlying logic that generates the rules allowing them to make up new sentences every time they speak, as well as the hidden meanings buried, so to speak, in the antecedent forms of the words they use on a daily basis. Some specialized linguistic training is therefore necessary for broadening the knowledge Inuit speakers have of their own language, thus enabling them to discover deeper dimensions of Inuktitut and other Inuit dialects.

Something else I discovered when learning Inuktitut was that most words denoting objects and ideas introduced into Inuit culture as a consequence of contact with *Qallunaat* also bore two levels of meaning. In a majority of cases, analysis of the component parts of these words disclosed an underlying description of the practical function or physical look of the denoted concept, as in *timmiujuq* (“that is in the habit of flying,” i.e., an airplane) or *kiinaujaq* (“that looks like a face,” i.e., money). In some other cases, however, the original meaning of a pre-contact word was applied or extended to a newly introduced concept, as in *ataniq* (“family head,” i.e., the king or queen of England) or *atuartuq* (“he/she follows a visible track,” i.e., he/she reads). Only completely new terms borrowed from another language, mostly English (e.g., *kaapi*, “coffee”), did not bear two semantic levels. Such words were very few in number.⁷

It was my interest in this phenomenon that led me to focus my doctoral research on what I called modern Inuktitut, words designating newly introduced objects and concepts in Nunavik and Labrador (Dorais 1983). By comparing the underlying meanings of over 2,100 new terms used in various cultural contexts (clothing, motors, medicine, etc.), I sought to understand how, within each context, these meanings—and thus the words that conveyed them—generated a structured discourse demonstrating how Inuit speakers envisioned different contemporary aspects of their culture (Dorais 1977). Later, I applied the same method to semantic contexts more embedded in the pre-contact Inuit world view, such as customary law (Dorais 1984a), animal names (Dorais 1984b), and gender relations (Dorais 1986).

Constructing Inuit Words

The ease with which a large number of Inuit terms, whether new or pre-contact, can be parsed (divided) into meaningful components comes from the polysynthetic structure of the language. Most words result from a process of construction, so to speak, combining a number of concepts that many other languages would express by way of a whole sentence, or at least with more than one word. This happens because Inuit words are usually made up of several morphemes (the word-internal units of signification), each morpheme having its own well-defined meaning. To a lesser degree, this also occurs in English, where for instance the word “houses” includes two morphemes: house- (“dwelling”) and -s (“plurality”). In Inuit, however, the specific and often very concrete meaning of each morpheme, as well as its pronunciation, is preserved within all words to which it belongs, as in the *qullisajaq* and *piujuq* examples quoted above, while in English, a term like “houses” is generally perceived as an indivisible unit. This explains why it is easy to parse Inuit words into meaningful parts.

The Appendix to this book presents a relatively extensive grammatical description of Nunavik Inuktitut, the principal Inuit dialect discussed throughout the following chapters. It is important, however, to say a bit more here on how Inuit words are constructed. In Inuktitut, as in other Inuit dialects, words consist of a base—a morpheme that always occurs at the beginning of the word—plus a variable number of added morphemes (from zero to six or more) called affixes, which almost never appear in word-initial position. Some of these (the derivational affixes) are optional. They specify, modify, or transform the meaning(s) conveyed by the base and by each affix that may precede them, and many have a “heavy” signification, translating as full English words. By contrast, the grammatical endings (inflections) are compulsory affixes (one per word) that must generally occur at the end of a word,⁸ in order to express its grammatical function as a noun, verb, or other part of speech.

This means that most Inuit words are semantic complexes that combine in an original way the separate meanings of their base, derivational affixes, and ending. Here are a few examples (in Nunavik Inuktitut), with the bases shown in bold type and the endings in italics:

1. **Sinigusuttuq**
sini(k)-gusuk-tuq
to sleep – to need – *third-person singular indicative*
 “He/she needs some sleep”
2. **Illujualiumalaartugut**
illu-(j)jua(q)-liu(r)-ruma-laar-tugut
house – big – to build – to want to – future tense –
first-person plural indicative
 “We will want to build a big house”
3. **Nunakkuujuuq una**
nuna-kku(t)-u(r)-juu-q / **una**
land – through – to go – usually – *singular number /*
this one
 “This (is) one that usually goes by land [i.e., a car]”
4. **Angijumik nunakkuujuuqartunga**
angiju(q)-mik / **nunakkuujuu(q)**-qar-tunga
something big – *singular direct object* / **car** – to have
 – *first-person singular indicative*
 “I have a big car”
5. **Tupialunnut tikilauravit quviasugit**
tupi(q)-aluk-nut / **tiki(t)**-lau(r)-ravit / **quviasu(k)**-git
tent – big – *to them* / **arrive** – past – *because you* /
rejoice – *second-person singular imperative*
 “Because you (one) arrived at the big tents, do (you)
 rejoice!”

These examples illustrate several salient characteristics of Inuit words, bases, and affixes:

1. The global meaning of a word may be different from, although related to, the sum of its morphemes, as with *nunakkuujuuq*, “one that usually goes by land” (ex. 3), which functions as a base (“car,” ex. 4).

2. Word-bases can begin an utterance, but as a general rule affixes cannot, even when they translate into English as full words or phrases, as with *gusuk-* (ex. 1), “to need” and *liur-* (ex. 2), “to build.”
3. The same idea can be conveyed by an affix or by a base, but the two have different forms, as in the case of affixes *-jjuaq-* (ex. 2) and *-aluk-* (ex. 5), “big,” versus the base *angiju(q)-* (ex. 4), “something big.”
4. Affixes (with any required inflections) can never constitute a whole utterance, except in some instances of colloquial speech (see Appendix), while complex words (base + affix/es + ending) and inflected verbal bases (*quviasugit*, ex. 5, “do rejoice!”) do.

The Inuit language is thus fundamentally different from English. However, when acknowledged, this difference does not constitute an obstacle to communication. Once the internal logic of Inuit words and the meaning of some basic morphemes have been understood and assimilated, the language becomes quite easy to follow.

Morphosemantics

The methodology of deciphering the underlying signification of a word through the semantic analysis of its morphemes is called morphosemantics. In addition to serving as a tool for ethnolinguists eager to research semiotics (the system of cognitive signs and symbols undergirding a language and the culture it expresses), morphosemantics is currently used in the computerized classification, parsing, and translation of scientific terms, medical terminology in particular (Namer and Zweigenbaum 2004).

In the Inuit language, a number of words, as well as most word-bases and affixes, cannot be broken down into components meaningful in current speech, even when they have more than one syllable. Some decades ago, it was proposed that this is because the Inuit language had changed over time, evolving from a monosyllabic to a polysyllabic structure. The agglutination of formerly significant monosyllables would have generated the polysyllabic morphemes that are functional in today’s language. Etymological research—in this context, comparing homophonous syllables in order to elicit their smallest common meaning—could allow us to parse polysyllables that are

semantically indivisible for current speakers into monosyllables that might have been meaningful to Inuit ancestors (Collis 1971).

The idea that the Inuit language was originally monosyllabic has now been abandoned, if it ever was taken into serious consideration. Nevertheless, parsing often yields interesting semantic results. As seen above, this is the case with the word *piujuq*. Subdividing it into three morphemes that happen to be monosyllabic and whose underlying signification (“it is something”) is not always acknowledged by modern speakers (for whom *piujuq* may only mean “it is good”) constitutes a good example of etymological morphosemantics.

The parsing of *piujuq* accords perfectly with the current grammar of Inuktitut, but this does not happen with every word. For instance, in my morphosemantic analysis of gender relations (Dorais 1986, 176; Dorais 2016, 68), I postulate that the underlying meaning of *ui* (“husband”) is “swelling, protuberance,” while that of *nuliaq* (“wife”) is “little female in heat,” two significations that would elicit a rather graphic description of marital relationships. My semantic postulate is based on a hypothetical—and thus debatable—etymological reconstruction of the morpheme *ui* and the disyllable *nuli-* (see Chapter 4). This reconstruction may or may not be accurate, but if it is, it illustrates the assertion of Bach (2009) that in polysynthetic languages, the etymology of what he calls “derivational items” (word-parts) may disclose meanings that have become opaque to current speakers because of lexicalization—the agglutination of separate morphemes, each with its own meaning, into one morphologically and semantically indivisible word (see Dorais 2017b).

Over the years, research in Inuit ethnolinguistics has shown that morphosemantics is very useful indeed for analyzing neologisms—words denoting objects and ideas introduced by *Qallunaat*. Apart from my *Uqausigusiqtat* (1983), studies on neology in Inuktitut include, among others, dissertations by Cancel (2011), Harnum (1989), and Saint-Aubin (1980), as well as articles by Therrien (2000) and Graburn (1965). Outside Canada, Enel (1982) has researched neologisms in the Inuit dialect of West Greenland, and Berge and Kaplan (2005) have studied aspects of lexical development in Alaska and elsewhere following contact with Europeans. In a more recent paper, Sadock (2017) discusses the role that lexicalized morpheme clusters play in defining the West Greenlandic lexicon, neological or not.

Methodological Issues

When applied to the general, basic pre-*Qallunaat* vocabulary, morphosemantics often tends, as we just saw, to generate seductive but etymologically and semantically questionable significations sometimes rejected by native speakers. As a matter of fact, the most productive way to investigate the wider meanings of Inuit words—both surface and underlying—seems to be one based on the assumption that the lexicon constitutes a total linguistic phenomenon. Words are explainable as proceeding from a mix of grammatical, semantic, semiotic, etymological, sociolinguistic, and other factors, and they are related to each other within significantly structured lexical arrangements. Therefore, they must be understood in terms of their use in actual speech acts (and hence in terms of their cultural and social substratum), as well as through their links with morphological and/or semantic cognates (related forms) and correlates within and beyond the arrangements being studied (Dorais 2016, 74).

As far as Inuktitut and related dialects are concerned, this type of lexicological analysis—where morphosemantics constitutes one tool among several for understanding specific semantic and cultural domains—has yielded more encompassing and productive results than morphosemantics alone. It has generated a number of publications, most of them by French ethnolinguists, such as Therrien's study of the human body (1987) and her reflections on the link between semantics and mental concepts (2002), Randa's dissertation (1994) on the ethnozoology of Igloolik Inuit, Bordin's analytical lexicon of anatomical terms in Inuktitut (2003), Tersis and Mahieu's semantic analysis of some East Greenlandic affixed morphemes (2006), and Cancel's analytical survey of the language used in the public sphere in Nunavut (2011). These studies show that the lexicon has the potential to open a door into Inuit thought and culture. By inserting morphosemantic analysis into a more general examination of relationships between the meanings of words and the cultural context of their use, this type of ethnolinguistic approach allows us to take a closer look at various aspects of the world view of Inuit.

This is precisely what readers are invited to do in the following chapters. The present book is designed as a kind of stroll through the cultural semantics of Inuktitut, that is, through the words and concepts by which contemporary Canadian eastern Arctic Inuit understand and express their culture. It consists in an intellectual walk around the lexicon of Inuktitut, a stroll where words serve as keys to open up Inuit culture and world view. The book includes six

chapters, dealing with words for the environment and the land; animals and subsistence activities; humans and spirits; family, kinship, and naming; the human body; and socializing with other people in the contemporary world. Our stroll ends with a reflection on the usefulness for modern Inuit—especially the young—to know about the underlying significations embedded in their language and culture. It is followed by the already mentioned Appendix, which offers a short and hopefully approachable description of the polysynthetic structure of Inuktitut, useful for understanding the very basis of Inuit cognition.

It must be noted that because the present work is not intended to be a study in linguistics, I do not provide readers with a full morphemic analysis of the words whose significations are discussed in the book. Rather than systematically identifying and translating every one of the Inuit morphemes contained in these words (as I did with the *qullisajaq*, *piujuq*, and other examples quoted above), I am content to render the literal meaning of each word as precisely as possible, without adding unnecessary linguistic details. I do provide, however, a practical semantic tool in the form of a Glossary, found at the end of the book. The Glossary lists in alphabetical order each of the more than 1,400 Inuit words discussed throughout the book, together with their current meanings and, when decipherable, their possible underlying significations or etymological links.

Proto-Eskimo Etymologies

Most significations under study here have to do with etymology. Those that do not stem from a straightforward parsing of words into currently used morphemes (synchronic etymology; see the *piujuq* example above) are elicited via a reconstruction of their original meaning (historical etymology). We saw that in some cases, such a reconstruction results from a semantic comparison between potentially cognate syllables and/or syllabic groupings—for instance, *nuli-* (possibly “female in heat”) + *-aq* (“small”) = *nuliaq* (“little female in heat”); currently “someone’s wife.” In other cases, however, it is possible and semantically productive to draw on etymological analyses going back further in time, to the era of the Proto-Eskimo language.

Proto-Eskimo (henceforth PE) is a hypothetical reconstruction of the common tongue heard some 2,000 to 2,500 years ago in central western Alaska and shared by the ancestors of those who now speak the Yupik languages (see

below) and Inuit dialects. In many cases, PE can disclose hidden significations that would remain inaccessible if morphosemantic analysis limited itself to the current state of the language. Consequently, a large number of PE etymologies appear in this book. All are drawn from the invaluable *Comparative Eskimo Dictionary* (2010) compiled by Michael Fortescue, Steven Jacobson, and Lawrence Kaplan (henceforth cited as Fortescue et al. 2010).

In the mid-1980s, these three scholars, who specialize in Inuit and Yupik linguistics, started to elicit sets of word-bases and affixes drawn from their own field notes and files, from the archives of the Alaska Native Language Center (University of Alaska Fairbanks), and from published dictionaries representing all principal Inuit and Yupik language areas. They then undertook a comparison of the dialectal variants of each of these vocabulary items, looking for systematic differences in sound and similarities in meaning. This allowed them to locate regularities in sound change as well as slight variations in signification. This information was projected back to reconstruct a single root for each item, hypothesizing it as the plausible PE form of the word-base or affix under study, in terms of sound and meaning.

By way of example, in current Inuit dialects and Yupik languages, the following words are found:

<i>akuq</i>	mouth of a river, lower flap of parka (Greenland Inuit)
<i>akuq</i>	tail of a woman's parka (eastern Canadian Inuit)
<i>aku</i>	lower part of garment (western Canadian Inuit)
<i>akuq</i>	lower part of garment (northern Alaskan Inuit)
<i>aguq</i>	skirt (western Alaskan Inuit)
<i>akuq</i>	root of plant (Central Siberian Yupik)
<i>akuq</i>	root, skirt (Naukanski [eastern Siberian] Yupik)
<i>aku(q)</i>	skirt, lower part of garment (Central Alaskan Yup'ik)
<i>akuq</i>	skirt (Alutiiq [south-central Alaskan] Yupik)

Comparison between the sounds and meanings of each of these words has allowed Fortescue et al. (2010, 15) to reconstruct a PE root *aku(r)*⁹ that

would have meant “space between” or “lower part.” This root could have been related to the PE base *akkir-* (“to lift up”).

A few words that are now homophonous derive from two or more different PE roots. For example, *sijjaq* means both “beach” and “fox den” in Nunavik Inuktitut, although etymology shows that in the first case, *sijjaq* derives from PE *cinðar* (“beach, shore”), while in the second, it comes from *sitijjaq* (“big mouse hole”). This does not preclude the possibility that some speakers might still see a semantic link between the two meanings (dens can be found on beaches), but such an assumption would not rest on a sound linguistic basis. Homophony is relatively rare, though, and words that yield several different English translations—thus seeming to be homonyms—must usually be considered as one and the same lexical item whose overall meaning encompasses a number of separate *Qallunaat* concepts. As shall be seen in the next chapter, the term *sila* (“outside, weather, air, intelligence, etc.”) is a good case in point.

Because the *Comparative Eskimo Dictionary* is my unique source for eliciting PE etymologies with some linguistic reliability, several of my analyses depend on the credibility of its data. This should not be a problem, though, since the work of Fortescue et al. is authoritative, widely recognized for its high scientific value and methodological rigor. Whenever the authors are not absolutely sure about an etymological reconstruction, they qualify it with words and phrases of caution (such as “perhaps” and “possible relationship to”) that I have transferred to the present book when quoting the *Dictionary*.

Some Epistemology

One important epistemological question arises at this point: To what degree are etymological reconstructions, those going back to PE in particular, actually significant and hence socially useful for contemporary Inuit? Even though the lexicon of Inuktitut and other Inuit dialects derives directly from PE, modern speakers are not usually aware of the archaic forms of their language, and if they are, they cannot always decipher them.

My answer to this question is that the lack of intelligibility between PE and the current Inuit language mostly concerns pronunciation rather than grammar and semantics. For example, the Inuktitut word *ui* stems from PE *ugi*, although the meaning remains the same: “husband.” In some cases, the modern signification of a vocabulary item may differ from its meaning in PE,

as in the *aku(r)* example above, but a semantic link can generally be found between the two, as with the PE word-base *kayu-* (“to be strong”) that has become *kajusi-* in Inuktitut (“to carry on with something; to persevere”). Indeed, resorting to etymology is particularly telling in this case, because it shows that the original signification of “persevering” is “to start to [-*si-*] be strong,” perseverance thus being considered as a form of moral—and perhaps physical—strength. Instances of this type are numerous, where a partial discrepancy between the meaning of a modern word and that of its PE etymon (etymological root) illuminates the underlying signification of the former expression.

The linguist Anthony C. Woodbury has signalled the historical stability of the languages descended from PE. Their lexical and grammatical structure remains essentially the same as that of their common ancestor: “In [Fortescue et al. 2010], modern [word] bases in the daughter languages are reconstructed as bases (or bases plus suffixes) in Proto-Eskimo; while modern suffixes [affixes] are reconstructed as suffixes (or suffix clusters), not as bases” (Woodbury 2017, 550). This stability corroborates my answer to the question raised above. Because the linguistic differences between PE and its derivative languages are largely superficial, most semantic concepts and semiotic images expressed through the original tongue should remain relevant to modern speakers, thus contributing to a deeper understanding of their world view and a strengthened cultural identity.

Still, a caveat must be introduced here. From a strict linguistic perspective, any hypothesis about the origin of a word may be considered conclusive if, and only if, it is supported by a solid etymological analysis such as that proposed by Fortescue et al. in the *Comparative Eskimo Dictionary* or, as far as synchronic etymologies are concerned, if it results from parsing words into currently used morphemes (as in the *qullisajaq* and *piujuq* examples above). Otherwise, such hypotheses must be deemed to rest on mere informed guesswork. They can in no way be considered conclusive and historically valid.

Nevertheless, in my opinion, these “good guesses” may still be valuable to modern Inuit speakers. Despite their lack of a scientific linguistic basis, they stem from apparent similarities between morphemes. These similarities suggest possible—albeit unproved—semantic links that can encourage speakers to contemplate plausible underlying meanings of the words they use, even while knowing that such speculations are not necessarily historically grounded. This is why a number of etymological guesses, identified as

such in the main text as well as in the final Glossary of Inuit words, are to be found throughout the book.

Dialects and Orthography

As hinted at earlier in this Introduction, the Inuit language comprises a number of dialects—regional forms of speech that possess their own characteristics but are largely intelligible to speakers of the other dialects. Inuit is also related to several languages that are likewise descended from PE but with which intelligibility is much lower. All these languages (collectively known as Eskimo) plus the more distantly related Aleut tongue (Unangam Tunuu) form the Eskimo-Aleut (or Eskaleut) linguistic family.

Map 1 shows the geographical distribution of Eskimo-Aleut languages. One of them, Sirenikski, is now extinct (its last speaker died around 1990 in the village of Sireniki, northeastern Siberia), but six are still alive, though severely endangered in some cases. These are listed from west to east (Dorais 2010, 28–29):

Aleut: Aleutian Islands and Alaska Peninsula (to the southwest of Alaska)

Central Siberian Yupik: northeasternmost Russia, St. Lawrence Island (Alaska)

Naukanski Yupik: easternmost tip of Chukotka (northeasternmost Russia)

Central Alaskan Yup'ik: southwestern Alaska

Alutiiq Cupik (Yupik): south-central Alaska

Inuit: northern Alaska, Canadian Arctic, Greenland (Kalaallit Nunaat)

The Inuit language constitutes by far the most important form of Eskimo-Aleut, both in geographical range (extending across the North American Arctic) and number of speakers (approximately 100,000 in 2016, including 42,000 in Canada, and more than 50,000 in Greenland).¹⁰ Together with Greenlandic, the Inuktitut dialects (see below) are still very much alive. The language is changing, of course, as it has done for several centuries, but it was and still is able to take on modern life, making use of its grammatical

and lexical resources to talk about the contemporary world in its own terms, as shall be seen in Chapter 6. Inuktitut and Greenlandic cannot be considered endangered yet, but some caution is necessary. The Alaskan and western Canadian Inuit dialects, as well as Labrador Inuttut, have stopped being passed on to children for the past three or four decades, and among speakers of Inuktitut, bilingualism might too easily become dominated by English.

The Inuit language can be subdivided into four groups of dialects. Their names—as well as those of some individual dialects—end with the cognate affixes *-titut*, *-tut*, *-tun*, or *-sut*, “[doing or talking] like.” Thus, to speak Inuktitut is “to talk like Inuit” (Dorais 2010, 28–29):

Alaskan Inupiaq (Inupiatun): three or four dialects (northern Alaska)

Western Canadian Inuktun: Inuvialuktun/Siglitun (Inuvialuit area of the Northwest Territories), Inuinnaqtun and Nattilingmiutut (Kitikmeot region of the Nunavut territory)

Eastern Canadian Inuktitut: see below

Greenlandic Kalaallisut: three dialects (West, East, and Polar Greenlandic)

Inuktitut is a group of six closely related forms of speech spoken in the eastern Canadian Arctic.¹¹ It includes the following dialects (Map 2):

Kivalliq: western Hudson Bay (Kivalliq region of Nunavut)

Aivilik: northwestern Hudson Bay (Kivalliq region of Nunavut)

North Baffin: northern Baffin Island (Qikiqtaaluk [or Qikiqtani] region of Nunavut)

South Baffin: southern Baffin Island (Qikiqtaaluk region of Nunavut)

Labrador: Nunatsiavut (northern Labrador) area of Newfoundland and Labrador

Nunavik: northern part of Quebec

Nunavik Inuktitut comprises two slightly different varieties (or subdialects): that of northeastern Arctic Quebec (also known as Tarramiut), and east coast of Hudson Bay (western Nunavik or Itivimiut subdialect). Two