

# **Developing Intermediate Language Learning Materials A Labrador Inuttit Story Database**

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This paper<sup>1</sup> describes the collaboration between two linguists and a public school language teacher in the making of a story database for use in the second language learning of Labrador Inuttit in Canada. First, we describe the process through which the collaboration took place. Linguists who are working with communities have linguistic goals, and communities have long-term language teaching goals. Where the two goals intersect, it is possible to have mutually useful collaboration. One of the challenges is to determine whether or not there is indeed intersection of goals so that precious time and effort is not wasted. Next, we describe the development of a story database that has the properties that we believe are optimal for intermediate language learners. It will have a large amount of original Inuktut data and will also have extra information for learners that is hidden from view unless the learner chooses to look at it. We believe that Internet story publishing is faster, cheaper and can reach a larger audience than traditional publishing. It can also have more innovative aspects such as audio and optional help, which is ideal for the intermediate learner, who will then control the level and speed of the information. Naturally, it also has limitations. It depends on access to expensive equipment, it can't be taken out on the land and the length of time that such materials will be available is usually unknown.

Labrador Inuttit is a member of the Eskimo-Aleut language family spoken in Nunatsiavut, which is located in northern Labrador in Canada. The dialect in Labrador is referred to as Inuttit when speaking in the language but as Inuktut or Inuttit in English. Inuttit speakers are found in the communities of Nain, Hopedale, Makkovik, Rigolet, Northwest River and Happy Valley/Goose Bay. The last two communities are located just south of Nunatsiavut. The dialect is closely related to other Inuktut dialects spoken in Nunavik (northern Québec) and Baffin Island. It has a different writing system from these other dialects, which use syllabics. Instead, Inuttit uses a roman system that derives from the old Moravian writing system (no longer used) developed for Kalaallisut (West Greenlandic).

The language has been in decline for over half a century, especially since the area became part of Canada when the Newfoundland (and Labrador) became a province of Canada. The Inuttit language situation is further affected by the fact that English has a long-standing tradition within the region, dating back to at least the nineteenth century. English was originally brought to northern Labrador by co-residents known as Settlers (Kallunângajuit), and now is used by almost every local inhabitant of Nunatsiavut. Inuttit is still spoken today by a small

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group of elderly monolinguals, a much larger group of middle-aged bilinguals and a little among young adults and youth. The number and ages of speakers varies across communities. Language shift is well on its way but could still be reversed if changes in education or community affairs take place (Andersen & Johns, 2005). There is a large population of receptive bilinguals, who do not speak much but understand the language (Johns & Mazurkewich, 2001), and researchers at the University of Toronto and the Nunatsiavut community are currently studying this issue.

Nunatsiavut was created in 2005 when the Labrador Inuit reached a land claim settlement with the Government of Canada and the Province of Newfoundland and Labrador. Within Nunatsiavut, there is a desire that the language continue, even by those who do not speak it. The community and schools have been addressing this issue over the last decade in a number of ways. The schools teach Inuttitut, although the amount and level depends on the community. Inuttitut curriculum is developed for the schools through the Labrador School Board. The Torngâsok Cultural Centre, which is responsible for language and culture within Nunatsiavut released an impressive number of Inuttitut materials in the fall of 2007. These include a version of *Inuttitut Level I* (Rosetta Stone) and an Inuttitut/English dictionary entitled *Labradorimi Ulinnaisigutet*. They also published *Unikkâlautta*, a book of Inuttitut short stories based on a story-telling festival held in May 2006. The storytelling was filmed and later the Inuttitut stories were transcribed and also translated into English. Finally they released a book for young children with simple Inuttitut words and pictures *Atuagaga uKausinnut*. In July 2008, a large community Inuttitut language conference was held in Nain to discuss and plan the next stages of language strengthening. This conference had over 80 participants and took place over three days.

The attitudes of children and youth towards learning the language have started to change. While they used to think of speaking Inuttitut as something which only older people do, they now see that speaking it has relevancy for them in terms of cultural identity, language speaking awards, jobs in the Nunatsiavut Government, etc. Inuttitut speakers are taking on the responsibility for helping would-be learners, and now encourage young learners, where they sometimes used to tease them about their mistakes. Overall there is a sense of urgency about language, as the entire community is aware of the significance of the fact that almost no children are learning Inuttitut as a first language and that elderly speakers are dying off.

Language teaching materials in the school have become increasingly sophisticated and the importance of oral language and complete sentences is well understood by most Inuttitut language teachers. While earlier lessons in past decades focused mostly on naming animals, telling time and learning the writing system, teachers now increasingly gear their lessons towards helping the young students to speak as naturally and as much as possible.

Like most schools across Canada's north, Inuttitut teachers in Nunatsiavut find the most challenging area is to find or develop appropriate Inuttitut materials at the intermediate or high school level. This need is complicated by the fact that

Inuttitut is a strongly oral language, where culture, tradition and knowledge are communicated almost exclusively through speaking, even though people know how to write. As a result, there are few written resources that are authentic in the sense that they were composed directly in Inuttitut and are not translations. We will call materials which are not translated Direct Inuktut. Across Canada one finds that the majority of Inuktut written materials are translations from English or French sources. Direct Inuktut is heard on the radio and television, but this type of media is not currently available to the public and schools for repeated listening. It is easy to imagine that this could change if podcasts were produced.

In summary, there is a need for materials suitable for intermediate learners who already know the basics of Inuttitut but need to improve their vocabulary, grammar, and discourse. Intermediate learners may be roughly defined as those who can make basic isolated sentences but cannot produce a paragraph of connected sentences (discourse) (see ACTFL, 1985). The Rosetta Stone Level I materials, which have just been introduced in the schools, appear to be very effective in helping the students learn to listen and express themselves. Nevertheless, they don't yet provide large stretches of Direct Inuktut containing complex discourse material. Well-composed material of this sort is equivalent to what is called literature in western (southern) societies. Inuktut speakers produce rich and sophisticated language material frequently, but it cannot be accessed repeatedly or at any time by intermediate learners.

### **Linguistic materials**

Over the course of years of fieldwork, a linguist will accumulate a set of language materials. Depending on whether the linguist is primarily interested in sound-systems or grammar, they will probably tape a few stories for either documentation purposes or for linguistic data. In our case, the linguist had taped numerous interviews with fluent speakers concerning grammaticality judgements, etc. There were also tapes of stories told by fluent speakers, some of them now deceased. Speakers were requested for a story, whatever the speaker wished to talk about. Legends or traditional stories are not usually found in Labrador Inuttitut. Instead there is a strong tradition of describing instances or earlier times in one's life. Usually, the linguist was not capable of understanding the stories.

The need for literature materials, mentioned above, combined with a set of story data materials from fieldwork brings an obvious solution to mind. Why not use the fieldwork materials for language learning? A number of the stories had already been transcribed from tapes. This work was done by skilled speakers of Inuttitut who were paid by the linguist. Transcribing oral speech to paper requires expertise. It is not easy to accurately write down another person's speech in your own language from a tape or audio file. Transcribers have to work very closely with language that sometimes differs a little from their own in terms of grammar or choice of words. They have to try to write what they hear, and not how they themselves would say it. At the same time, they have to delete false starts and

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anything that does not really form part of the story (Introduction, n.d.). Monolingual Inuttitut speakers prefer to speak rather than write down their stories.

The challenge was how to make the best use of the stories for the community, without needing to spend a large amount of time or money. If we could make the transcribed stories also useful for linguists working on Inuttitut, this would justify the investment of academic time and research money. A linguist employed by a university is expected to a) teach linguistics to university students of that university and b) to publish academic papers based on research. Their work is evaluated based largely on these two activities.

A story database with English translations and a morpheme gloss can benefit both the needs of the linguist and the community. It makes an excellent research tool for linguistics and can be used as a source of examples and new issues for the linguist to explore. At the same time a story database contains intermediate or advanced level language materials, which can be adapted to language teaching in the classroom. We summarize our general goals below:

- A. to design an optimal story database which will be useful in language teaching at the intermediate level and advanced levels. [Purpose]
- B. to reduce as much as possible the expense of time and money in creating the database. [Restrictions]
- C. to make sure at an early stage in the development of the database that the story materials will actually be useful within the classroom. [Feedback and evaluation]

The last point (C) is particularly important. Given that we were and still are dealing with a limited amount of time and budget from finite research grants (B), we needed to know as soon as possible whether the attempt at community collaboration (A) is successful or useful at all. If not, the entire project would have to be modified or perhaps even abandoned.

### **Specific goals of the Inuttitut story database**

As the story database was begun, we decided that the story material should have an English translation and also morpheme glosses so that intermediate Inuttitut language learners could use and improve their language skills. Sometimes stories are just presented in the native/Aboriginal language, but realistically this format is best for advanced learners and fluent speakers. At the same time, we didn't want the database to be cluttered with English and grammatical terminology. We felt that this would be off-putting and distracting to both learners and fluent speakers who might use the story database. Published stories with morpheme glosses of everything are difficult to read, and it can take time to learn how to use them.

We also had to take into account that Inuttitut is a polysynthetic language where long words are roughly equivalent to English sentences read from right to left. This is shown by the Labrador Inuttitut example below:

hotsikokKujautlunga  
'when I was told to get on a horse.'

This word sentence can be broken down into five morphemes with the following English glosses.

hotsi-ko-kKu-jau-tlunga  
horse-travel by-to tell (someone to do something)-passive-conjunctive I s

We decided it was important to make this information available to intermediate learners but only when they themselves wanted to see it.

We also wanted to utilize the audio source of the transcribed stories, as audio is an extraordinarily rich and valuable medium for learning a language. With digital audio, students and teachers can easily play oral material over and over again. Repetition by fluent speakers is important within a language classroom but many Inuttitut speakers find it unnatural to use language this way.

We decided that rather than just using previously taped oral stories, we would try to get a few written stories. A couple of individual speakers were asked to write short accounts of their choosing, either about how life was when they were young or some of their favorite memories of going out on the land. We emphasized that they should try not to think about English while writing the story. After a little hesitation, they agreed and returned with written stories of about one to two pages. Later they translated the stories into English for us. When asked if they had ever written pieces like this before, both answered no. Inuttitut speakers in Labrador have traditionally used writing to communicate to their families when there was no other means of communication. Writing for writing's sake in Inuttitut is fairly uncommon. With planning and encouragement, it may become more common in the future. We taped one of the authors reading her written piece and it was entered into the story database with both oral and written forms.

### **Building a story database**

Even though linguists often have large collections of language field notes in digital form, it is not always easy to share this material with others. The data may be in generic database programs like Filemaker or Microsoft Access, or even programs specialized for storing linguistic data like Shoebox. These kinds of databases typically make it straightforward to enter large amounts of language material with translations and other linguistic information. Nevertheless, it can be difficult to share the contents if other people do not have the same software or computer type (Mac vs. PC). It is also difficult to allow people in different locations to look at or add to the language data. Given that a collection of stories is intended for a wider audience than just language specialists, being able to share the story database directly with a non-academic audience is a desirable goal.

In the case of Labrador Inuttitut, materials need to be shared over vast distances, between developers in Toronto and collaborators and audiences in the

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communities of Nunatsiavut. Fortunately, Internet access is becoming increasingly widespread. Internet access is far more widely available than costly (or even free) database software. This allows both linguists and members of language communities to readily access and collaborate on collections of language materials. Internet posting is also a much cheaper and more efficient option than traditional print publication. Publication can often take years, involving a great deal of editing and revision. This sometimes results in a publication that is overly expensive and/or difficult to find or obtain.<sup>2</sup> Internet posting does not need to take as long because revision is possible even after posting. It also does not require the costs of paper publication.

Web applications, from Amazon to Mapquest to Facebook, have transformed the Internet from a world-wide posting board into a collection of interactive computer programs, accessible from anywhere, even when using a computer which is not your own. Not only web applications, but also tools for rapidly creating web applications have become commonplace. We decided to use the popular Ruby on Rails system to create a web application for inputting and viewing stories in Labrador Inuttitut, along with linguistic information and audio. Ruby on Rails greatly simplifies the task of writing programs that store and retrieve content from a server and allow users to interact with it over the Internet. It is also easy to add features that use Ajax, a technology that makes web applications interactive and convenient.

Our Labrador Inuttitut story database is accessible online to users acting either as the audience (readers/listeners) or as editors (linguists/community language professionals). Members of the audience are able to listen to audio recordings of Inuttitut stories, read the corresponding text with parallel English translation, and view the breakdown of words into their morphemes. Editors prepare, analyze and post this material. We require both the audience and editors to log in with passwords. The audience password is the same for everyone and each editor has their own password. This password system allows a minimum of security for viewing and more security for changes in the data.

Audience members accessing a story see a screen like the one shown in Figure 1. The Inuttitut story is in one column on the left. An English translation of the story is on the right. Having the English translation separate from the English means that an intermediate, advanced or fluent Inuttitut user can read the Inuttitut text straight through without having to look at the English.

The button just above the story allows users to hear the story as they read. Readers can also view the morpheme breakdowns of words if they choose. As mentioned above, many Inuttitut words are made up of several morphemes. Clicking on an individual word turns on the morpheme display, shown in Figure 2. As the user moves the cursor over each morpheme, an English gloss of that particular morpheme appears. In Figure 2, the cursor is over the morpheme *aula*, which means ‘depart/leave’ (compare this display with that in Figure 1). Clicking the word again turns off the morpheme display.

Being able to optionally see the meaning of a morpheme is useful for linguists and for speakers of the language with intermediate-level

Figure 1. Display shown to story audience

Al Katie E. Wintersluvunga	Hi. My name is Katie E. Winters.
Nainimiungutlunga tamâni Nainimi inoilaukkunga.	I am from Nain. I was born here in Nain.
AllagalâniakKunga pitjutigillugu aullaKattanigiKattajavuttinik Taslujammut.	I'll write a short story about our trips we have up to Taslujak.
PannailiakKattavugut kisiani Kaujimagutta silakKiniamangât	We start to go off only when we know the weather will be fine.

Figure 2. Morpheme breakdown shown for *aullaKattanigiKattajavuttinik*

Inoilaukkunga.

AllagalâniakKunga pitjutigillugu  
 [aulla·Katta·ni(k)·gi·Katta·ja·vuttinik]  
 T depart/leave ut.

PannailiakKattavugut kisiani Kaujimagutta

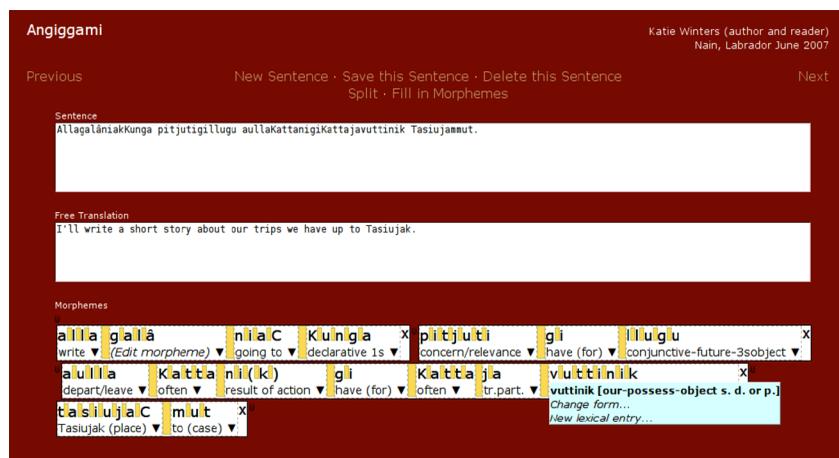
fluency. Optionality is an important feature because it will prevent interference when fluent speakers are reading. Fluent speakers might find such information a distraction or even confusing. Printed texts on paper are sometimes available with an English morpheme breakdown placed below each line of text. In this situation, it is difficult to avoid looking at the morpheme breakdowns, even if you don't need them. Intermediate learners do not always need morpheme breakdowns, and may find themselves distracted from reading the text if all the morphemes breakdowns are presented at once. We believe that they prefer to see extra information on a need-to-know basis. There may be only one morpheme in a long word that they do not recognize. It is also likely that intermediate learners will differ as to which morphemes they need help with. We have attempted to use the interactivity of modern web browsers to create the optionality that will help different users with different morphemes without creating the problem of too much information.

Of course, someone must put the stories, English translations and morpheme breakdowns into the database before readers can view them. The job of an editor is to divide each story text into sentences, provide a free English translation for each sentence and divide each word into morphemes with appropriate glosses.

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The editor working on a story must first decide where each sentence boundary lies. This decision is based on any punctuation in the written Inuttituk text and the English translation provided. After an editor has created a sentence boundary, the application provides a screen where, below the text and translation, each word in that sentence is available for division into morphemes. This can be seen in Figure 3, where the four word sentence in the upper part of the screen produces four white blocks below.

Figure 3. Editing screen



The interface provides possible division points for each word. These are the small bars on either side of each letter shown in Figure 3. Editors can divide a word into morphemes by clicking on a particular small bar. This immediately creates a real level of division, shown by the large bars. Morpheme divisions can be undone by clicking on the large bar. This causes it to return to a small bar.

Once a morpheme division is made, it must be translated. If it is a purely grammatical morpheme, it will be given a label which is often impossible to understand without training. This is an unfortunate but unavoidable aspect of grammatical morphemes, which are found at the right end of the word. For the rest of the morphemes, an English translation of some sort is usually possible. This is easiest in the case of noun and verb roots. Morphemes appearing between roots and final grammatical morphemes are often abstract in meaning and have a variety of translations in English, depending on context (Cook & Johns, to appear).

If the translation for a morpheme has already been entered once before, the existing translation of that morpheme will appear as the default once an editor creates the morpheme division. We believe that the presentation of smart defaults is another useful feature of the application. Most of an editor's time is spent dividing morphemes and entering translations. Many of the morphemes in a given word are quite common. Entering their translations repeatedly is not a good use of time. Repeated translation can also put the stories at risk of being

inconsistently glossed if the editor does not remember how they translated the morpheme previously. If there is no stored translation for a morpheme, or if the default translation is not appropriate in that context, the editor can click to show a menu that allows another translation to be added. This menu also allows the written form in which the morpheme is displayed in Inuttitut to be changed to a more general (or abstract) form if the editor thinks it to be appropriate. This option is shown in the lower right hand corner in Figure 3. This does not change the form of the morpheme in the story text, only in the morpheme display.

One of the project goals was to make a system that is as easy to use as possible, with little or no need for technical assistance after the initial set-up. Computer program developers come and go, and we wanted to make an application that could be run in the future by the editors alone. Our aim is not to need the services of the developer, who is a linguistics graduate student with expertise in computing science and programming. This graduate student will soon be pursuing a Ph.D. in another university. Rand Valentine (Department of Linguistics, University of Wisconsin-Madison) advised us to keep this as a goal during the development, because there are many instances where a developer leaves and other computer programmers cannot fix or even maintain the program.

Another goal was to reduce the computer work for the editors. The point-and-click features of the application and its ability to show smart defaults for morpheme translations have so far allowed for quite efficient and even enjoyable editing. Making the process efficient and pleasurable allows preparing and distributing texts in a reasonable amount of time. The application also adds extra value to the stories for linguists and lexicographers. Because each morpheme is stored along with its default translation, this information can be extracted from the database to make a simple glossary or lexicon. This is potentially very useful for linguists researching a language which is not their own, and could be beneficial for community dictionary and grammar projects.

As mentioned above our web application makes the story database usable by individuals or groups who we provide the URL and the password to. There is no need for the purchase of additional software on their part. In addition, the software used for the development of the web application (Ruby on Rails) and the database system that it uses to store and retrieve the texts (MySQL) are themselves free of charge.<sup>3</sup> This makes it possible in principle for us to make a general version of our story database system available for use by other community groups for other languages. We hope to do this in the near future. We would like to provide a system that can be installed and easily adapted to a community's needs by someone with a basic knowledge of web design. A technician would then house it on an Internet server. From that point on, it would run largely without technical intervention. Someone with background in computer programming could straightforwardly make any minor changes that might be needed. If completed, we hope that this system will then allow other groups of linguists and communities to quickly and easily collaborate on a project similar to ours. As we have made clear before, the content of such a database is valuable not

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only to communities who engaged in language maintenance and revitalization, but also to linguists as a source of natural language data.

### **Using the story database in the language classroom**

As mentioned previously, it was crucial to know as soon as possible if the project was useful for language teachers and learners. A fluent speaker of Inuttit teacher, Joan Dicker, with a B.Ed. degree employed at Jens Haven Memorial School in Nain, Labrador, used the Labrador Inuttit Story Database with her students. Her school has a student population of about 400 in grades K-12. Inuttit is available as immersion K-3 and is a core subject 4-9. It is an optional subject in high school and she teaches core Inuttit to all students in grades 4-9 and a course at the high school level. For most of the students, Inuttit is their second language. Only a handful of the students are exposed to Inuttit at home. For these students, even though they have some understanding of it, they do not speak it. Many of the students at the school are showing more interest in learning to speak the Inuttit language than before. Since the formation of Nunatsiavut in 2005, a form of self-government that includes government over economic development, health, education, language and culture and social programs, many of the beneficiaries of Nunatsiavut want to show that they are of Inuit descent. They want to learn the Inuit language. Knowing Inuttit is also one of the criteria for getting a job with the Nunatsiavut government.

Students are finally appreciating how important the Inuit language is. Some of them just want to be able to speak it. In the past, the youth did not think it was of much importance and did not bother to learn it. Some were even ashamed to try to speak it. This is no longer the case. People in Nunatsiavut want to demonstrate their identity as being an Inuk through speaking Inuktit. Back in the late 1970s and early 1980s there was no special classroom for teaching Inuttit. Now there is a classroom where students can come to study the language, instead of the teacher having to go into other classrooms to teach. This improves their learning quite a bit. Students are only exposed only to Inuttit materials in this classroom, and the teacher can try to make it so that the class is almost all in Inuttit. There are quite a few students who are showing a great deal of interest in learning the language. They are not shy about speaking or having conversations in Inuttit. All the students are very good at reading and spelling in Inuktit. They also have a very good understanding of the spoken language, and are told that it is up to them if they want to speak it. They also know that they have to try to use it not only in the Inuttit classroom, but outside of school, with their friends and at home. They are doing this.

The Labrador Inuttit Story Database is proving very beneficial to students learning Inuttit at Jens Haven School. Since students are already familiar with learning through computers, they are able to learn Inuttit in this new way. The Inuttit stories provide them with one more method of learning their language. In addition to the Rosetta Stone language program, the students now also have the opportunity to read, listen to and learn Inuttit stories by means of the computer. They are showing a great deal of interest in this kind of learning. One of the

reasons that the students enjoy the Inuit stories is that they are told and written by people who the students know or even are related to. They also enjoy stories because they don't have to write on paper in order to learn. They can learn at their own pace.

The stories are not too long and the students enjoy listening to people actually telling stories. When they hear parts that they understand or even find funny, there are smiles on their faces. The stories are broken down into small sections so that the students can figure out the meaning through the English if they do not understand. It gives them a better understanding of how the language works. Sentences that are single words are broken down into smaller units so that the students can find out which parts of the sentence mean what. They only do this if they don't understand.

This material is very useful to both Inuktitut teachers and to the students as yet another tool for learning Inuktitut. One of the main problems, however, is having adequate computer facilities. There is a computer lab that contains sixteen older computers. No more than five or six students at a time can view and listen to the stories because of the limitation of the school's network. If more than five students are reading and listening to a particular story, some of the computers shut down, which is very frustrating for everyone. Most of the students do not have access to computers at home and the only opportunity they have to use computers is at the school. Other than this, the materials are very useful, and the more stories the better it will be.

Our joint cooperation through developing and determining the usefulness of the Inuktitut Story Database has shown that it is indeed worthwhile to invest time and money in further work on the database through the addition and analysis of more Inuktitut stories. If continued over the long term, this story database will provide a showcase of Inuit literature in Labrador, both oral and written. We are currently demonstrating the database to more individuals within the community, with the goal of getting more stories for the database. We are exploring the feasibility of making the database into a general tool for other language communities.

## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup>Thanks to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for funding the research grants Labrador Inuktitut Community Grammar and the Mapping the Syntax of the Inuktitut Word. Thanks also the Ontario Government's Work Study grants program and the University of Toronto's Excellence awards, which supported a large part of Ewan Dunbar's work in this project. We would also like to thank Rand Valentine for advice at the beginning of the project.

<sup>2</sup>An unfortunate example of this is the Inuktitut Dictionary: Tununiq Dialect, published by the Department of Education, Nunavut. By Nunavut law, this wonderful dictionary could only be distributed within the school system and libraries, but could not be sold to the public, including Inuit families.

<sup>3</sup>Ruby on Rails is available at <http://www.rubyonrails.org/> and MySQL is available at <http://www.mysql.org/>

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