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A NEW INUIT ORTHOGRAPHY FOR GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES*

Paper presented by Canada

* Paper prepared by Mr. Stevenson, federal co-ordinator on the Inuit Language Commission. He also represents the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development on the Canadian Permanent Committee on Geographical Names.

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Prior to 1967 the spelling of geographical names of Inuit origin was done in a rather haphazard fashion. At its annual meeting that year the Canadian Permanent Committee on Geographical Names¹ agreed to use a new standard orthography devised by linguists in the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development for all new names of Inuit origin. It was also agreed that established names should not be changed although they may not reflect the recommended orthographic forms.

The standard Inuit orthography appeared reasonably satisfactory for use in both English and French texts, and for use in gazetteers and on maps. However, the Inuit themselves expressed reservations about the suitability of the orthography for all its language dialects. In 1974 the Inuit Tapirisat (National Inuit Brotherhood) which had been established three years earlier to serve the needs of the Inuit across Canada, asked the Federal Government to establish a language commission to investigate the status and various aspects of the Inuit language.

The Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development was sympathetic to the proposal and made available the requested funds to the Brotherhood. He also seconded from his department a federal co-ordinator. The Brotherhood appointed the six Inuit commissioners, the Inuit director and the three-man advisory committee made up of authorities on the Inuit language. The commissioners visited the 50 or so communities in the north to record the views of the Inuit people. Tape recorders were used to make a record of the comments and, as well, to convey the difference among dialects to the various communities. The Commission also worked with the CBC Northern Service, the community councils and others interested in the language of the Inuit.

On completion of the Commission's fact-finding tour the following conclusions were drawn:

(a) There is no doubt that the Inuit Language can survive. For the majority of the Inuit, no matter what age they are, it is still the preferred tongue. There is general alarm, however, at the threats to it from the powerful southern culture that is moving into the north, and fears that the Inuit language might be supplanted. But the optimistic view is that it can survive if certain actions are taken. It is evident that language, like gold, is merely a tool but that languages and culture are inseparable. Common speech is one of the strongest human bonds and it is therefore a common language which above all unites the Inuit.

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