FEATURED LANGUAGE: INUKTITUT

Submitted by Monica Charlotte Rachel Cohn on October 2, 2020 - 11:23am

Snow-covered Tundra by Lina Jarczyk

panikpit ilinxiaqtitsiija nanurmit nirijaulauqpa?

Linguists study languages which the average American rarely comes into contact with. Identifying and then answering a cutting edge research question in that language may require years of basic study, particularly when some words in that language correspond to English sentences.

UW is one of the few places in North America where formal study of Inuktitut is possible, through Canadian Studies. Agatha Downey received a Foreign Language Area Studies scholarship to study Inuktitut during 2019-20. The class is taught by Alexina Kublu and Mick Mallon, a husband and wife pair who have been at the forefront of teaching the Inuit language in Canada for decades. Classes were taught remotely long before COVID-19 made the practice common.

Inuktitut is what linguists call a polysynthetic language, with subjects, objects and the like being expressed through long chains of suffixes (or “chunks”, as Mick and Kublu refer to them) to a root. Most Inuktitut utterances consist of such words. Perhaps most difficult for English speakers is an extremely complex system of morphophonemics, or changes in sound when suffixes or suffix and root contact each other, which make the boundaries between them extremely difficult to discern for an outsider. Mick and Kublu tend to eschew formal linguistic terms in favor of their own more pedagogically-friendly terms for these processes (“parachuters” and “self-decapitators” being among the more eccentric).

A language puzzle for the linguistically inclined: can you figure out the free translation of this four-word Inuktitut sentence from the information in the second line? The Leipzig Glossing Rules can help you decode the second line, or better yet, take a morphology class (LING 481/581 some time).

panik-pit ilin-niaq-titsiija nanuq-mit niri-jaq-lauq-pa?
daughter-erg.2poss learn-fut-make.do-ag-abs.4poss bear-ins eat-pass-pst-q3sbj