

Session Review: Decolonizing Nomenclature One Language at a Time

Shauna Matthews

On November 8, 2023, Nathalie Guénette from the Canadian Heritage Information Network (CHIN) and Joanna McMann from the Government of Nunavut (GN) presented “Decolonizing Nomenclature One Language at a Time” at the 2023 Association of Registrars and Collections Specialists (ARCS) Conference in Montréal, Canada. The presentation outlined the collaboration between CHIN and GN to add Inuit language and terminology to the CHIN’s Nomenclature for Museum Cataloguing.

CHIN manages Nomenclature for Museum Cataloguing, a controlled and standardized list of terms for objects in museum collections, which is available online. It is useful for cataloguing objects to create organized and consistent terms which helps with quick and easy searching, categorization, and indexing. Nomenclature provides terms for objects in both English and French, Canada’s two official languages, and more recently, some Spanish terms.

The Government of Nunavut has holdings of Inuit items consisting of archaeological, object, and art collections. These collections were previously only catalogued in English and not available or accessible in Inuktitut, one of Nunavut’s official languages. This was problematic as Inuit could not access information about their cultural objects in their own language, as well as the use of offensive terms and colonial place names in English. McMann also found that when using Nomenclature for Museum Cataloguing, the English terms did not fully describe or capture Inuit items and concepts.

In 2021 McMann sent a request to CHIN to add Inuktitut terms to Nomenclature. Inuktitut words, such as kamik (boot) and pualuuk (mitten) were added to Nomenclature, available in both Latin orthography and syllabics. There were some problems that arose due to the structure of Nomenclature. Currently Nomenclature only has one preferred term. This is problematic for Inuktitut because it has many regional dialects, and the grammar of the language has different words for single, dual, and plural instances.

CHIN has come to realize that Nomenclature is missing Indigenous concepts in the current iteration of Nomenclature’s hierarchy and categorization. In addition to wanting to add new concepts, they also want to add terms for existing Nomenclature concepts in other Indigenous languages. They are actively searching for community partners to work with to add new terminology and are fully aware that the Indigenous communities should lead these projects and be in control of their own terminology. However, though actively looking for community partners, CHIN is not approaching Indigenous partners and is instead asking for communities to approach them.

This presentation did a good job of highlighting the effects of not having cultural information in the original language can have on the community the items come from. It reduces accessibility of the items itself as well as related information and can perpetuate harmful terms and colonial names. This presentation was particularly relevant for my work at

the Musée de Saint Boniface Museum (MSBM) in Winnipeg as an institution that holds Indigenous items in its collection. Though MSBM has very few Inuit items we do hold many items from Métis and Indigenous communities around Manitoba. Previous cataloguing methods do not meet current standards and most definitely have used harmful terms and colonial place names. My goals for the coming years are to assess the documentation of Indigenous items in the collection and review terminology used to describe these items. Utilizing the information from this presentation and the experiences of both CHIN and the GN I hope to include Indigenous terminology for object names as well as traditional place names for where these items came from.