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Unravelling translations of the “first Inuit novel”

SSHRC-funded researcher begins studying French and English translations of Inuit texts

Edmonton – MacEwan University’s Dr. Valerie Henitiuk is embarking on a study that looks at French and English translations of two different Inuit texts—Mitjarjuk Nappaaluk’s *Sanaaq* and Markoosie Patsauq’s *Harpoon of the Hunter*—both which have been called “the first Inuit novel.”

“Anthropologists and ethnologists have long studied Inuit stories, songs and legends, but rarely from a literary – much less a translation studies – point of view,” explains Henitiuk, who is also executive director of the Centre for the Advancement of Faculty Excellence, a professor in the Department of English and special advisor to the university, Indigenous initiatives.

“This is important and ground-breaking work, especially in a time when we, as Canadians, are waking up to the fact that Indigenous people in this country have well-established cultures that are centuries old and deserve respectful engagement,” says Henitiuk.

She is currently focusing on *Harpoon of the Hunter*, which Patsauq originally wrote in Inuktitut and then translated into English himself. His English version was first published in 1974, but appears to have been edited quite heavily in the process because it does not match the Inuktitut. The English was immediately translated into French, then German, then Danish. “It’s a bit like the childhood game of telephone,” says Henitiuk. “With each translation, you get further and further away from the original, and that means something very different is being transmitted at each stage. I think that’s worthy of comment.”

In the process of commenting, Valerie is careful and mindful of the fact that she is not Inuk, recognizing that collaboration will be a critical part of this work over the long term.

The project recently received funding from a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Insight Development Grant which is designed to help researchers establish a new project. Henitiuk will spend the next two years working with two research assistants, who are also MacEwan University undergraduate students, focusing on the English and French translations of both texts.

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