

ON THIN ICE: LANGUAGE, CULTURE & ENVIRONMENT IN THE ARCTIC

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There are some 40 or so indigenous languages spoken in the Arctic and Far North (depending a bit on how one defines “language” and “Arctic”). With the notable exception of West Greenlandic, or Kalaallisut [kal], in Greenland, all are undergoing shift and attrition. There is a high correlation between language retention and traditional lifestyle. While the links between language, culture and environment may not be obvious to outsiders, they are deeply embedded in the daily life of Northern indigenous peoples. They live in close contact with the land, the sea, and the animals which inhabit both. Many indigenous Arctic peoples continue to live partial or total subsistence lifestyles, which is reflected in their languages, most obviously in their lexicons, but also in the contents of their everyday stories, which often involve hunting, fishing, and encounters with animals (especially bears). In general, speaker communities which are still linked to their environment show higher rates of language retention than those who have experienced massive cultural shift. Thus language vitality varies not only from language to language, but also across communities. Language, culture, and the relationship to the land are key parts of a seemingly fragile and yet tenacious Arctic indigenous identity.

The situation at present is precarious. Beyond the well-known legacy of colonization and the impact of colonizing languages, the ecosystems and peoples are experiencing unprecedented change as this region warms and as globalization alters traditional ways of life. What are the possible responses to such changes? Is it simply the role of the linguist to record and document linguistic systems, the culture they are embedded in, and the traditional knowledge they encode? Or does the linguist play a role in sustainability in the region? What does sustainability mean in the Arctic context?