

# The East Greenlandic language

During his overwintering in Ammassalik in 1884-85, Danish explorer Lt Gustav Holm made the first study of the East Greenland language. His work was supplemented by companions Hanserak and Thalbitzer.

In 1934, a four-man French expedition led by Paul-Emile Victor arrived in Ammassalik (now called Tasiilaq) aboard Dr Charcot's *Pourquoi Pas?* to continue studying the East Greenland inhabitants. Over the next three years the French scientists lived among the local people, making long umiaq trips with them in summer and sledge journeys in winter, during which they succeeded in recording the bulk of the indigenous vocabulary. In more recent years, this original research material was put in order by Catherine Enel, a French ethnologist with the Musee de l'Homme, Paris, who in lived in Ammassalik.

Greenlandic was originally written using the French system of accented notation to try and render manageable the essentially guttural. This has recently given way to a simpler phonetic system where a short sound is shown with one vowel (A - as in *apple* - Ammassalik), and a long sound has two or more vowels (A - as in *far* - Nunaat). Whilst easier to decode, written words have become longer and a single word can stretch halfway across the page.

Greenlandic often sounds like Welsh. Their **dl** (as in Kalaadlit, now spelt Kalaallit, but pronounced the same) is hissed with the tongue in the same way as **ll** (as in Llandudno). It is similar to the ancient *eth*, which occurred in mediaeval English and Irish literature and was shown as a crossed d (ⱦ). The *eth* is still part of the Icelandic language today. Greenlandic is also constructed like Welsh, where places are described rather than named, and all the features are bundled together to identify its uniqueness, producing a whole sentence for a single place name. Anglesea's famous railway station is a good example. This contrasts with the Western European practice of claiming discovery or indicating ownership, as in Mt Everest or Thompson's Road. On Greenlandic maps, place names reflect the hunter's perspective, describing aspects of an island or peninsula needed for navigation while hunting. This can mean that the same name can appear several times on the same

coast, describing different places, which can leave the European traveller asking ‘Which Qeqertarssuatsiaq?’

Linguists now recognise that the Inuit share a circumpolar language. Greenlandic is a part of this, comprising three dialects, each operating in distinct geographical regions and defended with considerable rivalry. The speakers of West Greenlandic, the country’s official language, regard East Greenlandic as a barbaric language only spoken by primitive Eskimos (savages who still eat raw meat). Despite the support of Ethnologists, the East Greenlanders are fighting a losing battle to preserve their oral (and cultural) heritage, meaning the French have become linguistic embalmers. Meanwhile, the true polar Inuit, descendants of the last migratory wave from Canada who live in the Qanaq region in the far northwest, proudly refer to themselves as real Eskimos and claim to be the only true Arctic hunters left on Earth.

Eskimo is a Native American (Indian) word meaning Eaters of Raw Meat, and was used a derogatory term by horse-borne warriors to antagonise their northern coast-bound neighbours who didn’t dance around bonfires, scalp their foes and chew jerked buffalo. In fact the Inuit enjoyed tender raw whale and fish, as do Japanese today, as well as sealmeat boiled in stone crucibles over small blubber fires, and were as a consequence free of cholesterol and heart disease. Unwittingly, French scientists in Canada recorded this sarcastic term as ‘Esquimeau’ and by a curious paradox its Anglicised form – Eskimo – has been adopted not only as a universal race descriptor, but as a badge of rank by those who have most reason to shun it. The correct word is Inuit, pronounced *Innoo-it*, meaning literally, the People, as distinct from the seals, foxes, birds, bears, musk ox and all the other life forms with which they shared a landscape and maintained a deep respect based on dependency.

As Greenland adopted Home Rule, the old Danish towns were renamed. Julianehaab became Qaqortoq (pronounced kack-a-tock, or locally, hah-a-toh) meaning The White. Elsewhere, the French rendition was corrected to reflect true pronunciation: Angmagssalik was reduced to Ammassalik, meaning The Place Where in Summer We Catch the Capelin Fish. Travellers initially may struggle with longer names, such as Qeqertarssuatsiaq (Kekka-tars-sooa-seeah), meaning a little island, but once they grasp the basics, the fjord Inugsuarmit (Innoo-swar-meeoo) will seem easier than its Danish name, Sondre Skjoldungesun.

Typically, West Greenlandic sounds soft and rounded while in the East the harsher sounds reflect the life and climate. The ubiquitous **Q**, found at the end of many words, is sounded as a glottal K and issued from halfway down the throat. But normally, Greenlandic is produced at the front and most flexible part of the mouth, and could easily be regarded as a form of music, simply by imagining the topographical shape of what you are saying. Happy is sounded as a high note, sad is low, excitement is a long note, angry is sounded short and curt, while contemplative agreement is expired in a long sigh. Musically, a positive statement tends to end upwards, whilst a negative observation usually ends downwards.

*- Notes collated by Earle de Blonville FRGS*