

Linguistic diversity in Greenland: Nuuk as the hub of contact and change

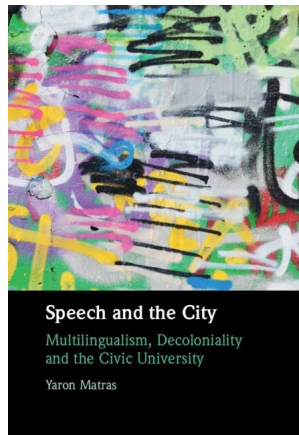
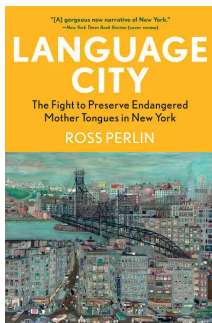
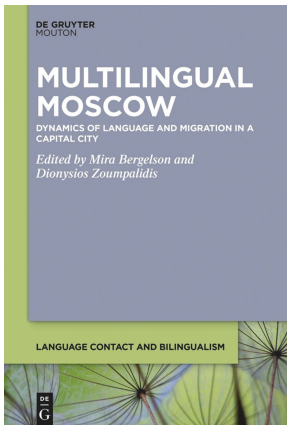
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- 3 Introduction to Greenland
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Cities in Sociolinguistics



Today's talk is part of a larger project that examines multilingualism in differing cities, asking:

What does the city do to language, and in particular to minoritized languages?

Project co-organized with James Costa, Nouvelle Sorbonne (Paris)

Includes:

- Paris: Judeo-Arabic & Provençal (Axelle Houbani & Natalia Bichurina)
- Istanbul: Mardin Arabic & Laz (Balkiz Öztürk, Didar Akar, Metin Bağrıççek)
- Istanbul: Judeo-Spanish (Ioana Aminian-Jazi)
- London: Albanian (Leonita Cato)
- Nuuk: Kalaallisut, English, Danish

Population, 2026 estimates

- Paris: 2,047,600
- Istanbul: 15,701,602
- London: 9,900,000 (projected)
- Nuuk: 20,298 (01 January 2026, *Statistics Greenland*)

- relatively small
- characterized by an urban lifestyle
- while also maintaining close connections with nature
- urban spaces in the Arctic are clearly delineated from the natural landscape by distinct borders, but deep connections to the natural world are part of the daily lives of Arctic urban dwellers
- Arctic cities are often multicultural, with a strong presence of Indigenous peoples

Nyseth (2017)

The city as epistemological problem

From Labov's (1972) New York to Pennycook and Otsuji's (2015) Sydney, the city has provided sociolinguistics with what appears to be a **natural container for the observation of sociolinguistic processes**: a bounded, stratified, multilingual space in which **language can be mapped, counted, and neatly correlated with social structure**.

Costa & Grenoble (*forthcoming*)

(Re)defining the city, from a sociolinguistic perspective

- city has typically been treated as a neutral backdrop against which sociolinguistic processes unfold,
- rather than as an active force that transforms the conditions under which languages are used, valued, and experienced

⇒ We argue: cities should be treated as a specific kind of social technology, one that restructures:

- the relations between speakers,
- between languages,
- and between linguistic practices & their conditions of value.

Work in Nuuk together with:

- Jessica Kantarovich, The Ohio State University
- Camilla Kleemann-Andersen, Ilisimatusarfik
- Tikaajaat Kristensen, Oqaasileriffik
and
- Ivaana Kleemann-Andersen

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CENTER IN PARIS**

Multilingual repertoires, of 2-3 languages (or more), in Nuuk

L1-L2-L3

- Kalaallisut-Danish
- Danish-Kalaallisut
- Kalaallisut-Danish-English
- Kalaallisut-English-Danish
- Danish-English
- English-Danish

monolinguals

- Danish, English,
 - monolingual Kalaallisut in Nuuk? (in the settlements, definitely)

Repertoire management

- widespread use of English in Nuuk
- it is replacing Danish, not English
- usage of English varies by age (mostly)
- use of each language is dependent on:
 - interlocutors
 - space

Repertoire management

- boundaries between languages are largely maintained
- use of language in one space, another in another space
- for example, in cafe Pascucci
 - order your meal in English (or Danish)
 - table conversation is in Kalaallisut
- signage can be in 1, 2, or 3 languages

Code-mixing

- seems to be predominately alternating codes (Muysken 2000)
 - little contact-induced change in linguistic structures
 - lexical borrowing
- characteristic of Nuuk youth language (culture)
 - based on self-reporting
 - casual observation
- often find one person speaking one language, and the other using a different language
 - in service encounters (2 strangers speaking)
 - also across friends, family members
- in daily life in Nuuk, people are required to use different codes

Signage & mixing

Cafeteria sign at Ilisimatusarfik:



Documenting multilingual practices is challenging!

- RUEG methodology
 - Research Unit “Emerging Grammars in Language Contact Situations”
 - <https://www.linguistik.hu-berlin.de/en/institut-en/professuren-en/rueg>

- RUEG methodology
 - Research Unit “Emerging Grammars in Language Contact Situations”
- sociolinguistic interviews
- participant-observation
- documenting the linguistic landscape
 - shops, grocery stores, cafes, bus stops, Katuaq (cultural center)
- language proficiency probe in public spaces
 - Tikaajaat Kristensen: spoke **only** Kalaallisut
 - Ivaana Kleemann-Andersen: spoke **only** Danish
 - Lenore Grenoble: spoke **only** English

Nuuk, the capital of Greenland



singular	plural	
kalaaleq	kalaallit	Greenlander(s)
inuk	inuit	Inuit people more broadly note: <i>inuk</i> = 'person'
qallunaaq	qallunaat	Dane(s) or foreigner(s)
kalaallisut		Greenlandic language
tuluttut		English
Kalaallit Nunaat		the land of the Kalaallit, Greenland

Greenland

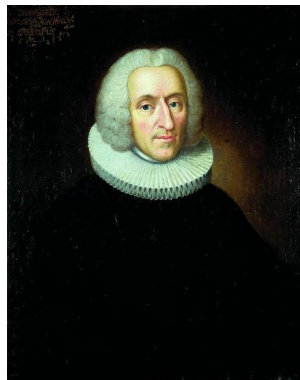


Quick & dirty overview of history



2500–800 BCE	early Saqqaq migrations (from North America)
700- BCE	early Dorset culture
980s	Erik the Red
early 1300s	late Dorset culture
1300-1400	Thule people arrive (ancestors of modern Kalaallit)
1721	Dano-Norwegian colonization
1953	official decolonization of Greenland
1979	Home Rule Act
2009	Self Government, Act № 473 of 12 June 2009
	Kalaallisut is established as the sole official language (Ch 7, Article 20)

- 1686-1758, Lutheran missionary from Denmark-Norway
- heard stories about the old Norse settlements on Greenland
- 1721: sets sail for Greenland, lands in July
- note: find no traces of missing Vikings
- establish themselves, set up a church





Nuuk & Hans Egede



Protesting Hans Egede & Colonization



<https://unric.org/en/red-paint-instead-of-celebrations/>

Quick & dirty overview of language development

1721

Dano-Norwegian colonization

introduction of literacy, bible translations

Review of Moravian records shows that missionaries viewed Kalaallit as ignorant & lacking in emotions, & incapable of converting to Christianity

Danish colonial powers banned performative practices as pagan, making singing, dancing and drumming illegal (Olsthoorn 2023)

1851

Kleinschmidt orthography developed and implemented

1953

official decolonization of Greenland

1973

alphabet reform, replaces Kleinschmidt orthography

1979

Home Rule Act

2009

Self Government

2015-

literacy rates among the highest in the world; 100% ages 15-21

Quick & dirty overview of assimilation

1721

Dano-Norwegian colonization

Review of Moravian records shows that missionaries viewed Kalaallit as ignorant & lacking in emotions, & incapable of converting to Christianity

Danish colonial powers banned performative practices as pagan, making singing, dancing and drumming illegal (Olsthoorn 2023)

1953

official decolonization of Greenland

extensive assimilation, Danification begins

1970s

protests against assimilation, countermovement begins & gains momentum

1979

Home Rule Act

2009

Self Government

Entry paths for English

- internet connectivity
 - 1999: all inhabited areas have satellite connections; some radio
 - 2009: submarine cable
 - system capacity of the Greenland Connect cable system was upgraded 1.92 Tbps to **12.8 Tbps** between Greenland, Iceland and Canada
 - Greenland Cable North (GCN) = upgraded to **4.8 Tbps**



<https://www.submarinenetworks.com/en/systems/trans-atlantic/greenland-connect>

Entry paths for English

- internet activities
 - movies, music
 - Facebook
 - YouTube
 - online gaming
- school
 - English instruction starts in 7th grade
 - in our interviews, many reported speaking English well before entering school
 - high school English class shows high proficiency, with students discussing films and novels in English (2023)

Примечание ИРЯ РАН: Facebook принадлежит компании Meta, признанной экстремистской и запрещенной в РФ

Interview with Nuka, (born in 2013 in Nuuk), recorded 17 April 2023 in Nuuk:

- 1 Nuka I learned English by watching a lot of movies and video games.
- 2 JK It's always the video games and YouTube. When did you learn English?
- 3 Nuka I would say I began to read and talk it fluently about maybe 7th or 8th grade.
- 4 I was getting the hang of it.
- 5 JK Wow.
- 6 LG Your English is beautiful. It's really good. Did you study it at school?
- 7 Nuka Of course, we had English, but it wasn't...
- 8 They were trying to teach us English, but we already could.
- 9 I didn't learn it from school. I learned it from the movies.

English is a lingua franca for:

- immigrants
- tourists
- business people
- government officials (from outside of Scandinavia)

Population of Greenland

Population	01 January 2026
Total	56,470
Nuuk	20,298 = 35%
Sisimiut	5,455
Ilulissat	5,150

$\text{Nuuk} + \text{Sisimiut} + \text{Ilulissat} = 30,903$ (about 55% of the total population)

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/805737/population-of-greenland-by-citizenship/>

Population of Greenland

Citizenship	2026	2024
Danish	53,911	54,361
Philippines	1,341	921
Thailand	428	349
Poland	80	138
Iceland	117	122
Sri Lanka	132	121
Sweden	88	78
PRC	65	65
Norway	61	63
Total	56,740	56,699

Note: Danish includes Danes, Faroese, & Greenlanders

Overheard on a bus:

father *Det er 15:18 når denne bliver til 30 så skal vi være der.*

'It's 15:18, when this turns 30, that's when we will be there

daughter *I don't have my watch on.*

father says something in Kalaallisut with a “wrong” ending (he doesn't sound like he speaks Kalaallisut fluently) a bit later, he says something in English to her, which the daughter answers in Kalaallisut. They continue to speak to each other in three languages.

Interview with Inuk (born in 2000 in Ilulissat), recorded 04 April 2023 in Nuuk:

- 1 JK What do you do in Nuuk?
- 2 Inuk I am, I'm a hotel a hotel receptionist
- 3 JK hotel receptionist? which hotel, uh which one?
- 4 Inuk Seamen's Home, uh it's near the harbor.
- 5 JK Ah, that one okay
- 6 LG Do you speak different languages?
- 7 LG Who, who stays there? Is it mostly Danes who stay there?
- 8 Inuk It's a Christian organization, so it's, uh, it's mostly Danish people.
- 9 LG Oh, I didn't know it was a Christian organization
- 10 Inuk and uh I mean I have uh I only have Greenlandic managers down there,
so that's cool
- 11 JK That's nice.
- 12 LG So do you speak, do you speak mostly Kalaallisut when you're working?

- 13 Inuk uh Danish actually, Danish, Greenlandic and English.
- 14 JK Do you speak, what language do you speak with your managers?
- 15 Do you speak Kalaallisut or Danish?
- 16 Inuk Kalaallisut.
- 17 JK Kalaallisut. So, you speak Danish and English with the customers then
- 18 Inuk co-workers and, co-workers and customers
- 19 JK Do you have a lot of Danish co-workers?
- 20 Inuk [laughs] yeah
- 21 JK Why did you laugh?
- 22 Inuk There's so many like that's the uh main... I don't know.
- 23 There's mostly white people down there. [laughs]

Tupernaq (born in 2001 in Nuuk), recorded 18 April 2023 in Nuuk:

- 1 JK So, what languages did you use at home when you were growing up, like with your parents and your brothers and sisters?
- 2 T Um, we used Kalaallisut and some Danish. Uh-huh. But not very often.
- 3 JK What about with friends?
- 4 T Uh, we use Kalaallisut, Danish and English. It's like all mixed up. [laughs]
- 5 JK Yeah, we've been hearing that. That's cool.
- 6 LG Do you remember if it was different in, I mean, you lived in a lot of places.
- 7 Was it mixed like that?
- 8 T Uh, I don't think that it was.
- 9 I noticed when I moved here, they talked a lot of Danish.

Interview with Tupernaq, discussing song writing:

- 1 LG Would you ever write music in Kalaallisut?
2 T I've tried. It doesn't go well with me.
3 LG Why? I mean, how so?
4 T I don't know.
5 I just have a hard time forming sentences in Kalaallisut sometimes
6 LG But forming words? I mean, your words are like sentences.
[general laughter]
7 T Yeah, but like, I don't know. It's kind of hard for me. Yeah.

- language proficiency probe in public spaces
 - Tikaajaat Kristensen: spoke **only** Kalaallisut
 - Ivaana Kleemann-Andersen: spoke **only** Danish
 - Lenore Grenoble: spoke **only** English
- language proficiency probe:
 - we individually went into shops & cafes and asked non-routine questions in the target language
 - NB: in many places, workers can respond to simple, routine questions in all 3 languages

Proficiency probe in public spaces

- in other cities in this project, researchers investigate language usage in neighborhoods
- so, in Istanbul Laz usage at the Laz language institute, Mardin Arabic at the cultural center



- opened in 2012
- 2 floors of retail, 8 floors of office space
- shops, cafes, grocery store

Nuuk Center, October 2022



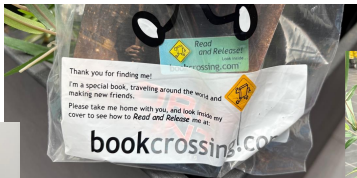
- all 3 languages are used, to varying degrees
- in the shops:
 - English worked everywhere
 - Danish worked in most places
 - Kalaallisut worked in many places

Language in the Nuuk Center

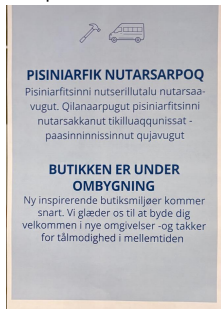


Signs in Nuuk Center

Signs in Pascucci cafe



Boutique closed for renovation



The Escalator in Nuuk Center



LAG goes to Torrak Outlet and observes that the clerks appear to speak only English. Ivaana is sent to test Danish.

Torrak Outlet, Ivaana (IKA) & Clerk (CK); Ivaana tries on a dress:

CK *Not size?*

IKA *Såden lidt poofy*

'kind of poofy'

CK *Ohh poofy, now we only have these. Have you tried Torrak?*

IKA *Torrak?*

CK *Yeah, the store next door.*

IKA *Oh nej, det har jeg ikke*

'Oh no, I haven't'

CK Try there, if they don't have it, we don't have it

Kalaallisut-Danish in AnZo smykker

The two workers were attending to other customers when TKG walked in. The one by the rings was talking Danish with Danish-speaking customers, and the one behind the register was speaking English to English-speaking customers.

AnZo smykker, Tikaajaat (TK) & Clerk (CK):

TK *Una assammioq qanoq angitigiva?*

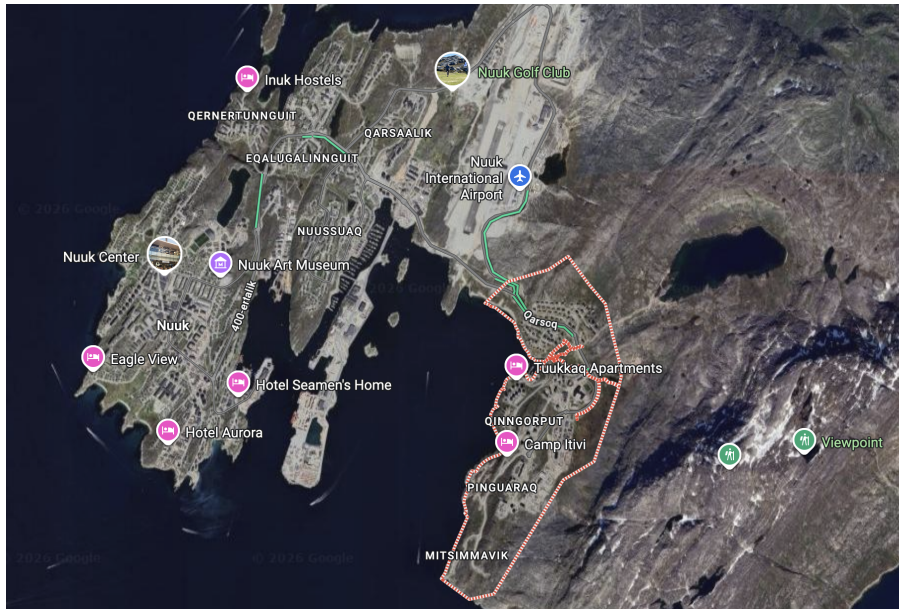
'What is the size of this ring?'

CK *Denne her er størrelse 61. Vil du prøve den?*

'This one is size 61. Do you want to try it?'

The rest of the transaction was similar, with TKG speaking Kalaallisut and the clerk responding in Danish.

Qinngorput: Change in language repertoires



Cafè Tamu menus





Clerk speaks to customers in Kalaallisut but to cooking staff in English

- I try to order in Kalaallisut: *Kukkukooq ilivitsoq*
- before I can get through, she asks me in English:
 - Clerk: Chicken? Half chicken?
 - LAG: No, $\frac{1}{4}$ chicken with salad
 - Clerk: Anything else?
- English is heavily accented, halting, not fluent

At the register

A man in front of me, who was buying a 4-pack of beer, asked the guy working something I didn't catch. He was speaking English, but the cashier didn't speak English well. However, with gestures and a little help from me, they were able to understand each other. Then, when it was my turn and the price was incorrect, I said that in Kalaallisut, and he responded in Kalaallisut, correcting the price.

What does the city do to minoritized languages?

- standard answer centers on contact, shift, and loss
- the city accelerates language shift by multiplying contacts with dominant languages
- reducing domains of use for minority languages, and disrupting intergenerational transmission

This is not the entire story

Costa & Grenoble (*forthcoming*)

- ➡ a transformation in the conditions of how linguistic value is determined
 - outside the city, a minoritized language may function as the unmarked medium of everyday life
 - people work, argue, joke, raise children, live their lives using the minoritized language
 - its value is embedded in a web of social relations, kinship structures, in all sorts of shared practices
 - urbanization detaches linguistic practices from the relational infrastructure that sustained them
 - in Nuuk, the minoritized language is spoken by the majority
 - nonetheless, urban practices transform its value

Qujanaq!

