

Module 8. Identity and Language

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Key Terms and Concepts

Identity
Verbal language
Nonverbal language
Anthropocentric
Non-anthropocentric
National
Ethnic

Learning Objectives/Outcomes

Upon completion of this module you should:

- Be able to discuss the importance and current problems of identity and language among indigenous populations in the Arctic
- Understand the difference between an anthropocentric view of nature and that of a non- anthropocentric view
- Describe the importance of using an indigenous or a national name to a person's identity

- List some of the current problems facing Arctic populations regarding their language and identity

Reading Assignments

Read the lecture and overview for Module 8.

Suggested Reading

Reading 1. Freire Paulo 1978 (or later edition): *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. London: Penguin Books

Reading 2. Corson D. 1995. Norwegian Sami-language act – emancipatory implications for the world’s indigenous peoples. *Language in Society* 24(4): 493-514, December 1995.

Overview

The aim of this module is to promote an understanding of language and identity. While some sections of the module discuss problems relating to all humankind, the examples are all from Scandinavia, Greenland, and other Arctic nations.

The social construction of language and how it is influenced by colonial encounters, linguistic policies and how humans define themselves in relation to nature is discussed. The emphasis is to show how living conditions, life style, changes in population and the national policies have influenced language and identity for Scandinavian and Greenlandic people.

Lecture

With the development of Northern autonomy comes an increased expression of that autonomy. This is seen both in the efforts to revive and preserve indigenous languages in the North, and in other expressions of indigenous identity. This has at times resulted in conflict between indigenous populations and that of the majority cultures consisting of people that historically have moved from lower parts of Europe into the Arctic. In the northernmost part of Norway, for example, immigrants were attracted to the coastline by the rich fisheries. Some of them came from Finland and some from other parts of Norway. This produced regions in Norway with three different languages and cultural traditions.

In Finland, Norway, Russia and Sweden, tensions are evident between the Sámi population and population of outsiders that have moved into that region. In Greenland the majority population – the Inuit - have long been dominated politically and economically by Denmark. Despite Greenland's achievement of Home Rule, it is still dependent upon Denmark and outsiders such as medical doctors and other academically skilled labour. Iceland is a notable exception having a fairly homogenous population of people with a Nordic background and with their own carefully protected language.

The limitations of language

Language is a broad concept covering both spoken and nonverbal language. Spoken language is characterized by socially agreed upon vocal sounds or words combined according to a mutual system. Human beings are, unlike animals, fairly unrestricted in what they can communicate with spoken language about. The spoken language can be put into written form. Nonverbal communication includes other forms of standardized communication such as gestures.

Different cultures witness great variations between what they communicate with words and what they communicate without the use of words, or as the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein described as 'what we remain silent about'.

How people experience the reality of their existence is of great importance to how they relate both to their own life and to the life of others. An individual's conception of his/her reality can be defined as his/her identity. Obviously the Arctic is a far different environment than that of most of the settlers moving into it. (The exception being Nordic and Russian settlers who have traditionally lived along the northern coastline, in the taiga or in mountainous areas, and have experienced conditions relatively similar to that of the most southern part of the Arctic populations.)

Traditionally, living in the Arctic has meant being regulated by light changing from 24-hour light or semi-light to 24-hour darkness or semi-darkness. Living off the land has meant that people have been dependent upon the cycle of animal life. Hunting has been

dependent upon animal migrations, ice and weather. Reindeer husbandry/reindeer-herding has been dependent upon the availability of lichen and other sources of food being seasonable available. Fishing and trapping likewise is dependent upon the season of the animals harvested.

Both religious beliefs and experiences of human identity have been influenced by the lifestyle and pattern of the people in the Arctic. Language has been specialized in order to communicate about important parts of living. For example the Sámi has a large number of words and phrases about snow and snow conditions. Those differences are obvious adaptations to the environment. Differences developed speaking about the spiritual world and human emotions are far more difficult to penetrate, as many early polar explorers and missionaries discovered. One early example is the missionary Hans Egede who tried to communicate about spiritual matters with the Greenlandic Inuit in the early 1700s (Egede 1926 original 1741 and Hindsberger 1997).

An important question, of crucial importance to cross-cultural communication, is if humans from different backgrounds can grasp different parts of reality. It is good reason to believe that the identity developed through close interaction with the Arctic environment have made people see a world in a far different way from those living under other conditions.

As David Abraham (1997: 73) points out: “Every attempt to definitively say what language is, is subject to a curious limitation. For the only medium with which we can define language is language itself”. In a way we are trying to grasp a phenomenon that might be different in different cultures with tools that makes us totally unable to do so.

Nordic and Greenlandic Languages

Sami

According to Pekka Sammallahti, the Sami language is more accurately referred to as a group of dialects; indeed “speakers of different varieties can barely understand one another even in the most elementary matters of daily life.” (Sammallahti 1990, 437) The Sami language group belongs to the Uralic family, which includes 25 million speakers in 21 languages, including about 6 million Finnish speakers. Nine Sami language areas are traditionally recognized, including i) South; ii) Ume; iii) Pite; iv) Lule; v) North; vi) Inari; vii) Skolt; viii) Kildin and ix) Ter. (You can see the locations of the nine Sami dialects on Page 418 of Arctic Awakenings <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0008/000861/086162e.pdf>) An estimated 35,000 people speak Sami – 20,000 in Norway, 10,000 in Sweden, 3000 in Finland and perhaps 1500 in Russia. The majority (approximately 80%) speak North Sami, and as few as 400-500 speak Inari.

Greenlandic

The official name of the language of Greenland Inuit is kalaalit oqaasii (or kalallisuut) which means the language of the Kalaallit or Greenlanders. Greenlandic is a relatively

very well preserved indigenous language, with nearly 80% of the 103,000 Eskimos speaking it, and it is still used as the main medium of communication in daily Greenlandic life (Petersen, 1990), with West Greenlandic as the most common dialect. Greenlandic or Kalaallit is one of four groups of the Inuktitut language, which includes:

- Iñupiaq (northern Alaska)
- Inuinnaqtun (Canadian Western Arctic)
- Inuktitut proper (Canadian Eastern Arctic)
- Kalaallit or Greenlandic (Greenland)

Inuktitut is related to the Aleut language, and together they form the Eskimo-Aleut family. All Eskimo-Aleut languages are *polysynthetic* languages, characterized by a synthesized root and a large number of affixes that create long words with sentence-like meanings.

How many words do the Inuit have for “snow”? According to linguist Steven Pinker, *“Contrary to popular belief, the [Inuit] do not have more words for snow than English. They do not have four hundred words for snow, as it has been claimed in print, or two hundred, or one hundred, or forty-eight, or even nine. One dictionary puts the figure at two. Counting generously, experts can come up with about a dozen, but by such standards English would not be far behind, with snow, sleet, slush, blizzard, avalanche, hail, hardpack, powder, flurry, [and] dusting.”* (Pinker, 64)

Icelandic

Icelandic is a North Germanic language, and as such is a sub-group of the Germanic family. Linguistically, it is most closely related to Norwegian and Faroese. Iceland was settled in the 800-900s, but its language remained very close to Norwegian until the 14th century. Two defining characteristics of the Icelandic language are its resistance to change, demonstrated by the ability of Icelandic readers to understand the Sagas which were written in the 12th Century, and its lack of dialects. Icelandic is an inflected language (meaning the word form is changed according to grammatical function) of moderate complexity.

Danish, Norwegian and Swedish

The Danish, Norwegian and Swedish languages are closely related and mutually intelligible. They form part of the North Germanic language group, and though pronunciation varies from country to country, the written version, particularly of Danish and Norwegian, is close. Indeed, some dialects within borders are more pronounced than between the individual languages. Together, the three languages are spoken by about 15 million people.

Norwegian has two official written forms - *Bokmål* (Standard Norwegian, or literally “Book Language”), used by a large majority (up to 90%) of Norwegians, and *Nynorsk* (“New Norwegian”) which is based on the provincial dialects of selected districts, mainly in western Norway. Swedish is also the mother tongue of about 6% of Finns and is an official language of Finland.

Finnish

Finnish is unrelated to the Scandinavian languages and is a member of the Finno-Ugric language family. Finnish has about 6 million speakers, mainly in Finland, though a few speakers exist in Norway, Sweden, Russia and Estonia, and in fact Finnish is an official minority language in Sweden.

Language and Identity

Language and identity are closely linked; indeed, some surveys of Sami populations are based on the number of Sami speakers, or people who had at least one parent or grandparent speak Sami as a mother tongue.

One of anthropology's most durable and perhaps necessary assumptions is the association between language and local identity (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991). Steedly (1996:447) questions the association between language and local identity through examination of linguistic policies and education programs in a colony. Her conclusion was that outsiders, through linguistic standardization, vernacular education and translation, produced "a set of linguistic resources for rule and resistance" for the population's identity. Thus the intention of linguistic standardization and translation could be just the opposite as the result.

Standardization of language has been attempted in most of the Arctic world. In the USA (Alaska), Norway, Russia and Sweden, it has been part of national policies to have one national language. In Finland and Canada the situation has been more complex having two official national languages. However, in both of those cases, minority languages like those belonging to the Sámi in Finland and the Inuit and First Nations of Canada have not been thought of as equal to the official national languages. Greenland has been a Danish colony and had for many years a similar policy, giving priority to the Danish language. In fact, in all the cases above, minority languages have in periods been discriminated against and historically have tried to be eradicated. Iceland is a different case having one homogenous population with a strong objective of promoting and protecting the national language.

For indigenous populations, like the Inuit and First Nations in the Canadian and US Arctic, the colonialism of outsiders have brought important changes to the fabric of local communities and families. The harsh policies of the past of removing children from their families, educating them in "national" languages, not allowing them to use their own language and interfering with traditional religious practices have brought both a loss of language and cultural identity, as well as pride (Millroy 1999). Children lost not only their own language but also the ability to communicate with their own parents and elders.

In recent years policy has changed, now acknowledging the importance of local indigenous languages. The blatant discrimination of yesterday has been replaced with a strong emphasis upon maintenance and sometimes reconstruction of local traditions and language. That is not always an easy process. In some cases traditional languages have

been replaced by one national language. In Finland, Norway and Sweden that is very much the case for a large portion of the Sámi population no longer being in command of their traditional Sámi language. The same situation can be found in other arctic countries having their local languages replaced by national ones.

Even within the traditional arctic populations, the standardization of indigenous languages has been a common policy. In Greenland, for example, the development of a “Greenlandic language” characterizes differences in the spoken language as dialects. Thus it is possible to pursue a policy of one Greenland nation with one language as opposed to a policy of a Greenland with several different languages. Interestingly, the Sámi population in Finland, Norway, Russia and Sweden gives emphasis to differences in the Sámi language and acknowledges nine or ten different Sámi languages. Ironically the Sámi linguist Pekka Sammallahti (1998) points out that if those differences are not acknowledged as languages but as dialects, then similarly Danish, Norwegian and Swedish should be defined as German dialects.

Arctic outsiders such as teachers, preachers/missionaries, linguists and public administrators have played an important role in language standardization and translation. In many cases missionaries were pioneers who worked to standardize language and to translate Biblical texts. Translating religious and biblical texts required extensive standardization. As Sammallahti (1998) points out, the Sámi language several local variations but the translations “created” a more uniform standard.

Emphasizing the similarity of the different versions of the Inuit language, Inuktitut, might serve to strengthen the unity of Inuit’s across borders of Alaska, Canada, Greenland and Russia. In the same way, emphasizing the similarity of the different versions of Sámi might strengthen their unity across the borders of Finland, Norway, Sweden and Russia.

It is possible to claim the standardization process helped to unite the Sámi into one group and in that way helped to strengthen Sámi resistance against the nationalizing of their culture. On the other hand, such standardization reduced the uniqueness of the local and put the language under foreign linguistic control. And, eventually, they re-presented it back to its speakers, in its now orthodox form, as a gift of civilization (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991:223).

Both in the Inuit and Sámi case the control of the language is now mostly in the hands of intellectuals from their own people. It might be claimed that they operate according to principles inspired by outside linguistics and political thought.

One example of the increased expression of autonomy and willingness to support an indigenous Arctic language is the Sámi Language Act enacted in Norway and Finland in 1992. (The Finnish Act is available at <http://www.finlex.fi/pdf/saadkaan/E0031086.PDF>). The Act established the principle of bilingual education. Even though some suggest, as the Canadian researcher D. Corson (1995) does, that the act had emancipatory implications, it also made visible the severe injustice and discrimination made towards the Sámi as part of Norwegian nationalism.

The ability and resources to teach indigenous languages in schools are critical to maintaining dialects and languages, and subsequently identities and cultures. The use of the Greenlandic language in schools, even in the 1950s and 1960s, has played a large part in the preservation of that language. The increasing use of indigenous languages in mass media – television, radio and newspapers - while standardizing languages, has also assisted in their preservation, and state support, particularly for the Sami, has been increasing.

Identity and names

During a stay in Siberia the summer of 1997 I visited an Nganasan family living at a place called Paiturma in Taimyr. The older male member and head of the family, told me that he thought a standardized written language was alien to the traditions of the Nganasan culture. In his opinion the backbone of his culture was the oral tradition, which he thought would be “killed” by the development of standardized written language. The Nganasan culture, consisting of a few hundred people, has no written language but there are those trying to standardize the language both out of scientific linguistic interest and in order to translate the Bible into that language.

Rydving (1993:127) discusses the importance of a person’s name as an aspect of identity. During my stay in Siberia I visited Nenets living east of Jenitsei River. All of them had a Russian name as well as an additional Nenet name. The later was not told to outsiders. In Rydving’s discussion a similar double name system use in Scandinavia was discussed: “The double name meant, above all, that there was no risk that foreigners would get access to the indigenous names, and through them the identities they represented. The Sámi name of the individual was in this way protected from being sullied and used for malevolent ends by Scandinavians”(ibid). I would like to emphasize the importance of a person’s name for his/her identity. Thus giving a person a “Christian European national” name would possibly have a great symbolic significance for the person. If the person kept, or had an additional secret indigenous name, it would also be of importance.

In the same way, the names we give to objects, animals, places and natural phenomena will be of importance. Changing those names back on maps and landmarks from the “nationalized colonial” to the local traditional might then also be of great importance. Looking at maps in Greenland and the Sámi areas of Norway, that is a policy being actively pursued in order to acknowledge and strengthen local traditional culture.

Factum verum

For the Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico, the only way humans can relate in a meaningful way is through what they themselves have done, or in Latin “factum verum” (what is done is truth) (Tristram 1983). Thus from his view our whole identity and language is concentrated around what we have done. Obviously that will be greatly different for an academic from New York, a fisherman and part-time farmer from Iceland, a reindeer-herder from Norway, Sweden, Finland or Russia and a trapper and hunter from the Canadian north. It will also be greatly influenced by structures in society such

as the Nordic welfare state and the economic and political collapse of the Soviet Union. Availability of education, training and salaried work will vastly change the experience of the individual. The academic of 2004 might very well come from a small Greenland community having received his training at the University of Copenhagen or some other university.

In the Swedish Geography Professor Gunnar Olsson's (1995) view, the problem of understanding other cultures is a problem of the chemistry in "the glue". In his opinion the relationship between the signifier and the signified is dependent upon social cultural glue through which words and objects, expressions and meanings are glued together. The problem is then that the glue might be different in different cultures. He concludes (ibid: 21); "In all its many possible implications the conclusion is still one. We are living – today as always – in a time the world and concepts, object words and meaning do not fit together. To find the road we have to depend upon maps of the invisible, maps which themselves are invisible. But who knows? Unthinkable thought! Maybe the map metaphor itself is obsolete, the geography changed to metagraphy. The history of the perspective shows that as soon as a creation becomes a habit, it's no longer functioning as questioning what we take for granted, but as a technique for preserving it". It is a complex process in which even the signifier might become unfixed. From that point of view it would always be a process with at least a potential of partly reversed roles.

Because only part of such a process would be conscious it is difficult to analyze; "It is the realm of partial recognition, of inchoate awareness, of ambiguous perception, and sometimes, of creative tension: that liminal space of human experience in which people discern acts and facts but cannot or do not order them into narrative descriptions or even articulate conceptions of the world: in which signs and events are observed, but in a hazy translucent light, in which individuals, or groups know that something is happening to them but find it difficult to put their fingers on quite what it is (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991:29). Often, I would argue, we do not understand or notice what is happening. The example of translation of the Bible that has happened all around the Arctic is illustrating. Often translation must have violated both the "native" language of the missionary/translator and that of the local language. As Comaroff and Comaroff (ibid: 218) write about a translator of the Bible, "He had created a counterpart of the scriptures, at least as he read them, in the tongue of the natives – as he had come to understand it. In short he had transposed the Bible into a cultural register true to neither, a hybrid creation born of the colonial encounter itself".

The Arctic has very much been an area of colonial encounters. Local cultures have been dominated and ruled by outsiders. Quite often to they have been dominated to the extent that the local population have identified with the values and ideas of the outsiders – or to put in the terminology of Paolo Freire (1978) of the oppressor. In the same way Adorno (1974) points out that the language of the subjected has been stamped out by domination in which they have choice to live without the ideas of the dominant group.

The coda that will never come

The coda is the final passage of music. It is usually elaborate or distinct. The development of identity and language is a never-ending story. It has clearly been influenced by the human encounter with nature. Without doubt people living in extreme climatic conditions will have to relate to nature in other ways than people living under other conditions. They have always had to do that and they will always continue to do so.

The Arctic world is no longer isolated. It is very much part of the rest of the world. People communicating have always influenced each other. To a greater extent than at earlier times at least part of the population living in the Arctic will be able to live “insulated” from their environment. The tension and interaction between those living in closeness to their environment and those insulated from it is likely to be of great importance for the development both of identities and language in the Arctic

It is difficult to predict the future. However we do know that Arctic peoples in the north in recent years have made efforts to revive and preserve indigenous cultures. How successful those attempts will be remain to be seen. It is up to all of us to participate actively in the future.

Most likely what happens among humans will be greatly influenced by forces outside of their control. Climate change, harsh winters and storms might very well be of greater importance than modern technology (Gamble, Davies, Pettit and Richards 2004 and Chylek, Box and Lesins 2004). In the long run no human can completely insulate her/himself from his or her environment.

Supplementary Readings/materials

Corson D. 1995. Norwegian Sami-language act – emancipatory implications for the worlds aboriginal peoples. *Language in Society* 24(4): 493-514, December 1995.

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The Meeting of Myth and science and “*Primitive thinking and the “Civilized” Mind*

Study Questions

1. Discuss the importance and current problems of identity and language among indigenous populations in the Arctic
2. Discuss the difference between an anthropocentric view of nature and that of a non-anthropocentric view
3. Discuss the importance of using an indigenous or a national name to a person's identity

Glossary of Terms

Anthropocentric and non- anthropocentric: The American philosopher Max Oelschalger (1991) sees a major difference in cultures between those cultures that see humans as part of nature and those who see humans as separate from nature (anthropocentric view of nature). According to such a view the indigenous cultures of the Arctic have represented non-anthropocentric cultures.

Ethnic: An ethnic group is bound together by common ties like race, nationality, language and culture.

Identity: An individual's conception of his/her reality

Indian: Native population of most of America. Towards the north the Indian population borders the population of Inuit's.

Inuit: The word Inuit means “the people”. They are widely called “Eskimos”. The Inuit's populate the Arctic from Greenland in the east, across northern Canada and Alaska to

the eastern part of Siberia. There are about 110.000 Inuit living in the Arctic. The language of the Inuit is called Inuktitut.

Koyukuk Indians: Named after the Koyukuk River in central Alaska, a major tributary to the Yukon River. The Koyukuk Indians are part of the Kutchin Indians a group of Athabascan –speaking Indian tribes. The Kutchin Indians were neighbours to the Inuit people living further north. In the late 20th century about 2000 Kutchin survives. The name Kutchin means “people”. Historically speaking they were hunters and traded both with Indians further south and with Inuit’s in the north.

Language: is a broad concept covering both spoken and nonverbal language. Spoken language is characterized by socially agreed upon vocal sounds or words combined according to a mutual system. Human beings are, unlike animals, fairly unrestricted in what they can communicate with spoken language about. The spoken language can be put into written. Nonverbal communication includes other forms of standardized communication like gestures.

National/Nationalism: While a nation is a unified territorial state with some kind of unifying political system, concepts like “National Pride” and “Nationalism” are used much wider than that, Nationalism representing a policy of having the nation as the highest goal and loyalty. As part of a policy of nationalism a one nation, one language and one culture policy was pursued in many countries. The Nordic countries are good examples of nations pursuing nationalism through a policy of one nation, one culture and one language. Such policies often led to discrimination of minorities like the Sámi in Finland, Norway, Sweden and Russia.

Nenets: Ethnolinguistic group living in northwestern Russia. The northernmost part of the Nenets are the tundra Nenets consisting of about 25.000 people. They inhabit Russian arctic from the Taimy peninsula and the Yenisey River in the east to the White Sea in the west.

The word Nenets means, “man”. The Nenet culture has been centred on reindeer herding, some fishing and hunting.

(In Russian singular Nenets, in plural nenetsy, formerly Samoyed or Yurak – in older literature the later forms might be used).

Nganasan: A high small group of people (less than thousand) inhabiting the northernmost part of the Taimyr Peninsula. The Ngansans are related to the Nenets. Formerly reindeer herding people, nowadays mostly reindeer hunting

Sámi: Traditional population of the northern part of Finland, Norway and Sweden and the Kola peninsula of Russia. In the late 20th century the official numbers of Sámi were 6000 in Finland, 40.000 in Norway, 20.000 in Sweden and 2000 in Russia. Traditionally reindeer herding and nature based activities like fishing, hunting and small-scale agriculture has been the most important part of the economy. Today the Sámi is very

much part of the modern economy of their home countries, however nature based activities remain both culturally and economically important.
(The name Sámi is also spelled Saami, Same, Sabme and sometimes called Lapp)

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