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The Great Eskimo Vocabulary Hoax and Other Irreverent Essays on the Study of Language

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Chapter Nineteen

The great Eskimo vocabulary hoax

Once the public has decided to accept something as an interesting fact, it becomes almost impossible to get the acceptance rescinded. The persistent interestingness and symbolic usefulness overrides any lack of factuality.

For instance, the notion that dinosaurs were stupid, slow-moving reptiles that soon died out because they were unsuccessful and couldn't keep up with the industrious mammals is stuck in the public consciousness. It is far too useful to give up. What insult are you going to hurl at some old but powerful idiot or huge but slow-adapting corporation if not 'dinosaur'? The new research discoveries of the last two decades concerning the intelligence, agility, endothermicity, longevity, and evolutionary robustness of the dinosauria have no effect on the use of the term 'dinosaur' and its supposed associations; no one wants to hear that the dinosauria dominated the planet with intelligence and adaptive genius for hundreds of millions of years and were far more successful than mammals have yet shown themselves to be.

It is in the scholarly community that we ought to find a certain immunity, or at least resistance, to uncritical acceptance of myths, fables, and misinformation. But sadly, the academic profession shows a strong tendency to create stable and self-sustaining but completely false legends of its own, and hang on to them grimly, transmitting them from article to article and from textbook to textbook like software viruses spreading between students' Macintoshes. Stephen O. Murray has pointed out to me a rather beautifully titled paper by John Shelton Reed, Gail E. Doss, and Jeanne S. Hurlbert of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill: 'Too good to be false: an essay in the folklore of social science' (*Sociological Inquiry* 57 (1987), 1–11). It is about the assertion that the frequency of lynchings in the American South in the early part of this century was positively correlated with the price of cotton, a 'fact' that has frequently been used as a key piece of evidence for frustration-aggression theory. Reed et al. show that nearly all

the numerous mentions of this 'fact' state the finding incorrectly, and neglect to cite the works in which real doubt has been cast on whether there is a fact there at all.

There are thousands of further examples, both within and without academia; whole books have been published on commonly believed fallacious (non-)knowledge (e.g. Tom Burnam, *Dictionary of Misinformation,* Crowell, New York, 1975). In the study of language, one case surpasses all others in its degree of ubiquity, and the present chapter is devoted to it: it is the notion that Eskimos have bucketloads of different words for snow.

What I do here is very little more than an extended review and elaboration on Laura Martin's wonderful *American Anthropologist* report of 1986. Laura Martin is professor and chair of the Department of Anthropology at the Cleveland State University. She endures calmly the fact that virtually no one listened to her when she first published. It may be that few will listen to me as I explain in different words to another audience what she pointed out. But the truth is that the Eskimos do *not* have lots of different words for snow, and no one who knows anything about Eskimo (or more accurately, about the Inuit and Yupik families of related languages spoken by Eskimos from Siberia to Greenland) has ever said they do. Anyone who insists on simply checking their primary sources will find that they are quite unable to document the alleged facts about snow vocabulary (but nobody ever checks, because the truth might not be what the reading public wants to hear).

In this chapter, I take a rather more critical stance regarding the role of Benjamin Lee Whorf than Laura Martin did; in fact, I'm rather cruel to the memory of that fine amateur linguist. Since several readers of this piece when it first appeared (and after it appeared in abridged form in the inaugural issue of the academic magazine *Lingua Franca*), let me be clear about this. Whorf has a lasting place in the history of linguistics, a place few of us can aspire to. He is basically responsible for opening up our access to an entire language that had previously been inaccessible (the classical form of Mayan that lay behind the Mayan hieroglyphs until Whorf deciphered them); he coined lastingly useful terms (*allophone* is an example) and introduced intriguing new concepts (the concept of a cryptotype, for instance); and he did important academic work almost entirely without having paid positions in the academic world—an uncommon achievement then, and one almost unheard of now.

But he wasn't a god, and his contribution to Eskimo lexicography looks shoddy to me, so I poke some fun at him in this chapter, just as I am liable to poke fun at anyone who stumbles across my path. Lasting though his place in the history of linguistics may be, Whorf was guilty

of his own small part of the amplification of a piece of misinformation, and deserves his own small share of opprobrium. Professor Martin has seen in writing numbers as high as *four hundred* (repeat, 400) given as the number of Eskimo words for snow. The four hundred figure came from a piece by a would-be author who admitted (under questioning by a magazine fact-checker) to having no source for the number whatsoever. The nonsense that Whorf unwittingly helped to foster is completely out of control.

"A silly, infuriatingly unscholarly piece, designed to mislead" is what one irate but anonymous senior scholar called this chapter when it was first published in *NLLT*. But this is not correct; rather, what I have written here is a silly, misleadingly unscholarly piece, designed to infuriate. There is a huge difference. If scholars of Boas, Whorf, and other giants of twentieth-century language study get angry enough at my flippancy, perhaps they will do some further research on relevant issues (finding out whether Whorf ever did do any informant work with speakers of the Inuit or Yupik languages, for example), and that is fine. I will read with interest whatever is published or sent to me on this topic. So will Professor Laura Martin, who continues to collect any and all citations concerning Eskimo snow terms, however misinformed or well-informed they may be; her address is: Department of Anthropology, Cleveland State University, Cleveland, Ohio 44115, USA.

Most linguistics departments have an introduction-to-language course in which students other than linguistics majors can be exposed to at least something of the mysteries of language and communication: signing apes and dancing bees; wild children and lateralization; logographic writing and the Rosetta Stone; *pit* and *spit;* Sir William Jones and Professor Henry Higgins; isoglosses and Grimm's Law; *Jabberwocky* and colorless green ideas; and of course, without fail, the Eskimos and their multiple words for snow.

Few among us, I'm sure, can say with certainty that we never told an awestruck sea of upturned sophomore faces about the multitude of snow descriptors used by these lexically profligate hyperborean nomads, about whom so little information is repeated so often to so many. Linguists have been just as active as schoolteachers or general-knowledge columnists in spreading the entrancing story. What a pity the story is unredeemed piffle.

Anthropologist Laura Martin of Cleveland State University spent some of her research time during the 1980s attempting to slay the

constantly changing, self-regenerating myth of Eskimo snow terminology, like a Sigourney Weaver fighting alone against the hideous space creature in the movie *Alien* (a xenomorph, they called it in the sequel *Aliens;* nice word). You may recall that the creature seemed to spring up everywhere once it got loose on the spaceship, and was very difficult to kill.

Martin presented her paper at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association in Washington D.C. in December 1982, and eventually (after a four-year struggle during which bonehead reviewers cut a third of the paper, including several interesting quotes) she published an abbreviated version of it in the 'Research Reports' section of AAA's journal (Martin 1986). This ought to have been enough for the news to get out.

But no, as far as widespread recognition is concerned, Martin labored in vain. Never does a month (or in all probability a week) go by without yet another publication of the familiar claim about the wondrous richness of the Eskimo conceptual scheme: hundreds of words for different grades and types of snow, a lexicographical winter wonderland, the quintessential demonstration of how primitive minds categorize the world so differently from us.

And the alleged lexical extravagance of the Eskimos comports so well with the many other facets of their polysynthetic perversity: rubbing noses; lending their wives to strangers; eating raw seal blubber; throwing grandma out to be eaten by polar bears; "We are prepared to believe almost anything about such an unfamiliar and peculiar group", says Martin, in a gentle reminder of our buried racist tendencies.

The tale she tells is an embarrassing saga of scholarly sloppiness and popular eagerness to embrace exotic facts about other people's languages without seeing the evidence. The fact is that the myth of the multiple words for snow is based on almost nothing at all. It is a kind of accidentally developed hoax perpetrated by the anthropological linguistics community on itself.

The original source is Franz Boas' introduction to *The Handbook of North American Indians* (1911). And all Boas says there, in the context of a low-key and slightly ill-explained discussion of independent versus derived terms for things in different languages, is that just as English uses separate roots for a variety of forms of water (liquid, lake, river, brook, rain, dew, wave, foam) that might be formed by derivational morphology from a single root meaning 'water' in some other language, so Eskimo uses the apparently distinct roots *aput* 'snow on the ground', *gana* 'falling snow', *piqsirpoq* 'drifting snow', and *qimuqsuq* 'a snow drift'. Boas' point is simply that English expresses these notions by phrases involving the root *snow,* but things could have been otherwise, just as the words for lake, river, etc. could have been formed derivationally or periphrastically on the root *water.*

But with the next twist in the story, the unleashing of the xenomorphic fable of Eskimo lexicography seems to have become inevitable. What happened was that Benjamin Lee Whorf, Connecticut fire prevention inspector and weekend language-fancier, picked up Boas' example and used it, vaguely, in his 1940 amateur linguistics article 'Science and linguistics', which was published in MIT's promotional magazine *Technology Review* (Whorf was an alumnus; he had done his B.S. in chemical engineering at MIT).

Our word *snow* would seem too inclusive to an Eskimo, our man from the Hartford Fire Insurance Company confidently asserts. With an uncanny perception into the hearts and minds of the hardy Arctic denizens (the more uncanny since Eskimos were not a prominent feature of Hartford's social scene at the time), he avers:

> We have the same word for falling snow, snow on the ground, snow packed hard like ice, slushy snow, wind-driven flying snow—whatever the situation may be. To an Eskimo, this all-inclusive word would be almost unthinkable; he would say that falling snow, slushy snow, and so on, are sensuously and operationally different, different things to contend with; he uses different words for them and for other kinds of snow. (Whorf 1940; in Carroll 1956, 216)

Whorf's article was quoted and reprinted in more subsequent books than you could shake a flamethrower at; the creature was already loose and regenerating itself all over the ship.

Notice that Whorf's statement has illicitly inflated Boas' four terms to at least seven (1: "falling", 2: "on the ground", 3: "packed hard", 4: "slushy, 5: "flying", 6, 7, . . . : "and other kinds of snow"). Notice also that his claims about English speakers are false; I recall the stuff in question being called *snow* when fluffy and white, *slush* when partly melted, *sleet* when falling in a half-melted state, and a *blizzard* when pelting down hard enough to make driving dangerous. Whorf's remark about his own speech community is no more reliable than his glib generalizations about what things are "sensuously and operationally different" to the generic Eskimo.

But the lack of little things like verisimilitude and substantiation are not enough to stop a myth. Martin tracks the great Eskimo vocabulary hoax through successively more careless repetitions and embroiderings in a number of popular books on language. Roger Brown's *Words and Things* (1958, 234–36), attributing the example to Whorf, provides an early example of careless popularization and perversion of the issue. His numbers disagree with both Boas and Whorf (he says there are "three Eskimo words for snow", apparently getting this from figure 10 in Whorf's paper; perhaps he only looked at the pictures).[1]

After works like Brown's have picked up Whorf's second-hand misrecollection of Boas to generate third-hand accounts, we begin to get fourth-hand accounts carelessly based on Brown. For example, Martin notes that in Carol Eastman's *Aspects of Language and Culture* (1975; 3rd printing, 1980), the familiar assertion that "Eskimo languages have many words for snow" is found only six lines away from a direct quote of Brown's reference to "three" words for snow.

But never mind: three, four, seven, who cares? It's a bunch, right? When more popular sources start to get hold of the example, all constraints are removed: arbitrary numbers are just made up as the writer thinks appropriate for the readership. In Lanford Wilson's 1978 play *The Fifth of July* it is "fifty". From 1984 alone (two years *after* her 1982 presentation to the American Anthropological Association meetings on the subject—not that mere announcement at a scholarly meeting could have been expected to change anything), Martin cites the number of Eskimo snow terms given as "nine" (in a trivia encyclopedia, Adams 1984), "one hundred" (in a *New York Times* editorial on February 9), and "two hundred" (in a Cleveland TV weather forecast).

By coincidence, I happened to notice, the *New York Times* returned to the topic four years to the day after committing itself to the

1. Murray (1987) has argued that Martin is too harsh on some people, particularly Brown, who does correctly see that some English speakers also differentiate their snow terms (skiers talk of *powder*, *crust*, and *slush*). But Martin is surely correct in criticizing Brown for citing no data at all, and for making points about lexical structure, perception, and Zipf's Law that are rendered nonsense by the actual nature of Eskimo word structure (his reference to "length of a verbal expression" providing "an index of its frequency in speech" fails to take account of the fact that even with a single root for snow, the number of actual *word forms* for snow in Eskimo will be effectively infinite, and the frequency of each one approximately zero, because of the polysynthetic morphology).

figure of one hundred: on February 9, 1988, on page 21, in the 'Science Times' section, a piece by Jane E. Brody on laboratory research into snowflake formation began: "The Eskimos have about four dozen words to describe snow and ice, and Sam Colbeck knows why." The *New York Times*, America's closest approach to a serious newspaper of record, had changed its position on the snow-term count by over 50% within four years. And in the *science* section. But hey: nine, forty-eight, a hundred, two hundred, who cares? It's a bunch, right? On this topic, no source can be trusted.

People cannot be persuaded to shut up about it, either. Attempting to slay the creature at least in my locality, I mentioned Martin's work in a public lecture in Santa Cruz in 1985, in the presence of a number of faculty, students, and members of the general public. I drove home the point about scholarly irresponsibility to an attentive crowd, and imagined I had put at least a temporary halt to careless talk about the Eskimo morpheme stock within Santa Cruz County. But it was not to be.

Within the following three months, two undergraduate students came to me to say that they had been told in class lectures about the Eskimo's highly ramified snow vocabulary, one in politics, one in psychology; my son told me he had been fed the same factoid in class at his junior high school; and the assertion turned up once again in a "fascinating facts" column in a Santa Cruz weekly paper.

Among the many depressing things about this credulous transmission and elaboration of a false claim is that even if there *were* a large number of roots for different snow types in some Arctic language, this would *not*, objectively, be intellectually interesting; it would be a most mundane and unremarkable fact.

Horsebreeders have various names for breeds, sizes, and ages of horses; botanists have names for leaf shapes; interior decorators have names for shades of mauve; printers have many different names for different fonts (Caslon, Garamond, Helvetica, Times Roman, and so on), naturally enough. If these obvious truths of specialization are supposed to be interesting facts about language, thought, and culture, then I'm sorry, but include me out.

Would anyone think of writing about printers the same kind of slop we find written about Eskimos in bad linguistics textbooks? Take a random textbook like Paul Gaeng's *Introduction to the Principles of Language* (1971), with its earnest assertion: "It is quite obvious that in the culture of the Eskimos . . . snow is of great enough

importance to split up the conceptual sphere that corresponds to one word and one thought in English into several distinct classes . . ." (p. 137). Imagine reading: "It is quite obvious that in the culture of printers . . . fonts are of great enough importance to split up the conceptual sphere that corresponds to one word and one thought among non-printers into several distinct classes. . . ." Utterly boring, even if true. Only the link to those legendary, promiscuous, blubber-gnawing hunters of the ice-packs could permit something this trite to be presented to us for contemplation.

And actually, when you come to think of it, Eskimos aren't really that likely to be interested in snow. Snow in the traditional Eskimo hunter's life must be a kind of constantly assumed background, like sand on the beach. And even beach bums have only one word for sand. But there you are: the more you think about the Eskimo vocabulary hoax, the more stupid it gets.

The final words of Laura Martin's paper are about her hope that we can come to see the Eskimo snow story as a cautionary tale reminding us of "the intellectual protection to be found in the careful use of sources, the clear presentation of evidence, and above all, the constant evaluation of our assumptions." Amen to that. The prevalence of the great Eskimo snow hoax is testimony to falling standards in academia, but also to a wider tendency (particularly in the United States, I'm afraid) toward fundamentally anti-intellectual "gee-whiz" modes of discourse and increasing ignorance of scientific thought.

This is one more battle that linguists must take up—like convincing people that there is no need for a law to make English the official language of Kansas (cf. chapter 14), or that elementary schools shouldn't spend time trying to abolish negated auxiliary verbs ("There is no such word as *can't*"). Some time in the future, and it may be soon, you will be told by someone that the Eskimos have many or dozens or scores or hundreds of words for snow. You, gentle reader, must decide here and now whether you are going to let them get away with it, or whether you are going to be true to your position as an Expert On Language by calling them on it.

The last time it happened to me (other than through the medium of print) was in July 1988 at the University of California's Irvine campus, where I was attending the university's annual Management Institute. Not just one lecturer at the Institute but two of them somehow (don't ask me how) worked the Eskimological falsehood into their

tedious presentations on management psychology and administrative problem-solving. The first time I attempted to demur and was glared at by lecturer and classmates alike; the second time, discretion for once getting the upper hand over valor, I just held my face in my hands for a minute, then quietly closed my binder and crept out of the room.

Don't be a coward like me. Stand up and tell the speaker this: C. W. Schultz-Lorentzen's *Dictionary of the West Greenlandic Eskimo Language* (1927) gives just two possibly relevant roots: *qanik*, meaning 'snow in the air' or 'snowflake', and *aput*, meaning 'snow on the ground'. Then add that you would be interested to know if the speaker can cite any more.

This will not make you the most popular person in the room. It will have an effect roughly comparable to pouring fifty gallons of thick oatmeal into a harpsichord during a baroque recital. But it will strike a blow for truth, responsibility, and standards of evidence in linguistics.

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Appendix: Yes, But How Many Really?

Yes, but how many are there really? I can just hear you asking. I've told you a lot about how sloppy everyone has been on this subject, and about how they ought to be challenged to cite some data, and about how much ridiculous and unsupported exaggeration has gone on. But I haven't told you anything about the actual vocabulary of Eskimos and the range of snow terms they really use.

Well, to tackle this question we must, however reluctantly, move from our armchair, at least as far as the phone or the computer mail terminal. I contacted the best Eskimologist I was personally acquainted with, namely Anthony Woodbury of the University of Texas at Austin, and asked him. I will paraphrase what he said. Keep in mind that with true scholarly caution and modesty, he is quite diffident about giving conclusive answers; the crucial issues about many relevant forms, he feels, need to be resolved by research that has not yet been done. I take responsibility for this somewhat embellished sketch of the position he takes.

When you pose a question as ill-defined as "How many Eskimo words for snow are there?" Woodbury observes, you run into major problems not just with determining the answer to the apparently empirical "How many" part but with the other parts: how to interpret the terms "Eskimo", "words", and "for snow". All of them are problematic.

The languages that the Eskimo people speak around the top of the world, in places as far apart as Siberia, Alaska, Canada, and Greenland, differ quite a lot in details of vocabulary. The differences between urbanized and nomadic Eskimos and between young and old speakers are also considerable. So one problem lies in getting down to the level of specific lists of words that can be verified as genuine by a particular speaker of a particular dialect, and getting away from the notion of a single truth about a monolithic "Eskimo" language.

Then one needs to get clear about what one proposes to count when one counts "words". Even in English, the distinction between internally unanalyzable roots (like *snow* and *slush*) on the one hand

and inflected word forms of nouns on the other is worth noting. *Snow* is one word, but it is easy to generate another dozen directly from it, simply by applying inflectional and derivational morphological rules to the root: *snowball, snowbank, snowblower, snowcapped, snowdrift, snowfall, snowflake, snowlike, snows, snowshoe, snowstorm, snowy*. . . . You get the picture.

Now, this may not seem like too wild a profusion of derived words. But in the Eskimo languages there is a great deal more inflection (grammatical endings) and vastly more fully productive derivational morphology (word formation). For each noun stem there are about 280 different inflectional forms. And then if you start adding in all the forms derivable by word formation processes that yield other parts of speech (illustrated in a rudimentary way by English *to snow, snowed, snowing, snowier, snowiest*, etc.), you get an even bigger collection—indeed, an infinite collection, because there really is no such thing as the longest word in a language of the Eskimo type where words of arbitrary complexity can be derived.

So if you identify four snow-related noun stems in some Eskimo dialect, what do you report? Four? Or the number of actual inflected noun forms derivable therefrom, certainly over a thousand? Or the entire set, perhaps infinite, of relatable words of all parts of speech?

Finally, Woodbury points out that there is a real issue about what is a word for snow as opposed to a word for something else. Some concrete examples will be useful here. Take the form *igluksaq*, which turned up (misspelled) on a list of twenty alleged words for snow in a Canadian Inuit dialect that was sent to me by Edith Moravcsik of the University of Wisconsin, who got it from a correspondent of hers, who got it from a minister of religion, who got it from some Inuit people in the Kewatin region among whom he had worked as a missionary. *Igluksaq* was glossed 'snow for igloo making' on the list. But Woodbury points out that the word is a productive formation from *iglu* 'house' and *-ksaq* 'material for'; in other words, it means simply 'house-building material'. In Woodbury's view, this would probably include plywood, nails, perhaps bricks or roofing tiles. *Igluksaq* isn't a word for a special kind of snow at all.

Another word on the list (misspelled again) was apparently meant to be *saumavuq*, and was glossed 'covered in snow'. But this, Woodbury reports, is clearly just a verb form meaning 'it has been covered'. It doesn't appear to have anything specifically to do with snow.

Many similar observations could be made about the words on the

list Moravcsik obtained. The unfortunate fact is that even lists of Eskimo words with meanings attached, written out by people with extensive acquaintance with the people and the language, have to be interpreted in a sophisticated way against the background of a full understanding of Eskimo morphology and etymology if we are to draw conclusions about whether they can be counted as words for snow.

So how many really? I know you still crave an answer. I will say only this. In 1987, in response to a request from some students at Texas who had read Laura Martin's article, Woodbury put together a list of bases in the Central Alaskan Yupik language that could be regarded as synchronically unanalyzable and had snow-related meanings. All of them are in Steven A. Jacobson's *Yup'ik Eskimo Dictionary* (University of Alaska, Fairbanks, 1984). Some of them are general weather-related words relating to rain, frost, and other conditions; some are count nouns denoting phenomena like blizzards, avalanches, snow cornices, snow crusts, and the like; some are etymologizable in a way that involves only roots unrelated to snow (example: *nutaryug-* is glossed as 'new snow' but originates from *nutar-* 'new' and *-yug-* 'what tends to be', so it means literally 'that which tends to be new' or 'new stuff'), but they have apparently been lexicalized as ways of referring to snow. The list includes both non-snow-referring roots (e.g. *muru-* 'to sink into something') and etymologically complex but apparently lexicalized stems based on them that are usually glossed as referring to snow (e.g. *muruaneq* 'soft deep snow', etymologically something like 'stuff for habitually sinking into'). The list has about a dozen different stems with 'snow' in the gloss, and a variety of other words (slightly more than a dozen) that are transparently derived from these (for example, *natquig-* is a noun stem meaning 'drifting snow' and *natquigte-* is a verb stem meaning 'for snow etc. to drift along ground').

So the list is still short, not remarkably different in size from the list in English (which, remember, boasts not just *snow, slush,* and *sleet* and their derivatives, but also count nouns like *avalanche* and *blizzard,* technical terms like *hardpack* and *powder,* expressive meteorological descriptive phrases like *flurry* and *dusting,* compounds with idiosyncratic meanings like *snow cornice,* and so on; many of the terms on Woodbury's list are much more like these terms than like simple mass nouns for new and unusual varieties of snow).

If it will allow you to rest easier at night, or to be more of an authority at cocktail parties, let it be known that Professor Anthony Woodbury (Department of Linguistics, University of Texas, Austin, Texas 78712) is prepared to endorse the claim that the Central Alaskan Yupik Eskimo language has about a dozen words (even a couple of dozen if you are fairly liberal about what you count) for referring to snow and to related natural phenomena, events, or behavior. Reliable reports based on systematic dictionary searches for other Eskimo languages are not available as far as I know.

For my part, I want to make one last effort to clarify that the chapter above isn't about Eskimo lexicography at all, though I'm sure it will be taken to be. What it's actually about is intellectual sloth. Among all the hundreds of people making published contributions to the great Eskimo vocabulary hoax, no one had acquired any evidence about how long the purported list of snow terms really was, or what words were on it, or what criteria were used in deciding what to put on the list. The tragedy is not that so many people got the facts wildly wrong; it is that in the mentally lazy and anti-intellectual world we live in today, hardly anyone cares enough to think about trying to determine what the facts are.