

Module 8

Identity and Language

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Key Terms and Concepts

- identity
- verbal language
- non-verbal language
- national

Learning Objectives/Outcomes

Upon completion of this module, you should be able to

1. discuss the importance and current problems of identity and language among indigenous populations in the Arctic.
 2. explain the difference between an anthropocentric view of nature and a non-anthropocentric view of nature.
 3. compare the importance to a person's identity between using an indigenous name and using a national name.
 4. list some of the current problems facing Arctic populations with respect to their language and identity.
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Reading Assignments

Paolo Freire (1978 or later edition), *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (London: Penguin Books).

David Corson (1995), “Norway’s Sami Language Act: Emancipatory Implications for the World’s Aboriginal Peoples,” in *Language in Society* 24 (4): 493–514.

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 from Scandinavia, Greenland, and other Arctic nations.

The social construction of language and how it is influenced by colonial encounters, linguistic policies, and the way humans define themselves in relation to nature are discussed. The emphasis is to show how living conditions, lifestyle, changes in population, and 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, witness the efforts to revive and preserve indigenous languages in the North and other expressions of indigenous identity. This has at times resulted in conflict between indigenous populations and the predominant cultures of the land, comprising people who historically have moved from southern parts of Europe into the Arctic. In the northernmost part of Norway, for example, the rich fisheries attracted immigrants to the coastline. Some of the immigrants came from Finland, and some people came from other parts of Norway. This produced regions in Norway with three different languages and cultural traditions.

In Finland, Norway, Russia, and Sweden, there are tensions between Sami and the people who have moved into the regions historically inhabited by Sami. In Greenland, the predominant population—Inuit—has long been dominated politically and economically by Denmark. In spite of Greenland’s achievement of Home Rule, Greenland still depends on 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 its own carefully protected language.

The Limitations of Language

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

There are great variations between cultures in what each communicates with words and without words—or as the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein described as “what we remain silent about (Wittgenstein 1996).

How people experience the reality of their existence is of great importance to how they relate to their own life and to the lives of others. An individual’s conception of his or her reality can be defined as his or her identity. Obviously, the Arctic is a far different environment than that experienced by most of the settlers before they moved into the Arctic. (Nordic and Russian settlers who have traditionally lived along the northern coastline, in the taiga, or in mountainous areas, however, would find conditions in the most southerly part of the Arctic relatively similar to their own experience.)

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 depended on the cycles of animal life. Hunting has depended on animal migrations, ice, and weather. Reindeer husbandry—or reindeer herding—has depended on the availability of lichen and other sources of food being seasonably available. Fishing and trapping, likewise, have depended on the season of the animals being harvested.

Religious beliefs and experiences of human identity in the North have been influenced by the lifestyle and patterns of the people in the Arctic. Language has been specialized in order to communicate about important parts of living. For example, Sami have a large number of words and phrases that denote snow and snow conditions, a reflection of the way people have adapted to the environment. Language that developed in speaking about the spiritual world and human emotions is 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 whether humans from different backgrounds can grasp different kinds of reality. It is reasonable to believe that the identity developed by northerners through close interaction with the Arctic environment has made them see the world in a far different way than people living in other conditions.

As David Abram 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” (Abram 1997, 73). In a way, we are trying to grasp a phenomenon that might be different in different cultures with tools that make 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: (1) South; (2) Ume; (3) Pite; (4) Lule; (5) North; (6) Inari; (7) Skolt; (8) Kildin; and (9) Ter. (To locate the nine Sami dialects on a map, see Collis 1990, 418, map 18.) An estimated 35,000 people speak Sami: 20,000 in Norway; 10,000 in Sweden; 3,000 in Finland; and perhaps 1,500 in Russia. The majority—approximately 80 per cent—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 Kalallisit), which means the language of the Kalaallit, or Greenlanders. Greenlandic is a relatively well-preserved indigenous language, with nearly 80 per cent of the 103,000 Inuit 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 Kalallisit is one of four groups of the Inuktitut language:

1. Inupiaq (northern Alaska)
2. Inuinnaqtun (Canadian western Arctic)
3. Inuktitut proper (Canadian eastern Arctic)
4. Kalallisit, 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. (See box 2.1.)

Box 2.1

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 1994, 64).

Icelandic

Icelandic is a North Germanic language, and as such is a subgroup of the Germanic family. Linguistically, it is most closely related to Norwegian and Faeroese. Iceland was settled during the 800–900s, but its language remained very close to Norwegian until the fourteenth 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 twelfth 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 versions, particularly Danish and Norwegian, are 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”), which is used by up to 90 per cent) 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 per cent 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. 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 who spoke 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). Mary Margaret Steedly questions the association between language and local identity through an examination of linguistic policies and education programs in a colony. Her conclusion is that outsiders, through linguistic standardization, vernacular education, and translation, produced "a set of linguistic resources for rule and resistance" for the population's identity (Steedly 1996, 447). Thus, the intention of linguistic standardization and translation could have just the opposite result in practice.

A standardization of language has been attempted in most of the Arctic world. In the United States (Alaska), Norway, Russia, and Sweden, it has been part of national policy to have one national language. In Finland and Canada the situation has been more complex, with two official national languages; however, in both of those cases, minority languages, like those belonging to the Sami 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 of these cases, minority languages have in periods faced discrimination and historically have fought eradication. 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, policies have changed and now acknowledge the importance of local indigenous languages. The blatant discrimination of yesterday has been replaced by a strong emphasis on the 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 Sami population who are no longer in command of their traditional Sami language. The same situation can be found in other Arctic countries that have had 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 Sami population in Finland, Norway, Russia, and Sweden gives emphasis to differences in the Sami language and acknowledges nine or ten different Sami languages. Ironically, the Sami linguist Pekka Sammallahti 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 points out, the Sami language has several local variations but the translations “created” a more uniform standard (Sammallahti 1998).

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

It is possible to claim that the standardization process helped to unite the Sami into one group and in that way helped to strengthen Sami resistance against the nationalization 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).

In both the Inuit and Sami cases, the control of the language is now mostly in the hands of intellectuals from their own people. It’s arguable that they operate according to principles inspired by outside linguists and political thought.

One example of the increased expression of autonomy and the willingness to support an indigenous Arctic language is the *Sámi Language Act*, enacted in Norway and Finland in 1992. (This Finnish act is available at <http://www.finlex.fi/pdf/saadkaan/E0031086.PDF>). The act established the principle of bilingual education. Even though some people, like the Canadian researcher David Corson (1995), suggest that the act had emancipatory implications, it also made visible the severe injustice and discrimination made towards the Sami 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, newspapers, and the Internet—while effectively standardizing indigenous languages, has also assisted in their preservation; and state support, particularly for the Sami, has been increasing.

Identity and Names

A person's name is arguably an important aspect of identity. The Nenets living east of the Yenisei River all have a Russian name as well as an additional Nenets name. The latter was not told to outsiders. A similar double name system has been used in Scandinavia. Giving a person a “Christian European national” name would possibly have a great symbolic significance for a person. If the person retained, 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 Sami areas of Norway, that is a policy being actively pursued in order to acknowledge and strengthen local traditional culture.

What Is Done Is Truth

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 Vico's point of 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 fisher 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 after receiving his or her training at the University of Copenhagen or some other university.

In the view of the Swedish geography professor Gunnar Olsson, the problem of understanding other cultures is a problem of the chemistry in “the glue” (Olsson 1995). In Olsson’s opinion, the relationship between the signifier and the signified depends on 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. Olsson concludes,

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. (Olsson 1995, 21).

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, one might 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 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” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991, 218).

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

Summary

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 close to their environment and those insulated from it is likely to be of great importance for the development 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 be of greater importance than even modern technology (Gamble, Davies, Pettitt, and Richards 2004; and Chylek, Box, and Lesins 2004). In the long run, no human can completely insulate himself or herself from his or her environment.

Study Questions

1. Discuss the importance and current problems of identity and language among indigenous populations in the Arctic.
2. Discuss the importance of using an indigenous or a national name to a person's identity.

Glossary of Terms

Eskimo	<p><i>noun</i> 1 a member of an Aboriginal people who populate the Arctic from Greenland in the east, across northern Canada, and Alaska to the eastern part of Siberia. There are about 110,000 Eskimos living in the Arctic. 2 the language of this people. <i>adjective</i> of or relating to the Eskimos or their language.</p> <p>In Canada, the word <i>Eskimo</i> has been superseded by INUIT with reference to the people and INUKTITUT with reference to their language.</p>
identity	<p>an individual's conception of his or her reality.</p>
Indian	<p><i>noun</i> a a member of the Aboriginal peoples of North and South America, or their descendants. Towards the north, the Indian population borders the population of Inuit. b any of the languages of the Aboriginal peoples of North and South America. c <i>Canadian</i> a status Indian.</p> <p>Although the use of <i>Indian</i> in this sense has declined because it is thought to reflect Columbus's mistaken idea that he had landed in India in 1492, it is common in the usage of many Aboriginal people and embedded in legislation that is still in effect. It is also the only clear way to distinguish among the three general categories of Aboriginal people (Indians, Inuit, and Metis).</p> <p><i>adjective</i> of or relating to the Aboriginal peoples of North and South America.</p>

Inuit	<i>noun</i> a word meaning “the people.” Any of several Aboriginal peoples inhabiting the Arctic coasts of Canada and Greenland. <i>adjective</i> of or relating to Inuit people or their culture or language. [See ESKIMO.]
Inuktitut	the language of the Inuit.
Koyukuk Indians	a people 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 Athapaskan-speaking Indian tribes. The Kutchin Indians were neighbours to the Inuit people living further north. In the late twentieth century, there were about 2,000 Kutchin. The name Kutchin means “people.” Historically speaking, they were hunters and traded both with Indians further south and with Inuit in the north.
language	1 the method of human communication, either spoken or written, consisting of the use of words in an agreed way. 2 the language of a particular community or country, etc. 3 any method of expression (e.g., body language; sign language).
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 in a wider context. Nationalism represents 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 this kind of national policy. Such policies often led to discrimination of minorities like the Sami in Finland, Norway, Sweden, and Russia.

Nenets	<p>an ethnolinguistic group living in northwestern Russia. The northernmost Nenets are the tundra Nenets, consisting of about 25,000 people. They inhabit the Russian Arctic from the Taimyr Peninsula and the Yenisei River in the east to the White Sea on the coast of northwest Russia.</p> <p>The word Nenets means, “man.” The Nenets culture has been centred on reindeer herding, and some fishing and hunting.</p> <p>In Russian, “Nenets” is singular and “Nenetsy”—formerly <i>Samoyed</i> or <i>Yurak</i>—is plural. The latter forms might be used in older literature.</p>
Nganasan	<p>a high group of fewer than 1000 people inhabiting the northernmost part of the Taimyr Peninsula. The Ngansans are related to the Nenets. Formerly reindeer herding people, today they are mostly reindeer hunters.</p>
Sami	<p>the traditional population of the northern part of Finland, Norway, Sweden, and the Kola Peninsula of Russia. In the late twentieth century, the official numbers of Sami were 6,000 in Finland, 40,000 in Norway, 20,000 in Sweden, and 2,000 in Russia. Traditionally, reindeer herding and nature-based activities like fishing, hunting, and small-scale agriculture has been the most important part of the Sami economy. Today, Sami are very much part of the modern economy of their home countries. However, nature-based activities remain both culturally and economically important.</p> <p>The name Sami is also spelled “Sámi,” “Saami,” “Same,” and “Sabme.” The indigenous population of the extreme north of Scandinavia are sometimes called Lapps, but they often prefer the name Sami.</p>

Supplementary Readings/Materials

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