Oqaasileriffik
Grønlands Sprogsekretariat · The Language Secretariat of Greenland

Providing comprehensible input where comprehensible input is unreachable –

teaching polysynthetic Greenlandic L2

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Attention!!

Saving time: Limited background info and no discussions. Only headlines and conclusions.
You can choose to trust me (I have a pretty impressive CV after 50 years in business!!) or you may check out the handout at

https://learn.gl/ci

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Punchlines

- Synthetic languages are **not** English. Do not trust ELT methodology uncritically!
- Authentic input crucial for acquiring any L2 incl. minority languages. Native language – not grammar books – is the teacher one cannot be without
- Do **not** introduce productive training in the early stages. Acquiring "our" languages evolves around receptive skills

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A few background facts

- A self-governed part of the Danish Kingdom with about 57,000 inhabitants
- Officially monolingual in Greenlandic Kalaallisut
- Greenlandic is L1 for almost all Greenlanders
- One of the most vital small languages in the world

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Historically strong

Linguistic rights never really challenged
Teacher training college in Greenlandic since 1847
Standard orthography since 1851
National newspaper in Greenlandic since 1861
Official language in monolingual Greenland 2009
Fully-fledged locally anchored language technology program developing since 2005

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Polysynthesis I

Inuit-languages are notorious for morphological richness
Hundreds of derivational and inflectional morphemes and enclitics form frightening combinatorics and extremely low frequency of running words. Ex:
Surface form *han bor* occurs around 1:7,800 (running words) in Danish whereas *nunaqarpoq* occurs 1:617,000
110 pieces of language material (stems+morphemes+enclitics) after chapter 2-1 generate more than 2 mio. wordforms

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Polysynthesis II

oqaaseq – word/ language
+PAKnn – several N (oqaaserpaat = several words)
+SUAQnn – big N (oqaasersuaq = big word)
+LIRInv – handle N (oqaasilerivoq = work linguistically)
+PAKnn+SUAQnn (oqaaserpassuit = very many words)
+PAKnn+SUAQnn+LIRInv (oqaaserpassualerivoq = work with language technology)

Greenlandic L1 an immense success but L2 a "failed state"

Greenlandic L1 is vital and developing while L2 has serious problems

L2 never the highest priority but neither was it ever uncared for.

Results were and are poor. Less than one per mil of all learners since 1953 made it to the lowest possible level of functional Greenlandic

Methodological epochs in Greenlandic L2

Latin tradition in the 50-s and 60-s ➡ a handful of successful learners

Audio-lingual tradition in the 70-s ➡ a leap forward

"Modern" pedagogy (ELT) from the 80-s ➡ Next to no successful learners

Unfit methodology and poor results

To ELT good methodology includes
- Communcative competence/situational approach (Pick up words and use them in real life)
- No/limited grammar (grammar will only teach you to shut up in correct English)
- Permissive view on correctness

Greenlandic – and other synthetic languages - are not English! A giant mistake to introduce ELT in the Greenlandic L2 classroom

Don'ts in Greenlandic L2

Do not expect to accumulate lots of words for use in real communication
(low word frequency + complex sandhi and phonology)

Do not trust the paradigm approach
(too many morphemes to internalize without real practice. Grammar in books and compendia will not more or less automatically turn active in your head)

Do not start producing L2 too early
(too many rules and restrictions you have not mastered yet)

Dos in Greenlandic L2

- Authentic *comprehensible input* sine qua non (Acquiring polysynthetic Greenlandic is doable. Some day the input **will** turn productive L2 almost magically!! (Trust me. I've been there myself!)
- Understand what is said **and** how it is said (semantics + integrated focus on forms ➡ active mental grammar)
- Consider that any stem = thousands of words (You need to recognize any new stem in any altered shape)

In our languages lexicon is not our best friend

Learn English words and use them. Add *in* to any place name and nothing changes.
London – in London
Add equivalent semantics to Finnish or Greenlandic place names and a lot changes.
Tampere – Tampereella/ Turku – Turussa
Nuuk – Nuummi/ Qasigiannguit - Qasigiannguani

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Coming to grips with combinatorics is our new best friend

Turu- without /k/ in *Turussa* is *Turku*.
Qasigiannguа- without *-it* and with an added /a/ in *Qasigiannguani* nevertheless still is *Qasigiannguit*. But the capacity to "grasp" the missing parts is mandatory for understanding the language – and sine qua non for acquiring it

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THE real problem

Comprehensible input the only viable way to acquire L2. Probably more so with "our" languages than with analytic languages because of many mental processes needed.

The until now unsurmountable problem:
In "our" L2 complexity and unacquired inflection and phonology render everything incomprehensible

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It is simple to offer comprehensible input

1) Describe a language with exactly all stems and morphemes known to the student at any point in his acquisition process. After next lesson supplement the automaton with all news.
2) Make the automaton randomize the millions of possible wordforms to be generated in the little language known to a student at any point of the acquisition process.
3) Create exercises and assignments for the student to exploit the input – **all of which is comprehensible (SIC!)**

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A few examples

The very first step after lesson 1: Listen, decipher and accept that sound changes all the time (17 proper nouns + two case endings = 51 wordforms)
A randomized example:
You hear *Uummannamut*, you understand that *Uummannaq* is followed by case terminalis, {mut}. You know that *Uummannaq* is a p-stem (or are reminded about it) dropping final /q/ before {mut} and you hear (maybe notices) the a-alternation from [..ɑq] to [..am:ut] and speak out [u:m:an:amut]

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A few examples II

An example after lesson 2: Listen, decipher and understand sandhi and phonology in randomized sentences from your "lesson 2 language" (exercise 3.10X):
You hear *Pituffimmut aallarpunga*, you understand that it means *I left to Pituffik*. You check that you understand why -k is assimilated to following /m/ and you check your understanding of the inflectional morpheme in the verb. Finally you speak out [pituf:im:ut a:ɬ:ɑp:uŋa]

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A few examples III

An example after lesson 5 including a bit of strongly guided production: Negate the questions (exercise 5.4X)

Arnannguaq Paamiuni ilinniartippiuk? Understand that it means *Did you teach Arnannguaq in Paamiut* and make sure that you understand how the sentence is constructed. Then answer:
Naamik, Arnannguaq Paamiuni ilinniartinngilara.

Colorless green ideas sleep furiously

Semantic tags (invisible to students) are great helpers during word formation
pizza+Sem/food-h+TUR+Der/nv+Gram/IV+V+Ind+1Sg Will generate *Pizzatorpunga/ I ate pizza*
vs.
illu+Sem/build+TUR+Der/nv+Gram/IV+V+Ind+1Sg ? Will **not** generate *Illutorpunga/ *I ate a house*

and in sentences as well

I met Nuka in Katuaq (the culture house)/ Nuka Katuami naapippara:
Nuka+Sem/Mask+Prop+Abs+Sg
Katuaq+Sem/inst+Prop+Lok+Sg
naapip+Sem/encounter+V+Ind+1Sg+3SgO
will generate because of syntactic rules like (simplified):
• Sem/[Mask|Fem] as object for Sem/[encounter|teach] is TRUE
• Lok+Sem/[inst|geo] as adverbial to Sem/[encounter|teach] is TRUE
• .. (many more rules)

while ..

*I met Katuaq in Nuka / *Katuaq Nukami naapippara:*
Katuaq+Sem/inst+Prop+Abs+Sg
Nuka+Sem/Mask+Prop+Lok+Sg
naapip+Sem/encounter+V+Ind+1Sg+3SgO

will **not** generate because:
• Sem/[inst|geo] as object for Sem/[encounter|teach] FALSE
• Lok+Sem/[Mask|Fem] as adverbial to Sem/[encounter|teach] FALSE

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