ESKIMO WORDS FOR SEA-ICE

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Linguistics professor Geoffrey Pullum demolished the Boas-Whorf claim that there are 200 Eskimo words for snow, in his book The Great Eskimo Vocabulary Hoax (Univ. of Chicago, 1991). A new version of this myth shows up in Mariana Gosnell’s Ice (Alfred Knopf, 2005).

Sea-ice...can be a mishmash of ages, sizes, stages, degrees of saltiness, and types...I [Gosnell] picked up a list of Inupiat words for ice and snow that the North Slope Borough in Barrow gave visitors to the annual bowhead-whale hunt and showed it to [local resident] Kenny Toovak...Did people actually use all the words for ice on the list? I wanted to know. There were 76. After Toovak gave the list a hard, blistering look, he said he’d get back to me.

Some words, including sikuliagruaq (thick ice) and agiuppak (a smooth wall of ice along the edge of landfast ice formed by other moving ice), you heard people use, he said, but others, like aluksraq (young ice punched by seals forming a seal blowhole), not much. He laughed at two separate words of the list; they were like “cap” and “hat”, the same thing! When I pointed to nunagvaq (ice once used by walrus) and asked how anyone could tell, he frowned at my thickheadedness. The ice was brown, of course; walruses defecated all over it.

When I showed Richard Glenn [an ice geologist in Barrow] the list, he added sugainnuq and defined it as “huge, moving ice that threatens integrity of the lead edge; could be large piece of pack ice or agglomeration of multiyear ice and first-year ice”. He translated the often-used sagrat as “ice floes of random size, beltways of ice with water on both sides”. On seeing qinu (slush), he was prompted to tell the story of a hunter who was paddling his kayak with a single paddle until he came to qinu and had to start using two...In the case of sea ice, Eskimos have clearly concocted many more than a dozen words, although I never could pin down what proportion of them are in common use.