

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 *munagvaq* (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 *sugainmuq* 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.