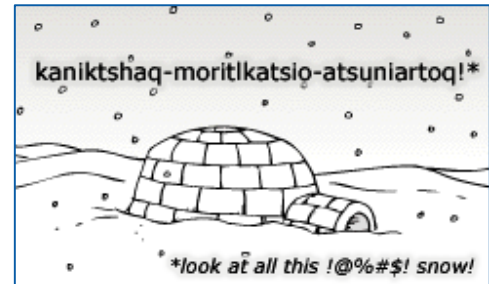


Language Myth Busters

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1. The Inuit people (Eskimos) have over 40 words for snow.

This myth is a really common urban legend, and over the years in popular writing, this figure is seen to skyrocket up to 400 words for snow. The Inuit language is what linguists call ‘polysynthetic’: words are formed by stacking suffixes and prefixes onto a root word, and the resulting meaning translated into English is often a full sentence. An example from the University of Pennsylvania is *qanipalaat*, which would be translated “it’s snowing in small feathery clumps”. They also offer this cartoon:



2. Chinese and English are the hardest languages to learn.

It’s important to distinguish here between learning a first language and a second language. When children learn their first language, it doesn’t matter which language it is, they’re able to learn it rapidly and seemingly effortlessly by a very young age. When we pass through adolescence, our brains change fundamentally in a way that makes learning another language not as easy as learning our first. The difficulty of learning a foreign language depends on a number of factors, one of which is how different the 2nd language is structurally from the first. Certain features of language can prove more difficult if structures of the native language and 2nd language are very different or absent in one but present in the other. For example, the learning the tones in Mandarin may prove challenging for speakers whose native languages don’t have tones (English, German, French, etc.), while speakers of languages similar to Mandarin in that respect, like Cantonese, may have an easier time. It’s all a matter of relativity in the end.

3. The English language is deteriorating.

The end of the English language, and many other languages, has been bemoaned for a very long time, probably as frequently as people predict the end of the world. One fact about spoken language always remains true – language changes to accommodate new social situations and technological advances. Languages incorporate or innovate new words to express new concepts (‘to email’ or ‘to google’); words expand their meanings to cover new situations (‘a computer mouse’) or restrict their meanings to specific situations. Keep in mind that what we say now may well not have been acceptable 50, 100, or 200 years ago.

4. Languages don’t die out very quickly.

According to the SIL Organization, there are at least 6900 separate recognized languages on Earth. Of those, hundreds are endangered with small populations of elderly native speakers left – in some cases only a handful remain. In a couple of years or decades, when these speakers die, the language will die with them. Some current estimates speculate that a language dies every couple of months.

5. Raising children bilingually is a mistake because they will get confused and never become truly proficient in either language.

This myth used to be widely believed and many immigrant parents focused on making sure their children learned one language (usually English in the United States), without giving them the opportunity to embrace the language of their heritage. It’s been shown that raising bilingual children is a perfectly sound practice – at first they may be confused about when and where to use which language (for example using English in school and Spanish at home), but they figure this out quickly as part of the language acquisition process. Bilingual children are offered the richness of two languages and in most cases two cultures, offering them an important way to connect with their heritage.