TOPIC...COMMENT

The great Eskimo vocabulary hoax

Most linguistics departments have an introduction-to-language course in which students other than linguistics majors can be exposed to at least something of the mysteries of language and communication: signing apes and dancing bees; wild children and lateralization; logographic writing and the Rosetta Stone; *pit* and *spit*; Sir William Jones and Professor Henry Higgins; isoglosses and Grimm's Law; *Jabberwocky* and colourless green ideas; and of course, without fail, the Eskimos and their multiple words for snow.

Few among us, I'm sure, can say with certainty that we never told an awestruck sea of upturned sophomore faces about the multitude of snow descriptors used by these lexically profligate hyperborean nomads, about whom so little information is repeated so often to so many. Linguists have been just as active as schoolteachers or general knowledge columnists in spreading the entrancing story. What a pity the story is unredeemed piffle.

Anthropologist Laura Martin of Cleveland State University spent some of her research time during the 1980s attempting to slay the constantly changing, self-regenerating myth of Eskimo snow terminology, like a Sigourney Weaver fighting alone against the hideous space creature in the movie *Alien* (a xenomorph, they called it in the sequel *Aliens*; nice word). You may recall that the creature seemed to spring up everywhere once it got loose on the spaceship, and was very difficult to kill.

Martin presented her paper at the annual meetings of the American Anthropological Association in Washington D.C. in December 1982, and eventually (after a four-year struggle during which bonehead reviewers cut a third of the paper, including several interesting quotes) she published an abbreviated version of it in the 'Research Reports' section of AAA's journal (Martin 1986). This ought to have been enough for the news to get out.

But no, as far as widespread recognition is concerned, Martin labored in vain. Never does a month (or in all probability a week) go by without yet another publication of the familiar claim about the wondrous richness of the Eskimo conceptual scheme: hundreds of words for different grades and types of snow, a lexicographical winter wonderland, the quintessential demonstration of how primitive minds categorize the world so differently from us.

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And the alleged lexical extravagance of the Eskimos comports so well with the many other facets of their polysynthetic perversity: rubbing noses; lending their wives to strangers; eating raw seal blubber; throwing grandma out to be eaten by polar bears; " We are prepared to believe almost anything about such an unfamiliar and peculiar group," says Martin, in a gentle reminder of our buried racist tendencies.

The tale she tells is an embarrassing saga of scholarly sloppiness and popular eagerness to embrace exotic facts about other people's languages without seeing the evidence. The fact is that the myth of the multiple words for snow is based on almost nothing at all. It is a kind of accidentally developed hoax perpetrated by the anthropological linguistics community on itself.

The original source is Franz Boas' introduction to *The Handbook of North American Indians* (1911). And all Boas says there, in the context of a low-key and slightly ill-explained discussion of independent versus derived terms for things in different languages, is that just as English uses separate roots for a variety of forms of water (liquid, lake, river, brook, rain, dew, wave, foam) that might be formed by derivational morphology from a single root meaning 'water' in some other language, so Eskimo uses the apparently distinct roots *aput* 'snow on the ground', *qana* 'falling snow', *piqsirpoq* 'drifting snow', and *qimuqsuq* 'a snow drift'. Boas' point is simply that English expresses these notions by phrases involving the root *snow*, but things could have been otherwise, just as the words for lake, river, etc. could have been formed derivationally or periphrastically on the root *water*.

But with the next twist in the story, the unleashing of the xenomorphic fable of Eskimo lexicography seems to have become inevitable. What happened was that Benjamin Lee Whorf, Connecticut fire prevention inspector and weekend language-fancier, picked up Boas' example and used it, vaguely, in his 1940 amateur linguistics article 'Science and linguistics,' which was published in MIT's promotional magazine *Technology Review* (Whorf was an alumnus; he had done his B.S. in chemical engineering at MIT).

Our word *snow* would seem too inclusive to an Eskimo, our man from the Hartford Fire Insurance Company confidently asserts. With an uncanny perception into the hearts and minds of the hardy Arctic denizens (the more uncanny since Eskimos were not a prominent feature of Hartford's social scene at the time), he avers:

> We have the same word for falling snow, snow on the ground, snow packed hard like ice, slushy snow, wind-driven flying snow — whatever the situation may be. To an Eskimo, this all-inclusive word would be almost unthinkable; he would say that falling snow, slushy snow, and so on, are sensuously and operationally different, different

things to contend with; he uses different words for them and for other kinds of snow. (Whorf 1940; in Carroll 1956, 216).

Whorf's article was quoted and reprinted in more subsequent books than you could shake a flame-thrower at; the creature was already loose and regenerating itself all over the ship.

Notice that Whorf's statement has illicitly inflated Boas' four terms to at least seven (1: "falling", 2: "on the ground", 3: "packed hard", 4: "slushy", 5: "flying", 6, 7, . . . : "and other kinds of snow"). Notice also that his claims about English speakers are false; I recall the stuff in question being called *snow* when fluffy and white, *slush* when partly melted, *sleet* when falling in a half-melted state, and a *blizzard* when pelting down hard enough to make driving dangerous. Whorf's remark about his own speech community is no more reliable than his glib generalizations about what things are "sensuously and operationally different" to the generic Eskimo.

But the lack of little things like verisimilitude and substantiation are not enough to stop a myth. Martin tracks the great Eskimo vocabulary hoax through successively more careless repetitions and embroiderings in a number of popular books on language. Roger Brown's *Words and Things* (1958, 234–236), attributing the example to Whorf, provides an early example of careless popularization and perversion of the issue. His numbers disagree with both Boas and Whorf (he says there are "three Eskimo words for snow", apparently getting this from figure 10 in Whorf's paper; perhaps he only looked at the pictures).[1]

After works like Brown's have picked up Whorf's second-hand misrecollection of Boas to generate third-hand acounts, we begin to get fourth-hand accounts carelessly based on Brown. For example, Martin notes that in Carol Eastman's *Aspects of Language and Culture* (1975; 3rd printing 1980), the familiar assertion that "Eskimo languages have many words for snow" is found only six lines away from a direct quote of Brown's reference to "three" words for snow.

But never mind: three, four, seven, who cares? It's a bunch, right? Once more popular sources start to get hold of the example, all constraints are removed: arbitrary numbers are just made up as the

[1] Murray (1987) has argued that Martin is too harsh on some people, particularly Brown, who does correctly see some English speakers also differentiate their snow terms (skiers talk of *powder*, *crust*, and *slush*). But Martin is surely correct in criticizing Brown for citing no data at all, and for making points about lexical structure, perception, and Zipf's Law that are rendered nonsense by the actual nature of Eskimo word structure (his reference to "length of a verbal expression" providing "an index of its frequency in speech" fails to take account of the fact that even with a single root for snow, the number of actual *word forms* for snow in Eskimo will be effectively infinite, and the frequency of each one approximately zero, because of the polysynthetic morphology).

writer thinks appropriate for the readership. In Lanford Wilson's 1978 play *The Fifth of July* it is "fifty". From 1984 alone (two years *after* her 1982 presentation to the American Anthropological Association meetings on the subject — not that mere announcement at a scholarly meeting could have been expected to change anything), Martin cites the number of Eskimo snow terms given as "nine" (in a trivia encyclopedia, Adams 1984), "one hundred" (in a *New York Times* editorial on February 9), and "two hundred" (in a Cleveland TV weather forecast).

By coincidence, I happened to notice, the *New York Times* returned to the topic four years to the day after committing itself to the figure of one hundred: on February 9, 1988, on page 21, in the *Science Times* section, a piece by Jane E. Brody on laboratory research into snowflake formation began: "The Eskimos have about four dozen words to describe snow and ice, and Sam Colbeck knows why." The *New York Times*, America's closest approach to a serious newspaper of record, had changed its position on the snow-term count by over 50% within four years. And in the *science* section. But hey: nine, forty-eight, a hundred, two hundred, who cares? It's a bunch, right? On this topic, no source can be trusted.

People cannot be persuaded to shut up about it, either. Attempting to slay the creature at least in my locality, I mentioned Martin's work in a public lecture in Santa Cruz in 1985, in the presence of a number of faculty, students, and members of the general public. I drove home the point about scholarly irresponsibility to an attentive crowd, and imagined I had put at least a temporary halt to careless talk about the Eskimo morpheme stock within Santa Cruz County. But it was not to be.

Within the following three months, two undergraduate students came to me to say that they had been told in class lectures about the Eskimo's highly ramified snow vocabulary, one in politics, one in psychology; my son told me he had been fed the same factoid in class at his junior high school; and the assertion turned up once again in a "fascinating facts" column in a Santa Cruz weekly paper.

Among the many depressing things about this credulous transmission and elaboration of a false claim is that even if there *were* a large number of roots for different snow types in some Arctic language, this would *not*, objectively, be intellectually interesting; it would be a most mundane and unremarkable fact.

Horsebreeders have various names for breeds, sizes, and ages of horses; botanists have names for leaf shapes; interior decorators have names for shades of mauve; printers have many different names for different fonts (Caslon, Garamond, Helvetica, Times Roman, and so

on), naturally enough. If these obvious truths of specialization are supposed to be interesting facts about language, thought, and culture, then I'm sorry, but include me out.

Would anyone think of writing about printers the same kind of slop we find written about Eskimos in bad linguistics textbooks? Take a random textbook like Paul Gaeng's *Introduction to the Principles of Language* (1971), with its earnest assertion: "It is quite obvious that in the culture of the Eskimos... snow is of great enough importance to split up the conceptual sphere that corresponds to one word and one thought in English into several distinct classes..." (p. 137). Imagine reading: "It is quite obvious that in the culture of printers... fonts are of great enough importance to split up the conceptual sphere that corresponds to one word and one thought among non-printers into several distinct classes..." Utterly boring, if even true. Only the link to those legendary, promiscuous, blubber-gnawing hunters of the ice-packs could permit something this trite to be presented to us for contemplation.

And actually, when you come to think of it, Eskimos aren't really that likely to be interested in snow. Snow in the traditional Eskimo hunter's life must be a kind of constantly assumed background, like sand on the beach. And even beach bums have only one word for sand. But there you are: the more you think about the Eskimo vocabulary hoax, the more stupid it gets.

The final words of Laura Martin's paper are about her hope that we can come to see the Eskimo snow story as a cautionary tale reminding us of "the intellectual protection to be found in the careful use of sources, the clear presentation of evidence, and above all, the constant evaluation of our assumptions." Amen to that. The prevalence of the great Eskimo snow hoax is testimony to falling standards in academia, but also to a wider tendency (particularly in the United States, I'm afraid) toward fundamentally anti-intellectual "gee-whiz" modes of discourse and increasing ignorance of scientific thought.

This is one more battle that linguists must take up (like convincing people that there is no need for a law to make English the official language of Kansas, or that elementary schools shouldn't spend time trying to abolish negated auxiliary verbs). Some time in the future, and it may be soon, you will be told by someone that the Eskimos have many or dozens or scores or hundreds of words for snow. You, gentle reader, must decide here and now whether you are going to let them get away with it, or whether you are going to be true to your position as an Expert On Language by calling them on it.

The last time it happened to me (other than through the medium of print) was in July 1988 at the University of California's Irvine campus,

where I was attending the university's annual Management Institute (yes, despite my temperamental unsuitability, I was sent away for a summer course in how to be an administrator; but enough of my private pain). Not just one lecturer at the Institute but two of them somehow (don't ask me how) worked the Eskimological falsehood into their tedious presentations on management psychology and administrative problem-solving. The first time I attempted to demur and was glared at by lecturer and classmates alike; the second time, discretion for once getting the upper hand over valor, I just held my face in my hands for a minute, then quietly closed my binder and crept out of the room.

Don't be a coward like me. Stand up and tell the speaker this: C. W. Schultz-Lorentzen's *Dictionary of the West Greenlandic Eskimo Language* (1927) gives just two possibly relevant roots: *qanik*, meaning 'snow in the air' or 'snowflake', and *aput*, meaning 'snow on the ground'. Then add that you would be interested to know if the speaker can cite any more.

This will not make you the most popular person in the room. It will have an effect roughly comparable to pouring fifty gallons of thick oatmeal into a harpsichord during a baroque recital. But it will strike a blow for truth, responsibility, and standards of evidence in linguistics.

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Note
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