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A STRAIGHT DOPE CLASSIC FROM CECIL'S STOREHOUSE OF HUMAN KNOWLEDGE

What are the nine Eskimo words for snow?

February 16, 1979

Dear Cecil:

In view of the blizzards we've been having lately in the Great White Midwest, how about a vocabulary lesson? I've heard the Eskimos have nine words for snow. What are they?

— Karen, Chicago

Cecil replies:

I've got a lot more than nine words for snow, and I don't even need to resort to Eskimo. That's because I have a powerful descriptive vocabulary.

However, if we must confine ourselves to Eskimo talk, I can still come up with quite a few terms, as long as you'll let me throw in some words for ice too: *kaniktshaq*, snow; *qanik*, falling snow; *anijo*, snow on the ground; *hiko* (*tsiko* in some dialects), ice; *tsikut*, large broken up masses of ice; *hikuliaq*, thin ice; *quahak*, new ice without snow; *kanut*, new ice with snow; *pugtaq*, drift ice; *peqalujaq*, old ice; *manelaq*, pack ice; *ivuneq*, high pack ice; *maneraq*, smooth ice; *akuvijarjuak*, thin ice on the sea; *kuhugaq*, icicle; *nilak*, fresh water ice; and *tugartaq*, firm winter ice.

If we wish to include peripheral items we may speak of *iglo*, snow house (igloo); *haviujaq*, snow knife; *puatrit*, snow shovel; *wkuag*, block of snow for closing the door of a snow hut. I imagine after-dinner chats in Eskimoland must get a bit monotonous after a while, considering the restricted range of subject matter. Fortunately, they have about 20 words for trout to liven things up with.

Most of the preceding words are from the dialect of the Umingmaktormiut, a tribe living in the eastern part of arctic America. Since the necessary diacritical marks aren't available, the spellings are a little on the approximate side. However, Eskimos aren't such hot spellers anyway.

The problem with trying to pin down exactly how many Eskimo words there for snow and/or ice — or for anything, for that matter — is that Eskimo is what's called a "polysynthetic" language, which means you sort of make up words as you go along, by connecting various particles to your basic root word. For example, we may add the suffix *-tluk*, bad, to *kaniktshaq*, snow, and come up with *kaniktshartluk*, bad snow.

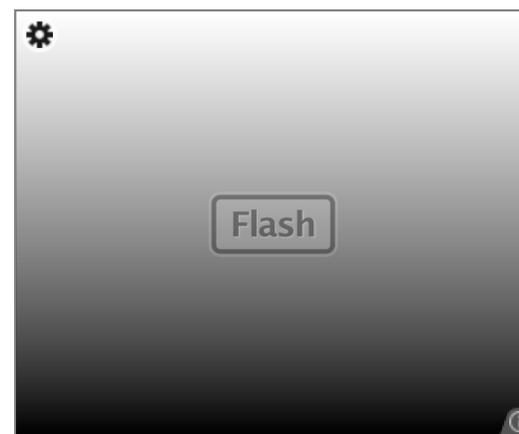
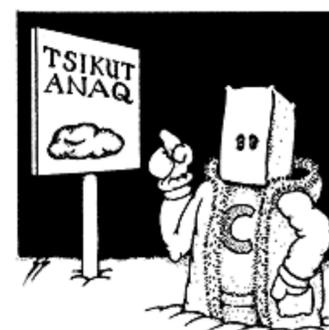
By means of this system we may manufacture words that would fracture the jaw of an elk. To illustrate I offer the word *takusariartorumagaluarnerpa*, a chewy mouthful signifying: "Do you think he really intends to go look after it?" It takes nerve to flog your way through a word of this magnitude. That's why Eskimos are so laconic — they're conserving their strength for their next foray into their godawful grammar.

In my spare time I've been attempting to construct an Eskimo sentence in my basement, such as will be suitable for the season. I haven't got it perfected yet, but it's coming along pretty well, and with a little work it might pass for the genuine article. So far I have: *kaniktshaq moritlkatsio atsuniartoq*.

When completed, this sentence will proclaim: "Look at all this freaking snow." At present it means: "Observe the snow. It fornicates." This isn't poetic, but it's serviceable, and I intend to employ it at the next opportunity. Anyone who feels it would alleviate his or her tension is invited to do likewise. Should it be felt that this is too burdensome a load of verbiage to be hauling around all the time, one may avail oneself of the timeless Eskimo interjection *anaq*, shit. This is appropriate to a wide variety of situations.

— Cecil Adams

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