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 confines 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; quvak, falling snow; amnoq, ice on the ground; loko (niko in some dialects); ic, nukut, large broken up masses of ice; hikaq, thin ice; quvak, new ice without snow; kanuq, new ice with snow; punap, drift ice; peqaluj, old ice; manulup, pack ice; ionuq, high pack ice; munaq, smooth ice; akumiy, thin ice on the sea; kuhupaq, ridges; nikul, fresh water ice; and runaq, firm winter ice.

If we wish to include peripheral items we may speak of iglo, snow house (igloo); huxciujaq, snow knife; puautrif, snow shovel; uckuxaq, 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 Umingmaktormiat, 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 are 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 new words as you go along, by connecting various particles to your basic root word. For example, we may add the suffix -tluk, shit. This is appropriate to a wide variety of situations.

By means of this system we may manufacture words that would fracture the bow of an eel. To illustrate I offer the word tukusariartorumagaluarnerpa, 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 foray into their godawful grammar.

I've got a lot more than nine words for snow, and I don't need to resort to the genuine article. So far I have:

kuhugaq, large broken up masses of ice; haviujaq, snow knife; pvag, snow shovel; and kumikhrug, bad snow.

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kaniktshaq moritlkatsio atsuniartoq, snow; hikuliaq, falling snow; and kumikhrug, bad snow.

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