

The Names Eskimo, Inuit, and Inupiaq/Inupiat

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Abstract

The trend in English toward avoiding the name *Eskimo* in favor of *Inuit* will not prevail in Alaska, where only one of the four Eskimo language/culture groups, the Inupiat, identifies closely with *Inuit*. The term *Inupiaq*, though used in English correctly according to the native language pattern adjectively and to refer to an individual and to the language, is losing ground to the English pattern, in which one form (in this case *Inupiat*) fills all slots.

Cultures have often adopted insensitive names or inaccurate forms for the indigenous groups that they contact or conquer. Probably the most notorious instance of this in Western colonialism is *Indian*, which Columbus applied to the first natives he met in the New World. *Indian*, however, has become the accepted general designation for groups with widely varying linguistic and cultural affiliations. And though there are alternatives to it, such as *Native American* and *Amerindian*, there does not seem to be any real social pressure to replace *Indian*, as, for example, *Black* has virtually eliminated *Negro* from current American usage.

However, in the case of *Eskimo*, the situation remains unsettled. Because *Eskimo* is Algonquian and is widely believed to have the disparaging meaning "eater of raw flesh,"¹ some people are avoiding it by using *Inuit* (or *Innuit*), an eastern Eskimo form meaning "people." While this may be a comfortable solution for Canada and Greenland, a similar shift in Alaska, home of approximately 38,000 Eskimos, is not without complications.

There are actually four Eskimo language groups in Alaska: Central Yupik (in southwestern Alaska); Alutiiq (on Kodiak Island, the eastern portion of the Alaska Peninsula, and the coast of Prince William Sound); Siberian Yupik (on St. Lawrence Island), and Inupiaq (in northwestern and northern Alaska).² Of these, only Inupiaq is part of the dialect continuum stretching from Unalakleet, at the base of the Seward Peninsula, across Canada to Greenland. The other three Eskimo peoples of Alas-

ka do not identify themselves with the name *Inuit*. Linguistically they are closer to each other than to speakers of Inupiaq. Culturally they feel, in varying degrees, that they are quite distinct from the northern Alaskans. In fact, the speakers of Alutiiq consider themselves to be Aleuts.

The overgeneralization of *Inuit* in Alaska is appearing more and more in writing done at some distance from Alaska. A recent usage guide even asserts that "*Innu*it or *Inuit* . . . is the official and polite term used in Alaska, Canada, and Greenland" (*Success with Words* 356). This is simply not accurate for Alaska – not in "official" or media usage, nor in the speech and writing of the people themselves, except for the speakers of Inupiaq, who recognize their close relationship to the larger Inuit linguistic/cultural continuum.

Yet even here there is a naming complication in English. Though these northern Alaskan Eskimos use *Inuit* to acknowledge their more general affiliation, they usually refer to themselves – and are referred to by other Alaskans – with forms from their own dialect. This has created an interesting tug-of-war in Alaskan English between the Eskimo and English naming patterns. Most closely reflecting the native language is *Inupiat* for the people in the plural or collectively, *Inupiaq* to refer to one person and to name the language, and either *Inupiat* or *Inupiaq* as a noun modifier. Table 1 summarizes this pattern schematically.

However, the way English treats language and nation/culture names differs significantly, making it unlikely that English speakers (including probably most Inupiat) will maintain this pattern. With only a few exceptions that I can think of, English speakers use the same form for both the language name (noun) and the noun modifier (adjective), for example *Spanish*, *German*, *Chinese*, *Dutch*, *Navajo*, *Kutchin*, *Tlingit*, and so on.

We must also consider the forms that are used in English to designate members of a culture as individuals, as groups, and as the people collectively. Of the many sub-types in the English pattern only two are relevant to the *Inupiaq* and *Inupiat* question:

a. In the first sub-type, nouns not ending in a sibilant (/ʃ/, /s/, /z/, or /ʒ/) are pluralized with the regular -s suffix, and the term for the

Table 1. Inupiaq-influenced pattern of English usage of *Inupiaq/Inupiat*.

Language Name	<i>Inupiaq</i>	"She speaks Inupiaq."
Modifier	<i>Inupiaq</i> , <i>Inupiat</i>	"He follows Inupiaq/Inupiat customs."
Singular	<i>Inupiaq</i>	"He is an Inupiaq."
Plural/Collective	<i>Inupiat</i>	"They are Inupiat."

people collectively is the same as the plural. Examples: *one Russian, two Russians, the Russians; one Greek, two Greeks, the Greeks; Norwegian(s); Albanian(s); German(s)*, and so on.

b. The second sub-type also consists of nouns not ending in a sibilant, but here there is a possible unmarked plural/collective—more possible for some than for others, perhaps. The members of this set seem mostly to be non-national, non-Western groups: *one Navajo, two Navajo, the Navajo; one Kutchin, two Kutchin, the Kutchin; Ainu; Newari; Yupik*; and many others.

What then can we predict for *Inupiaq/Inupiat* in English? First, the identity throughout the English pattern of language name and modifier clearly suggests that either *Inupiaq* or *Inupiat* will ultimately fill both slots. If *Inupiaq* is well established as the language name, then we might expect the same form for the modifier (e.g., “Inupiaq customs”), the singular form (“one Inupiaq is”), the plural (“two Inupiaq are” or “two Inupiaqs are”), and the collective (“the Inupiaq believe” or “the Inupiaqs believe”). This is what has happened for the Eskimo people just to the south. The form used throughout the English pattern is the singular *Yup’ik* ‘a person, a southwest Alaska Eskimo,’ rather than the plural *Yupit*.

Another possibility is that the plural form *Inupiat* could become the language name and the modifier and be construed as a singular form having a plural either with *-s*, as in sub-type a, or unmarked, as in sub-type b, thus, for example, “he speaks Inupiat,” “Inupiat customs,” “one Inupiat is,” “two Inupiat are/two Inupiat are.” Precedent for this is also nearby. The Eskimos of Canada are called by the plural *Inuit*, and this form is also the language name, the modifier, and almost always the singular, though *Inuk* is occasionally used. *Inuit* is also sometimes pluralized with *-s*.

Since the Alaskan Inupiat and Canadian Inuit are closely related culturally and linguistically, this Canadian pattern could be having an influence, for in Alaskan English usage the preferred modifier by a wide margin is *Inupiat*. The preferred plural form is *Inupiat*, though occasionally an *-s* is added. Thus, as Table 2 shows, two of the slots in the pattern seem to be decided.

Table 2. Emerging pattern of English usage of *Inupiaq/Inupiat*.

Language Name	_____	“He Speaks _____.”
Modifier	<i>Inupiat</i>	“She follows Inupiat customs.”
Singular	_____	“She is an _____.”
Plural/Collective	<i>Inupiat(s)</i>	“They are Inupiat(s).”

The question then is whether the pressure of the pattern can be resisted. Can sufficient awareness be maintained among Alaskans who use the terms in English contexts—including the Inupiat themselves—such that the usual English pattern does not apply? Probably not. Least likely, I think, is that the singular noun will survive as *Inupiaq*. The singular is frequently used, and the tendency to make it identical with the base of the plural will be strong. Already “an Inupiat” is fairly common.

It may be, however, that *Inupiaq* can be maintained as the language name. References to the language are made much less often than to the people. Furthermore, those who need to designate the language are frequently aware of it as a linguistic object, often in connection with its declining usage or with its place in education or the traditional culture. Thus, its isolation from the singular, plural, and modifier may allow usage to be subject to sufficient normative correction to preserve it.

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Notes

1. Ives Goddard, in the “Synonymy” section of the Introduction to the Arctic volume of *Handbook of North American Indians*, shows that this common assumption “cannot be correct for the presumed Montagnais source of the word Eskimo itself.” The meaning “raw-meat eaters” fits only Ojibwa forms used to designate the people, and is not likely to be related to the word itself.

2. In Fig. 1 (a map) in Anthony Woodbury’s “Eskimo and Aleut Languages” (Damas 50) and in articles throughout the Arctic volume of *Handbook of American Indians* the term *Pacific Yupik* is used for what I have called *Alutiiq*, which is the people’s preferred designation for their language and culture, reflecting their perception of themselves as Aleuts. In the scholarly literature their Eskimo language has been referred to variously, including *Pacific Yupik*, *Pacific Eskimo*, *Sugpiaq*, *Suk*, *Pacific Gulf Yupik*, and *Chugach Eskimo*.

Works Cited

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