



# Yair Sapirs tale ved lanceringen af sangen OQAATSIGUT / THE LANGUAGE SONG

## Taler

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## Dato

8. november 2023

## Sted

Nordatlantens Brygge,  
København

## Omstændigheder

Sangen *Oqaatsigut/The Language Song* er en hyldest til det grønlandske sprog og til alle oprindelige og truede sprog i verden. Den er skrevet af Yair Sapir, Malik Chemnitz og Christine Tongue og fremføres af Sikki & TNA, både på grønlandsk og engelsk.

Mine damer og herrer! Velkommen, welcome, tikillúarisi!

Language is something that we, all humans, share. And perhaps because we all have it, we sometimes tend to take it for granted.

During my years as a researcher, I have talked with many people who themselves, their parents, or grandparents, lost their language. A language loss is often experienced as a trauma, and simultaneously as a loss of one's culture, identity, and roots.

A language is but one attribute of a person's individual or group identity. And this attribute very often coincides with other attributes – traditions, heritage, clothing, dishes and so on. When a language disappears, due to colonisation or to other types of power manifestations, many other of the other of the group's attributes disappear.

About a half of today's languages are at risk of dying out. And many of those languages are indigenous languages – in Europe, America, Africa, and Asia. Luckily, Greenlandic, or Kalaallisut doesn't belong to the group of the most endangered languages: Although the language is not present in all domains of life in Greenland – for instance, for higher education you need to switch to another language, Greenlandic is still the majority language of the Inuit in Greenland. Additionally, and most importantly – the Greenlandic language is transmitted from the parents' generation to the children generation, thus

ensuring its survival.

Some people ask me: Isn't the fact that so many languages disappear just a natural result of modernisation, as well as globalisation? And moreover – wouldn't it be better if all human beings just spoke one, single language?

First of all, we all have the right to decide for ourselves which language we should talk. Linguistic rights, that is, the right to choose which language one wishes to use in the private, or in the public sphere, are a part of the international human rights, included in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights already back in 1948.

Moreover, when we look at the history of language loss, we can clearly see that in most cases, people did not voluntarily decide to give up their language. Rather, language loss is usually caused due to one group of people overpowering another one and imposing its culture and language on it. Today we know about the Estonian, Lithuanian, Latvian and Ukrainian languages as these nations regained their independence.

In Europe, Lutheranism and the French revolution opened the door for language diversity, for nation states, and for the translation of the bible to small national languages, rather than reading it in Latin or Old Slavonic. This way, many European nations could 'upgrade' their languages to turn them into literary and scholarly languages, used in all walks of life. This way, also Scandinavia acquired new literary languages – first Danish and Swedish, but in the 19th century also Norwegian, Finnish, Icelandic and Faroese, as a part of a national and political revitalisation. However, for other minorities in Scandinavia it, such as the Sami, the fight for the native language was much harder. Many Samis in Norway, Sweden and Finland, have lost their languages due to harsh assimilation policies and due to a strong discriminatory policy, through which some speakers began to judge their own language as a 'bad' language that is not worth using, and likewise towards their culture. Sami began to be introduced in schools only in the 1970s.

However, compared to other colonialised languages, Greenlandic has been lucky, as the language was never forbidden by the Danish authorities. The fact that Greenland is an island, far away from Denmark, probably also contributed to the protection of the language from extinction. But in the 1950s, some

advocated a linguistic and cultural assimilation of the Greenlanders. One Danish minister in the 1950s went as far as to suggesting that the Greenlandic language should be simply abolished. As an attempt, Danish was introduced into the first three grades of the elementary school in Greenland. However, some years later, Greenlandic was reintroduced there. Some Inuit families decided to switch over to Danish, as they were told that Danish was the language of... the future. And indeed – this is a concept, which has been adopted by many small language communities from the powerful part, i.e. that the old, small, native tongue has no place in the modern world. Being the first generation of native Hebrew speakers in my family, I can tell you that these ideas are baseless – my people managed to revitalise my ancient Hebrew language from the ashes after 2000 years, during which it was mostly used for religious purposes. I have never felt that I had grown up with a language that was artificially brought back to life, or with a language that lacks words for the modern world. Today, Hebrew is spoken by more than 10 million people and can be used in all walks of life.

And what can we treat as natural and unnatural? Is it natural that we should all be speaking American English in 30 or 50 years, or that our language should contain 70% of English loanwords? No, there is nothing natural about it. It is up for every language community to shape its own linguistic reality as it wishes. Moreover, we today know that our brains are capable of containing several languages at the same time. Hence, native language skills are not a hinder for mastering more languages. On the other hand, multilingualism is enriching!

Greenland is an excellent example of a rather small community, who decided to preserve its own culture, language and identity. With linguistic diversity, we also have cultural and ideological diversity. By acquiring knowledge about the different languages, we also acquire knowledge and respect towards other groups, their cultures, as well other ways of approaching reality.

I am deeply grateful to all of those who made the production of this song possible: NAPA, the Greenlandic Culture Fund, the non-profit project Small Languages Rock, my co-authors Malik Chemnitz and Christine Tongue, our fantastic singer Sikki and the amazing musicians Torbjørn, Natalia and Andreas. Mange tak! Qujanaq!

**Kilde**

Manuskript tilsendt af taler

**Kildetype**

Digitalt manuskript

**Tags**

Indvielsestale

**URI**

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