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Opportunity Knocks: Unlocking the Door to English-Greenlandic Bilingualism

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Abstract: *Developing a decolonized Greenlandic identity entails challenging colonial categories and fostering complex, inclusive national identities. While Greenlandic is not in immediate danger of extinction, its marginalization in professional, technical, and high-level administrative, or educational contexts poses a long-term threat to its status as a fully functional, modern language. Greenlandic is considered essential to Greenland's identity and independence movement, while continued reliance on Danish is often perceived as a remnant of colonial history. Danish-speaking colonial connotations are likely to fade if Greenlanders adopt culturally responsive bilingual education that protects cultural heritage while also preparing youth for the financial opportunities that come with global English. Embracing linguistic hybridity through a gradual shift to English as a second language and reorienting Greenland's relations toward the U.S. could be the best approach to achieving national independence. This shift could also make it easier to incorporate elements of modernization in Greenland's 21st century identity and facilitate the inclusion of Danish-speaking Greenlanders in the process. As noted by Gad (2009), Greenland's agency in choosing to move beyond essentialist narratives requires dialogue across cultures to preserve its language without sacrificing self-determination or access to power.*

INTRODUCTION

President Trump's serious geostrategic concern about the potential Chinese and Russian exploitation of vulnerabilities in Arctic security spurs interest in how an increase in the local

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need for English could affect Greenland. Greenland already grapples with the language rights of its Indigenous Greenlandic Inuit majority within the Kingdom of Denmark**.** Of the less than 100,0000 Inuit people speaking Inuit languages, about half speak Greenlandic (Møller, 2021). Set against English and Danish as powerful societal languages that symbolize status, Greenlandic is struggling to survive. In this context, English is often seen as an undesirable consequence of globalization and an inevitable culprit of the potential erasure of the Greenlandic language and identity.

However, promoting English bilingualism is bound to add complexity to the post-colonial dichotomies experienced by Greenlanders and diminish their negative consequences (Björklund, 2011). Emphasizing English language learning can also challenge simplistic identity politics discourses and diffuse tensions between maintaining traditional identity and integrating modernization. According to Gad (2009), Greenland's ethno-nationalist revival has supported legal and political advancements but has limited economic and educational self-sufficiency. At a time when the United States is arguing for a more robust U.S. presence on the island to field interoperable military capabilities at scale around the world, Greenlanders may want to reconsider the benefits of English as a second language over Danish.

Even though the law protects the rights of both Greenlandic and Danish-speaking peoples to use their respective languages in government and legal settings, social disparities exist in Greenland because a significant portion of the administrative and political elite use Danish. Greenland's Home Rule government is responsible for most domestic affairs, yet Danish remains integral to Greenland's judiciary and public administration (Heinrich, n.d.). Also contributing to the social divide is a shortage of Greenlandic-speaking professionals, especially in major towns, which maintains a high reliance on Danish and translators. Hence, elevating

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Greenlandic as a tool to dismantle colonial legacies, particularly in education, has been at the heart of Greenlanders' efforts toward independence from Denmark.

Jacobsen (2015) suggests that Greenlandic governments have exploited a Greenlandic identity narrative based on Inuit traditions and language as a distinct and hereditary culture to leverage independence from Denmark. However, contemporary attempts to distinguish Greenlandic from Danish immigrants and foreign nationals as fundamentally different cultures dismiss important elements of colonialism that cannot be excluded from Greenlandic identity. Therefore, a monolithic ethnic depiction that treats most Greenlanders as a single block reduces complex subgroups into a uniform stereotype, ignoring significant differences within the population. Furthermore, Gad (2009) notes that most Greenlanders embrace ideas linked to Danish influence regarding language and social inclusion, democratic ideals, welfare benefits, and a need for modernization, which conflict with traditional and nationalist narratives.

As a consequence of Greenland's colonial history, the Danish language and influence continue to dominate over education and governance. Often contrasted with Danish influence as Other, Greenland's identity is portrayed through traditional Inuit culture, yet Björklund (2011) affirms that the power dynamics of language policies have privileged Danish and Greenlandic bilingualism. Structural inequalities marginalize monolingual Greenlandic speakers economically and socially, while bilingual Greenlanders benefit from greater opportunities. Hence, linguistic inequalities from post-colonial power dynamics often entail the exclusion of monolingual Greenlandic speakers from information and power, while bilinguals occupy elite positions.

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Since the introduction of Home Rule, both the Greenlandic and Danish languages are taught in schools and can be used in all public contexts (Heinrich, n.d.). The school law of 1979 also helps protect Greenlandic as the language of instruction beginning in the first grade. In addition, it states that Danish language instruction begins in the fourth grade and English in the seventh grade. Furthermore, the Home Rule actively supports Greenlandic literature, art, and film. Relatedly, the Greenland Language Council, known as the Oqaasiliortut, monitors the development of the Greenlandic language and approves new terminology. To provide a clear framework for linguistic integration in Greenland, the language policy act of 2010 proposes removing existing language barriers and promoting language acquisition to strengthen Greenlandic and its development as a native and second language (Statsministeriet, n.d.).

The Language Threat in Greenland

Greenlandic belongs to the Eskimo-Aleut (Eskaleut) language family, which is also spoken in Alaska, Canada, and Siberia. It is an umbrella term that includes all the dialects of the Inuit language spoken across the island. The population of Greenland (Kalaallit Nunaat) is widely dispersed, but because West Greenland is the most densely populated area, Kalaallisut, literally, "in the way of the Greenlander," is the standard language of most Inuit communities on the island. Other spoken dialects include East Greenlandic and Inuktun, or Avanersuarmiutut (Polar, or Northern Greenlandic). According to a 2026 United Nations report, Greenlandic is used by roughly 70% of the population in Greenland. Despite being spoken by 85–90% of the population (roughly 50,000–57,000 people), UNESCO has classified Greenlandic as a vulnerable language, and certain Greenlandic dialects as facing endangerment. The significant social and cultural changes that Greenlandic communities have

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undergone to transition to a more modern labor society have been associated with a deterioration in the mental health of young people given that today's Indigenous youth often lack the cultural connection to shared identity, engagement, and purpose that served as a protective factor for older generations (Rubin et al., 2024; Wexler et al., 2014). Though mastered by those populations who use it as a daily means of expression, if Greenlandic is absent from the educational system, media, publishing, and public domain in general, it risks joining the thousands of languages that disappear each year. Greenlandic predominates in primary education and daily life and, since 2009, has been declared the sole official language. Still, no language test is required to reside in Greenland, and higher education and many administrative systems currently rely on Danish to a significant degree. Demant-Poort and Elstad (2023) find that a shortage of educational materials and qualified teachers fluent in Greenlandic significantly hampers its use in higher education. Since Danish is the main language of instruction in higher education, Greenlandic-speaking students with low Danish language proficiency may find themselves at a disadvantage upon entering higher school and university in either Greenland or Denmark.

The Language Policy Act protects the right of businesses and organizations to create their own language policy, such that public authorities and private companies with at least ten employees are free to use languages other than Greenlandic (Faingold, 2023). This facilitates conditions for Greenlandic to give way to Danish and English in the workplace, potentially aggravating its exclusion in high-stakes spaces. Nonetheless, the digital presence of the Greenlandic language may be growing thanks to increased youth social media use, even though few specialized software and online tools exist in Greenlandic, and comprehensive online Greenlandic dictionaries and specialized software remain scarce.

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Too often, rather than becoming bilingual, minority language speakers opt to switch completely to the societal language (Crystal, 2000). Greenlanders' general access to the Internet, where English is the dominant language, greatly improved after the sea cable was laid in 2008. Greenlandic children, many of whom use YouTube and gaming apps, are already communicating with their Greenlandic peers in pidgin-style English. Hence, in an effort to decrease language inequality and avert language death while adequately preparing students for global competition in Greenland, Faingold (2023) supports targeted investments in education to foster literacy in Greenlandic, Danish, and English.

Culturally response bilingual education

Cultural competence in education refers to educators' ability to understand, respect, and respond to the diverse cultural backgrounds and identities of the students they serve (Eden et al., 2024). It calls educators to recognize, understand, appreciate, and integrate the cultural diversity present in educational and community settings and create learning environments where students feel valued, respected, and empowered to succeed regardless of their cultural heritage or background (Horvat et al., 2014). Actively integrating these principles into institutional policies, curriculum development, and teaching practices fosters the ongoing process of building relationships, respecting varied cultural backgrounds, and improving student engagement to close equity gaps. Given these points, Greenlandic policy-makers who sidestep English learning because they believe it comes at the cost of cultural knowledge may regulate teacher training programs in ways that shortchange Greenlanders.

Culturally Responsive Education aims to help students thrive in the evolving place-based needs and opportunities within their communities. It attempts to connect Indigenous students'

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community, culture, local knowledge, and practical skills with academics to promote students' self-efficacy (Fons, 2025). Notwithstanding the benefits of culturally responsive education, instructional design for 21st century Greenlandic youth should also help learners build transferable communication skills that enhance their employment potential and the well-being of their communities. Safeguarding the intangible Greenlandic cultural heritage is not mutually exclusive with broadening students' worldview in ways that help them compete on a global level. A reductionist view of the subtle interplay between big and small languages labels big languages as killers and smaller languages as victims. In a world where approximately half of the world's population is bilingual, and 20% is multilingual (Crystal, 2000), the view that the English language is a tool for globalization that threatens the Greenlandic language and identity may be an oversimplification of the possibilities available to students

Pituffik, or Thule Air Base, plays a role in advancing mutual benefits for the Greenlandic and American peoples in many areas. It also indicates that Greenlandic-English bilingualism may be key to connections involving strategic employment opportunities. After all, societal bilingualism often occurs when sustained contact between two or more language groups with different levels of numerical, economic, and political power takes place (Grosjean, 1982). Hence, responsive, equitable teaching strategies are not consistent with anti-American bias in education - a bias that could preclude students of low socioeconomic backgrounds from accessing important real-world opportunities at home. Fons (2025) maintains that Culturally Responsive Education Outside the Classroom (CREOtC) "affects learning and motivation among Indigenous students, as authenticity and real-world connections to their own culture provide students with a sense of belonging to the land and community as well as to school" (p. 22). To be sure, a worldview that values protecting and promoting the diversity of Indigenous

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cultural expressions can coexist with quality English instruction for accessing personal growth opportunities.

A Post-Post-Colonial Greenlandic Identity

Adequately preparing Greenlandic students for sustained and improved cooperation with the United States may be key to leveraging ethnic bias at home. At present, Danish may present a bulwark against the important benefits that bilingual students of Greenlandic and English could reap, but geography may change that. According to Davis (2026), the fully operational Golden Dome missile-defense project is designed to defend against nuclear intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), as well as long-range cruise missile threats, hypersonic weapons, and fractional orbital bombardment systems from Russia, China, and North Korea. The estimated $175 billion to $3.6 trillion U.S. investment in Greenland over the next two decades represents a significant rise in competitive employment opportunities and long-term cultural exchange (Schaefer, 2026).

Despite Greenlanders' resistance to President Trump's interest in Greenland, the United States has a long history of close cooperation with the Danish and Greenlandic governments based on deep economic ties, strong defense partnership, and shared respect for democratic values, human rights, and the rule of law (U.S. Embassy Copenhagen, 2020). The political will and capacity for autonomous decision-making beyond colonial constraints will determine whether Greenlanders take practical steps in language policy and international relations to move past colonial dependencies and adopt English as their second language. Gad (2009) asserts that such a move would align with strategies used by other post-colonial nations to successfully navigate

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globalization by reducing their colonial language of dominance. If Greenlanders center their post-post-colonial identity development on modernization rather than on cultural identity preservation, a gradual shift toward English could ease their movement to independence with integration into global markets.

CONCLUSION

Language can serve as a means of seizing and maintaining power. People in positions of authority will try to protect their status by using their mastery of the societal language as a barrier to impede others from social advancement. Because over 70% of people from Denmark speak English as a second language, prioritizing English language learning could help many Greenlanders mitigate issues of ethnic bias. As a means of forging a strong Greenlandic national identity, a gradual shift towards English as a second language could help reduce Danish influence. In short, strategically prioritizing English in education could abate colonial connotations, facilitate the inclusion of Greenlandic-English bilingual speakers in positions of power, and improve Greenland's prospects for independence (Gad, 2009).

Denmark, with its relatively small military, cannot realistically defend the vast Arctic territory against real existential threats. Hence, President Trump's 2025 U.S. National Security Strategy made clear its intent to reassert American preeminence in the Western Hemisphere in the face of a threatening encroachment by China and Russia into either Greenland or Latin America. Within the projected U.S. sphere of influence, linguistic hybridity offers Greenlanders an opportunity to spur inclusion and reduce social stratification. Embracing Greenlandic-English bilingualism as a post-post-colonial Greenlandic identity is a real consideration that today's Greenlanders must seriously weigh for themselves.

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