

# The Semiotic Landscape in Nuuk, Greenland

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## Abstract

This paper explores the semiotic landscape in Nuuk, the capital of Greenland. The connection between images and choice of language in both public and private signs is analysed in relation to the function of the signs, Greenlandic culture, history and politics, and the space where the signs, notices, and advertisements are displayed. The data was collected in May 2017. The focus is on signs depicting the sun, polar bears, and people. The use of the images and the choice of languages reveals centralising, reclaiming, localising or even transgressive tendencies in the civic frame, the school system, the community, the marketplace, and on the walls of social housing. The data also shows the importance of English in the global marketplace (tourism and shipping), the tertiary education system, and graffiti. The Greenlandic language is firmly in the centre in almost all contexts, but Danish appears in the civic and community frames and in the marketplace for practical reasons.

## Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to study the semiotics of both public and private signs in the linguistic landscape of Nuuk, the capital of Greenland. The topic is important in the endangered languages context because Greenlandic is a statutory national language with a vigorous language use according to the Ethnologue classification (Simons & Fennig, 2017) and thus a success story in the minority language context. Second, although the language of signs and notices has been studied in the minority language context (e.g. Puzey, 2008; Cenoz & Gorter, 2006; Coupland, 2010; Moriarty, 2014a, 2014b; Pietikäinen, 2014) there are no previous studies on the linguistic or semiotic landscape in Greenland. Third, the combination of semiotics and sociolinguistics, i.e. the relationship between the discursive modalities of language, image and space, is an emerging field with which the current paper is engaging (e.g. Jaworski & Crispin, 2010; Jaworski, 2015).

Approximately 50,000 people in Greenland and Denmark speak West Greenlandic (Kalaallisut). Greenlandic is an Eskimo-Aleut language and closely related to Inuktitut in Canada. It is a polysynthetic language with a rich system of suffixes. Greenlandic has many Danish loanwords (e.g. *palasi* ‘priest’, *femten* ‘fifteen’, *juulli* ‘Christmas’).

Greenland has been under the Scandinavian sphere of influence since the Middle Ages. Protestant missionaries from Denmark and Norway started moving to the country in the 1600s, and Greenland became a Danish colony in this period. In the 1900s there was a shift from a traditional fishing and hunting culture to a money economy and consumerism; this has been followed by a revival of Greenlandic culture (Stenbaek, 1987). Greenland remained a Danish colony until 1979 when it was granted Home Rule. The Home Rule Act granted official status to the Greenlandic language (alongside Danish). Greenland achieved a greater level of political autonomy in 2009, when Home Rule was replaced with Self Rule. At this time Greenlandic became the only official language. However, in practice the country remains fully bilingual with Danish. Danes who live on the island work as tradesmen, academics, teachers, and administrators. They constitute around 12% of the population (Central Intelligence Agency, 2017). English is a prominent third language.

The Danish name for Nuuk was Godthåb. The Danish government moved people from small rural coastal settlements to the capital in the 1960s in an effort to impose a modernising and urbanisation agenda on the Danish colony; this created the first truly urban Greenlandic environment leading to rapid growth and impacting the traditional way of life (Grydehoj, 2014). Godthåb was renamed Nuuk in 1979, and it now has

approximately 17,000 inhabitants. Although tourism has been a key priority for Greenland since 1991, the sector shows slow growth due to prices, accessibility, and extreme conditions (Kaae, 2006).

### **Research questions**

This study seeks to explore three key questions. First, what imagery is used in government and road signs, commercial signs (brands) and community signs in Nuuk, Greenland? Second, how do the images relate to the linguistic elements in the signs? Third, how do the images relate to Greenlandic culture and the space they are in?

### **Theoretical framework**

Traditionally the term ‘linguistic landscape’ refers to the languages of official signs (e.g. traffic signs, street names, government notices), private signs (e.g. shop names, private business signs, personal ads) and graffiti (Landry & Bourhis, 1997; Gorter, 2006; Shohamy & Gorter, 2009). These signs have both an informative function and a symbolic function (Landry & Bourhis, 1997), i.e. they are used both to convey information and to promote certain types of ideologies.

In more recent studies, the concept of linguistic landscape has been expanded to include other modalities, such as food packaging, notes, discarded items, and moving signs on buses or t-shirts, in addition to other elements, such as the non-linguistic aspects of signs (e.g. Jaworski & Crispin, 2010). This dynamic, constantly mediated multimodal linguistic landscape gives space its meaning and interacts with the built environment (Moriarty, 2014a).

Semiotics refers to the study of signs (e.g. Sebeok, 2001; Chandler, 2017). There are some recent sociolinguistic studies that are particularly relevant for our approach. For example, Papen (2015) has studied the linguistic landscape and the semiotics in Berlin. She noted the ‘aesthetization’ and commodification of commercial signs and the use of English in the fields of fashion, food, and tourism. Furthermore, Papen observed that signs in green colour are associated with a green lifestyle. Together with urban street art, these green signs add to the trendiness of an area. A second relevant study for our paper is Jaworski and Thurlow’s (2010) article on travel posters for the super-elite tourists. They have analysed the representations of silence both in the images and in the accompanying text. Abousnougá & Machin (2010) have gone even further and analysed the semiotics of war monuments and the ideologies behind the choice of images therein.

Theoretically, we rely on the notions of centre and periphery. In minority language contexts there is a constantly negotiated dynamic process of centralising and peripheralising norms and ideologies (Kelly-Holmes, 2013; Pietikäinen, 2013; also Grydehoj, 2014). The centre is dominant and advanced, and associated

with political, economic, and trade power. The periphery is the opposite. Globalisation interferes with the local dynamics between languages. Our study of the semiotic landscape in Nuuk will take into consideration the question of how central the Greenlandic language is within this context and how it relates to Danish, the former colonial language, Danish, as well as English, the global language.

### **Method**

Our study is qualitative and explores the non-linguistic aspects of signs and the interaction of these images with the languages used in the signs, on one hand, and the built environment and society, on the other hand.

According to Kallen (2010: 43) the spatial domains in which the semiotic landscape can be divided into are: 1) the civic frame (space governed by the state), 2) the marketplace (the world of commerce), 3) portals (e.g. airports, banks, internet cafés, TV channels), 4) the wall (graffiti and posters), 5) the detritus zone (rubbish on the ground and in bins), 6) the community (social clubs and leisure), and 7) the school. Our paper excludes 5) the detritus zone but visits all the other spaces.

### **Data**

Our data was collected during a fieldwork trip 8 May – 23 May 2017 in Nuuk and its suburbs Nuussuaq and Qinngorput. The data set of 90 images was collected to study the linguistic landscape in Nuuk (see Valijärvi & Kahn, *in progress*) but here the focus is on semiotics, specifically images depicting the sun, polar bear, and people. The selection has been made because the themes in question recur in a number of different contexts and zones. Their prominence and cultural significance point to a particular importance within the semiotic landscape of Nuuk, which is worthy of analysis.

### **Analysis**

#### **The sun**

The Greenlandic flag, which was officially adopted in 1985, is divided into two horizontal bands of white (top) and red (bottom). There is a circle in the middle where the colours are reversed: white at the bottom and red on top (Figure 1). The white symbolises ice and the red is the sun. Moreover, white and red are also the colours used in the Danish flag, and as such the Greenlandic flag evokes close associations with the colonial power. Despite this prominent link, it is important to note that Greenland is the only Nordic country or territory that does not have the Nordic cross in its flag.



Figure 1: Greenlandic flag

This image is a prominent feature of the semiotic landscape of Nuuk, appearing on numerous signs in a variety of different contexts. For example, on the wall of a social housing block in Nuuk we can see an image of the sun accompanied by the words *tatiginnineq* ‘trust’ and *asannineq* ‘love’ (Figure 2). It is important to note that the sun symbol in this case draws explicitly on the imagery of the Greenlandic national flag, as it is framed by a blue ocean underneath and a white sky above. The imagery appears to be used to convey unity: people (tenants of the building and, in the broader sense, citizens of Greenland) are in on this together (see ‘People’ section below for further discussion of the theme of unity in Nuuk signs).



Figure 2: The wall of a social housing block

This image is in stark contrast with the colonial reasons behind the existence of the social housing block, as discussed in the introduction above. It can also be instructively contrasted with the transgressive graffiti inside the building (Figure 3), which coincidentally also features a circle on a red background. In this case, the meaning of what appears to be the sun symbol (whether intended as such or not by the artist) has been subverted so that instead of conveying unity, positivity, and national identity, it suggests dissatisfaction and youth identity



Figure 3: Graffiti inside social housing block

The language of the social housing motto is Greenlandic as it is a domain for the colonised, i.e. only Greenlandic-speaking people would be likely to live in these blocks. The language of the transgressive graffiti is Greenlandic and English; this suggests that the writers are attempting to place themselves within an international as well as local context and align themselves with the global language. By contrast, the colonial language, Danish, is rejected or used in a subversive manner; for example, the Danish loan word *pølse* ‘sausage’ is employed in a transgressive figurative sense in this context (cf. Pennycook, 2009). Taboo language and explicit references are frequently in graffiti.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the same red sun is also a prominent feature of the realm of consumerism and tourism in Nuuk. For example, it appears in a tourist shop sign accompanied by English and Danish only in white writing (Figure 4). The Greenlandic word *inuk* ‘person’ is used to evoke authenticity and appeal to tourists (cf. Pietikäinen, 2013). This time the sun, and the clear resemblance to the red and white design of the national flag, invite viewers to consume in the marketplace space, and offer them a shopping experience laden with specifically Greenlandic symbolism.



Figure 4: Design shop sign

The sun circle likewise appears in another international context, that of shipping and transport. It can be seen on the logo of containers belonging to the Royal Arctic shipping company, accompanied by English text and waves (Figure 5). The Royal Arctic shipping company is wholly owned by the government of Greenland and its important purpose is to bring much-needed supplies to Greenland. The company’s key role in maintaining

the life of the nation is reflected in the choice of the logo, the sun symbol. It also indicates where the goods are headed or where they are coming from. The use of English reflects the international orientation of the shipping company and the fact that English is the language of the global marketplace.



Figure 5: Royal Arctic shipping logo and shipping container

The local marketplace likewise makes use of the sun symbol and Greenlandic flag, but exhibits greater use of the Greenlandic language than the zones discussed previously. In Figure 6, the sun is used to make the Danish supermarket Brugsens's name more Greenlandic: it appears inside the *g*, forming a shape closely resembling the red and white flag design. The name is further localised by the use of the Greenlandic diminutive suffix *-eeraq*. A larger Brugsens in Greenland does not have the diminutive suffix but ends in an *-i* instead (Brugseni) for the same localising reasons (The *-i* suffix is commonly attached to Danish loanwords when used in Greenlandic). The Danish name has been reclaimed and adapted for a specifically Greenlandic clientele. This modification of a Danish supermarket name reflects the centralising Self Rule policies of the Greenlandic government on one hand, and the dual cultural identity of Greenlandic people on the other hand (cf. Sowa, 2004).



Figure 6: Figure 5: Supermarket Brugseneeraq

The sun also appears in a recent sign for Queen Ingrid's Hospital in central Nuuk (Figure 7). In this case the imagery seen on the flag has been modified by a change in colour: the rising/setting sun is yellow rather than red. This alteration could perhaps be interpreted as a subtle shift away from Danish linguistic dominance in Greenland (by removing the link with the colours of the Danish flag). The order of languages reflects this change and the current policies of bringing Greenlandic to the centre: Greenlandic is preceded by Danish in the civic frame.



Figure 7: Hospital sign

### Polar bear

Like the sun, the polar bear, *nanoq*, is a common feature of the semiotic landscape in Nuuk. The polar bear is featured on the coat of arms of Greenland, adopted in 1989, on a blue background that symbolises the oceans surrounding Greenland (Figure 8).



Figure 8: Greenland's coat of arms

A striking use of the polar bear is in the supermarket context. Almost all products in Nuuk supermarkets have labels in Danish only, or Danish and other Scandinavian languages, with very few products including Greenlandic. The polar bear is featured on one of the only exceptions to this trend, a fruit cordial aimed at an exclusively at local market with a bilingual Greenlandic-Danish label (Figure 9). The Arctic image is at odds with the fruity flavour of the drink. Yet in the marketplace domain the image serves a means to commodify and sell to Greenlandic consumers, highlighting the centrality of the product in the local context. The rest of the products in supermarkets have Danish labels (possibly for practical reasons as they are imported from Denmark, which has a much larger consumer base).



Figure 9: Nanoq fruit concentrate

The polar bear is also a central element of the logo for the local Nuuk TV station (Figure 10). The text itself is in Danish: LOKAL 'local', DIGITAL 'digital', NANOQ FILM 'polar bear film', REKLAM 'ads'. This portal space is usually bilingual, in spite of the fact that, as mentioned above, Greenlandic is the only official language of the country.



Figure 10: Nuuk television channel

This is also the case with in the bilingual newspaper *Sermitsiaq* where Greenlandic comes first. It seems that on the sign the Greenlandic language has been replaced by the polar bear. In this respect an instructive comparison can be drawn between Nuuk TV and Air Greenland, as the latter is a dominant player in the portal space in Greenland. Air Greenland likewise draws on national visual associations by use of the red and white colours of the flag, as seen in Figure 11.



Figure 11: Air Greenland logo

However, in contrast to this Nuuk TV advert, Air Greenland's language policy is trilingual: Greenlandic first, Danish second, and English third. Like the sun symbol, the polar bear is a feature of the façade of social housing in Nuuk. In this case, the polar bear seems to evoke unity, happiness, and global solidarity when featured on the wall of a council house and accompanied by a positive message in English (Figure 12). This piece of wall art is newer than the one in Figure 2 and thus the language of upbeat propaganda is not Greenlandic but English. This use of the polar bear in conjunction with the English text serves to juxtapose this salient symbol of Greenlandic identity with an outward-facing, global orientation, sending the message that the local is fully engaged with the international English-speaking world.



Figure 12: Wall art on social housing

## People

Along with the sun symbol and the polar bear, people feature prominently in the public signs in Nuuk. As a general rule, people in Greenlandic signs are portrayed

as obedient, well-behaved, and united, standing together. The image in Figure 2 discussed above also contains a group of Greenlanders shows Greenlanders standing together inside the sun symbol. A similar image of unity is shown in the kindergarten / nursery sign in Figure 13, which contains a group of people rowing together inside an *umiaq*, a Greenlandic open skin boat that is propelled by oars or paddles. The use of the Greenlandic word *umiaq* as the name of this kindergarten is in keeping with the fact that the language of primary education is Greenlandic, i.e. the school space is predominantly Greenlandic. By contrast, secondary education in Greenland is conducted in Danish. (Examination of these points is beyond the scope of the present article; see Valijärvi and Kahn, *in progress*, for discussion.)



Figure 13: Kindergarten

Interestingly, the University of Greenland logo bears a close resemblance to the kindergarten / nursery logo shown above as it also features people on a boat together (Figure 14). As in the case of the kindergarten, the use of this symbol of togetherness can be interpreted as conveying a message regarding the importance of unity and community within education in Greenland. Furthermore, as in the case of many other signs in Nuuk public spaces discussed in this paper, it is in the shape of the sun, evoking subtle yet clear associations with the Greenlandic flag. The choice of languages for the logo are Greenlandic and English, reflecting the local yet simultaneously international outlook of the university. Inside the university buildings signage is trilingual with Greenlandic first in large font followed by Danish second and English third in a smaller font. This is in line with the policies of bringing Greenlandic to the centre but at the same time connecting to a global community with English (as mentioned in the case of Air Greenland, another local institution with strong international links).



Figure 14: University of Greenland logo

With respect to the theme of unity and togetherness evident in Nuuk signs containing people, it is worth noting that the people in the hospital sign in Figure 7 are a nuclear family, which conveys the message that this is the unit of society and the people to be treated by the health care system.

While the majority of signs including people feature groups rather than individuals, on occasion a sign containing a single person can be found. An example of this is shown in Figure 15. In this case, the individual in question is doing the decent urban thing by clearing up after their dog. These traits of obedience and good behaviour are closely linked to those of unity and togetherness that can be seen in the images of groups. The languages of this sign are Greenlandic first and Danish second, as is typical of community and official signs in Nuuk.



Figure 15: Clean up after your dog

A further example of the obedient, united, and community-oriented nature of people featured on Nuuk signs can be seen in Figure 16. This is a statement displayed in Pisiffik, a Greenlandic supermarket, containing an image of two people accompanied by a bilingual Greenlandic / Danish announcement that energy drinks will not be sold to children. As in other posters appearing in community spaces, this has Greenlandic first and Danish second. This trend further supports our findings about Greenlandic being brought to the centre: it is associated with the trappings of modernity, in this case energy drinks. (Greenlandic is also the language associated with other aspects of modern urban life such as Apple computers and electronic customer satisfaction surveys where you press a button to make your experience known to the staff; see Valijärvi and Kahn, *in progress*, for further details.)

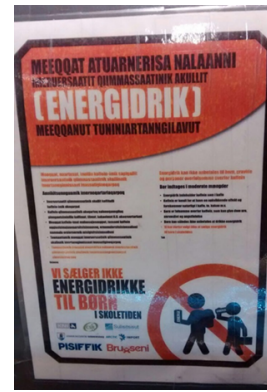


Figure 16: We do not sell energy drinks to children

In addition to togetherness and community-mindedness, another common theme seen in the representation of people within the community domain in Nuuk signs is activeness, healthiness, and trendy modernity. For example, the notice in Figure 17 advertising a photo competition aimed at young people features figures engaged in healthy outdoor pursuits and other sports activities. Like most signs in the public domain, the first language in the poster is Greenlandic and the second language is Danish.



Figure 17: Photo competition

Similarly, the concert advertisement in Figure 18 contains a central image of anonymous ecstatic bodies engaged in an active leisure activity. Greenlandic is the main language of the community space in this instance, as is often the case in grassroots-produced announcements in Nuuk. Figures 17 and 18 illustrate the fact that an emphasis on physical pursuits is a common theme in this type of unofficial sign relaying information about leisure activities, whether they actually refer to a physical activity or not. These signs also highlight the fact that Greenlandic is very much in the centre in this type of setting, as it is in official government-produced signs



Figure 18: Concert

An extremely salient example of this emphasis on physical activity as a key element of the community domain in Nuuk is the announcement of a shopping complex currently under construction in the city centre (on the the plot of the notorious block P, a large council house building where significant numbers of rural Greenlanders were settled by the Danish government in the 1960s). The shopping centre will have an English name, *Playground* (Figure 19). As in leisure posters like that shown in Figure 17, the images accompanying the names of the shops to be featured in the shopping complex are basketball players and BMX cyclists. As in the case of the posters shown in Figures 17 and 18, these images reflect the message that urban people in Nuuk are physically active and in control, whether it be in Greenlandic or English.



Figure 19: Nuuk Playground shopping centre

As seen above in the cases of the sun and polar bear in Figures 2 and 12 respectively, social housing in central Nuuk has often been reclaimed and rebranded with street art containing images strongly associated with Greenlandic identity and culture. A striking example of this trend is shown in Figure 20, which contains an image of a smiling Greenlandic man on the wall of otherwise anonymous tower blocks in central Nuuk. This image can be contrasted with most of the other images of people discussed above in that it exhibits a lone figure rather than a group, does not explicitly indicate obedience or community-mindedness, and does not show physical activity. Rather, the man's unmistakably traditional Greenlandic appearance suggests that, instead of classifying this figure as an outlier among the images of people discussed above, this image can more fruitfully be understood as a symbol of Greenlandicness just like the sun and the polar bear.



Figure 20: Social housing

While the images of people seen in the Nuuk semiotic landscape are often local, as discussed above, global images can be found as well. Such global imagery can be seen in the Nuuk airport, where the internationally recognised figure appearing on an exit sign has first been paired up with Greenlandic text (Figure 21). In this case, the figure is universal, but the sign has nevertheless been localised by means of the Greenlandic and Danish text. As is the norm for official and government signs in Nuuk, the Greenlandic appears first and the Danish second. In this case, the Greenlandic version is also much bigger than the Danish one, indicating that the designers' plan for the portal consists of a fusion of global imagery with Greenlandic language. In this case, as in most of the others discussed above, the Greenlandic language is very firmly at the centre.



Figure 21: Emergency exit

## Summary and conclusions

Our study has examined the semiotic landscape in Nuuk with a focus on three distinct categories of images: the sun, the polar bear, and people. These three categories can be observed in diverse contexts in the signs of Nuuk and reflect a number of key shared themes regardless of the setting in which they appear (official government signs, commercial logos, product labelling, announcements for leisure activities, etc.).

With respect to the sun, our investigation shows that the image is used to evoke associations with the Greenlandic flag and by extension with Greenlandic identity. It can be found in official and government contexts (such as the logo of the University of Greenland and Queen Ingrid's hospital), in consumer contexts (such as the Brugseni supermarket, the Royal

Arctic shipping company logo, and the Inuk Design tourist boutique), and as a message of positive propaganda serving to promote unity on the walls of social housing. Conversely, the sun can serve as a symbol of transgression when appearing in youth graffiti inside council houses. With respect to language, the sun symbol can be paired with English in the global marketplace and localised with Greenlandic in the local marketplace and the civic frame.

Like the sun, the polar bear is used as a salient marker of Greenlandic identity. It mirrors the sun symbol in that it appears on the wall of social housing, in consumer products, and in official contexts such as the Nuuk TV logo. In addition to evoking Greenlandicness, the polar bear also resembles the sun in that it is used to denote unity and positivity when appearing on the wall of a council house. Again like the sun, the language accompanying the polar bear varies depending on the context. In the marketplace frame accompanied by Greenlandic and Danish, and in the portal space it is accompanied by Danish. In contrast to the sun symbol, the polar bear appearing on the wall of a social housing block is attached to an English message, suggesting an outward-facing, global dimension.

People in Greenlandic signs generally appear in groups (as seen in a diverse range of images including e.g. signs for primary education, tertiary education, Queen Ingrid's hospital, social housing, and a concert), conveying notions of togetherness and unity. They also exhibit obedience and community-mindedness (as seen in the example of the energy drink sign and the admonishment to clean up after dogs). In some cases the groups of people appear in conjunction with symbols of Greenlandic culture such as the sun (in the social housing and hospital signs) or the *umiaq* (in the kindergarten / nursery and university signs). Another trend visible in the signs containing people is an emphasis on sporty, physically active bodies, as seen in the posters for a photography competition, a concert, and the future Nuuk Playground shopping centre. The picture of an Inuit man on a housing block in central Nuuk differs from the other images of people in that it does not conform to the above patterns, but instead resembles the sun and polar bear images in that it can be interpreted a sign of national pride and reclamation of the semiotic space for traditional Greenlandic identity.

With respect to the languages appearing in conjunction with these images of people, there are again differences depending on the context. In the tertiary education space the images are accompanied by text in Greenlandic and English, the latter serving to connect Greenland to the global scientific community. In the community frame dutiful people do the right thing in Greenlandic first and Danish second, as is the norm in this type of official setting. The same order of languages can be found in posters using athletic bodies to advertise leisure activities, indicating that it is not only in the official

sphere that Greenlandic is at the centre, but also in bottom-up contexts. As in the case of the sun and the polar bear, here English is once again in the marketplace space associated with consumerism and similar anonymous sporty images. Occasionally a global image, such as the figure running towards the exit in the Nuuk airport, appears, again combined with Greenlandic text in conjunction with a smaller Danish version.

This study has thus shown that symbols of Greenlandic identity constitute a prominent feature of the semiotic landscape in Nuuk, and that, when read in conjunction with the accompanying multilingual (Greenlandic, Danish, and English) text, these symbols reflect a vibrant culturally specific landscape with Greenlandic largely at the centre.

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