
HOW MANY WORDS FOR SNOW?



The notion that the Inuit have dozens of words for snow is widespread, completely false, and still taught in schools. How did this unfounded myth gain such momentum?

From Ivory Towers to Pop Culture

Most people have been told at least once that “Eskimos” (explanation to follow) have many words for snow. This pearl of wisdom is usually shot off in an academic setting as an example of how different cultures adapt their language to the specifics of their environment. Few know that this “fact” is not only false but makes no sense, given a basic understanding of Eskimo languages.

The myth got started in 1911 when renowned anthropologist Franz Boas pointed out that Eskimos have four distinct root words for snow, translating as “snow on the ground,” “falling snow,” “drifting snow,” and “snowdrift.” It is unclear where Boas collected this linguistic data. Eskimos speak a polysynthetic language, meaning they take a root word, such as *snow*, and then add on to it a potentially endless number of descriptors. For example, Eskimos could take their root word for *snowdrift* and tack on to it their words for *cold*, *high*, *insurmountable*, and *frightening*, thus creating one very long and descriptive word. Because the language works in this way, there are, technically, an infinite number of “Eskimo words for snow.”

Because Boas was widely read in academic circles, textbooks soon started to make seemingly random claims about the number of ways Eskimos refer to snow. According to Roger Brown’s *Words and Things*, Eskimos have just three words for snow. Carol Eastman, in *Aspects of Language and Culture*, claims they have “many words” for snow. Once these academic postulations such as these drifted into the mainstream, the number of Eskimo words for

snow inexplicably skyrocketed. A 1984 *New York Times* article put the number at 100, while a 1988 article in the same paper marveled at the “four dozen” different words for snow.

What Is an “Eskimo” Word, Anyway?

The Eskimo-words-for-snow myth becomes even more nonsensical when you consider that there is no such thing as one “Eskimo” language. “Eskimo” has become a popular blanket term for the indigenous peoples of eastern Siberia, Alaska, Canada, and Greenland. Eskimos are generally divided into the Inuit and Yupik. In some regions, the term “Inuit” has come to be used as a replacement term for “Eskimo,” but in other regions this is not accepted, as not all Eskimos are Inuit. The groups collectively referred to as Eskimo or Inuit speak many different languages, though there are commonalities among them.

The popularity of the language myth is fueled by an “Oh wow, aren’t they strange!” factor that often comes with fast facts about different cultures. Even if some Inuit languages do have more words for snow, that fact in itself isn’t terribly provocative. Linguist Geoffrey Pullum points out in his essay *The Great Eskimo Vocabulary Hoax*: “Botanists have names for leaf shapes; interior decorators have names for shades of mauve; printers have many names for different fonts . . . would anyone think of writing about printers the same kind of slop we find written about Eskimos in bad linguistics textbooks?”

Perhaps at some point in the future, a rumor will spread among the Eskimos that “Americans” have a dizzying number of words for snow, including but not limited to *flurry*, *blizzard*, *nieve*, *neve*, *slush*, *schnee*, *snowball*, and *snowflake*.

What’s the Eskimo Word for “House”?

That would be *igloo*, and another misconception is that Eskimos of yore lived in rounded structures made from neatly stacked ice blocks. In fact, basic igloos could be constructed quickly and were typically used only as emergency shelters. Eskimos lived in sod houses in the winter months and tents in the summer.