

Lesson 1

Introduction

Welcome to our mini course in Greenlandic. The very first steps will be for you to acquire a specific new skill and to start looking at language learning with new eyes:

First and foremost you need a decent pronunciation of normal Greenlandic. Without it you will never get going with the learning process. If your pronunciation is too striking or corny Greenlanders will soon lose interest in communicating with you and you will not be able to practice your new skills naturally and accordingly never acquire the language. Bad pronunciation will namely often be taken as lack of respect for the Greenlandic mother tongue. And with good reason. There is no acceptable reason for bad pronunciation. Everybody can acquire decent Greenlandic pronunciation skills in a few days with a little help and a tiny bit of commitment.

Secondly, I will try to help you over what might be the biggest obstacle for you to learn Greenlandic namely the fact that you need to unlearn many of the strategies you have used this far in acquiring other foreign languages like Spanish or French.

Since the birth of the nature method in second language teaching half a century ago the trend has been to use L2 in real communication without too much worry about grammatical correctness.

Such languages are namely so-called analytic languages which among other things means that the languages are made up of short words with a limited inflexion and that a few thousand words come up again and again. Here is an example: If you learn to say *Je suis une femme* (I'm a woman) you will already have the four "building blocks" *je*, *suis*, *une*, and *femme* for use with lots of other contexts for instance as itself like in *Une femme* (a woman) or *Je pense donc je suis* (I think, therefore I am). In the polysynthetic Greenlandic language the same phrase will be one and only one word, *arnaavunga*, which obviously will be of no use for example in the famous quotation from Descartes. *Arnaavunga* cannot be reused in any other context than this specific 'I am a woman'.

The fact you must accept is that whereas you readily learn French and Spanish by learning single words and phrases by heart without giving too much thought to grammar and theory such scheme does not function with Greenlandic. In your former experiences with second language learning the words were your friends and grammar most likely your enemy. In polysynthetic Greenlandic single words could easily turn out to be your worst enemies whereas grammar could be your best friend.

Does it sound over-theoretical and far-fetched? Maybe it does but there is no short cut around this fact. Still, you should not worry too much for even though Greenlandic is very different from anything you have experienced this far this does not in itself mean that the language is difficult. Dissimilarity and difficulty are two different items that should not be confused. You will simple

accept as your starting point the fact that Greenlandic is different and start the learning process from there. This system will as gently as possible guide you through the dissimilarities.

For of course you can learn Greenlandic if you want to. Non-Inuit children in Greenland soon acquire Greenlandic absolutely naturally and before Greenlanders learned to speak Danish - that was before 1950 - almost all grown-up foreigners in Greenland, too, spoke Greenlandic. So the bottom line: You need to do a conscious job to learn it but of course you can with a little help!

Pronunciation course - single sounds

There are obstacles on the way towards mastery of Greenlandic. Actually so many, that quite a few learners give up already in the initial stages. That is of course a sad fact but for a number of sociological reasons most likely a fact we must learn to live with. But as mentioned already there are no valid reasons for bad pronunciation of Greenlandic for instance when mentioning persons and places in Greenland.

So let us just do it!

A new sound [q]¹

The letter *q* and the sound [q] might sound like a real killer in the beginning. The sound is not very widespread. It is found in Arabic but we do not have it in English. Still, as you will soon learn: It is different but not difficult.

[q] is a uvular stop consonant. It is formed when the back of the tongue creates a closure toward the uvula. There is no fricative noise in the [q] so if you should ever be advised to behave as so many before you by approximating the *q*-sound with the Danish sound in words beginning with *kr*:- Do close your ears. You will learn a bad habit that will be hard to get rid of at a later stage.

So make sure to do it right from the beginning. Start by positioning your tongue as well as you can. Open your mouth extremely widely and press the tip of your tongue toward the back of your lower jaw. Now keep your tongue in that position while breathing out with a long 'aaaaaaaaaaar'-sound.

Make sure that the tip of your tongue does not move away from its position behind the lower jaw and do not stop the airflow and then try so utter an English word beginning with *gra*.. like *grammy*, *grave* or the like.

You will realize that the position of your tongue tip prevents you from lifting your tongue to the proper place for uttering the word you try to utter. Instead the back of your tongue collide with the uvula on its way up producing a tiny little click-sound. That it exactly the Greenlandic [q].

Now repeat the exercise many times until you reach mastery in controlling the back of your tongue so much that you can produce the proper sound even without the initial long 'aaaaar'.

In the beginning it is easiest to produce [q] between two a-sounds especially if you introduce the initial a-sound a tone higher than the closing one. Do that

¹ In linguistics phonetic spelling comes between square brackets.

many times. Later you might want to try to form the uvular stop with different context like [ɑqqu]² and [ɑqqi].

A few unaccustomed sounds [ɣ], [ɬ], [x], and [χ]

Apart from the [q] there are four unfamiliar sounds in Greenlandic but as with [q] they are not at all problematic as long as you avoid all attempts to walk around the sounds via approximations to other sounds. Once you start out along such lines you will be in trouble and will find yourself in great problems getting out of the wrongly learned patterns again.

So do it right from the beginning:

[ɣ] is a sound you do not find in English but you might know it from Spanish (as in *bodega*) or Portuguese (as in *José Saramago*, the Nobel-laureate Portuguese novelist). [ɣ] is formed like English [g] with a tiny little opening between the back of the tongue and the soft palate.

If you have problems producing the sound try this exercise:

Pronounce ga-ga-ga-ga-ga many times with short intervals. At some point your tongue will grow tired and not make it all the way till the palate thus leaving a small opening over the tongue. The air will produce a hissing sound. That is exactly the correct [ɣ]. Repeat the exercise until you can produce the sound even isolated from other sounds.

[ɬ] is the unvoiced parallel to normal /l/. It is unknown in English but you might have heard it in Welsh (a 'church' is pronounced [ɬan]).

The unvoiced /l/ behaves exactly like the normal /l/ in the mouth. The difference is in the vocal cords. They vibrate during normal /l/ and are at rest during [ɬ]. So again: Do not attempt to pronounce the unvoiced /l/ by means of an s-sound. Unfortunately, one hears it often in poor Greenlandic L2 but it sounds horrible in Greenlandic ears. It is a genuine l-sound with no [s] whatsoever.

Here is a little trick to help you isolate the voiceless /l/. Before you produce the /l/ in words with an initial unvoiced consonant as in *plain* or *slave* your vocal cords are at rest. Try to force them to stay at rest for a while like this:

[p ɬ l a ..] and [s ɬ l a ..]. After a few minutes' training you should be able to produce words like *ɬain* and *ɬave* with the proper unvoiced /l/ initially.

[x] is the unvoiced counterpart to [ɣ]. It is common in very many languages like in German *ich* (I). It is always long (double) in Greenlandic so it does not need its own letter. Whenever you find two *gg* the sound is [xx].

[χ] is the unvoiced r-sound. That, too, is widely spread in the World's languages including Spanish and French. You might for instance like to drink Spanish *Rioja* with *jalapeños* or you might recognize the sound from French 'letter' [letχ]. Like with the [x]-sound the [χ]-sound is always long (double) so it does not need its own letter. Whenever you have two *rr* the sound is [χχ]

That is all there is to the story of single sounds in Greenlandic. Wasn't that surprisingly short? Once you have given these few sounds a little exercise you

² IPA uses [ɑ] for open /a/ as in *hard* with [a] denoting narrow /a/ as in *The mad Hatter*

will be in the position to reproduce even long words in Greenlandic and you will be able to read aloud from the newspaper and expect to be understood.