

Lesson 2

Get rid of a few annoying mistakes

Do not lower your vowels before [ŋ]

In English vowels are open before *-ng-*. We pronounce *sing* with an e-sound not an i-sound. It does not function like that in Greenlandic. When followed by *-ng-* 'i' is narrow like the *i-* in *Bill*, 'u' is a u-sound not an o-sound, and 'a' is a narrow 'a' not an open one as in *hard*.

Do not get led astray by inconsistencies in writing

Do not let orthographical inconsistency fool you. We have for historical reasons 5 vowel characters in Greenlandic, *i*, *e*, *u*, *o*, and *a*. But inside a Greenlander's head¹ there are only three vowels plus a rule that lowers vowel pronunciation before the low consonants *-r-* and *-q-*.

In Canada and Alaska they use only three characters. Accordingly Greenlandic *erneq* ('son') is spelled *irniq* in Canada and the capital of Nunavut is spelled *Iqaluit*. Still, it is pronounced exactly like Greenlandic *eqaluit* ('trouts').

It would have been much easier for you as a learner had we had the Canadian system also in Greenland for the unnecessary *e* and *o* pave the way for at least two misunderstandings:

(i) We are accustomed to the fact that the difference between vowels carry meaning. *suck* is not the same as *sock* and *litter* is not the same as *letter*. There are thousands of such minimal pairs. In Greenlandic *o* and *e* do not mean anything at all. An *o* is just a *u* pronounced very open because of a following low consonant and an *e* is nothing but an *i* followed by a low consonant. Observe that for untrained Greenlandic ears words like *litter* and *letter* sound absolutely alike. You should keep this observation in mind if you live and work with Greenlanders because hundreds of daily misunderstandings are caused by this fact.

(ii) But there is even more to it than that. Our eyes often deceive us so that we tend to bring our English pronunciation of *e* and *o* into Greenlandic. Then we have real problems for the said English vowels are not very open, rather somewhere between narrow and open. Greenlandic /i/ and /u/ before /r/ and /q/ are extremely open [ɛ] and [ɔ] sounds. Without such wide opening already in the vowels it is hard to pronounce sounds like [q] decently. There are no o-sound in the word *Oqaasileriffik* ('The Language Secretariat'). The /u/ before q is an [ɔ]. If you try consciously to avoid bad influence from writing you will soon find that the weird sounds are absolutely unproblematic.

Double consonants are really long in Greenlandic

In English double consonants are not pronounced. There is only one t-sound in words like *batter*. To get the feeling for a real long /t/ try to pronounce *wet*

¹ Such abstract sounds are called **phonemes**. Phonemes are normally written between slashes like this /ajunŋiqaaq/ ('it is very good'). Orthographical *ajunngeqaaq*

towel without pause between the two words.

In Greenlandic all characters are pronounced so whenever you find two adjacent consonants you must pronounce both. The difference between single and double consonant is significant. You will face thousands of misunderstandings if you do not master this difference. *usuk* is 'penis' whereas *ussuk* is 'bearded seal' and *illunut* is 'towards some houses' whereas *illunnut* is 'to my house' etc. etc.

In the exercises you will hear a series of short words. Use them to sharpen your ear to the difference. Write the words on a piece of paper. It will sharpen your listening comprehension and open your eyes for the differences between English and Greenlandic orthography. Do not worry about word meaning. It does not matter at all at this moment.

The exercises are first and foremost an attempt to force you to distinguish between single consonant vs. double consonants and between word with r-sound versus words without r-sound.

Here are two hints both of which will be elaborated tomorrow:

If you hear a rising tone or no tone at all there can be only one consonant as in *ata* ('hey'). If you hear a falling tone there will be double consonants as in *attat* ('button').

You will never hear /r/ before a consonant. It will always be assimilated to the following consonant. In order to recognize it you must focus on the vowel quality. Vowels are extremely low before /r/ and /q/ as in *erneq* ('son') pronounced [ɛn nɛq] or *arnaq* ('woman') pronounced [an naq] or *orsoq* ('fat' or 'blubber') pronounced [ɔs sɔq].

Specialities with ŋ and the different types of -ts-

ŋ or *ng* in orthography produces an amazing amount of absolutely unnecessary misunderstandings in spite of the fact that the sound is well known in English and Danish as in *Young singers sang angry songs*. It works exactly alike in English and Greenlandic: *-ng-* is just a way to put the single consonant /ŋ/ on paper it is not a sequence of two different consonants.

Still, Greenlandic /ŋ/ differs from /ŋ/ in quite many languages including English in two respects

1. There is no lowering of the vowels before /ŋ/ in Greenlandic so whereas we pronounce *sing* with an e-sound a Greenlander would find it natural to use an i-sound as in *lit* [siŋ]
2. In English ŋ is part of the preceding syllable whereas ŋ is initial in the following syllable in Greenlandic. We say [seŋ ə] not *[si ŋə] as it would be in an untrained Greenlander's pronunciation. *angipput* ('they are big') is pronounced [a ŋip put] not *[aŋ ip put] and *ungasipput* ('they are far away') is pronounced [u ŋa sip put] not *[ɔŋ a sip put]. The same goes for hyphenation rules: *a-ngip-put* and *u-nga-sip-put* are now hyphenated according to the rules.

To complicate matters even more we have a special way to write /ŋŋ/. It is not spelled **-ngng-* rather as *-nng-*. Try to remember that the first *-n* is not an /n/

but a shorthand for the first of two adjacent /ŋŋ/. The hyphenation rules reflect this as one hyphenates between the *-n-* and the *-ng-*. *ajunngilaq* ('it is good') is hyphenated like this *a-jun-ngi-laq* and pronounced [a juŋ ŋi laq].

Orthography does not distinguish between /ts/ and /tt/

The sequence of letters *-ts-* is used inconsistently and can be hard to follow. First and foremost you must know that some of the *-ts-* you meet are phonemes and therefore in the position to build new meanings. For instance does *atsat* mean '(paternal) aunts' as opposed to *attat* meaning 'button'. Unfortunately, not all instances of *-ts-* are /ts/ phonemes. Often *-ts-* is just double /t/ followed by an /i/. That is the reason why it sometimes is hard to see the relation between related words as in 'Our land's' *Nunatta* (the phonological form is /nunattə/) as opposed to 'in our land' *Nunatsinni* (/nunattənni/). Or that the double /t/ in 'I put him to bed' (phonologically /sinittippara/) is spelled *sinitsippara*.

The lack of logical description is due to the fact that /ts/ and /tt/ are pronounced absolutely alike when followed by an /i/. Do by the way observe that *-ts-* is not pronounced as [t] and [s]. The correct pronunciation is always a normal [t] followed by a [t] with a bit of aspiration. 'I put him to bed' is accordingly pronounced [si nit t^sip pa ra] and 'aunts' [at t^sat].