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From Greenland to Yakutia: Grounding language policy in multilingual practices in the Arctic

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Abstract

Urbanization is a global trend, and even remote, sparsely populated areas like the Arctic are undergoing massive migrations into cities, radically changing the language ecologies for local languages. The present study aims to understand the interrelations between different components of the language ecology, and to develop a theoretical framework for future analyses. Two Arctic regional cities, Nuuk, the capital of semi-autonomous Greenland, and Yakutsk, the capital of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), are analyzed as case studies in the analysis. This study relies on participant-observation fieldwork, focused interviews on language attitudes and language proficiency, and a survey of existing documentation (official surveys, records, policies, and media reports) on language policies and their implementation in both regions. Interviews were conducted in multiple trips to both regions from 2019–2025. Observational data documenting changes in language behavior and attitudes dates from 2008 in Greenland, and from 2017 in Yakutsk, to the present. Attitudinal and usage data comes from sociolinguistic surveys, in-depth sociolinguistic interviews, informal discussions, and participant-observation in Nuuk and Yakutsk. Applying Appadurai's (1990, 1996) *scape theory* to these differing language ecologies reveals the complex and interconnected nature of factors contributing to language usage, and the necessity of a multifaceted approach to implementing policies to foster language vitality.

Keywords: *multilingualism, language shift, migration, urbanization, scape theory, globalization, language policy*

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От Гренландии до Якутии: языковая политика, погруженная в многоязычные практики в Арктике

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Аннотация

Урбанизация — это глобальная тенденция, и даже отдаленные, малонаселенные районы, такие как Арктика, переживают массовую миграцию в города, что радикально меняет языковую экологию местных языков. Настоящее исследование направлено на обоснование взаимосвязей между различными компонентами языковой экологии и разработку теоретической основы для будущих анализов. В качестве примеров для анализа рассматриваются два арктических региональных города: Нуук, столица полуавтономной Гренландии, и Якутск, столица Республики Саха (Якутия). В данном исследовании используется смешанный подход, включающий полевую работу методом включенного наблюдения, фокусированные интервью об отношении к языку и уровне владения языком, а также анализ существующей документации (официальные опросы, записи, политические документы и сообщения СМИ) по языковой политике и ее реализации в обоих регионах. Интервью проводились во время многочисленных поездок в оба региона в период с 2019 по 2025 г. Данные наблюдений, документирующие изменения в языковом поведении и отношении к языку, охватывают период с 2008 г. в Гренландии и с 2017 г. по настоящее время в Якутске. Данные об отношении к языку и его использованию получены из социолингвистических опросов, углубленных социолингвистических интервью, неформальных дискуссий и включенного наблюдения в Нууке и Якутске. Применение теории «ландшафтов» Аппадурай (Appadurai 1990, 1996) к этим различным языковым экосистемам выявляет сложный и взаимосвязанный характер факторов, влияющих на использование языка, и необходимость многогранного подхода к реализации политики, направленной на повышение жизнеспособности языка.

Ключевые слова: многоязычие, языковой сдвиг, миграция, урбанизация, теория «ландшафтов», глобализация, языковая политика

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1. Introduction

National language policies generally address the use, development and status of language(s) as spoken within the boundaries of a single nation state. Such policies are often construed as static and unresponsive to the demands of globalization, as they operate under outdated ideologies that ignore increasing mobility, superdiversity and digital interconnectedness, features that characterize the modern world. Mobility, the movement of people, capital, ideas, technology, and knowledge, is the central and most visible feature of globalization. While mobility

has always existed historically, it has intensified in modern times, revealing both the opportunities and deep contradictions of globalization (Khondker 2023). This mobility has a deep impact on language ecologies and linguistic practices, and we have yet to understand how it affects local languages. In the Arctic in particular, where overall populations are relatively small, and cities are small compared to those located in the south (Nyseth 2017), research is needed to understand how these mobilizations affect language practices, in particular in urban settings, as increasing portions of the world's population move to cities. The present study aims to understand how language policies and language ecologies shape language use and language shift in Greenland and the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) through the lens of mobility and globalization and, using these case studies as a springboard, to develop a theoretical framework for future analyses. At first glance this might appear to be an awkward comparison: Greenland is a large island where the majority population is Indigenous Inuit, a group that comprises 88% of the total population which numbers some 58.000. The Sakha Republic, in contrast, is part of the continuous land of the Russian Federation and the majority population is a Turkic group, the Sakha people, who comprise 52% of the population, which is considerably larger than in Greenland, at approximately 1.000.000. The two regions are in fact comparable, and are undergoing comparable demographic changes which, in turn, lead to language shift. Although language policies in both areas are intended to protect and support usage of the local languages, they are nonetheless giving way to majority languages due to a combination of factors.

Focusing on the two capital cities in each region, Nuuk and Yakutsk, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do the sociolinguistic ecologies of Greenland and Yakutia compare, particularly with respect to multilingualism, migration, and urbanization, and how do these factors contribute to language shift?
2. What roles do global and local forces, conceptualized through Appadurai's (1990, 1996) *scape* framework of *ethnoscapes*, *mediascapes*, *technoscapes*, *ideoscapes*, and *financescapes*, play in shaping language practices in each region?
3. What factors drive the increasing use of dominant and global languages (Danish, Russian, and English) over local languages (Kalaallisut and Sakha) in different social domains?

The analysis can provide keys as to how language policy be grounded in real-world multilingual practices rather than idealized or top-down assumptions.

The structure of this article is as follows. To understand the complex nature of these changing ecologies, I first provide an overall account of the current status of the local languages in each region (Section 2.1 and 2.2), and then a background discussion of the relevant language policies in Greenland and Yakutia (Sections 2.3 and 2.4, respectively). Section 3 provides the theoretical framework for the analysis in terms of Appadurai's (1990, 1996) *scape* theory, which is followed by a discussion of methods (Section 4). Results are provided in Section 5 and discussion in Section 6, which is followed by a conclusion (Section 7).

2. Sociolinguistic framework

2.1 Language usage in Greenland and Yakutia

Greenland (*Kalaallit Nunaat*) is a semi-autonomous region with domestic affairs run by its own Self Rule Government since 2008. The majority population is Indigenous Inuit, or locally known as *kalaallit* (singular *kalaaleq*) in the local language, *Kalaallisut*. *Kalaallisut* (or Greenlandic) is an Inuit language spoken by an estimated 50,000 people. This figure is based on an assumption that people born in Greenland are likely to speak the language, although in fact it is probably lower, as there is some early language shift. *Kalaallisut* is widely used in private spaces, is spoken in the home, and children learn it as a first language. Legally the use of *Kalaallisut* is guaranteed in all public domains, at least on paper. Yet there are a number of pressures that act against its actual usage, notably in the capital Nuuk, which is home to over one-third of the country's population of 56,542 (*Statistics Greenland: 2025*¹), and it is under pressure in all of Greenland's cities, to varying degrees. Despite its relative autonomy, Greenland is part of the Kingdom of Denmark, and Danish is dominant for some sectors of the population, particularly in Nuuk. Demographically Greenland's population is increasingly diverse, with emigration of local Greenlanders to Denmark and beyond, resulting in a decline in *Kalaallisut* L1 users, coupled with an ongoing influx of permanent immigrants and temporary workers. Climate change has only increased immigration in recent years.

Determining which percentage of the population considers itself to be *Kalaaleq*, and which Danish is complicated. Census data does not include information about ethnic identity, but rather citizenship. Since citizens of Greenland are citizens of Denmark, and the largest number of immigrants to Greenland are also Danish citizens, tracking ethnicity is complicated and there are no precise figures.

One proxy is place of birth since the majority of births in Greenland can be assumed to be to Greenlanders (not ethnic Danes). As seen in Table 1, just over 88% of the population of Greenland was born there, suggesting that the total number of ethnic Greenlanders is in the neighborhood of 88%.² Table 1 also shows the distribution of residents not born in Greenland, which on the national level is 12%, but is nearly twice as high in the capital Nuuk (21.0%); numbers rounded to the nearest tenth of a percent.

Language knowledge and usage is complicated to assess. In Greenland there is no census or survey data on language; the fact that Greenlanders are citizens of Denmark³ complicates the picture. Birthplace can serve as a general proxy, because there is an overall correlation (although not an absolute correspondence) between language and place of birth: people born in Greenland are more likely to speak

¹ Demographic data for Greenland as of 01 January 2025 from Statistics Greenland (2025) unless otherwise noted.

² World Factbook 2024 puts the number at 88.1% of a total population of 57,751.

³ Statistics Greenland does track citizenship, and some 96% of all residents are Danish citizens. Somewhat less than 0.5% are citizens of other Nordic countries.

Kalaallisut in the home, and those born outside of Greenland—even to two Inuit Greenlanders—less likely. The picture is further complicated by variation in Greenland. Kalaallisut is the standard language based on West Greenlandic; the Inuit varieties spoken in parts of northern Greenland (*Avanersuarmitut*) and in East Greenland (*Tunumiisut*) are sufficiently different to be considered distinct languages by many linguists. (See Dorais 2010: 1–54) for a discussion of classification issues of the Inuit languages.) The data in Table 1 suggest that somewhere in the neighborhood of 12% of the population may not speak Kalaallisut and this figure doubles in Nuuk. The likelihood of hearing or using another language is much higher in the capital than other locations, as confirmed by both personal experiences and the reports from consultants.

Table 1. Population by birthplace, 01 January 2025

Population	Number	Percentage, %
Total, Greenland	56.542	100.0
Born in Greenland	49.738	88.0
Outside of Greenland	6.804	12.0
Total, Nuuk	19.903	100.0
Born in Greenland	15.722	79.0
Outside of Greenland	4.181	21.0

Source: Statistics Greenland, <https://stats.gl>

2.2. Language usage in Yakutia

In contrast to Greenland, the All-Russia census, conducted every 10 years, does provide information about ethnicity of the population and respondents’ first language. The total population in Yakutia has been consistently growing over the last decade; as of 01 January 2025, it had reached 1.007.058.

Table 2 provides the ethnicity as self-declared in the 2020–2021 census for all groups comprising greater than 1% of the population along with the autochthonous groups of Yakutia, with percentages rounded to the nearest tenth of a percent for the larger groups.

Both Dolgan and Chukchi live in higher concentrations outside of Yakutia, in Taimyr and the Chukotka Autonomous Okrug, respectively, but the greatest number of Yukaghir live here.

Of course, ethnic affiliation and language usage do not necessarily coincide; see Table 3 for language data. Furthermore, the census does not recognize mixed ethnicity, but there are many mixed marriages. This ideology affects individual views of identity, and it is common to have people declare themselves to belong to a single ethnic group but note that their parents belong to different groups, especially if specifically asked.

In contrast to Statistics Greenland, language usage is tracked by the All-Russia census; Table 3 gives information about Russian and local (autochthonous) languages, and immigrant languages with 2000 or more native speakers. The figures for ethnicity (Table 2) and language usage (Table 3) do not correspond for two

reasons: (1) a significant number (152.863) census respondents did not give information about language and/or ethnicity; (2) some ethnic groups speak a language other than their ethnic (ancestral) language. This is clearly seen for Indigenous minorities, who greatly outnumber the speakers of their languages.

Table 2. Ethnic population of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), 2020–21

Population by ethnicity	Number	Percentage, %
total 2020	949.280	100.0
Sakha	469.348	55.2
Russian	276.986	32.6
Evenki	24.334	2.9
Even	15.627	1.6
Kyrgyz	13.233	1.3
others ⁴		
Dolgan	2147	0.22
Yukaghir	1510	0.15
Chukchi	709	0.07

Source: National make-up of the population of the Russian Federation, *All-Russia Census 2020–2021* Vol 5, tab 1.

Table 3. Language usage in the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) & Yakutsk, 2020–2021

Language	Yakutia	Yakutsk & environs	Yakutsk only	Environs
Sakha	474.162	137.300	126.181	11.119
Russian	320.935	85.717	80.352	5.365
Kyrgyz	9.907	7.682	7.630	52
Tadzhik	5.148	4.065	4.028	37
Buryat	4.115	747	691	56
Even	3.810	478	446	32
Evenki	3.712	506	472	34
Armenian	3.363	2.352	2.343	9
Chinese	2.842	2.842	2.840	2
Uzbek	2.821	1.761	1.754	7
Ukrainian	2.419	423	405	18
Yukaghir	450	70	67	3
Chukchi	389	9	9	–
Dolgan	298	39	38	1
Unknown	152.863	126.966	126.276	690
Total	842.823	245.962	229.167	16.795

Source: *All-Russia Census 2020–21*, Vol 5, tab 7 for Yakutia; tab 9 for Yakutsk and environs

Based on the data in Table 3, 56% of the population of Yakutia sees Sakha as its native language, and 38% — Russian. The percentage is roughly the same for Sakha in the capital and its environs; Russian dips to 35%. Across Yakutia, the remaining percentages are miniscule: only 0.01% consider Kyrgyz their native tongue. But in Yakutsk these ratios change because the majority of immigrants live in the capital. All immigrant languages in Table 3 (Kyrgyz, Tadzhik, Buryat, Armenian, Chinese,

⁴ Others are, from largest to smallest, Ukrainian, Buryat, Tadzhik, Tatar, Armenian, Chinese, and Uzbek. Together they comprise approximately 3.5% of the total population.

Uzbek and Ukrainian) combined come to a total of 19,449, or 7.9%. Moreover, Table 3 provides only the largest immigrant groups and, importantly, we see that a full third of all census respondents in Yakutsk did not provide language information.

In addition, the numbers for the Indigenous languages are certainly inflated, as people equate native (*rodnoj*) language with ethnicity, rather than with proficiency (Danilov 2025). While all census data are problematic, the 2020 All-Russia census is particularly difficult to interpret, due in large part to the fact that it was conducted during the covid-19 pandemic; see Gabdrakhmanova & Alos-i-Font (2024) and Gabdrakhmanova & Vakhtin (*this volume*). The actual presentation of the data is also confusing in places. Volume 5, tab 7 gives the data of respondents according to ethnicity and language use. A total of 120 languages is listed for Yakutia; 156 people are cited as speaking another language.

Despite these many caveats, Table 3 provides a general picture of which language people in Yakutsk, and more generally in Yakutia, see as their primary, first language.

2.3. Language policies in Greenland

Language is a central part of ethnic and national identity in Greenland. There is deeply held belief in Greenland that in order to be a real Kalaaleq, you must speak Kalaallisut. This Kalaaleq identity is constructed in contrast to the Other, with the Other being defined as Danes and Danish (Gad 2019), and further in terms of the contrast between Kalaallisut-speaking Greenlanders on the one hand, and Danish-speaking Greenlanders on the other (Gad 2005, Kleemann-Andersen 2020). This is the result of a long-standing tug-of-war between Denmark and Greenland over control of the country. Although Greenland was officially decolonized by Denmark in 1953, this date actually marks the beginning of a campaign of assimilation. A core component was the introduction of Danish-language education at all levels of formal schooling; as a result, children quickly learned, and shifted to, Danish. Language shift was a major impetus in the push toward more self-control that resulted in the Home Rule Government, established by the Home Rule Act of 1979. The Home Rule act simply stated that Kalaallisut is the main language (Danish *hovedsproget*), but also stated the need to teach Danish thoroughly, and granted the use of both languages in the public sphere. Home Rule was superseded by the institution of the Self-Government Act of 2009⁵ which gives Greenland self-autonomy in all areas except foreign affairs and defense, which remain with Denmark. One result of this autonomy was the passing of the Language Policy Act of 2010, which establishes Kalaallisut as the national language of Greenland. It also grants the right of Danish speakers to use Danish, and Kalaallisut speakers to use Kalaallisut, as well as the right to use English or other languages as needed. In this way the Language Policy Act ratifies the importance of Kalaallisut but recognizes the multilingual nature of Greenland society. Moreover, the language of instruction in the secondary schools and in higher education is often Danish, in large part because of a lack of qualified

⁵ For more details on Greenland's path to Self-Government, see Akrén (2022).

teachers who are fully proficient in Kalaallisut. In the workplace, the presence of even just one Danish speaker can mean that the language used is Danish. This illustrates that although Kalaallisut is the legal national language, Danish is still required in many domains. The Language Policy Act also provides an opening for English usage in society. (Faingold 2023 provides a succinct overview.)

This tug-of-war about languages is central in political discourse, commonly referred to as the language debate. A central part of the debate is the position of Kalaallisut vis-à-vis Danish, whether a one-nation-one-language view is appropriate in Greenland, and knowledge of Kalaallisut is essential for identifying as a Greenlander. Gad (2019) examines the language debate in the Greenland Parliament and the newspapers *A/G* and *Sermitsiaq* for the time period 2002–2016. Many voiced an opinion that Greenlanders (Kalaallit) need to know Kalaallisut (Gad 2019: 488–491). At the heart of the debate is a question of the position of languages other than Kalaallisut in Greenland. Even before the institution of the Self-Rule Government, the public began debating the role of English in society. In 2002, the idea was that English would be an important language for modernizing and internationalizing the country, and could be used alongside, or even instead, of Danish. In 2016 the debate shifted to viewing Danish, like Kalaallisut, as a potential obstacle to internationalization of the country (pp. 503–504).

As this discussion suggests, the question of the position of English in Greenland has been a matter of debate for over 20 years. In that time, there has been an increase in immigrants to Greenland by people from outside of Scandinavia, that is, by people less likely to arrive already speaking Danish or another closely related language that would facilitate acquisition of Danish. In addition, the last 20 years have seen a rapid increase in internet and cell phone accessibility: 0.2% of the population had access to broadband in 2003, compared to 29.6% in 2021. Overall internet access increased to 69.5% in 2019. Moreover, the data show that there is an average of 1.2 mobile phones per person in Greenland in 2024, versus 1.1 per person in the US (*World Data* 2024). Taken together, these changes have provided important inroads for English in Greenland and have changed the language debate, together with the debate about possible policy solutions. This leads to the question of how these changes affect actual language usage, and whether demographic changes in Greenland society are reflected in Greenlanders' linguistic repertoires and the way they use them.

2.4. Language policy in the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia)

As a part of the Russian Federation, language usage in Yakutia is governed both by federal law and local law. Russian is the official national language of the Russian Federation. The Constitution of the Russian Federation also allows the republics to instate their own language laws and policies within their territories. Article 46⁶ of the Constitution of the Republic of Sakha makes both Russian and Sakha the official languages of the Republic, and the languages of the local, autochthonous peoples are official in those areas where they live compactly. Languages with this status are

⁶ https://constitution.garant.ru/region/cons_saha/chapter/363aa18e6c32ff15fa5ec3b09cbefbf6/

clearly defined in Article 5 of the Language Law of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) of 16 October 1992 № 1170-XII, (with further modifications, most recently in 2016): Chukchi, Dolgan, Even, Evenki and Yukaghir all enjoy this official status and right to use and development.

The policies are clearly formulated in these laws. As in Greenland, in the Sakha Republic the actual execution of the policies is less clear, but at least on paper, these rights are guaranteed. Article 9 guarantees the stable development of bilingualism in Russian and a local language, and supports multilingualism in the Republic's languages as desired by its citizens. Yakutia's language law makes the importance of **locality** explicit: the five named minority languages have official status in those regions where the ethnic populations live (Article 6) guaranteeing their development, although there are inherent challenges to reaching this goal. Yakutia encompasses a huge territory, and there are significant dialect differences across all its languages, making it problematic to implement a standardized language curriculum. This is not to argue for the linguistics necessity of a unified standard language, but this is the attitude that governments generally adopt, and Yakutia is no exception. Because it is part of the Russian Federation that has a strong standard ideology, this is hardly surprising. Moreover, the Indigenous minorities “fully function” in only 7 villages in Yakutia: Evenki in Iengra (Neryungri ulus) and Tyanya (Olekminsk ulus); Even in Andryushkino (Nizhnekolymensk ulus), Berezovka (Srednekolymensk ulus), and Topolinoe (Tomponsk ulus); Chukchi in Kolysmskoe (Nizhnekolymensk ulus) (Sharina 2022: 36). Speakers of Indigenous languages in all of these villages are currently shifting to the majority languages, Sakha and/or Russian, for daily communication. So, although the Language Law legislates their use on the same level as the 2 majority languages, in practice this does not happen.

2.5. Summary: Greenland vs. Yakutia

In both territories, the subnational entity is situated with regard to the larger national unit. The political status of Greenland differs from that of the Sakha Republic: Greenland is moving toward independence from Denmark. This difference in political status is reflected in language laws, with Kalaallisut (Greenlandic) the official language of Greenland, and Danish may be used in official, administrative purposes. Where it comes to education, the situation is complicated. The Prime Minister of Denmark's office notes that “[t]he question of educational instruction in Danish is not governed by the Self-Government Act, but it is assumed that the Self-Government authorities must ensure provision of education in Danish and other relevant languages that would enable Greenlandic youth to pursue further education in Denmark and other countries” (*Office of the Prime Minister of Denmark* 2025).

In terms of educational policies, in Greenland education is technically conducted in Kalaallisut by law, but Danish is often used, for two key reasons. First, if there are children who do not speak Kalaallisut in a class, the language of instruction is often shifted to accommodate them. This is particularly frequent in Nuuk, which has the highest population (numerally and percentage-wise) of

residents who are not Kalaaleq. Second, there is a shortage of qualified teachers who are capable of conducting classes in Kalaallisut. And a switch to Danish in the classroom sometimes happens due to purely practical constraints or rather, as accommodation to even a single Danish speaker. But there is also a clear ideology that children need to learn Danish for further education in Denmark, and in fact many children spend a year abroad studying before they have graduated from high school.

In contrast, there is no such political movement in the Sakha Republic where both Russian and Sakha are official; the need for Russian is not contested and in fact is necessary to pass the Unified State Exam (*edinnyj gosudarstvenny ekazamen*), a mandatory nationwide test that both certifies graduation from secondary school and serves as an entrance exam for higher education. Russian is unquestionably the national language. The Language Law of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) effectively promotes bilingualism: Sakha (and the Indigenous autochthonous languages) may be developed and used *alongside* Russian. It is not a replacement strategy. Practical constraints play a role here too, as in Greenland: the law states that parents have the right to send their children to Sakha-immersion schools but there is a shortage of such schools.

3. Appadurai's theory of scapes and language usage

Appadurai's (1990, 1996) framework of *scapes* provides a powerful tool for analyzing the linguistic dynamics in both Greenland and Yakutia. Appadurai notes that there are "brute facts" that any ethnographer must face, facts which have to do with "the changing social, territorial and cultural reproduction of group identity" (p. 48), a claim that captures the dynamic nature of language ecologies and social identity that we find in both Greenland and Yakutia today. This dynamicity grounds the interaction of locality and the forces of globalization in these two areas. Language usage is locally anchored: it is constructed in the here-and-now of interaction. At the same time, in the modern world locality is not only a spatial construct, but also a relational one and a digital one. Appadurai's approach is anchored in the tension between local identity and global belonging. Greenland aims to be part of the global economy while Yakutia seeks global partners in terms of development across sectors.

The scape framework identifies 5 different scapes for conceptualizing how culture moves across national boundaries: *ethnoscapes*, *mediascapes*, *technoscapes*, *ideoscapes*, and *financescapes*:

- *Ethnoscapes* have to do with the flow of people, including both internal and external migrants, temporary visitors (such as tourists, guest workers), refugees, students, and how their movement shapes cultural and linguistic ecologies (landscapes), or imagined worlds in Appadurai's view. Crucially, *ethnoscapes* encompass not only cross-border migration but also internal mobility, the movement of people within national or regional territories that is often overlooked in language policy discussions.

- *Mediascapes* involve the dissemination of information and cultural narratives through media. More specifically, they include both the electronic

technology that makes this distribution possible, as well as the images created by this media. For Appadurai, writing in the 1990s, media included newspapers and magazines, television and film. In the modern context they must be extended to encompass social media, streaming platforms, and algorithmically curated online content, all of which now constitute the primary media environment for younger speakers in both Greenland and Yakutia. The rapid expansion of technoscapes in today's world has had a major impact on mediascapes; the two operate in tandem.

- *Technoscapes* refer to the distribution of technology, particularly the infrastructure (such as broadband networks, mobile connectivity, digital devices) that enables or constrains access to media and communication. In remote regions, the rapid recent expansion of connectivity has made technoscapes a decisive factor in language ecology, opening pathways to dominant-language content that previously did not exist.

- *Ideoscapes* encompass political and cultural ideologies that circulate globally and locally, including discourses about nationalism and identity. Ideoscapes involves values about language, identity, modernity, and belonging, that travel across populations alongside people, media, and capital. In language contexts, this includes beliefs about which languages are prestigious, useful, or authentic, as well as top-down policy ideologies about territorial language rights and national identity.

- *Financescapes* refer to flows of economic capital and the hierarchies of value they produce. In language contexts, financescapes connect labor migration to language shift, and shape individual decisions about which languages are worth investing in learning.

These five scapes do not operate independently. They are, in Appadurai's framing, fundamentally disjunctive: they move at different speeds, reach different populations, and produce contradictory effects. A technoscape that brings broadband internet to a rural Sakha community simultaneously creates a new mediascape dominated by Russian-language content, which reinforces an ideoscape in which Russian is associated with the modern and the global. This kind of cascading interaction is precisely what makes language shift in globalized contexts so difficult for policy to address: the causes are structural and multi-scalar, not reducible to any single domain.

Applying the scape framework to Greenland and Yakutia serves two purposes. First, it provides an analytical vocabulary for the empirical findings in Section 5, allowing the diverse pressures on Kalaallisut and Sakha to be examined in relation to one another rather than in isolation. Second, and more broadly, it situates these two Arctic cases within a theoretical account of how globalization operates at the local level, one that is sensitive to the particularity of each context while enabling genuine comparison. The framework is especially well suited to the Arctic, where the intersection of Indigenous language politics, resource-driven migration, rapid digital integration, and shifting national and subnational governance creates precisely the kind of disjunctive, multi-scalar dynamics Appadurai's model was designed to capture.

4. Data and methods

Research was conducted using a mixed-methods approach combining participant-observation fieldwork, focused interviews on language attitudes and proficiency, and a review of existing documentation, including official surveys, records, policies, and media reports, concerning language policy and its implementation in both regions. Interview data were collected during multiple fieldwork trips to both regions between 2019 and 2025. Observational data on shifts in language behavior and attitudes extend from 2008 in Greenland and 2017 in Yakutsk to the present. Attitudinal and usage data derive from sociolinguistic surveys, in-depth interviews, informal discussions, and participant-observation conducted in Nuuk and Yakutsk.

Focused, in-depth sociolinguistic interviews were conducted in Nuuk in 2023 with 14 participants, identified by snow-balling technique or through responses a post on Facebook seeking participants. The interviews included in the present article were conducted in English, by two American researchers (Lenore Grenoble and Jessica Kantarovich), and a Greenlander Siisi Jensen) attended many of the sessions. All participants completed a brief interview with basic questions about their language background and then performed some linguistic tasks. Many became engaged with the interview questions and spoke at length. The participants are primarily women (12 women, 2 men) owing in large part to the fact that we sought out participants through contacts at Ilisimatusarfik, the University of Greenland. The university student population is overwhelmingly female, approximately 98%. Participants were born in the years 1973–2002, so that the oldest was 50 and the youngest 21 years old at the time of recording.

In addition, analogous sociolinguistic interviews have been conducted since 2020 by the team at the Arctic Linguistic Ecology Lab at the M.K. Ammosov North-eastern Federal University in Yakutsk. (Preliminary interviews were conducted by Lenore Grenoble, Jessica Kantarovich and Albert Ventayol-Boada in 2017 and 2019.) Over 1000 respondents were interviewed in 2020–2023, but the present analysis draws on only a subset of these interviews. In the present study, the analysis of interview and participant-observation is qualitative, not quantitative.

Although the interviews are not presented in detail here, they provide confirmation of assessments gathered through participant-observation and casual conversations with residents and visitors in both Greenland and Yakutia. In addition to the interviews, participants in Nuuk and Yakutsk completed two linguistic tasks: (1) a picture-based elicitation task and (2) a narration after viewing a short cartoon film. These experiments are not relevant to the present study, as they collected linguistic data only, and the results are not given here. But these tasks did spark deeper conversations with some consultants who discussed the use of language and their own ideologies in depth, and these remarks help shape our understanding of the situation in Greenland and Yakutia today.

Finally, teachers at the high school in Nuuk (GUX Nuuk⁷) were interviewed on two separate days in November 2022 and observed three classes. One was conducted entirely in Kalaallisut, one in English, and one primarily in Kalaallisut with mixing of Danish to accommodate students with limited Kalaallisut proficiency. Informal interviews and participant observation were conducted in both capitals, Nuuk 2022–2025 and Yakutsk 2019–2025, with a focus on workers in service industries and shopping areas and markets, as these areas are often staffed by migrants.

5. Results

Across both regions, the findings reveal a consistent gap between formal language policy and actual language practice. Although both Greenland and Yakutia have legal frameworks explicitly promoting Kalaallisut and Sakha, respectively, those languages increasingly operate within ecologies dominated by national and global ones. In Greenland, English is displacing Danish as the primary lingua franca; in Yakutia, Russian is the language of interethnic communication, and shift away from Sakha is most visible among younger generations.

5.1. *Ethnoscapes: Mobility and multilingual subjectivities*

The movement of people through and within both regions is the most visible driver of changing language ecologies. Four types of mobility are relevant: outmigration, internal migration, immigration, and short-term temporary movement.

Outmigration has had different historical trajectories in each region but produces convergent effects. In Yakutia, the break-up of the Soviet Union triggered a large exodus of ethnic Russians and immigrant workers, leaving a smaller but more ethnically Sakha population (Grenoble 2020, Heleniak 2017). In Greenland, outmigration is ongoing: many teenagers spend a year in Danish boarding schools, and higher education abroad is common. Net migration stood at –485 in 2024, and the number of Greenland-born residents declined from 50.425 in 2005 to 49.738 in 2025. If current trends continue, the total population is projected to fall below 50.000 by 2050 (*Greenland in Figures* 2025: 6).

Internal migration from smaller settlements into the capitals is driven by labor markets and, increasingly, climate change. Interviews in Greenland document high levels of within-country mobility: some young people had lived in six or seven towns by the age of 20, and 12 of 14 interview respondents had parents born in different towns. In Yakutia, movement from rural Sakha-speaking villages into Yakutsk reshapes both the city's demographic composition and the language repertoires of those who arrive.

Immigration is closely tied to labor demand. Foreign nationals comprise 4.5% of Greenland's population, with the largest groups from the Philippines, Thailand, and Sri Lanka. Statistics Greenland describes this dynamic directly: the country's

⁷ <http://guxnuuk.gl/>. I am grateful to Alliaq Kleist Petrussen who arranged these visitations.

demand for labor requires immigration to continuously offset emigration (2025: 7). Non-European laborers more than doubled between 2020 and 2025, from 450 to 947 (*Greenland in Figures* 2021: 19, 2025: 19), and they are concentrated in Nuuk and in service sectors with high public contact, such as hotels, restaurants, and retail. In 2025, 38.5% of hotel and restaurant workers came from Denmark or abroad (348 of 903); the proportion in retail is untracked but likely comparable.

Short-term and seasonal visitors compound these effects. Tourists and seasonal workers arrive speaking Danish, English, or Russian and have little practical incentive to acquire Kalaallisut or Sakha. Tourism is growing sharply in both regions. In Greenland, hotel guest numbers rose from 96.222 in 2018 to 153.874 in 2024, driven in part by doomsday tourism, with visitors seeking landscapes before they change irrevocably (Dawson et al. 2015). An international airport opened in Nuuk in 2024 with direct flights from Denmark, Iceland, and the United States, and numbers are expected to rise further. In Yakutia, tourist arrivals in the first eight months of 2025 reached 184.187, a 16.3% increase over the same period in 2024 (*Yakutsk MID*, October 2025). The majority arrive from elsewhere in the Russian Federation, making Russian the operative lingua franca.

Tourism also reshapes the linguistic labor market: English-speaking Greenlanders are in demand in the tourist industry, increasing both the domains where English is required and its social and economic value.

Urbanization is the cumulative result of all these movements. Nuuk and Yakutsk are growing faster than any other settlements in their respective regions, and both are environments where local languages are systematically disadvantaged. At least 21% of Nuuk's population was born outside Greenland and does not speak Kalaallisut; the actual figure is higher, since not all native-born Greenlanders are Kalaallisut speakers. In Yakutia, one third of the entire population lives in Yakutsk, and only one third of Yakutsk residents consider Sakha their first language (Table 3). Russia has the highest urbanization rate in the Arctic at 88% (Badina 2020: 7), and the trend extends beyond the capital: even in rural northeastern Sakha, indigenous populations are consolidating into larger, more central settlements (Kuklina & Krasnoshtanova 2017).

5.2. Mediascapes: The circulation of linguistic and cultural representations

Both regions have meaningful local-language media infrastructure. In Greenland, KNR (*Kalaallit Nunaata Radioa*) broadcasts radio and television in Kalaallisut across two channels, and a small but active film industry has produced roughly one feature film per year since 2009. Facebook is the dominant social platform, and Kalaallisut is its preferred language, though users frequently mix in Danish or English. Yakutia has more extensive resources, reflecting its larger population: two Sakha-language radio stations, two main Sakha-language television channels (*NVK Sakha* and *Yakutiya 24*), a children's channel (*Tooku*), and a well-developed film industry operating since the founding of Sakhafilm in 1992.

Yet these resources are outweighed by the volume of content available in dominant languages. For online video, games, and popular music, Kalaallisut and

Sakha content is negligible compared to what is available in Danish, English, and Russian. Survey data from Yakutia illustrate the pattern clearly: among respondents aged 18–30, 56% receive news primarily via social media and 54% via Telegram, while only 4% read print. Moreover, 58% of all respondents prefer to receive information in Russian, rising to 69% when the medium is the internet, while only 17% prefer Sakha (Gavril'ev 2024). Media experts in Yakutia are pessimistic: seven of nine surveyed believed Sakha-language content is more likely to decrease than increase over time (Gavrilyev & Podoynitsyna 2024). Demand and supply are both insufficient.

5.3. Technoscapes: Infrastructures and affordances

Rapid expansion of internet access in both regions has been a major structural shift. In Greenland, 69.5% of households had internet access at the start of 2025, up from 20.7% in 2008 (*Digital 2025: Greenland; Greenland in Figures* 2010). In Yakutia, 98% of the population had internet access in 2024, compared to 60.4% in 2014 (*Sakha (Yakutiya) Stat* 2025; *CEIC Data* 2021).

In principle, this connectivity could support grassroots production of local-language content. In practice, it has primarily served as an entry point for dominant-language media. Parents in both regions report that their children acquire English and Russian through online video platforms rather than through local-language content. In Russia, the blocking of YouTube has been offset by domestic equivalents such as RUTUBE, VKVideo, which reproduce the same dynamic with Russian content. Greater connectivity translates, in the current media environment, into greater exposure to the languages that dominate it.

5.4. Ideoscapes: ideologies and values

In both regions, a strong ideological link between language and ethnic identity persists: to be a genuine Kalaaleq or Sakha is widely understood to require speaking the corresponding language. As elsewhere, a commonly held belief is that to be a real, authentic representative of an ethnic group, one must speak the language, Kalaallisut or Sakha. Such beliefs are strong among ethnic Greenlanders or Sakha, and play a key role in language maintenance and sustainability.

That commitment, however, coexists with a competing ideology: that national and global languages are more practical, particularly for economic advancement. Among immigrant populations in both regions, this view is dominant. It is reinforced by a secondary belief—widespread but rarely examined—that Kalaallisut and Sakha are simply too difficult for outsiders to learn, making acquisition not worth attempting. The practical consequence is a near-complete absence of L2 learning resources and classes, which in turn makes the belief self-fulfilling. The point is illustrated by a conversation in Yakutsk with an Uzbek cab driver who advised me not to bother learning Sakha—too hard, and not worth it. When asked how this could be so, given that he himself speaks Uzbek, another Turkic language, he said the two were mutually unintelligible. The linguistic observation is accurate; what the

exchange revealed was the underlying ideology: Sakha has neither the practical value nor the learnability that would warrant the effort. Comparable attitudes are commonly encountered in Greenland.

5.5. Financescapes: Economic drivers

A full analysis of the economic dimensions of language shift exceeds the scope of this study, but the broad contours are clear. Labor-driven immigration is itself a product of financescapes: economic inequalities draw workers from Southeast Asia, Central Asia, and elsewhere into Greenland and Yakutia in search of better conditions. Once present, immigrant workers have strong incentives to acquire Russian or Danish, both languages with broad geographic portability. And they have little incentive to invest in Kalaallisut or Sakha, which offer limited returns outside their home regions. Focus groups in Yakutia further show that the availability of Sakha-language internet content varies by economic zone, with commercially marginal regions producing less (Gavrilyev & Podoynitsyna 2024). At the upper end of the prestige hierarchy, English's dominance in IT and global professional contexts makes it an attractive investment across both regions, adding another dimension of pressure on local languages.

6. Discussion

The five-scape framework reveals that language shift in Greenland and Yakutia is not reducible to any single pressure, but emerges from the interaction of demographic, technological, economic, and ideological forces operating simultaneously across local and global scales. What the comparison makes visible is a structural pattern: each scape amplifies the others. Ethnoscapes bring speakers of dominant languages into contact with local ones, creating multilingual settings in which the languages with the broadest reach—Russian, Danish, and English—tend to prevail in public and commercial domains. Mediascapes and technoscapes extend that reach further, ensuring that speakers in even remote areas are immersed in content that is overwhelmingly in those dominant languages. Financescapes then attach material incentives to this linguistic hierarchy, making proficiency in national and global languages not merely convenient but economically necessary. Ideoscapes close the loop: as dominant languages become more present and more rewarded, prevailing beliefs about their utility and prestige reinforce individual choices that cumulatively accelerate shift.

Two findings from the data deserve particular emphasis. First, urbanization functions as an intensifier rather than an independent cause. Nuuk and Yakutsk are not simply locations where shift is happening; they are settings in which all five scapes converge with unusual density. The demographic concentration of non-local speakers, the concentration of service industries staffed by migrants, the greater connectivity and media exposure, and the concentration of higher-education and employment opportunities, all in one place, make the capitals qualitatively different environments from rural areas, even as rural areas are themselves undergoing

change. Second, the convergence of outcomes across two regions with very different political arrangements, a semi-autonomous territory moving toward independence and a federated republic within a centralized state, suggests that language policy alone, however well-designed, cannot counteract these structural forces. Both Greenland and Yakutia have substantive legal protections for local languages; both show accelerating shift. The gap between policy provisions and lived language practice is not primarily a failure of political will but of analytical framework: policies designed around territorial stability, and bounded domains cannot keep pace with the fluid, mobile, digitally connected realities the scape analysis exposes.

7. Conclusion: Changing language ecologies and future steps

The comparative analysis of Greenland and Yakutia points toward a broader theoretical argument about what language policy must do differently if it is to be effective in contemporary Arctic and, indeed, global urban contexts. The central finding is that local languages are being marginalized not because speakers have abandoned them as markers of identity—in both regions, Kalaallisut and Sakha retain deep symbolic importance—but because the conditions of everyday life increasingly demand languages with wider functional reach. This distinction matters for policy. The conventional response to language shift is to strengthen formal protections: legislate official status, mandate language instruction, fund media production. Greenland and Yakutia have done all of these things. What they have not done, and what current policy frameworks are poorly equipped to do, is engage with the translocal flows that reshape language ecologies from outside the reach of any single jurisdiction. Immigration from the Philippines, Thailand, and Central Asia, social media content consumed by children, or the economic calculus of seasonal workers who arrive speaking Danish or Russian and have no practical incentive to acquire Kalaallisut or Sakha are not addressable through national or subnational legislation alone.

A more productive policy orientation would begin from the multilingual realities speakers actually inhabit rather than from idealized monolingual or stable-bilingual norms. Several implications follow. Language-in-education policy needs to reckon with the fact that classrooms in Nuuk and Yakutsk are increasingly diverse, and that the presence of even a single non-Kalaallisut or non-Sakha speaker often shifts the entire instructional register. Rather than treating this as an aberration to be managed, policy could develop pedagogical approaches that work with multilingual classrooms as the norm. Similarly, language planning for digital and media domains requires sustained investment in locally produced content that competes not merely on the grounds of cultural authenticity but on quality, accessibility, and relevance to younger users.

The scape framework developed here offers a diagnostic tool for this kind of policy thinking. By mapping which scapes are most actively driving shift in a given context and how they interact, language planners and communities can identify the leverage points that are most tractable. For example, in Greenland and Yakutia, ideoscapes may be the primary target: the persistent belief among immigrant

workers and even among some Kalaallisut/Sakha speakers that the language is too difficult or not useful enough to learn forecloses acquisition before it begins, and this belief is susceptible to change through community-level engagement and visible demonstrations of their economic and social value.

These suggestions are necessarily preliminary. The present study is limited by its qualitative, case-study design, and future research should pursue larger-scale comparative work across other Arctic cities to test whether the convergence observed here holds more broadly. Quantitative longitudinal data on language use across domains, generations, and migration trajectories would allow more precise modeling of which scape interactions drive the fastest shift and which interventions show the most promise. Participatory action research conducted in close collaboration with local speakers and policymakers would bridge the gap between analytical diagnosis and effective implementation. What the present study contributes is a framework: the argument that language ecologies in the contemporary Arctic are translocal systems, and that policies adequate to their complexity must be designed accordingly.

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Ethics statement

Research on this project was approved by the Institutional Research Board at the University of Chicago with protocol #IRB17-1362. All speakers gave oral consent prior to being interviewed and were given the opportunity to modify, omit or add questions as they chose.

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