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## GREENLANDIC DIALECT CLASSIFICATION

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### Abstract

Geographically not strictly part of Europe, Greenland is still part of the Danish Kingdom. Consequently, Greenlandic is a language spoken in (geopolitical) Europe. The dialects and sub-dialects of Greenlandic Eskaleut, which form part of a wider language continuum that stretches across the Arctic coastal regions from North Alaska to East Greenland are described. There are three main Greenlandic dialects – West Greenlandic (Kalaallisut), East Greenlandic (Tunumiisut) and Polar Eskimo (Inuktun), but only one official written language (Kalaallisut), which is the language of literature, the media, the church and higher education. The majority of the population speaks Central West Greenlandic. The dialect classification is based exclusively on linguistic (mainly phonological) grounds.

**Keywords:** dialects, diglossia, Kalaallisut, Polar Eskimo, East Greenlandic

**Name:** kalaallisut [kala:ʰisut]

**Language code:** ISO 639-1: kl, ISO 639-2: kal

## CLASSIFICACIONS DEL DIALECTE GROENLANDÈS

### Resum

Encara que no estrictament part d'Europa des d'un punt de vista geogràfic, Groenlàndia forma part de Dinamarca. En conseqüència, el groenlandès és una llengua parlada a Europa (geopolítica). En aquest treball es descriuen els dialectes i subdialectes del groenlandès eskaleut, que formen part d'un continuu lingüístic més ampli que s'estén per les regions costaneres àrtiques des del nord d'Alaska fins a l'est de Groenlàndia. Hi ha tres dialectes groenlandesos principals: el groenlandès occidental (Kalaallisut), el groenlandès oriental (Tunumiisut) i l'esquimal (Inuktun), però només hi ha una llengua

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escrita oficial (Kalaallisut), que és la llengua de la literatura, dels mitjans de comunicació, de l'església i de l'ensenyament superior. La majoria de la població parla groenlandès central occidental. La classificació dialectal es basa exclusivament en motius lingüístics (principalment fonològics).

**Paraules clau:** dialectes, diglòssia, Kalaallisut, esquimal, groenlandès oriental

## SUMIORPALUUMMIT KALAALLISUUMIT KLASSIFIKATION

### Abstract

Kalaallit Nunaat Europap nunataanut ilaanngikkaluarluni Qallunaat kunngeqarfiannut ilaavoq. Tamaattumik (geopolitikki eqqarsaatigalugu) Europami kalaallisut atugaapput. Naggueqatigiinni Eskaleutini sumiorpaluutit Kalaallisuunut ilaasut taakkulu sumiorpaluutaat, Sikuiuitsup Avannarliup sineriaani Alaskamit Kalaallit Nunaanni tunumut oqaaserineqarlutik siaruarsimasut allaaserineqarput. Kalaallisut pingasunik immikkoortunik sumiorpaluuteqarpoq – Kalaallisut/Kitaamiusut – Tunumiusut kiisalu Inuktun, avanersuarmiusut, kisianni Kalaallisut ataatsimik allattaaseqarput, atuakkiani, tusagassiutini, oqaluffimmi kiisalu atuarfeqarfinni atorneqartumik. Sumiorpaluutit taamaallaat oqaasilerineq (pingaartumik nipisiuinerimi) aallaavigalugu agguarneqarput.

**Keywords:** Sumiorpaluutit, digelossi, Kalaallisut, Avanersuarmiutut, Tunumiisut

### 1. Introduction

West Greenlandic or Kalaallisut ([kala:ɬisut]), is the official language of Greenland. Greenland is geographically part of the North American continent, but geopolitically it is linked to Denmark and, consequently, part of Europe. When considering the Greenlandic dialect situation, one must bear in mind that all varieties of Greenlandic Inuit are dialects on a continuum that stretches across the Arctic coastal regions from North Alaska to East Greenland. This dialect continuum is the result of the Thule Inuit migrations out of North Alaska that started about a thousand years ago, reaching Greenland by 1200 AD. The Inuit continuum together with the five extant Yupik languages of Alaska and Chukotka make up the Eskimoan branch of the Eskaleut family, that also includes the very divergent branch constituted by Aleut alone (cf. Fortescue 2017). The typological distance with the other language varieties spoken in Europe, Greenland's migration history, peripheral geographic situation, and the difficult living and travel conditions combined with a low number of speakers spread over a very large geographical space contributed to the fact that Greenlandic dialects

did not become part of the Nordic and European dialectological tradition developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The earliest awareness of dialect differences within Greenland reflected in written sources was probably that of Paul Egede in his dictionary of 1750, where he includes some dialect forms from dialects north and south of Central West Greenlandic as spoken in Godthåb (Nuuk). The latter was the first dialect encountered by the missionaries and formed the basis of the written language. The very great difference between East and West Greenlandic was not appreciated until Thalbitzer's study of 1914. His earlier volume (1911) was based on the Kangaatsiaq-Uuumannaq dialect, but he also mentions the Upernavik dialect. Although some Polar Eskimo forms had been cited in earlier works dealing with the Inuit continuum of dialects (such as Birket-Smith, 1928) it was not until Holtved's publications (1951, 1952) that the position of that dialect was better understood.

The standard language, known as Kalaallisut, is simply the majority dialect of the west coast that forms the basis of the written and broadcast language in Greenland. Nevertheless, the difference between the three main Greenlandic dialects, West Greenlandic (Kalaallisut), East Greenlandic (Tunumiisut) and Polar Eskimo (Inuktun), is greater than that between any adjacent dialects within Canada and Alaska, mainly due to their divergent phonologies, with the result that there is restricted intelligibility of Tunumiisut and Inuktun by speakers of Kalaallisut. In the other direction, Kalaallisut is understood by speakers of Tunumiisut and Inuktun thanks to their familiarity with it through media, schools and church. The situation can be characterized as one of asymmetrical diglossia (see Dorais 2010: 256), in this case between Tunumiisut and Inuktun (the home languages) and Kalaallisut (the dominant, written, ecclesiastic and pedagogic language) – there is also a more general diglossic situation among West Greenlanders, almost all of whom are more or less fluent in Danish, employing it largely in the work place as opposed to Kalaallisut at home or socially. There is inevitably a certain sense of resentment among speakers of the two marginalised dialects owing to the priority given to measures supporting only the dominant dialect Kalaallisut by politicians in the capital, Nuuk. This is especially so as regards

Tunumiisut, which has remained isolated from the rest of the country after the establishment of a colony at Ammassalik by Gustav Holm in 1906. It has more than its share of social problems today. Speakers of Inuktun – relative newcomers to Greenland from Arctic Canada – at least have neighbours both within Greenland and within Canada, and due to their late arrival in Greenland (see below) they have linguistically as much in common with Canadian dialects as with other Greenlandic dialects. A further small group joined them from Baffin Land in the mid-nineteenth century. Up until the establishment of a trading post at Qaanaaq by Knud Rasmussen and Peter Freuchen in 1910 there was apparently no contact with the rest of Greenland. Within Kalaallisut itself there are a number of dialects or sub-dialects, but here there is no mutual intelligibility to speak of. Their position can be seen on Figure 1 in Section 2. The principal occupational pursuits of the country are commercial fishing in the “open water” ports of the west coast, while subsistence hunting is still practiced in the north and east, and sheep farming is prevalent in the extreme southwest.

The number of speakers of Kalaallisut is considerably greater than any other Inuit (or Yupik) population, and the percentage of the population born in Greenland speaking it is an impressive 98%, unique for an indigenous North American language. The figures given in Table 1 are based on those for the 1990 census, as presented in Dorais (2000: 46).

	<b>Total population</b>	<b>Population born in Greenland</b>	<b>Number of speakers</b>
Kalaallisut (West Greenlandic)	51269	42047	41205
Inuktun (Polar Eskimo)	846	767	752
Tunumiisut (East Greenlandic)	3443	3147	3084
Total for Greenland	55558	45961	45041

Table 1. The linguistic situation in the three dialect regions of Greenland (Dorais 2000: 46)

The total number of speakers (97% of the population born in Greenland) is 61932 (Dorais 2010: 236). This includes over 13000 Greenlanders resident in Denmark (many of them students) given in Baunbæk (2007) – the number may be less today, given the increasing opportunities for higher education and training in Greenland itself. It should also be added that there are about 9000 Danes resident in Greenland at any one time

(Petersen 1990: 293), few of whom speak Greenlandic despite a recent law requiring permanent residents to at least attempt to learn it. The west coast population has since early colonial times become to a certain degree ethnically mixed with Scandinavians, particularly in Nuuk, where ca. 33% of the population are Danes, compared with 14% elsewhere (Jacobsen 2000: 51).<sup>1</sup>

Kalaallisut is the official language of the region (which still constitutes part of the Danish Kingdom though it enjoys a relatively high degree of autonomy within it), and all official documents are bilingual, in Kalaallisut and Danish. The number of Danes in administrative and educational positions is still high, though since the introduction of Home Rule in 1979 – and in 2009 a further increase in autonomy from Denmark (Self Rule as opposed to Home Rule) – it has gradually shrunk. From early colonial times Kalaallisut has been the language of the Church and of elementary schooling, and since 1979 it was declared the principal school language, though resident Danes could decide between a Danish and a Greenlandic curriculum. A Greenlandic University (Ilisimatusarfik) has been established by the Greenlandic Parliament, entrance to which is for Greenlandic speakers, and in which at least many of the courses are taught in Kalaallisut. The shortage of trained Greenlandic teachers remains a problem for complete realization of intentions here, a situation which is gradually being improved – though this does not involve representation of the non-Kalaallisut dialects.

There is a huge discrepancy as regards written literature between Kalaallisut and the two other main dialects. Quite unique among Eskaleut languages, Kalaallisut in its dominant form, Central West Greenlandic (which happens to be the most conservative dialect) has a literature stretching back several centuries, including pedagogic and ecclesiastic works, songs, novels, short stories and biographic reminiscences and folklore collections (see Petersen 1984). It also has two bilingual newspapers and its own radio station, Kalaallit Nunaata Radioa (broadcasting at least 80% in Kalaallisut, the rest in Danish), also very limited television broadcasting (mostly in Danish). By

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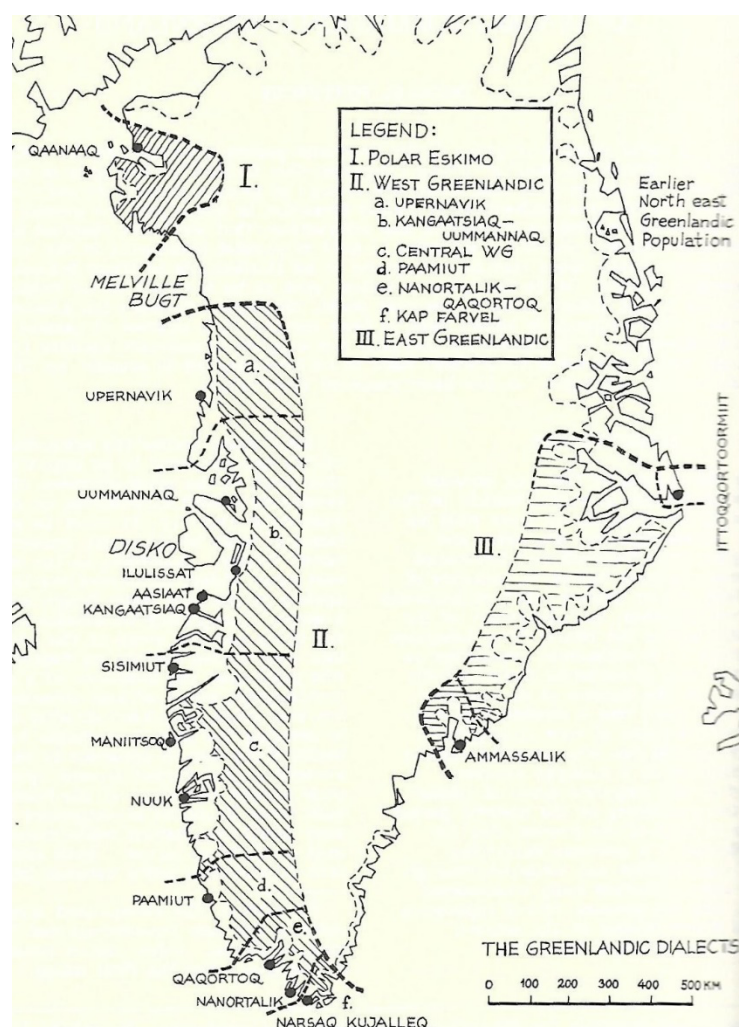
<sup>1</sup> In this study, Jacobsen describes a new urban variety of Danish ('Nuuk Danish') among young people in the capital. It displays syllable-timed prosody like West Greenlandic, as opposed to stress-timed standard Danish (also some other contact effects). This is particularly prevalent among youngsters of mixed Greenlandic/Danish parentage.

contrast, there is virtually no published literature in Tunumiisut and Inuktun apart from scholarly collections of folk tales and songs (notably Holtved 1951, for Inuktun and Victor 1991, for Tunumiisut), and these are not primarily intended for popular consumption. In part this is a problem of orthography – confounding the inherent problem of choosing suitable orthographies for the dialects is the fact that all of their speakers must learn the orthography of Kalaallisut, in particular in school, and this has led to controversy (and stalemate) as to what (if any) orthography to use to render texts in the dialects. It should be noted that Kalaallisut itself has undergone a major change in orthography, with the older standard (largely morphophonemic) introduced by Samuel Kleinschmidt in his grammar and dictionary of the 1850s phased out after 1973 and replaced by a (more or less) phonemic system. A variety of individual solutions have been proposed for the dialects, some reflecting the Kalaallisut pronunciation of certain (new) orthographic conventions (in particular geminate fricatives), others being closer to the phonemic (and Canadian Inuktitut) norm. An account of the difficulties here can be found in Leonard (2015). As regards the other West Greenlandic (sub-)dialects, again almost nothing has been published apart from scholarly works (e.g. Vebæk (2006) for the southwest, and Lynge (1955) for the Upernavik dialect).

## **2. The classification of dialects: Fortescue (1986a)**

The classification of the Greenlandic dialects is based strictly on linguistic (principally phonological) grounds, as summed up in Petersen (1990), native-speaking professor of Eskimology at the University of Copenhagen at that time. The classification is not based on traditional fieldwork or data collection methods in spatial dialectology, but on different research sources. Their geographical distribution is clear-cut and uncontroversial today, with the exception of the settlement of Savissivik in the south of the Polar Eskimo region, where half the population consists of West Greenlanders speaking the Upernavik sub-dialect who have moved north. Note that the major dialects only correspond in part to the distinction between the subsistence

hunting districts and the primarily commercial fishing-based districts: although the hunting districts include the districts where East Greenlandic and Polar Eskimo are spoken, they also include the Upernavik district on the west coast. The large differences between the three major dialects is, on the criterion of mutual intelligibility, probably sufficient to consider them separate languages (Map 1).



Map 1. The Greenlandic dialects (Fortescue 1986a: 414)

In the following paragraphs I shall characterize the principal differences between the dialects, starting with Polar Eskimo (Inuktun). In general, although conservative compared with other Greenlandic dialects, Inuktun has developed its own idiosyncratic phonological features further away from Proto-Inuit and its contemporary neighbour

dialects while at the same time replacing a certain portion of its lexicon with imports from dominant West Greenlandic (WG). Although grammatical differences from West Greenlandic are rather minimal, it has retained the category of dual number, all but lost elsewhere in Greenland. It also has indicative inflectional paradigms (intransitive -*tuq*, etc., transitive -*gaa*, etc.), which in WG are purely subordinate/ participial in function. Prosodic differences, including the “compaction” of verbal endings (often involving the affix -(*g*)*huaq*- ‘big’), give it a particular “muffled” character difficult for West Greenlanders unfamiliar with it to follow. This is increased by a characteristic trait it shares with western Canadian Inuit, namely the replacement of \*/s/ by /h/ varying with palatal /ç/ (thus *hiku* for WG *siku* ‘ice’), though it retains geminate /ss/. The palatal sounds is regular in the sequence /huuq/ or /huur-/, which become /hiuq/ or /hiur-/ (as in *hiuq* [çiuq] ‘why’, WG *sooq*). Clusters of velar /g/ [ɣ] or uvular /r/ [R] plus /h/ produce voiceless fricatives /xx/ and /χχ/ (as in as in *axxak* ‘hand’ and *aχχaaq* ‘ball’), which have a quite different source in WG (geminate /g/ and /r/ respectively). This constitutes one of the problems in devising an orthography for the dialect, since school children have to learn the WG convention in their school books. Kalaallisut has retained the old diphthongs /ai/ and /au/ (elsewhere changed to /aa/) and has maintained unassimilated consonant clusters like *akpa* (‘guillemot’) compared to WG *appa*. Another characteristic trait is the development of a glottal stop replacing the first element in geminate sonorants, thus *a’girhuq* [aʔɣiχχuq] ‘he comes’ vs. WG *aggersoq* [axxiʳsuq] ‘(he) coming’. More recent changes include vowel-harmony like changes in the original diphthongs /ua/ and /ui/, depending on context, thus -(*g*)*huaq* ‘big’ (retained after syllables with /u/) becomes -(*g*)*haaq* after a syllable with /a/, and -(*g*)*hiiq* after one with /i/. /ui/ becomes /ii/ after syllables with /i/ or /a/ (thus affix -*paghiit* ‘many’ from -*paghuit*). See Fortescue (1991) for further details.

East Greenlandic (Tunumiisut) is actually closer to WG historically, although some very advanced phonological changes plus considerable vocabulary replacement due to earlier naming taboo has rendered it no longer easily intelligible to WG speakers without some experience of the dialect. There is no dialect division within it today, though an earlier sub-dialect within Sermilik fjord has now completely merged with the main Ammassalik (Tasiilaq) variety, which was also taken north to the



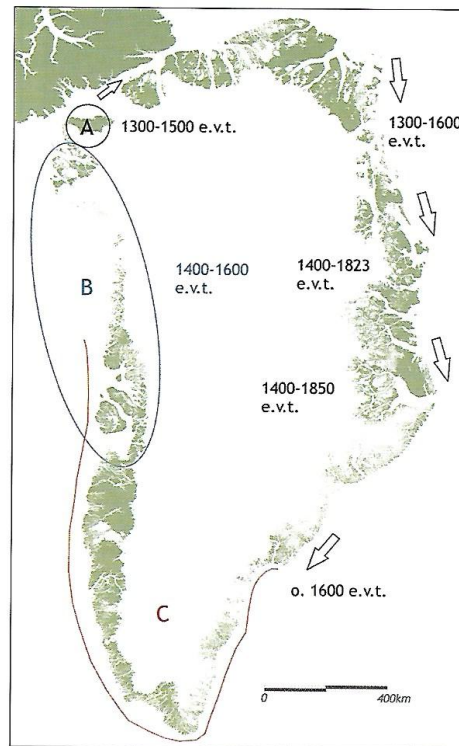
settlement of Ittoqqortoormiit in the 1920s. The phonological inventory is considerably reduced compared to WG, with single intervocalic WG /t/, /l/ and (original) /š/ all becoming a flapped /l/ (as in *puiltit* ‘seals’ corresponding to WG *puišit* and *alaani* ‘below’ corresponding to WG *ataani*), whereas the corresponding geminates all become /tt/ (thus *itti(q)* corresponding to both WG *išši* ‘cold’ and *illu* ‘house’). But the most significant difference lies in the “i-dialect” phenomenon characterising Tunumiisut, whereby original /u/ goes to /i/ in certain contexts (as in the *itti* ~ *illu* case above). Specifically, this change is blocked in word-initial syllables, or when preceded by a labial consonant or in a syllable following with one containing a preserved /u/. Historically this can be explained in terms of ‘delayed labialization’, which is best seen in the west coast i-dialect of Upernavik, where the consonant following the delabialized /u/ is itself labialized. This change in combination with the frequent loss of intervocalic sonorants (especially nasals) between like vowels produces such forms *iik* ‘human being’ corresponding to WG *inuk*. Intervocalic /k/ and /q/ are weakened to voiced fricatives, whereas original intervocalic fricatives are nasalized, thus for example *nugappiaq* ‘boy’ for WG *nukappiaq*, and *uangit* ‘us’ for WG *uagut*. Intervocalic geminate fricatives (voiceless in WG) have become geminate stops in Tunumissut, as in *ikkiaq* ‘throat’ for WG *iggiaq* [ixxiaq]. An isolated archaism is the retention of initial /c/, changed elsewhere to /s/ (thus *cigiq* ‘ice’ for WG *siku* – the addition of a final /q/ on vowel stems is also typical). As regards lexicon, over 30% of the vocabulary is estimated to be different from that of WG or other Inuit dialects (Dorais, 2010: 53), the widely accepted explanation being in terms of naming taboo, whereby it was strictly forbidden to utter someone’s name after they died, many personal names consisting in fact of common nouns, which also had to be replaced by parallel or descriptive expressions. Thus *angut* ‘man’ is replaced by *tikkaq* (originally ‘rutting seal’), whereas *natseq* ‘ringed seal’ is replaced by *miigattak* (lit. ‘the very small one’), and *qajaq* ‘kayak’, is replaced by *saqqit* (lit. ‘tool for being seen’). This is a phenomenon with traces in the Arctic in the shamanic tradition, but nowhere so evident as among the isolated East Greenlanders. For further examples see Robbe & Dorais (1986).

The other i-dialects are far closer to WG, in fact are clearly WG sub-dialects that have been affected to varying degrees by contact with i-dialect speakers. I shall return to the question of how that may have come about historically. The Upernavik sub-dialect, besides preserving the i-dialect phenomenon in a somewhat more transparent manner than Tunumiisut, also shares a few other traits with the latter, namely the treatment of geminate fricatives as stops, and the nasalsization of intervocalic /g/ and /r/, as well as a few lexical items. For further details see Fortescue (1986b). There are virtually no grammatical differences from WG, which is also true of the intermediate sub-dialect, Kangaatsiaq-Uummannaq, which is not an i-dialect but does share the nasalization of intervocalic /g/ with Upernavik, also the future tense marker *-ssu-* (Upernavik *-tsu-*), which is also typical of EG and Kap Farvel, as opposed to central WG *-ssa-*. It also has /tt/ for WG /ts/ before /u/ and /a/ (as in *aattaat* ‘just now’ for WG *aatsaat*). As regards the southern i-dialects, one can distinguish three variants, all sharing the trait of shortening geminate consonants following a long vowel. The southernmost variety, Kap Farvel, is the most strongly affected by the eastern (as opposed to Upernavik) variant of the i-dialect phenomenon (Rischel 1975). It also shares with it the development of geminate fricatives, but that of geminate /ll/ is idiosyncratic, namely a slightly affricated retroflex [ɖɖ]. Specific to Paamiut is the retention of the distinction between original /s/ and /š/, as in older central WG.

### 3. Discussion and conclusion: The origin and distribution of the dialects

One question that has intrigued and puzzled investigators of Greenlandic dialects in the past has been the explanation for the distribution of the idiosyncratic i-dialect phenomenon in non-adjacent coastal regions of the country. This was one of the principal subjects at a symposium on Greenlandic pre-history in Nuuk, 1981. It was suggested there that this might reflect a non-Inuit (“Paleo-Eskimo”) substratum language (Petersen 1986). A satisfactory consensus now appears to have been reached, combining linguistic and archaeological findings. This is represented in Map 2 (from Gulløv 2012), which indicates the movements of the Thule Inuit arriving in

Greenland after about 1200 AD (the later arrival of Inughuit (Polar Eskimos) towards the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century has not been added).



Map 2. The origin of i-dialects (Gulløv 2012: 140)

On the map 'A' indicates the starting point for the i-dialects in a group left behind in northwest Greenland after the main wave of incoming Inuit from Canada had moved down the west coast, starting some hundred years before. These first Inuit were to inhabit the coasts marked by 'C', all the way round the extreme south by about 1450, though by now there was contact and competition with the Norsemen, who had been in southern Greenland since around 1000 AD but had retreated entirely from Greenland by the 16<sup>th</sup> century. 'B' indicates the ensuing movement southwards of i-dialect speakers eventually producing the mixed Upernavik dialect. Meanwhile, 'A' expanded across the north of Greenland as indicated, eventually reaching the present Ammassalik area around 1600 AD and leaving the northeast uninhabited behind them. This movement was to continue south around the southern tip of the country and up the west coast as far as Disko Bay in trading expeditions but not permanent

settlement. Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the East Greenlanders living on the southeast coast (south of Ammassalik) moved in waves to the southwest coast, merging with WG speakers. These later movements were to result in the mixed i-dialects of southwest Greenland (in particular the Kap Farvel sub-dialect). This would not have affected Central West Greenlandic, which was by now firmly established in the fjords of the central “open water” coast and unchallenged as the dominant variety of the language after the initiation of missionary activity in the area by Hans Egede in 1721.

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