

## When he speaks about language, Greenlanders listen

By Jørgen Chemnitz

**Two variants of Greenlandic are in danger of becoming extinct according to the UN**

The new year got off to something of a disconcerting start for the 50,000 speakers of Greenlandic: they were told they were speaking an endangered tongue.

Unesco, the UN culture body, included all three forms of Greenlandic on its Atlas of Languages in Danger. Unesco estimated that only a tenth of the world's 2,400 languages will survive the next century, and uses the map to chart linguistic health. Eastern Greenlandic (with 3,000 speakers) and Northern Greenlandic (1,000 speakers) were rated 'definitely endangered', while Western Greenlandic (50,000 speakers) fared slightly better, it was still listed as "vulnerable".

The news awoke calls for the Self-Rule administration to protect the language, and with some 20 percent of the population able to speak only Greenlandic (the rest also speak at least Danish) the country's language experts called the predictions credible.

One expert, Carl Christian Olsen, called especially on young people to take more pride speak-

ing their traditional tongue.

He added that shoring up the language required developing trade terminology, using it in public, at home and at schools and making sure all signage was in Greenlandic.

When Olsen speaks about Greenlandic, people listen. As head of the Greenland Language Secretariat, he is regarded the country's highest language authority.

But even though he too called on lawmakers to help shore up the language, he also pointed out that Greenlandic has a history of assimilating outside words that could help it to survive.

'Greenlandic was formed back before people received a formal education,' he says. 'But as people learned trades, words from carpentry or barrel making began to enter the language. Today, it is computer terms that are being added.'

His organisation was formed as an independent national institution in 1998, and used the first two years of its existence to come up with a state of the language report. In 2006, it published a report about linguistic integration.

The secretariat is also responsible for place names, individual names and is being the deciding authority when it comes to matters of linguistic correctness. In addition, it deals with the introduction of new words into Green-

landic, creating words if necessary, and for making sure that the language is included in new technological advances.

'Language technology is things like spell checkers on computers, and what we have now is compatible with 90 percent of the language.' One glitch though, is that there is no Greenlandic spell checkers for Apple computers, he admits.

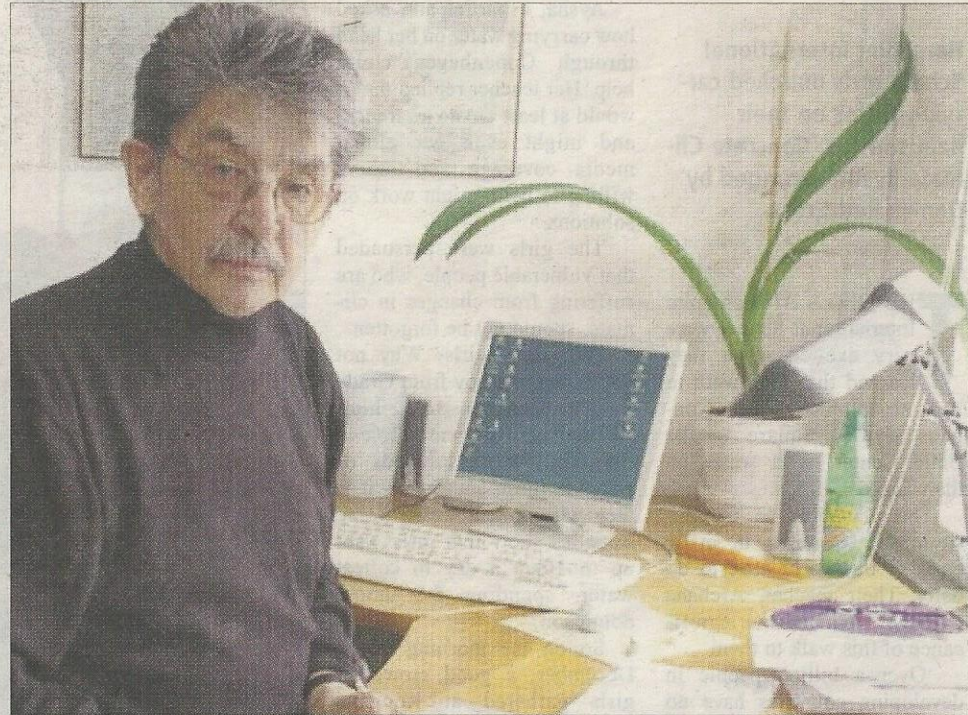
Olsen describes language as a series of circles. At the centre is the common language shared by everyone. Around it are smaller circles representing language domains – professional jargon, shop talk or other subsets of the language specific to smaller groups.

'Terminology is a key area,' Olsen says. 'The first areas we tackled when we began to renew the language were terms from the criminal justice system and then financial terms.'

Since then, Greenlandic has been enriched by words relating to shipping, anatomy and other areas.

Olsen points out though, that words are only as useful if they are used. The best acceptance pattern, he says, is if professionals accept the term and begin using them in their daily work. Doing so helps them to spread to the population as a whole.

Despite Unesco's grim outlook for Greenlandic, Olsen says the language continues to devel-



Carl Christian Olsen wants young Greenlanders to take more pride in their linguistic heritage

op at a rapid pace. In the space of five years, he estimates, as many new words are added as it takes other languages to add over a generation.

'If a Greenlandic goes to Denmark to study and comes back five years later, the difference would be noticeable.'

Compared with other languages of the Polar region Greenlandic receives one of the cleanest bills of health.

Alaskan language Yupik, for example, is all but condemned.

'There are no Yupik speakers under 50. It is going to disappear.'

Part of Greenlandic's strength is that a written version has existed for over 150 years. Church hymns, songs and literature have all been put on paper using the Greenlandic language.

'That helps,' Olsen says, adding that without a written

form, languages have little chances of surviving. And codifying that written language, as the Standard Greenlandic reform from 1973 does, is a further important survival tactic.

Most important of all for securing the language's survival, Olsen says, is using it, but developing trade terminology, using it in public, at home and at schools and making sure all signage is in Greenlandic.