At the Intersection of Language, Security, and Youth Voices: Spotlight on Arctic Youth Dialogue 2026 Participants

By: Sophia Stedman

From the 27th of August until the 3rd of September, youth aged 18-35 from across the Arctic and Europe gathered in Brussels, Belgium for the Arctic Youth Dialogue (AYD) to discuss issues all around the topic of security and the Arctic. AYD is a four-day-event, complementing the two-day EU Arctic Forum, where participants create policy proposals in subgroups themed around four different topics, namely Food Security, Cultural Security, Biodiversity and Climate Security, and Health Security. These policy proposals were created with various insights from across the Arctic and Europe, from indigenous activists to law students to young diplomats, and were given feedback through exchanges with policymakers within that area of expertise. The final policy proposals were presented to EU policymakers at the EU Arctic Forum, where the participants were able to use their voices to express what matters most to them as Arctic and European youth, for the future of the Arctic.



Group photo of the 2026 AYD cohort (taken by Nikita Salukvadze)

For the first time, as a part of AYD, there was a Youth Media Team, which aimed to document the event from various angles and create projects that reflect the Arctic and our youth. Aiming to fulfill this purpose, I chose to put a focus on the indigenous languages of the Arctic, as a linguistics student myself. Over 40 different indigenous languages are spoken across the Arctic, and form a key part of culture, environment, and security in the North. Through interviews with four participants that speak or are learning their indigenous language(s), we will explore the various intersections of language and the Arctic. If you would like to watch the full interviews, check them out here!

Language Shaping our Everyday Perception of the World

Aggiu, a participant in AYD and a speaker of Inuktitut, sees language as “cultural preservation.” For her, Inuktitut conveys “the knowledge that kept our ancestors alive for thousands of years”, forming a vital part of life and survival in the Arctic. As many terms “can’t accurately be translated to English”, Aggiu demonstrates the importance of using indigenous languages to describe the environment, traditional practices, and the world around us, which is lost through an ever-increasing focus on English and other colonising languages across the Arctic.

Taniesha, one of the two Head Facilitators of AYD and learner of Upper Tanana, stressed the need to learn the language before it’s too late, citing that “our Elders speak of a time where we will see a change in the world, where we need to go back to living off the land”, and that if youth are getting further and further away from the land, they will not have the tools they need to survive. She notes that there are “two different worlds” in a way, when connecting indigenous languages to broader society, where the tools for life and survival, in coordination with the land lie in the language. In this sense, language provides a key, opening the door into cultural and self-preservation, given that Taniesha says that “our culture is where our strength lies”. If culture is inherently tied to language, then fostering the ability to learn, speak, and flourish through one’s own indigenous language is key in ensuring indigenous culture can persevere. Language is something that was stripped away from indigenous people, with “generations where boarding schools, where there was a lot of violence, it was taken away from them”, context which Taniesha provides. The revitalisation of indigenous languages, through education programmes, targeted support, the ability to access services like healthcare in one’s own language, therefore creates a vital dimension to the various topics discussed at AYD. It is relevant, when thinking of “the plants, the animals, the seasons, that cannot be directly translated into English”, where the necessity of highlighting indigenous languages becomes evident.



Mats'ą̂säna Mą, a participant in AYD and speaker of Däkwänje, explains how respect through language plays a key part in her daily life, speaking of “ädùulį”, which are the laws

and the protocols of communication and “dän shâwthän”, meaning a good or respectful person. These words influence the lens through which we see communication and its relationship to lived experiences, as well as ways of viewing the world, providing a variety of perspectives on life. Respecting the world around you provides a foundation for innovative ways of thinking about current issues that we face. Further going into this, Mats'âsäna Mą says that, for her, speaking her language is “a political act, bringing back language as a big ‘F you’ to the people who repressed the language, reinstating our right to be indigenous”. The everyday act of speech is politicised by the fact that indigenous languages were repressed for so long by various colonising forces, and its usage is not just key for understanding the needs of a community, but also for taking back the power and the rights that were taken away from many indigenous people throughout history.



Juhán Nikolaus, the other Head Facilitator and a speaker of North Sámi, notes how vital the specificity of indigenous languages is for protecting and studying the environment. As a biology student at the University of Tromsø, he emphasises that “you need to be very specific and use the right words, so that other people can understand you.” This level of specificity, he ascertains, is often only possible through indigenous languages, of the people who have inhabited the Arctic for thousands of years. He states that “you should use indigenous languages when talking about the climate and biodiversity and our lands and our waters, because we have the terminology, we have a knowledge system that can be used”. He notes that “lived knowledge is something that you do, and language is a way to record it”, emphasising that indigenous knowledge systems are created through language and lived out through indigenous practices, protecting the Arctic environment and nature.



Juhán Nikolaus giving the AYD keynote speech at the EU Arctic Forum (taken by Sophia Stedman)

Language & the AYD topics

The subgroups at AYD focused on four different topics: Cultural Security, Health Security, Biodiversity and Climate Security, and Food Security. The participants connected these topics to their experiences of language in a variety of ways. Juhán Nikolaus, as a Head Facilitator of AYD, emphasised the role that adequate language access plays in cultural sovereignty, as well as protecting and promoting the mental and physical wellbeing of indigenous peoples. He further notes that language is vital to explaining "how you can harvest resources in a sustainable way." Taniesha, on the other hand, talks about how traditional practices can only properly survive through language, and create opportunities to (re)connect with sustainable and secure future practices.



Aggiu, as a part of the Food Security subgroup, looks at the importance of access to traditional foods and, by that, traditional ways of life. "There is a language loss when our communities are not connecting with our foods" she states. Given that language and food are so interconnected, Aggiu emphasises that "language lives through our foods, because that's our way of life, it's helped us survive." In a way, the description and preparation of food through the use of indigenous languages, connected to the needs of the Arctic

environment, helps to foster the necessary care needed for food consumption and supports the sustainable and secure survival in and of the Arctic.

Mats'ậsäna Mą, as a part of the Biodiversity and Climate Security subgroup, relates her topic closely to the needs of the people as well. She speaks about the importance of salmon, and the "intrinsitive [sic] language that ties into it", from everything from the catching of salmon, to the processing of it, to the ways in which each part of the salmon plays an essential role in her community's life. She further notes the "sustainability feature" of indigenous practices and language use, with "ways to show that you're not gonna take something you don't need or take more than you need". In these ways, she notes that language is used to "practice what we preach in respecting Mother Earth, especially the environment and the animals". In these ways, there is a lot to learn from indigenous practices and language use in terms of creating and fostering secure practices that ensure a sustainable Arctic.

Youth and the Importance of Preserving Indigenous Languages

Beyond the topics that were discussed at AYD, a key aspect of the event is the youth advocacy dimension, given that young people often do not get a seat at the table when Arctic issues are discussed. With this, the participants were asked how they see the importance of language learning and language use as a young person.

For Taniesha, the importance of language for her as a young person is "the connection to elders" and "pride in being able to speak your language". Pride, for her, means recognising that "it is hard to learn, it is hard to find spaces and people and it is an extra task on top of surviving". Overcoming those challenges is what helps her continue to support the revitalisation of her language. Beyond that, she speaks about the connection that language gives her to her elders, through being able to communicate with them in ways one cannot do with English.



Mats'ậsäna Mą, at one point one of the youngest speakers of her language, emphasises the importance of being able to speak to elders as a young person, noting that it's empowering for her "to be one of the people who is able to do that before they head into the spirit world and leave us". For her "to know that elders were given this opportunity to see through the elders' own eyes and their own lens that the language is being picked up again and it isn't dying"

supports her and pushes her to continue learning and speaking the language, especially as a young person.

Aggiu, speaking about her journey with Inuktitut, says that she feels that she “has a big responsibility to learn it back, even though it’s hard”, echoing what Taniesha shared and recognising that it is important but also oftentimes difficult to learn (back) your language. Beyond that, Aggiu notes that “it’s something I really value and want in my life and want for my territory and my people”. In these ways, language creates connections and community throughout the Arctic, and can empower young people in their ways.

Finally, Juhán Nikolaus also speaks about the connectedness that speaking North Sámi offers him. “It’s a way to ground myself, to remind myself of who I am, where I come from, who I know, and the people who know me”. As such, a vital element of language is connection, even if language just looks like a different way of communicating at first, there are so many layers of social, environmental, and political impact that indigenous languages can have, and can achieve. Most importantly though, as Juhán Nikolaus states, “it makes me feel like I’m not alone.”



Taniesha & Juhán Nikolaus (taken by Sophia Stedman)