

## **\*58. The Saami languages: the present and the future**

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### **Introduction**

The Saami languages are Fenno-Ugrian languages spoken from central Sweden and Mid-Southern Norway to the tip of the Kola Peninsula in Russia by 25,000-35,000 speakers. The number of ethnic Saami is probably nearly 100,000. There are no deep linguistic boundaries within the language area between neighbouring dialects, but ten Saami languages can be distinguished, six of which have written standards. Core areas are in the north of Norway, Sweden, and Finland; other speakers live interspersed among the majority population, even in the bigger cities. (Sammallahti, 1998) The Saami are one of the most described peoples in the world. Still, we have very little reliable data on the population and their languages. A Saami representative at an international meeting jokes, "After all these centuries with expeditions and research we still do not know who we are, where we live, how many we are and which languages we speak."

To avoid humiliation and to give their children better chances in life, indigenous and minority parents often decide to speak a dominant or official language with their children. Saami parents have not been an exception to this rule, especially in the past. "Optimistic" estimates suggest that at least half of today's oral languages might be dead or moribund-no longer learned by children-in a hundred years' time. Pessimistic but still realistic prognoses place the figure as high as 90 percent or even more. Numerous factors influence attempts to maintain the Saami languages.

Regularities discovered by the Neogrammarians in how language structures change for a while made it popular to look at a language as a living organism. Its development, aging, and dying was considered "natural", out of human reach. Languages were not killed, they "died of old age." This agentless "model" for the prediction of the future of languages is still found among politicians, and legitimates their way of treating minority languages.

It has since become clear that language is an institution constructed in and by society, and that it should be studied as such. Many studies have revealed the intricate connections between factors affecting a language's position in society. (Hyltenstam et al., 1999; King, 2000) The languages people learn can be considered linguistic capital. In this model, the worth of each language on the linguistic market

is decided by the political and economic power of the people using the language. Sufficient theoretical models are not yet available to predict the survival or death/killing of indigenous or minority languages, even in broad terms. Every language is itself unique and every language situation has its own characteristics. Even if the situation seems dire for many languages, it is still possible to revitalise them and start using them more. Which languages survive and which do not ultimately seems to be a question of human will, not of any rules of nature.

## **Reflection on Saami Experience**

Up to the 17th century the Saami society lived its own life, with little interference from the outside. From then on the language situation can historically be divided in three distinct periods: a missionary phase, a harsh assimilation phase, and the present phase with progress for integration and some self-determination.

The 17th and 18th centuries characterise the beginning of missionary activities, with some very positive projects for the benefit of the Saami languages: teaching was conducted through the medium of Saami and religious texts were translated into Saami. From the middle of the 19th century, a new policy based on national romanticism and vulgar-Darwinist ideas led to a harsh suppression of the Saami and their languages. The Norwegian Parliament and government pursued overtly a policy aiming at assimilating the whole Saami population in Norway in the course of one generation. During a 30-year period from 1970 onward, a new policy—first and foremost a result of the Saami cultural and political movement that has grown stronger since World War II; the first Saami initiatives from around 1900 did not survive the harsh political climate that dominated at that time—has gradually been formed by the Nordic states. New language policy processes are bottom-up, starting at the local level and moving up to the national level. (Magga, 1990) In the political field the process has reached the international level and Saami movements have also formed an essential basis for the formulation of indigenous and minority rights in general.

All of these stages have had effects on the languages. The "dark century" from 1870 to 1970 had detrimental effects which can still be felt on both the languages themselves and their status and speakers. In the coastal areas of Norway (and elsewhere) negative attitudes were by the Saami themselves, and intergenerational transfer of the language ceased in one generation.

It seems that the new language efforts from 1970 onward have been successful in many ways: in achieving recognition for the Saami languages, in developing the languages themselves, and in maintaining the total numbers of Saami speakers. On a national level, these efforts have been successful when it comes to legislation and formal recognition. The identification of language rights as part of general human rights has obviously had positive effects. Governments with

aspirations in human rights have listened to arguments about language rights. Sadly, the clear tendency of Nordic governments today is to be less sensitive toward this kind of argument. As long as states could enhance their international profiles as defenders of human and indigenous rights without large concessions, they were willing to support cultural and other rights for indigenous peoples. But there seems to be a limit when real self-determination, including questions of land rights, are brought into the agenda. This general tendency is echoed internationally.

Recent language efforts have also faced difficulties. Majority attitudes were easier to influence in favor of minority languages when the whole debate was at the level of principle. To influence everyday practice has proved much more difficult. Likewise, implementation of language legislation has been difficult at both central and local levels. One of the most striking failures of the Saami strategies is that the smaller Saami languages (in numbers of speakers) have not seen success in improving their situation or even in defending their previous position. This failure is partly due to the fact that most speakers live apart from the larger Saami groups—dispersed among Norwegians, Swedes, Finns, and Russians—and do not have the demographic concentration that would enable them to use their language in the workplace and in official situations, including schools. Saami initiatives have also faced problems in getting language legislation implemented. In Norway, many municipalities with a Saami population had developed procedures giving the Saami some local linguistic rights. But when the Saami language law (in force since 1992) designated certain areas as belonging to the Saami administrative districts, many of the municipalities left outside these official districts—often municipalities where the speakers of the smaller Saami languages lived—withdrew services in Saami, claiming that the law did not require them. The situation has thus deteriorated in non-Saami-designated areas. This decline is clearly evident in the largest study ever on the use of Saami languages in Norway (the study contains interviews with almost 1000 Saami speakers and over 1000 Norwegian speakers in the Saami areas and can be read in Saami and Norwegian at [www.samediggi.no](http://www.samediggi.no)). (SEG, 2000)

Legal protection is clearly insufficient; strategies for implementing maintenance support principles must be worked out. The rights of Saami speakers and their languages are still weak compared with non-Saami speakers, even in traditional Saami areas. The situation of upper secondary schools established specifically for Saami students in traditional Saami areas in Norway is illustrative. When there is **one** Norwegian-speaking student in a class, it is taken for granted that **all** teaching must be in Norwegian. When teachers have used Saami in their teaching in such situations, lively debates on the rights of the Norwegian speaker have ensued and the situation has been described as one of discrimination against the Norwegian speaker. Teachers naturally try to avoid accusations of discrimination, with the result that hardly any teaching takes place through the medium of Saami. This result ruins the entire system of education through the medium of Saami for Saami students.

There clearly exists a culture clash between the Saami community's collective right to maintain and develop their language(s) and the right of individual Norwegian-speaking students, be they (ethnically) Saami or not; a clash, that is, between indigenous collective rights thinking and "western" individual rights thinking. While there is agreement at a principle level about the value of indigenous cultures and languages, the realisation of these principles fails in everyday life. Only slowly do Saami speakers dare to start claiming their rights in practice. If someone chooses to speak Saami at an official meeting, this action might still be interpreted as a demonstration-especially if the person in question is believed to master the majority language as well.

Though new Saami language niches are being created-at least one higher education institution uses Saami as its main language (<http://samiskhs.no>), this development is not unproblematic. Many majority language speakers don't seem to understand the necessity of using Saami; many seem to think that their language rights are infringed if they are exposed to a monolingual Saami situation. They may demand that more of the activities at a Saami institution be in a majority language in a language that they themselves understand forgetting that such a change would violate Saami speakers' rights and neglect the need to use and develop Saami languages in all domains.

A significant discrepancy still exists between rhetorical (positive) attitudes on the group level, and actual language choice on the individual level. (Johansson, 1975) Many Saami parents who are active in Saami cultural efforts (furthering and developing traditional handicraft, for instance), use the majority language with their own children. And in marriages with a non-Saami-speaking spouse, Saami is often not used in the home. Even some prominent defenders of Saami culture and language have not taught Saami to their children. Decolonisation of the mind is a long process (see Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Decolonising the Mind*)

A linguistic market where demand not only exists, but is actively created, is necessary for the supply to be developed and maintained. An example: in earlier times the Saami (and their reindeer) dominated the transport systems in winter in the north. Because of their monopoly, everyone needing their services had to know some Saami. Today's snow scooters, helicopters, and cars in Norway "speak Norwegian." Certain brutal realities are decisive when it comes to implementation. We are only beginning to create new niches for Saami languages in a modern society.

## **Factors in Language Maintenance Strategies**

**Societal (structural and ideological) factors** influence the relationship between the minority in question and the majority population. *Political factors, including general legislation*, regulate or limit the position of minorities in society, their degree of

autonomy and self-determination. The position also has social implications for the use of the languages. *Language legislation* is one of the most obvious instruments for protecting minority languages. During the 1990s, legislation aimed at securing Saami speakers certain limited rights within administration, police, courts, and in other sectors of society was introduced in all three Nordic countries with a Saami population (Finland, Norway, Sweden). It is still too early to evaluate the effects<sup>1</sup>. A central question for both types of legislation is implementation. In certain parts of Norway the resistance from the Norwegian-speaking majority against any form of Saami cultural rights has been very strong. In such a situation the majority's "own" people in the administration-a sector that the majority as a rule dominates-are often reluctant to follow the rule of law. *Majority attitudes* (e.g., pluralistic, segregative, assimilationist) play a decisive role both in the preparation of legislation and in the everyday status of minority languages. In Saamiland, these attitudes were very negative until the 1960s and 70s and have only recently started changing in a more positive direction.

*Economic resources* confer social status; minority peoples are often far from wealthy. Earlier Saami reindeer herders were believed to be very rich and this perception had a positive effect on the status of their languages. Today the Saami areas are, economically, the weakest areas in all three countries. Modern economic "development", including the exploitation of natural resources in Saami areas (where the profits go elsewhere), does not further Saami language development; on the contrary, Saami-speaking workers in mines may even experience overt discrimination, and their language can be used only informally. Industrialisation as a rule promotes majority languages and suppresses the Saami languages, Company languages are always Norwegian, Finnish, and Swedish, and/or English, never Saami. Majority *socio-cultural norms* dominate while Saami norms are made invisible. Even a simple thing like the answer to the Saami "Buore beaivvi!" (Good morning) is unknown to most non-Saami in Saami areas, even when the Norwegian population has by now lived there for 4-5 centuries. Saami clothes are considered exotic (and used by the tourist industry). Even or uneven distribution of *educational resources*, including questions concerning the medium and the content of education, is decisive for competence development in indigenous languages. In Saamiland the formal education level is generally low among the Saami population, although it may be high in comparison to local surroundings in a few places with a concentration of Saami institutions with formally-educated Saami (in Kárásjohka, for example).

**Group level factors** describe the internal life of the group. Certain *demographic factors* are not advantageous for Saami language maintenance:

- 1) the Saami live in four countries (Finland, Norway, Russia, Sweden) rather than one;
- 2) they live mostly interspersed among majority groups and their total number, especially within each country, is relative low;

- 3) the total number of speakers of some of the Saami languages is very modest, even if the total number of speakers is not yet critical;
- 4) more young people marry across linguistic boundaries and their children as a rule do not learn Saami but this may be changing. On the other hand, the Saami-speaking population is young-a valuable potential.

The situation of the languages can involve great challenges. The variety of Saami languages and/or dialects, in itself a richness, has also meant difficulties in creating writing systems. National borders and national languages have influenced these writing systems and functioned as a mitigating factor against standardisation. Bilingual situations tend rapidly to develop in favour of the majority language and the loss of Saami.

The Saami population is heterogeneous in terms of cultural background, occupation, education, internal organisation, and in institutions where national norms in four different states create differences. The Saami are today found in nearly every kind of *occupation*, in addition to traditional occupations like reindeer herding, fishing, and farming. Saami *ethnicity* is a positive factor for language maintenance because, despite several states and languages, it defines the group as one people, with certain rights. On this basis *internal organising* has been very effective during the last 30 years, and a series of *Saami institutions* has been established. Among these, Saami media (radio and newspapers) are an important factor. Though TV production in Saami is still very modest, the Saami Radio and three Saami medium newspapers have established Northern Saami as a modern language. Cultural expressions like literature and theatre have developed and have had a stimulating effect on language maintenance and development.

**Individual factors** have to do with the behaviour and attitudes of individuals. Are children socialised into speaking Saami as their mother tongue, at home and outside? Which language or combination of languages do bilingual Saami choose with other bilinguals? A study about language choice (Helander, 1984) in a small village in northern Sweden showed the usual functional differentiation: Saami was the language of family and everyday life whereas Swedish was used in all situations involving outsiders. The opportunities to "choose" Saami are very limited. The most important of all factors for individuals is the *language socialisation* in families and in the closest environment outside home. This choice-whether or not to transfer the language to the next generation-is the real key to language maintenance. But it in turn influences and is influenced by other factors. As a general rule Hyltenstam et al. also emphasise the importance of a genuine need for the language-it must have a value on the linguistic market.

## **Linguistic Human Rights as Part of Maintenance Strategies**

Some of the direct main agents for linguistic (and cultural) genocide-formal education and the mass media-come under societal factors, as do the macro-level economic, military, and political agents behind them. The concept linguisticism was created to address issues of linguistic inequality, by analogy with racism and sexism; to refer to "ideologies, structures and practices which are used to legitimate, effectuate, regulate and reproduce an unequal division of power and resources (both material and immaterial) between groups which are defined on the basis of language." (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1988; 2000)

Linguistic genocide can be understood as an end point on a continuum where the other end point is full enjoyment of all linguistic human rights. Official languages and their native speakers in most cases enjoy all linguistic human rights, including state support for the intergenerational transmission of their languages in the state school system through the use of these languages as the main media of education. But the same is not true for the Saami languages. The situation is worst in Sweden and not good even in Finland and Norway, despite Saami's official or semi-official status there (Saami's strongest position is in the education system in Norway<sup>2</sup>). The educational scenario for most indigenous peoples today still fits UN definitions of linguistic genocide.

First language attrition and loss have been described fairly extensively in research literature and fiction; some focuses on the Saami. Of Finnish immigrant minority members in Sweden who had Swedish-medium education, not one spoke any Finnish to their own children (Janulf, 1998). Even if they themselves might not have forgotten their Finnish, their children were certainly forcibly transferred to the majority group, at least linguistically. This happens to millions of speakers of threatened languages the world over, including many Saami: education through the medium of a dominant majority language often leads to the students using the dominant language with their own children. Over a generation or two the children are linguistically and often also culturally assimilated. Since there are no alternatives in formal education (i.e., schools or classes that teach mainly through the medium of the threatened indigenous or minority languages), the transfer to a dominant group happens by force. For it to be voluntary, alternatives should exist, and parents would need to have enough reliable information about the long-term consequences of various choices. None of these conditions are normally fulfilled for indigenous or minority parents and children: the situations where children lose their first language through forced assimilation can often be characterised as genocide according to Articles II (e) and (b) of the 1948 UN International Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide:

Article II(e), *'forcibly transferring children of the group to another group'*; and

Article II(b), '*causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group*'; emphasis added).

A wealth of research and statistics about the "mental harm" caused by forced assimilation also exists. Effects include reduced chances for expressing and even developing one's full potential, linguistically, psychologically, cognitively, on the labour market, and in societal participation. Indigenous and minority children have to work much harder to achieve. This situation obviously entails a threat to democracy and equality. Williams concludes in his large study from Malawi and Kenya that "[f]or the majority of children in both countries the test results, and classroom observations, suggest there is a clear risk that the policy of using English as a vehicular language may contribute to stunting, rather than promoting, academic and cognitive growth." (Williams 1998: 63-64; emphasis added. A similar conclusion is reached in Australia by Anne Lowell and Brian Devlin in an article (1999) entitled "Miscommunication between Aboriginal Students and their Non-Aboriginal Teachers in a Bilingual School." Education through the dominant language clearly "severely inhibited the children's education," (p. 137) and was "the greatest barrier to successful classroom learning for Aboriginal Children" (p. 156).

For the maintenance and development of languages (and thereby linguistic diversity on earth), educational language rights, including the right to mother-tongue-medium education, are absolutely vital. Binding linguistic human rights, education rights in particular, might be one of the necessary (but not sufficient) ways of counteracting linguicide and linguisticism. Unfortunately, today there is no proper basis in international law for these rights to be implemented (see the overviews and analyses in Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, eds., 1994 and Skutnabb-Kangas 2000). When we move from the non-duty-inducing human rights instrument preambles about the importance of languages to their binding clauses-especially to the educational clauses-language often disappears completely. In the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), for instance, the paragraph on education (26) does not refer to language at all; in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966), the educational Article (13) omits reference to language or linguistic groups (which have been mentioned in its general Article 2.2). If language-related rights are included and specified, the Articles dealing with these rights are typically so weak and unsatisfactory as to be virtually meaningless. For instance, in the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (in force since 1998; Norway, Sweden, and Finland have ratified it for the Saami), the formulations in the education Article 8 include a range of modifications. Just as in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities, the opt-outs and alternatives permit a reluctant state to meet the requirements in a minimalist way-which it can legitimate by claiming that a provision was not "possible" or "appropriate," or that numbers



were not "sufficient" or did not "justify" a provision, or that it "allowed" the minority to organise teaching of their language as a subject, at their own cost.

## Conclusions

Revitalisation and even reclamation of earlier minorised languages are taking place. Amery (2000) describes encouraging work on reclaiming Kaurna, an Australian Aboriginal language where the last speaker died some 60 years ago. The reclamation is mainly based on missionary documents dating from around 1850. The Māori, Hawaiians, and Saami use "language nests" in which pre-schoolers are taught in the indigenous languages by linguistically and culturally proficient elders. Their pre-school teachers and parents also often develop more proficiency in the ancestral language. In immersion programs for these indigenous children, they are taught in indigenous languages that they initially do not know. The training of teachers and journalists in, for, and through the medium of several small indigenous languages is expanding: in Arctic areas, for instance, indigenous peoples are also establishing their own universities. Master-Apprentice programs in California (see Hinton, 1994) pair off proficient indigenous elders with younger people for 6-12 months, 20 hours a week, for language revitalisation purposes, where the only requirement is that they use an indigenous language. These are just a few examples.

Despite such work, strategies to counteract the linguistic dominance and hierarchisation that may ultimately lead to the disappearance of the majority of today's languages are urgently needed. Today's efforts are completely insufficient. We will mention some urgent tasks.

- The basic facts about minority and indigenous languages in terms of numbers of speakers (at each level) and their geographic distribution must be established. In many countries, even in modern countries like the Nordic ones, these kinds of basic data are lacking.
- New additional strategies to support numerically small languages must be found. We do not believe that a certain critical number of speakers is needed for a language to be maintained; it is more a question of finding innovative strategies, making people aware of the potential and the globally invaluable knowledges embedded in every language and culture.
- The languages must be used as media of instruction in education, in the labour market, in administration, and in other official domains. If a language is only taught as a subject, it is not developed in terms of vocabulary and discourse for use in all domains. Either/or questions of the following type (often heard in Africa or Asia) are misplaced: should meagre economic resources be used for primary education through the medium of the indigenous/minority language, or for higher education? Both are vital, and without using the language for purposes above the primary education level

and everyday life, the language will soon be unable to function in other domains-and what value does it have on the linguistic market if one cannot use it to discuss physics or politics? Likewise, collective and individual rights do not compete; both are necessary and complement each other.

- Strategies should be developed for strengthening the use of indigenous languages in the private sector (banks, shops, etc.). Much can be learned from places like Quebec and Latvia; we need language supporter groups who prepare labels in Saami and go paste them on milk packs in shops in order to draw attention to discriminatory language practices.

- Orthographic standardisation must be done with great care and respect. If smaller-in-numbers language speakers feel that their languages and experiences are not being respected, they will not feel that resulting written languages are their own. Linguistic and orthographic self-determination is essential.

- When writing systems are being developed or revised, the extent to which these writing systems can be used in a technological age should be considered. Alternatives that use common fonts and can be used on TV and on the Internet-and that ordinary people still feel represent the languages more or less fully-must be developed.

- We must make sure that indigenous peoples are granted the right to become high level multilinguals, and at the same time guarantee them the possibility of living and dying in one language-their mother tongue<sup>3</sup>. To support a minority language both on the individual level and on the collective level and to support the development of the language itself means that we have to use our resources accordingly. As a rule, furthering real equality means that we have to support a minority language much more than a majority language. Every forum where the minority language can be used locally is immensely more important to it than to the majority language. Equality is misunderstood if it leads to an equal division of time and resources between a minority and majority language.

- Majority attitudes are of course decisive for the development of an official sphere for the language. Without a rather radical turn in majority awareness in Scandinavia, teaching in Saami and legislation to support it would never have developed. Because minorities often adopt the majority's attitudes toward minorities and their cultures, majority members must be supportive at the local and personal levels.

- States are still the main actors on the international stage. States have the primary responsibility in all international cooperation and in the development of international law. The contributions from states like Norway and Denmark have clearly been important in the process of developing instruments like the ILO Convention 169. Linguistic human rights must be seen as a part of the general human rights system (Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 1994). It is urgent to develop binding international legal standards that oblige states to protect and develop language rights both as

individual rights for every human being and as collective rights for a people, in particular with a focus on minorities and indigenous peoples.

- Conflict avoidance should not lead to weakly expressed demands. In Norway conflicts have opened up a path toward constructive solutions. Handling conflicts over longer periods does take a much heavier toll on minorities than majorities, however.

## **What Can You, The Reader, Do?**

If you are a majority group member, you must remember that tolerance is not enough. Show your active interest through learning at least some words of relevant minority language(s) where you live. The best course of action would be to learn to communicate at least on an elementary level in (at least one of) the minority language(s), but every kind of recognition is important. Try, for instance, to use the original names of indigenous/minority individuals and learn how to pronounce them correctly. Find out what the original place names were/are in the indigenous/minority language in your area, and how they can be used officially. Find out which other names derive from those languages and how attention can be paid to the connection. Remember how important it is-especially for minority children-to have a positive response from the environment. Minority languages are not a threat, and a will to keep a minority language alive is not an attack on you or your language. The right to one's own language is one of the most essential existential issues that human beings have to deal with. A community with more languages than one is natural and represents strength, not weakness.

If you are an indigenous or minority representative, share your knowledge with others. Remember that the planet cannot exist without us-biodiversity and linguistic and cultural diversity are related and support each other mutually (see [www.terralingua.org](http://www.terralingua.org)) and are prerequisites for life on earth. Land and language support each other as indigenous peoples have always known. With the death of the last speaker of any language, a vast library dies-and it might have contained solutions to some of the urgent problems facing the survival of the planet.

## **Acknowledgements**

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<sup>1</sup> See Huss, 1999 and Aikio-Puoskari & Pentikäinen, 2001 for Finland; Magga, 1994 for Norway; and Hyltenstam et al., 1999 for Sweden.

<sup>2</sup> Since 1998 every Saami child all over the country has an individual right to the teaching of Saami as a subject in comprehensive school (ages 7-15). Within the Saami districts in the north they also have an individual right to be taught through the medium of Saami. Outside this area, there must be least ten pupils to claim this right (Law on education 17.07.1998 nr. 61 from KUF [Kirke-, utdannings- og forskningsdepartementet], § 6-2, Samisk opplæring i grunnskolen).

<sup>3</sup> The question is to what extent having high levels of competence in two or more

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languages that can be used for the same purposes always leads to monolingualism in a majority language (as was thought earlier). Another question is to what extent diglossia (where two languages are used for different purposes) also in the end leads to monolingualism in a majority language in societies where the general linguistic ethos is monolingually oriented, as it is in most Western societies. A solution is that various systems always support and use the language (of those that people are supposed to become multilingual in) that otherwise has fewer chances of developing up to a high formal level. And this is always the indigenous language, for both minorities and those in the majority population who want to become multilingual. Equality must always be seen in the light of the goals rather than in a mechanical way.