

# **Ethnic Groups, Language Maintenance and Ethnic Identity**

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## **Introduction**

In the following I am going to look at the development and future prospects of the language situation in Finland from the wider point of view of ethnic group, language maintenance and identity. When speaking about Saami I shall widen my perspective beyond the national borders.

The linguistic situation in Finland is the outcome of a long historic process. Originally a province in the Swedish realm its official language was Swedish. The three other spoken languages of the time were Finnish which was spoken by the majority of the population in the province, and Saami or Lappish spoken by the fishermen, hunters and reindeer herders in the northern parts of the province which is now known as Finnish Lapland, and towards the end of the Swedish rule, Romany spoken by a few migrating bands in the southern parts of Finland.

## **Finnish and Swedish**

When Sweden ceded Finland to Russia in 1809, Finland became an autonomous grand duchy where administration was based on the Swedish system and where Swedish legislation lived on; it goes almost without saying that Swedish remained the official language also in the autonomic grand duchy, even if the head of state was the Russian emperor.

The European national romanticism movement of the latter half of the 19th century sought to establish a national identity for Finland which was separated from Sweden but not integrated into the Russian state. One of the vehicles of this identity was the Finnish language which distinguished the administratively independent semi-nation from Swedes in the west and Russians in the east. Having a distinct language was considered to be the basis of being a separate nation and being a separate nation justified the

aspiration to becoming independent from foreign rule. As the main figure of the Finnish patriotic movement Johan Wilhelm Snellman – whose native language was Swedish – put it in the mid-19th century: "We are not Swedes, we won't become Russians, so let us be Finns". Finnish was officially equalized with Swedish in Finland in 1863 with a transition period of 20 years.

The precursor to the promotion of Finnish into a vehicle of national identity was the secular public educational system which was established in mid 19th century and replaced the Swedish-based system inherited from the Swedish period. Finnish became the language of instruction in the public primary schools of the Finnish-speaking areas whereas the use of Swedish continued in Swedish-speaking areas. Even though high schools also started using Finnish as a language of instruction in the latter part of the 19th century, Finnish was not equalized with Swedish in university instruction until the 1930's, a couple of decades after Finland became independent in 1917.

In a little more than a century Swedish had lost most of the momentum in public life and it became the minority language it is today, equal with Finnish on paper but spoken by a minority of 6 % of the population and therefore less visible in public life. Alongside with this development, Finnish was promoted from a minority language of a Swedish province to the main national language of Finland. At present Finnish is the dominant language in higher education, but there are a number of bilingual academic institutions such as the University of Helsinki and monolingual Swedish institutions such as Åbo Akademi and the Svenska Handelshögskolan (Swedish School of Economics).

Another precondition for the promotion of Finnish to a national and official language in 1863 was its public use in churches and the literal tradition which started in the 16th century. In addition to religious texts Finnish was initially used in practical contexts such as law translations and calendars. In the second half of the 19th century, after the publication of the national epic Kalevala, the first Finnish secular novels, plays and poems were published and Finnish eventually became a full-fledged language with adequate expressive power for all walks of social life.

As a national language alongside with Finnish, Swedish enjoys a full educational system, state services, county services in bilingual counties, numerous daily newspapers, a national radio and TV channel, local radio channels, a national language-based political party and – in addition to monolingual Swedish counties on the western and southern coast – the monolingual Swedish-speaking archipelago province Åland. Even though

the percentage of Swedish-speakers on the mainland (the autonomous 100 % Swedish-speaking Åland archipelago excluded) has been in steady decline from 14 % in 1880 to the present 6 %, initially as a result of the Finnicization movement of the national program around the year 1900 and later on as a result of mixed marriages and urbanization, the number of speakers has remained largely the same over the years. It is estimated that in addition to the 300.000 individuals who have registered Swedish as their native language at present there are another 300.000 bilingual speakers who identify themselves with the Finnish-speaking population.

Finland-Swedish identity as a group of people is based on language, and only those who have been officially registered as Swedish-speakers are eligible to vote in the elections of the national organ for Finland-Swedish interests, Svenska Finlands folkting, and to participate in its decision-making. Language-based identity is natural, since many originally Finnish-speaking families began using Swedish when it was the dominant language under Swedish rule, and as the independence movement chose Finnish as one of its vehicles of national identity the tide turned and many Swedish-speaking families went over to use Finnish as their home language. Recently there have opinions according to which descent should also be used as an additional ethnic criterion but these have met with due criticism. Language-based identity clearly favors linguistic, communicational and cultural unity of the ethnic group especially in a situation where there is no clear areal identity and where no physiological properties nor features of material or spiritual culture distinguish the ethnic group from others in the same area.

### **Saami**

The third indigenous language in Finland, Saami, remained outside these national processes in the northern parts of the country where it was spoken by a couple of thousand people. The adjacent areas in inland Norway, Russia and Sweden were inhabited by the same ethnic group and practically all the inhabitants on the northernmost coast of Norway and on the Kola Peninsula in the north-western extreme of Russia were Saami-speaking around the year 1500 AD.

In 1640 the northernmost quarter of the area of present Finland, the large adjacent areas in and east of the Scandinavian highland of present Sweden and the inland of present northernmost Norway belonged to the Saami area called Lapland where no settlers were allowed except with the consent of the Saami. Towards the end of the 17th century the Saami area was opened for settlers and the Saami in Finland were gradually assimilated by the expanding Finnish-speaking majority population except in the present Saami area which comprizes the three northernmost counties of the country

and the northern corner of a fourth. In this area the Saami are in minority except in the northernmost county Utsjoki where Saami is the native language of a narrow majority.

Language may have played a part in Saami identity prior to 1640 but it is probable that identity was based mainly on areal, occupational and – very likely – spiritual factors. The Saami were in practically absolute majority in the inland, and language seems to have been the vehicle of local identity instead of an ethnic one. This is reflected in the formation of a number of local varieties which developed into several different languages by 1640. The Saami communities, so-called *siidas*, signaled their local identities and communalities the same way as today, through the idioms their members spoke and through the features of their material culture, especially clothing and ornamentation.

As the Finnish-speaking majority populations expanded into the Saami areas, areal identity lost its significance, and when the settlers took up hunting, fishing and eventually reindeer herding and the Saami acquired cattle, it became increasingly difficult to maintain occupation-based identity. What was left was language and ethnic clothing. As most Saami wear ethnic clothing only at festivities, language has become the most important ethnicity marker in daily life.

Before becoming a vehicle of identity the Saami language was an instrument, not only to the Saami themselves but also to outside forces making their way into the Saami areas. The most obvious example of this is the activities of the churches.

The Saami area is the meeting zone of Rome and Constantinople which is why the western Saami are Lutheran and the eastern Saami Greek-Orthodox. The first western churches in the Saami area were built *iuxta paganum* – next to pagans – as we are told, in the early 14th century, and the activities of the eastern church reached a concrete milestone in the early 15th century with the founding of the first monastery in the White Sea the western and northern coasts of which were mostly Saami-speaking at the time.

The clerical use of Saami began in the 17th century in Sweden. The Swedish government commissioned the first Saami books which were written in what seems to be a Saami-based pidgin language. The author was a clergyman who belonged to a family of traders and his knowledge of Saami obviously derived from that context. After some unsuccessful experiments in the first half of the 17th century which aspired at creating a common language for all the Saami in the Swedish realm, true Saami idioms were used in publications which from the 18th century on also contained

practical books such as calendars and law translations. Original Saami-language fiction and poetry began to be published in the beginning of the 20th century. At present the bulk of publications in Saami are school books, fiction and poetry comes next and religious literature is published comparatively little.

Apart from occasional primers, the first school text book in Saami – in arithmetics – was published in the late 19th century. During the first half of the 20th century very little school materials were printed in the Nordic countries, but the idea of school instruction in vernaculars which was the leading thought of the public educational systems in these countries, sipped into to the Saami schools already in the beginning of the 20th century when the first native Saami teachers began their careers. Saami was used in schools alongside with the official language of the country, and some teachers even produced occasional and unpublished school materials in Saami.

The work of these pioneers paved the way for later developments which led to a full Saami school curriculum from the first grade right up to high school. Because of the lack of qualified teachers, the higher grades, junior high and high school, usually have less courses conducted in Saami but in primary schools all subjects except the official language of the country are taught in Saami. The curriculum aims at native language maintenance and not at a transition to official language.

In higher education, practically all the instruction is given in Saami in the Sámi allaskuvla (Saami University College) in Guovdageaidnu, Norway, which mainly educates primary school teachers. Saami Language Studies is also taught as a major subject in three Nordic universities in Oulu (Finland), Tromsø (Norway) and Umeå (Sweden). In Oulu and Tromsø both theoretical and practical instruction is given entirely in Saami, and the students are also required to use Saami in their exams, term papers and theses as well as in their interactions with the department staff. The formal terminology and expressions began developing after World War II when the first grammatical expositions in Saami were written and published, and the meetings of the Saami language students and researchers in the 70's and 80's were especially important for the development of an adequate expressive power for university studies.

At present there is both spontaneous and formal vocabulary and expression development going on to develop the Saami language as an adequate medium of communication in changing society. Especially the Norwegian efforts to finance language development work as well as cultural

activities on the whole is worth mentioning in this context, and I am sorry to say that Finland and Sweden lag far behind.

Speaking of education in Saami, a lucid but short and discouraging sideway must be mentioned. The ethnic policy in the Soviet Union in the 20's and most of the 30's stressed the importance of local languages and cultures. In the ensuing educational program, complete primary school curriculums and materials were developed and teachers trained for most of the northern minorities, among them also the Saami on the Kola Peninsula, forty years earlier than the corresponding developments took place in the Nordic countries. Under Stalin's terror in the late 30's the tide turned. School instruction in vernaculars was abolished as a nationalistic phenomenon and most of the teachers were liquidated. The turmoils of World War II and its aftermath worsened the circumstances. After the war the Kola Peninsula was made a military area because it was the main port of the western Soviet Union and played an important part in World War II. In the new demographic situation which followed, there have been practically only mixed marriages and in these mixed families only Russian was spoken. At present very few people in reproductive age are able to use Saami as a language of the home, and the chances of survival look very grim for the Saami language on the Kola peninsula.

In addition to educational, research and cultural institutions and the fact that Saami is spoken in several countries with different dominant languages the maintenance of Saami is further supported by the so-called Saami Language Acts given in the 90's in each of the three Nordic countries Finland, Norway and Sweden. These acts guarantee that people have the right to use Saami both orally and in writing when approaching state, province and county authorities as well as the right to receive official documents in Saami. The officials are not required to use Saami themselves and often interpreters will be used. Having a third party present is awkward in many cases and therefore many people try to do without an interpreter and use the official language of the country.

Expanding the use of Saami beyond traditional domains is necessary for the maintenance of the language in modern society. There are many examples of societies which have replaced their language in the course of two generations: the grandparent generation is practically monolingual in the original language of the society and speak it to the next generation which becomes bilingual in schools, through media and when dealing with authorities. They try to do their children a service by speaking to them in the official language and make them monolingual but in a language different from their grandparents' generation.

The pressure to begin using the majority language and to let go of native Saami has become especially heavy in the late 60's and 70's with the intensification of education, entertainment media and the introduction of television and later on computers with their entertainment and educational uses. If these developments wouldn't have been counterbalanced with measures which expanded the use of Saami to practically all domains of modern society and thereby strengthened its social status, it is likely that linguistic acculturation in Saamiland would have been fast and completed in a few generations. Now the Saami language seems to be viable in the core areas but there are imminent external and internal threats to its maintenance.

The external threats are the consequences of globalization and economic development which hit hard the traditional Saami ways to make a living. Reindeer herding and fishing are viewed not as a ways of life but as economic activities which have to obey the rules of the commercial world in terms of profit and organization, and the number of reindeer herders have to be reduced accordingly. At the end reindeer husbandry may support only one fourth of the people it supported in the 60's. Such developments threaten the very existence of the core Saami communities by undermining a substantial part of their economical basis.

The internal threat is probably as severe in the long run. It threatens the existence of the Saami as a linguistic and cultural group.

Saami interests are discussed and ethnic policy outlined in representative organs called Saami Parliaments; there are three of them, one in Finland, one in Norway and one in Sweden. In order to be entered into the electoral register, one has to regard oneself as Saami and speak Saami as one's native language or have a parent or grandparent who does or has done so or who has been entered into the Saami electoral register. Although the register is based on language, it is not necessarily the language of the person in the register and not even the language of the grandparent generation. As more and more people move away from the core Saami areas and their children and grandchildren grow up in majority contexts, most voters won't differ linguistically nor culturally from their neighbors.

In the end, descent becomes the most important criterion instead of language and culture. The strategy the Saami have chosen is the opposite of that of the Finland-Swedes. It remains to be seen, which of the two strategies is more useful with the maintenance of an ethnic group in mind, but it is obvious that the Saami strategy leads to a linguistically and culturally heterogeneous electorate with conflicting interests in such vital matters as the status of the language and whether the natural resources in the Saami areas should be used to make a living or for recreational purposes.

## **Romany**

A different language situation prevails among the Finnish Roma or Gypsies who came to the Swedish realm in the 16th century and represent the fourth old linguistic group in pre-autonomous Finland where Roma groups were ordered to move in late 17th century. As a vehicle of identity their language differs markedly from that of the Finnish-, Swedish- or Saami-speaking groups. Finnish Romany ceased to be the first language of the members of the ethnic group in late 19th century but lived on as a restricted secret language which was learned as a part of the socialization process. The identity of the Roma as a group of people is not based on everyday language anymore but on relationships within and between the Romany families, codes of conduct and dressing and – to an ever lesser extent – ability to use the secret language. The language has been used in religious contexts and there is a primer and elementary educational materials in addition to a few dictionaries and grammatical expositions. It is unlikely that the language will be reestablished as a first language of the Roma in Finland but it seems that courses and school programs are necessary for its maintenance as a part of their cultural heritage. In a public education context, however, the problem is its main use as a secret language which should not be made public.

## **Language Maintenance: How and Why**

These are, in short outline, the vicissitudes of the four old oral languages in Finland. Finnish which was initially a minority language in the Swedish realm was promoted to the first language of an emerging nation. Swedish went the opposite way but maintained its official position as a national language and is in principle equal with Finnish in public life. The same ideas which promoted Finnish – that all peoples have the right to maintain and develop their own languages – were used to promote Saami into the language of schools and higher education. Saami is in principle equal with Finnish and Swedish in primary and secondary school instruction and an official language in the Saami area. Romany has lost its status as a first language of its group but been maintained as a second language with special functions but without official status.

According to some estimates, there are more than six thousand human languages in the world. The real number might be larger, however, because it is difficult to draw a line between languages and dialects. What is a single language with a number of dialects for one person may be a set of languages for another.

Most of the present 6000-7000 languages are minority languages and are spoken by a very small number of people. It is predicted that the majority of these language will pass into oblivion in a few generations and that we are ultimately left with a couple of hundred viable languages.

It is clear, however, that the languages of the world and their varieties are vehicles of identity, and together with physical things such as what people wear, how they shape their artefacts, how they decorate their surroundings and so on, language and its variants signalize identities: we talk like this and others talk differently. If languages are lost, local and group identities will be reflected in language variants rather than languages themselves.

It is a frequently asked questions whether and why languages should be maintained. In a global human heritage perspective, languages are as unique as biological species and linguistic diversity should therefore be maintained in the same spirit as biological diversity.

The other argument, which is as important as the global human heritage argument, is the right of every ethnic group to maintain and develop its own language as a means of communication and a vehicle of identity if it wishes to do so and the necessary human resources are available. This is the human rights argument.

The third argument in addition to the human heritage and human rights arguments is the intellectual argument. Languages are also instruments of thought and each of them looks at the world in a different way in terms of the meanings of their words, the construction of their expressions and their strategy to relate things. Language does not determine thinking but rather guides the speaker's attention to the concepts expressed by its words or semantic categories used in its structure. Thus for the speaker of a language which uses the dual number, situations with two participants are fundamentally different from situations with more than two participants and the speaker of a language with a detailed terminology for different kinds of snow is more likely to pay attention to the quality of snow than the speaker of a language without such detailed terminology. In this respect, too, languages are as unique as natural species and should be provided with the same conditions of survival and development and protection against threats as natural species.