

SÁMOVÉ

JAZYK, LITERATURA A SPOLEČNOST

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ON SOCIOLINGUISTICS IN SÁMI CONTEXTS

Jon Todal

I. THE SÁMI CHECKER BOARD

The Sámi languages are spoken in the northern parts of the Scandinavian Peninsula and on the Kola Peninsula in Northwestern Russia, which comprise a contiguous region. The Sámi are an indigenous people in this area. Sámi languages are spoken in Russia, Finland, Sweden and Norway. They are minority languages in all of the four countries. The respective majority languages are Russian, Finnish, Swedish and Norwegian. Sámi belongs to the family of Finno-Ugric languages. The three majority languages, Russian, Swedish and Norwegian, are Indo-European languages, the fourth majority language, Finnish, is Finno-Ugric, but Finnish and Sámi are not mutually intelligible.

I am frequently asked to explain the Sámi language situation of today, but this is an impossible task, as there is no such thing as *the* Sámi language situation. There is a myriad of Sámi language situations.

Figure 1

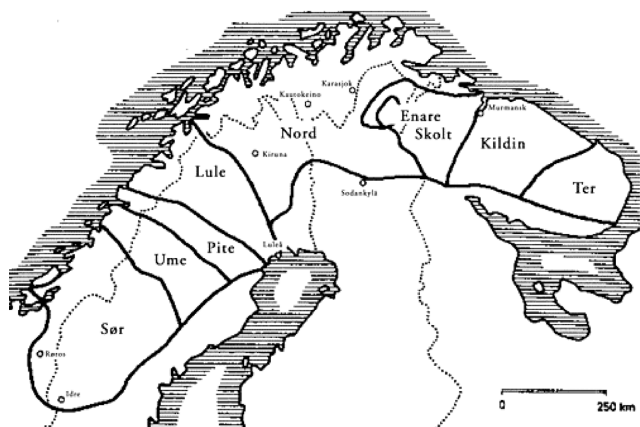


Figure 1 shows the traditional area of habitation for the Sámi people. As we can see, it comprises large parts of the Scandinavian Peninsula and the Kola Peninsula in Northwestern Russia. The boundaries drawn on the map, which go in an east-west direction, delineate the boundaries for the various Sámi languages. It is customary to divide Sámi into nine or ten different languages. But it must also be emphasized that they comprise a dialect continuum, in which neighboring languages are – or were – mutually understandable. The names on the map stand for the following nine languages:

- | | | |
|-----------|---|-----------------|
| 1. Sør | = | Southern Sámi |
| 2. Ume | = | Ume Sámi |
| 3. Pite | = | Pite Sámi |
| 4. Lule | = | Lule Sámi |
| 5. Nord | = | Northern Sámi |
| 6. Skolt | = | Skolt Sámi |
| 7. Enare | = | Anár/Inari Sámi |
| 8. Kildin | = | Kildin Sámi |
| 9. Ter | = | Ter Sámi |

In addition to these nine languages, it is customary to name a tenth Sámi language in the Russian area of the Kola Peninsula, namely Akkala Sámi. In some contexts Ume Sámi is a Southern Sámi dialect, but it also shares some grammatical traits with Sámi languages further to the north.

In view of the fact that there are nine or ten Sámi languages, we can say that there also are nine or ten language situations. But it is even more complicated than this would indicate. At the same time that the boundaries for the Sámi language go in an east-west direction, the boundaries between the countries Russia, Finland, Sweden and Norway go in a south-north direction. Thus, we can describe the situation as a checker board with different language situations within each square.

Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of the various Sámi languages in the four countries where they are spoken.

Figure 2

	Russia	Finland	Norway	Sweden
Southern Sámi			X	X
Ume Sámi			X	X
Pite Sámi			X	X
Lule Sámi			X	X
Northern Sámi		X	X	X
Skolt Sámi	X	X	X	
Inari Sámi		X		
Akala Sámi	X			
Kildin Sámi	X			
Ter Sámi	X			

Figure 2 shows that four of the languages are spoken in only one of the countries; other four are spoken in two countries and two of them (Northern Sámi and Skolt Sámi are spoken in three of the four countries).

The European Union should also be mentioned in this connection, as its boundaries have consequences for the Sámi

nation. Finland and Sweden are members of the EU, while Norway and Russia are not.

Each of the different countries has its own majority language, school system, legal system and political traditions, and therefore a different understanding of “minority language”. Continuing on this line of thought, we can say, for example, that there are three different language situations for Northern Sámi, since the Northern Sámi region is shared by three countries.

For this reason, research in the field of Sámi sociolinguistics is most often undertaken using only one of the squares in the checker board in Figure 2.

II. THREATENED SÁMI LANGUAGES

It may be said that all of the nine or ten Sámi languages are threatened in some way. But some of them are more threatened than others. Pite Sámi and Ter Sámi are no longer being transmitted to children, a fact which may indicate that they will disappear if no steps are taken in future in order to save them.

Inari Sámi and Lule Sámi are spoken by only a few hundred speakers. But these languages are still being spoken by children and young people, and there are schools, nursery schools and kindergartens where these languages are used.

Northern Sámi has the strongest position of all the nine languages. The language is written by the mass media, spoken on radio and TV, used by the Government and in politics, schools, pre-schools; popular songs are written in it and it is used in the churches. And most important of all, it is transmitted in a natural way from generation to generation within the families. But in the case of Northern Sámi, it is necessary to distinguish between conditions within the core area for the language and the area outside it.

III. SÁMI SOCIOLINGUISTICS

III.1 Sámi Languages as a University Subject

Since the second half of the 1800s, it has been possible to study Sámi language at the university level. Today, you can study Sámi language at this level at the University of Uppsala and the University of Umeå in Sweden, the University of Oulu in Finland and the University of Tromsø in Norway. In addition, you can study it at the Sámi University College in Norway.

The Sámi University College at Guovdageaidnu is situated in the middle of the Northern Sámi area on the Norwegian side of the border. The Sámi University College was established in 1989.

The college is the only Sámi institution of higher education in the world, and it is the college's aim to serve the entire Sámi region. For all practical purposes, however, it works within the Northern Sámi area and the language of instruction and administration at the Sámi University College is Northern Sámi. But the college does have students from all four countries in the Sámi region.

In the study of Sámi languages, the emphasis has traditionally been placed on the study of grammar and language history, particularly from earlier times. Historical linguistics has enjoyed a particularly strong position. Up to the present, there have been very few studies of the Sámi languages in a societal context.

III.2 Sociolinguistics

Sociolinguistics is a new discipline in our field. It has appeared in the 1980s, when Elina Helander submitted her doctoral dissertation on language practice in a small, trilingual society in Northern Sweden, where Sámi, Finnish and Swedish were spoken (Helander 1984).

In the late 1980s, Marjut Aikio completed a doctorate on language shift in a rural area in Northern Finland, from Northern Sámi to Finnish (Aikio 1988).

In 1999, Leena Huss, who works at the University of Uppsala in Sweden, published the book *Reversing Language Shift in the Far North*, which addresses all the minority languages in Northern Scandinavia (Huss 1999).

In 2000, Anna-Riitta Lindgren, who is at the faculty at the University of Tromsø, published a study on the use of Sámi language among Sámi who had moved to the Finnish capital of Helsinki (Lindgren 2000).

Jon Todal followed up this rather short tradition when he wrote his dissertation on revitalizing the Sámi languages in Norway (Todal 2002).

The five persons mentioned above did their research and produced their dissertations without any support of local colleagues or university departments in the field of Sámi sociolinguistics.

There is also much variation in the language used to spread the findings. Helander's dissertation is written in Swedish, Aiko and Lindgren wrote their books in Finnish, Huss used English and Todal Norwegian. Not one of the books is written in a Sámi language. This is also a good illustration of the complicated language situation within the Sámi area!

But this situation is about to change. In 2005, Torkel Rasmussen wrote his master's thesis on Sámi sociolinguistics (Rasmussen 2005). This thesis is written in Northern Sámi. At present (2009), Rasmussen is working on his doctoral dissertation on language conditions in the Tana Valley, a valley which is divided by the national boundary between Finland and Norway and where the spoken language has traditionally been Northern Sámi. This dissertation will be the first in the field of sociolinguistics that is written in a Sámi language.

At the Sámi University College, there are now three doctoral candidates who are writing their dissertations in sociolinguistics. There are also three doctoral candidates in the field at the University of Tromsø. In addition, the Sámi University College has three students working on their master's degrees in the field (2009). They are all writing their degrees in Sámi.

It was a milestone in our young field when the Sámi University College established a professorate in sociolinguistics in 2008.

IV. LANGUAGE REVITALIZATION IN ONE CHECKER BOARD SQUARE

As we have seen, all of the Sámi languages must be regarded as threatened languages, and since this is the case, it is natural for scholars in the field of Sámi sociolinguistics to focus on two areas of language change (from Sámi to one of the majority languages) and language revitalization (strengthening Sámi). Most of the studies mentioned above take the latter into consideration, and for some of them, it is the main perspective. All of those who are presently working on doctoral dissertations in the field of Sámi sociolinguistics are concerned with questions connected with revitalization. Several of them have already written a master's thesis on the subject of revitalization (Johansen 2006, Johansen 2007, Rasmussen 2005, Satta 2005, Scheller 2004).

One of the most interesting language revitalization processes to be found on the Sámi checker board lies in the square "Southern Sámi in Norway".

Unfortunately, there are no official statistics to tell us the size of the Southern Sámi population in Norway or the number of people who speak Southern Sámi. One way to create some statistical basis for numbers would be to incorporate questions in the census surveys that are taken every ten years. And this has been done. But the census for 1970 was the last one in Norway to ask questions regarding the knowledge of the Sámi language. These questions were addressed to people in some districts in the three northernmost provinces of the country. Norwegian censuses have never asked questions about language use or ethnicity in Southern Norway, where the majority of the Southern Sámi families live. There has been resistance in Norway, especially after the World War II, to register a person's ethnicity.

IV.1 Southern Sámi in the Family Setting in Norway

In 2000, the Sámi Language Council financed a survey on the use of the Sámi language in Norway. The Center for Sámi Resources

and Studies carried out the survey, with the aid of the Norwegian Gallup Institute, Opinion. Using telephone interviews, a representative selection of people living in the districts where it was known that Sámi had been used as the vernacular in everyday life were questioned. Those who were contacted for the survey answered questions about their language competence.

Seventeen percent of the respondents said that they understood Sámi well enough to follow a conversation on everyday matters. If we can assume that the selection was indeed representative for the entire population in these districts, the answers to the survey indicate that about 25,000 people in Norway can understand an everyday conversation in Sámi. This number, however, applies to three of the Sámi languages in Norway taken together, Northern Sámi, Lule Sámi and Southern Sámi. According to the survey, about 1000 persons in Norway understand a conversation in Southern Sámi.

Respondents in the survey who indicated that they understood Southern Sámi were interviewed in greater detail as to their assessment of their language ability. Using a scale from “very good” to “nothing”, they were asked to evaluate their own ability to understand, speak, read and write Southern Sámi. With reference to linguistic revitalization, it is of particular interest to ascertain the number of people with the ability to *speak* Southern Sámi. It will be primarily this group that can be instrumental in passing the spoken language on to the youngest generation.

Twenty-eight percent of those who answered that they understood Southern Sámi rated their spoken ability as “good” or “very good”. Accordingly, there should be about 280 persons in Norway who have a mastery of spoken Southern Sámi (numerical results from the survey are presented in Ravna 2000a and 2000b; methodology is evaluated and commented on in Skutnabb-Kangas 2000).

The number of ethnic Southern Sámi in Norway has been unofficially estimated at around 1000 persons (Dunfjeld 1996). As related above, Ravna (2000a and 2000b) estimates that ca. 280 persons in Norway have a good mastery of the spoken language. Those who speak the Southern Sámi language well

thus constitute about 28 % of the Southern Sámi living on the Norwegian side of the border. Using these figures, we can see that a majority of Southern Sámi families in Norway have exchanged the Southern Sámi vernacular for Norwegian.

Furthermore, the above numbers indicate that a revitalization of the language can be achieved only to a limited degree via a parent or even a grandparent generation that changes its language in the home setting from Norwegian to Southern Sámi, since there are few parents who are fluent enough in Southern Sámi to be able to transmit the language in this way. In most cases, revitalization efforts must begin in the nursery school, kindergarten and elementary school, where Southern Sámi is put to use, and then family members can widen the efforts by using as much Southern Sámi language as they can in dealings with the children. In such a context, the number of pupils who choose Southern Sámi as a school subject will be of particular interest to those who desire revitalization.

The only reliable statistics we have give us the number of pupils who have elected Southern Sámi as a school subject.

IV.2 Southern Sámi in Elementary Schools in Norway

Sámi is an official language in Norway and Sámi children have legal right to learn Sámi as a subject in elementary schools.

In the period from the academic year 1993/1994 until 2008/2009, the number of pupils electing Southern Sámi in the elementary school in Norway increased, as the numbers in the Table 1 indicate.

The number of pupils taking Southern Sámi increased from 53 for the academic year 1993/94 to 101 for the academic year 2008/2009. This was an increase of almost 100% during this period. Since Southern Sámi is an elective, these figures may be interpreted as an indicator of increasing interest among Southern Sámi parents for their children to learn the language. In the context of the present-day language situation, we can also interpret this

Table 1 Numbers of pupils receiving instruction in Southern Sámi in the elementary school in Norway 1993–2004

Academic Year	1993/94	1997/98	2001/02	2006/07	2008/09
Number of Pupils	53	84	98	116	101

(Numbers for academic years 1993/94 and 1997/98 are taken from Todal 2002, 89–101. Numbers for academic years 2001/02 to 2008/09 are taken from *Grunnskolenes info-system [Elementary School Information System]*)

as an indicator of increasing interest in the revitalization of Southern Sámi.

Instruction in Southern Sámi in Norway is today offered as two separate streams that parents can choose between. These streams or curricula are: Southern Sámi as a first language and Southern Sámi as a second language. Both streams have functional bilingualism as their goal. “Southern Sámi as a first language” requires that instruction in other subjects than Southern Sámi also be given in the Southern Sámi language. In the stream “Southern Sámi as a second language” this model is an *option*, but it is not required.

Of the two models, “Southern Sámi as a first language”, the one that requires instruction to be given in Southern Sámi, is best suited to promote linguistic revitalization. According to the educational categories for strong and weak bilingual education set up by Baker (2001, 192–202), only “Southern Sámi as a first language” is a strong model. Weak models are less suited for achieving the goal of bilingualism.

Students studying Southern Sámi in Norway were distributed between the two models mentioned above as shown in Table 2 below.

Can we interpret these figures as signs of a Southern Sámi language revitalization?

Table 2 Distribution of pupils taking Southern Sámi in Norwegian elementary schools during the period 1997/98 – 2008/09, according to the curriculum elected

	1997/98	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09
Total students	90	123	116	105	101
Southern Sámi as a first language	4	16	18	16	19
Southern Sámi as a second language	86	107	98	89	82

Table 2 shows that around 4 % of the students taking Southern Sámi followed the strong bilingual model, Southern Sámi as a first language, during the academic year 1997/98. The percentage had increased to 19 % by the academic year 2008/09.

V. THE FUTURE

Research in sociolinguistics addresses a variety of subjects and scholars must be given freedom to choose the area that interests them most. In the Sámi context, however, it is natural to focus on questions that approach the Sámi languages as *threatened languages*. Language shift and revitalization will therefore provide important areas for research. On the Norwegian side of the border, the situation for the Southern Sámi language, discussed in section 4, provides ample material for research projects on these subjects.

In an area where we find so many languages as we do in the Sámi area, including both various Sámi languages and various majority languages, it is also natural to do research on what happens as a result of *language contact*. This research has not been the subject of this article, but it should be mentioned that scholars at both the University of Tromsø and the Sámi University College are working in this area, which is important in the field of sociolinguistics (cf. Bull 2004, 2006 and 2007 and Dannemark 2007).

It is not possible in an article of this type to give a complete survey of research in the field of Sámi sociolinguistics. It is my intention to show how new this discipline is in our field and to demonstrate how it has been developed and strengthened during past few years. In the next few years, several doctoral dissertations will be published in the field of Sámi sociolinguistics, and then the situation will be entirely different, much better than up to the present, and with a promising future. These developments should be inspiring for all of those who are interested in the relationship between minority languages and society.

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