

Small languages and small language communities 52

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THE SOUTHERN SAAMI LANGUAGE IN SVAHKEN SIJTE¹

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Abstract

The Southern Saami language is one of several Saami languages in Scandinavia and Northwest Russia. Today the Southern Saami language is an endangered language; most of the speakers are older people. This article describes an effort to transmit the language to the children in Svahken Sijte, the southernmost reindeer herding community in Norway.

The Saami are an indigenous people of the Scandinavian Peninsula and the Kola Peninsula in Northwest Russia. In this area a number of Saami languages are spoken. These languages belong to the Finno-Ugric language family.

Today, the borders between Russia, Finland, Sweden, and Norway divide the Saami nation into four areas, but the Saami languages and the transition from dialect to dialect do not follow state borders. All the four states mentioned have practiced a policy of assimilation towards the Saami. That the Saami lived along state borders was an important reason for the assimilation policy; the states' governments wanted to have a population they could trust in these vulnerable areas. The official justification for the assimilation was based to a large degree on social Darwinism. Assimilation implied lifting "backward" groups up to a higher level. The Saami languages and Saami ethnicity became stigmatized, and many bilingual Saami parents started to speak the majority language with their children at home.

In surveys of the Saami language one will normally learn that there are nine different "languages" or main dialects. Such divisions are, of course, always more or less arbitrary and may be subject to debate. In any case, this division was made some time ago, and three of these dialects or languages are no longer transmitted to children.

Today there are children who speak and receive instruction in Kildin Saami (in Russia), Inari Saami (in Finland), Skolt Saami (in Finland),

Northern Saami (in Finland, Sweden, and Norway), Lule Saami (in Sweden and Norway), and Southern Saami (in Sweden and Norway). All of these Saami languages have their own written standards. By far the greatest number of Saami speakers speak Northern Saami.

Though relatively few in numbers, speakers of Southern Saami are to be found in a large geographical area in the southern reaches of the Saami realm. Northern and Southern Saami are not mutually intelligible languages. The Southern Saami language has far fewer speakers than Northern Saami, and in our time Southern Saami must be labeled as an endangered language. The subject of this article is an effort at the local level to revitalize the Southern Saami language in Norway.

1. The situation for the Southern Saami language in Norway

In Scandinavia, the traditional habitat of the Southern Saami is divided into two by the countries Sweden and Norway. There are no official statistics to tell us the size of the Southern Saami population, or the number of people who speak Southern Saami. The last Norwegian census to ask questions about knowledge of the Saami language was the census of 1970. 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 Saami families live. There has been resistance in Norway, especially after the Second World War, to register a person's ethnicity.

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

With the aid of an unofficial language survey in 2000 and the government's annual Norwegian school statistics, I will take a closer look at the situation for Southern Saami in the families and schools in Norway today. The situation for Southern Saami in Sweden will not be dealt with here. Most likely, the situation for Southern Saami in Sweden is quite similar to that in Norway.

1.1. Southern Saami in the family setting

In 2000 the Saami Language Council financed a survey on the use of the Saami language in Norway. The Center for Saami 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 Saami 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 Saami 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 Saami. This number, however, applies to all three Saami languages together, Northern Saami, Lule Saami, and Southern Saami. According to the survey, about 1000 persons in Norway understand a conversation in Southern Saami. It is this group that is of primary interest in our context.

Respondents in the survey who indicated that they understood Southern Saami 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 Saami. With reference to linguistic revitalization, it is of particular interest to ascertain the number of people with the ability to *speak* Southern Saami. 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 Saami, 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 Saami (numerical results from the survey are presented in Ravna [2000a, 2000b]; methodology is evaluated and commented on in Skutnabb-Kangas [2000]).

The number of ethnic Southern Saami in Norway has been unofficially estimated at around 2000 persons (Dunfjeld 1996). As related above, Ravna (2000a, 2000b) estimates that ca. 280 persons in Norway have a good mastery of the spoken language. Those who speak the Southern Saami language well thus constitute about 14% of the Southern Saami living on the Norwegian side of the border. Using these figures, we can see that a majority of Southern Saami families in Norway have exchanged the Southern Saami 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 changing its language from Norwegian to Southern Saami in the home setting, since there are very few parents or grandparents who are fluent enough in Southern Saami 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 Saami is put to use, and then the family members can widen the

Table 1. *Numbers of pupils receiving instruction in Southern Saami in the elementary school in Norway 1993–2004^a*

Academic year	1993/94	1994/95	1997/98	1999/2000	2001/02	2004/05
Number of pupils	53	58	84	104	98	121

a. Numbers for the academic years 1993/94 to 1999/2000 are taken from Todal (2002: 89–101). Numbers for the academic years 2001/02 to 2004/05 are taken from *Grunnskolenes info-system* [Elementary School Information System] 2005.

efforts by using as much Southern Saami language as they can in dealings with the children. In such a context, the number of pupils who choose Southern Saami as a school subject will be of particular interest to those who desire revitalization.

1.2. *Southern Saami in the elementary school of Norway*

In the period from the academic year 1993/1994 until 2004/2005, the number of pupils electing Southern Saami in the elementary school in Norway increased, as the numbers in the table below indicate.

The number of pupils taking Southern Saami increased from 53 for the academic year 1993/94 to 121 for the academic year 2004/05. This was an increase of 130% during the ten-year period. Since Southern Saami is an elective, these figures may be interpreted as an indicator of increasing interest among Southern Saami parents for their children to learn the language. In the context of the present-day language situation, we can also interpret this as an indicator of increasing interest in the revitalization of Southern Saami.

Instruction in Southern Saami in Norway today is offered as three separate streams that parents can choose among. These streams or curricula are: 1) Southern Saami as a first language, 2) Southern Saami as a second language, 3) Southern Saami language and culture. Of the three, both 1 and 2 have functional bilingualism as their goal. Curriculum 1 requires that instruction in other subjects than Southern Saami also be given in the Southern Saami language. In curriculum 2 this model is an *option*, but it is not required. Curriculum 3 does not have bilingualism as its goal, but rather an understanding of language and culture.

Of the three models, curriculum 1 is the 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 curriculum 1 (Southern Saami as a first language) is a strong model, while

the two other models are weak. The weak models are less suited to achieving the goal of bilingualism.

The students studying Southern Saami in Norway were distributed among the three model curricula mentioned above, as shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2. *Distribution of pupils taking Southern Saami in Norwegian elementary schools during the period 2001–2004, according to the curriculum elected^a*

Curriculum	2001/2002	2002/2003	2004/2005
1. Southern Saami as a first language	1	3	10
2. Southern Saami as a second language	74	79	69
3. Southern Saami language and culture	23	40	42
Total students	98	122	121

a. The figures in Table 2 are taken from *Grunnskolenes info-system* 2005.

Table 2 shows that around 1% of the students taking Southern Saami followed the strong bilingual model, Southern Saami as a first language, during the academic year 2001/02. The percentage had increased to more than 8% by the academic year 2004/05. Half of the students taking Southern Saami as a first language attend the Elgå Center for Developing Youth (henceforth, the Elgå Center) in Engerdal County.² The children from the Saami community Svahken Sijte attend school here.

2. The revitalization project in Svahken Sijte

The southernmost Norwegian Saami habitational area in the traditional sense is to be found in Engerdal County in the Province of Hedmark in Southern Norway. Here Southern Saami make a living with reindeer herding in the area surrounding Lake Femund. The reindeer-herding community is called Svahken Sijte in Southern Saami. The closest school for the children from Svahken Sijte is the Elgå Center, which offers nursery school, kindergarten, and elementary school programs. Both ethnic Saami children and ethnic Norwegian children in the area attend the school.

In 2000 the Elgå Center applied for funding to start a project to strengthen the use of the Southern Saami language among children at the nursery school, kindergarten, and elementary school levels. The application was a result of an initiative by Saami parents. The center was awarded funds to run a project over a period of five years, and it was

begun in 2001. The main objective was to use as much Southern Saami with the children as possible. The goal was for children to start speaking Southern Saami before they started elementary school, and that by that time, they would understand the language so well that they could be given lessons in various subjects in the Saami language.

2.1. *Conditions for linguistic revitalization in Svahken Sijte*

A revitalization project in Southern Saami raised quite a few questions. Factors such as language competence in the families, attitudes towards language, and the availability of teachers had not been assessed. The project had to start by assessing fundamental conditions for revitalization in the local environment.

2.1.1. *Documentation and teaching supplies.* As far back as can be documented, there have been few speakers of Southern Saami. Even so, the language itself is well documented, and there is a common spelling norm for the various Southern Saami dialects. A system of grammar has been developed, and there is a Southern Saami/Norwegian dictionary. But there is still no Norwegian/Southern Saami dictionary. Through the years, a number of teaching aids have been developed, and there are CDs, cassettes, and children's films that have been dubbed in Southern Saami.

2.1.2. *Language ability in the families.* Some of the members of the grandparent generation in Svahken Sijte can speak Southern Saami. They learned the spoken language as children and should be characterized as native speakers. They have, however, never learned to write Southern Saami.

The grandparent generation did not transmit the Saami language to their own children in the 1960s and 1970s. To understand why, we have to know the assimilation policy mentioned above. From the mid-1800s the Norwegian government developed a policy of Norwegianization towards the Saami, a policy which lasted up until the 1960s. The goal was to make the Saami as Norwegian as possible — in language, culture, and national identity. During this time the Saami languages and Saami ethnicity became stigmatized.

In addition to the stigmatization of Saami language and Saami ethnicity, bilingualism was considered harmful by the educationalists. These two things, stigmatization of the Southern Saami language and the belief that bilingualism was harmful for the children, were important factors

when the grandparent generation decided to speak Norwegian with their children at home.

The parent generation has some knowledge of Southern Saami, due in part to having heard and used many words at home as children (e.g. greetings, terms for family relations, and technical terms used in reindeer herding) and in part to having had Southern Saami as a school subject. The parent generation did not attend school in Engerdal, but were sent to a state boarding school further north. This boarding school has offered Southern Saami as a subject since as far back as 1968, but the language has rarely been used in other subjects apart from Southern Saami.

No one in the parent generation in Svahken Sijte spoke Southern Saami with their own parents as a child, and instruction in Southern Saami during a few class periods a week was not sufficient to make them active speakers of the language. But several of today's parents have taken language courses as adults. Some have even taken formal training in the language for a college degree.

2.1.3. *Attitudes towards the language and bilingualism.* Both in the homes in Svahken Sijte and in the local school, the ability to speak the Southern Saami language is seen as a positive value in itself. All of the Southern Saami parents in the district stand behind the goal of the children becoming active users of the language and behind the school's application for funding to run a five-year project promoting the Southern Saami language. Attitudes towards the language are positive, among the parents, in the school, and in the local government.

In Norway there is no tradition of promoting bilingualism through the school system. But an investment in Southern Saami in the schools will necessarily imply a simultaneous effort to make the students bilingual in Norwegian and Southern Saami. This effort implies some new methodological challenges for the schools. At the same time, it is necessary to counteract the misconception that bilingualism is harmful. Since the project was started, the project team has had to devote a lot of time to studying how to promote good bilingual development among the children.

2.1.4. *Finances.* Since the development of bilingualism has not been a traditional goal in the Norwegian school system, the public schools have not been given the means to pay for the cost of a strong bilingual educational model. The opportunity to use such a model at the Elgå Center has been made possible because the Saami Parliament provides funding for the costs during the project period. It is not certain whether a strong bilingual educational model will be financed following the end of the project period.

2.1.5. *Local leadership.* The initiative for the application for the project came from the local community, and the project is led by a local leader who speaks Southern Saami herself. The leader is also the mother of two of the children in the project. Local activists and local support is crucial for the success of language revitalization projects. Svahken Sijte is fortunate to have a local leader, local activists, and support.

2.1.6. *Professional resources.* A Saami infrastructure that can support the work for the Southern Saami language is already in place. The Saami Parliament and its funding role have already been mentioned. There is also a Saami University College that provides professional consultants on the project. The author of this article works at Saami University College and has been involved in the project as a consultant from its beginning. Individuals on the faculties of a number of Scandinavian universities (Uppsala University in Sweden, for example, and the University of Oslo in Norway) have been used as consultants for shorter periods.

Furthermore, Svahken Sijte has benefited from the international network that Saami organizations and institutions have already built up, in this case to promote efforts on behalf of language and education (concerning this network, see Huss 1997; Todal 2003). For example, both the Kohanga Reo movement in New Zealand and language policy in Wales were well known in Southern Saami circles long before the project at the Elgå Center was begun.

2.1.7. *Teachers.* It is quite difficult to find preschool and elementary school teachers who are capable of using Southern Saami on the job. There are few who possess the combination of a formal education in teaching and a good knowledge of Southern Saami. It has been difficult to recruit such persons to the Elgå Center as well, but the center has succeeded in recruiting enough faculty members with knowledge of Southern Saami so that the language has been in more use at the Elgå Center than in any other nursery school, kindergarten, or elementary school in Norway.

The South-Saami-speaking members of the staff of the Elgå Center are all ethnic Saami who find it important to transmit their heritage language to the children. They who worked in the project are not paid better than other teachers in Norway, but it has been an advantage in recruiting teachers for the project that teachers in Norway in general are better paid than teachers in Sweden. Most of the South-Saami-speaking teachers at the Elgå Center come from the Swedish side of the border.

2.1.8. *The Southern Saami linguistic domain.* Outside of the three school levels mentioned above and the home, there are few domains

where Southern Saami is in use. The work involving reindeer in the mountain area is one sphere where it is quite necessary to know Southern Saami terminology in order to function. There are some jobs in public administration and in the bureaucracy connected to the Saami Parliament,³ where a knowledge of Southern Saami is an advantage. Now and then religious services are held in Southern Saami, also in Svahken Sijte, and twice a week there is a short radio program in Southern Saami.

A natural investment in the efforts to strengthen the language in the future will be to create new domains where Southern Saami is used. It is of particular importance to create domains where the *children* can use the language.

2.2. *Description of the project*

As this article is being written, the project at the Elgå Center has not yet come to an end. After the termination of the project, it will be evaluated and a report on the results will be submitted to the Saami Parliament. In the present article, I will therefore only be able to describe what has been done in the project so far and give some indication of the results as we perceive them so far.

The project had the objective of creating an environment where the children would encounter Southern Saami as often as possible in the preschool years. The first challenge was to find nursery school teachers who could speak Southern Saami all day. The project addressed the problem by using two strategies. Firstly, when faced with the choice between employing an applicant with an education certificate and one with a good knowledge of the Southern Saami language, priority was given to the language skills. Secondly, if it was not possible to find an applicant who was a native speaker of Southern Saami, a person who had learned the language as an adult was selected. People with a good knowledge of Southern Saami as a second language can serve as good role models for the children. In addition to the tenured faculty members, the project has employed good speakers of Southern Saami to work periodically and on a temporary basis in the nursery school and kindergarten.

In order to use Southern Saami as much as possible in the day-to-day work, the project has had to negotiate with the rest of the elementary and preschool environment to make it possible for the children to have more time with the group immersed in Southern Saami. For the duration of the project this has been made possible thanks to the Saami Parliament, which has covered the extra costs for the school and preschool.

So that the children could experience speaking Southern Saami in natural settings, the project has established several Southern Saami domains where the language is used consistently. A large, pleasantly lit room in the Elgå Center is set up as a Southern Saami room. When the children are there, everyone must speak Southern Saami. Every Wednesday the children spend the day out in the mountains, where they can use a sod Saami-style hut. As long as they are there, everyone is supposed to use Southern Saami. Certain everyday situations, such as common meals, are at the same time Saami experiences. Also, there are certain people who consistently speak Southern Saami to the children.

The project has established a system to train the employees in the nursery school, kindergarten, and elementary school environments, both for those who have completed their formal training and for those who have not. The training consists of course work, seminars, and field trips. Subject matter for the course work and seminars has taken up questions concerned with bilingualism, methodology, and strategies for strengthening minority languages. Field trips have been taken to other preschools and schools where minority languages are used. Most often, the participants have visited nursery schools, kindergartens, and elementary schools in Sweden and Norway where the Northern Saami and Lule Saami languages are in use. But the project has also visited more distant places. In 2002 a group of students, teachers, parents, and one grandmother went to Sleat and Broadford on the Isle of Skye in Scotland, where they studied the instruction in Scottish Gaelic and the use of the spoken language in the school environment. In 2004, a representative for the project visited the school in St. John's on the Isle of Man in the Irish Sea, where instruction is now offered in Manx Gaelic. This got underway at about the same time as the Elgå project started its program in Southern Saami.

The leaders of the project have evaluated the linguistic results at regular intervals. This is difficult to do, since no one knows at this time what level of language ability can be *expected* of the children. No language tests in Southern Saami exist. To address these problems, the project has worked out an observation form to help with systematic observation of the actual language in use on the part of the children. As the children mature and are able to produce more advanced language, it will be possible to make recordings of their spoken language and use it to analyze their spoken ability. The project aims at developing such a database of recordings to be used in the final evaluation of the results.

Language courses have been arranged for the parents, so that they can follow the development of their children towards functional bilingualism. Several of the children now speak Southern Saami better than their parents.

2.3. *What has been achieved?*

As it turned out, it was difficult to find enough persons with knowledge of Southern Saami for the positions at the Elgå Center. As a result, it has not been possible to speak Southern Saami to the children all day every day. But in any case, the Elgå Center offers an environment where the children hear more Southern Saami than in any other school or preschool.

One of the goals for the project was that the children should become active speakers of Southern Saami. The children now answer in Southern Saami when they are spoken to in that language, and they are able to explain things in Southern Saami. We have observed that the children display a positive attitude towards the Southern Saami language, and they do not seem apprehensive about using it. By and large, however, they speak the language only with adults. With their peer group they normally use Norwegian.

Another goal was that on finishing preschool the children would understand Southern Saami sufficiently well so that the Southern Saami language could be used to teach certain subjects when they went on to elementary school. Those of the children who have now finished their preschooling and started elementary school understand the language so well that they are being taught a number of subjects in Southern Saami.

A more long-term goal is that on finishing middle school, the children will be able to express themselves equally well in Southern Saami and Norwegian. But this goal extends beyond the period of this project, which will only last five years.

2.4. *The project and the future*

The most pressing future challenge is to ensure that the children in Svahken Sijte will be given the opportunity to follow a strong bilingual educational model all the way through middle school. The opportunity to work towards this goal will mainly depend on the politicians. Southern Saami is a language threatened with extinction, and it is the responsibility of the Norwegian government to take measures to preserve it as an active language in the future. If Norway is willing to take the necessary measures, the government will have to supply funding so that the children in school at the Elgå Center will be able to continue on the course that has been begun.

In a broader perspective, the results from the Elgå Center can be important in the work to revitalize the Southern Saami language in the whole area, covering territory in Norway and Sweden. If the results from

the language motivation project at the Elgå Center are as good as they appear to be at the present time, the governments of Norway and Sweden will need to pass regulations and provide the funding so that the Svahken Sijte model can be adapted to local conditions and used in all the communities where Southern Saami students want to learn to speak, read, and write their traditional language.

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Notes

1. The author would like to thank Nancy L. Coleman for her help in translating the author's Norwegian into English.
2. County and province as governmental administrative units are used here in the American-Canadian sense. In the British sense, the Norwegian "kommune" would be called a municipality and the next level a county: Engerdal Municipality and Hedmark County.
3. The Saami Parliament (of Norway) was established in 1989 and is elected by the Saami people in Norway. The Saami in Finland and Sweden have their own parliaments. Those who want to vote in the elections to the Saami Parliament have to enroll via a Saami registration list. The parliament has no legislative power or taxation power.

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