BILINGUALISM AND LANGUAGE ATTITUDES IN
NORTHERN SAMI SPEECH COMMUNITIES IN FINLAND
PhD thesis
Summary

Thesis supervisor: Dr Bakró-Nagy Marianne, University Professor

PhD School of Linguistics,
Uralic Linguistics and Languages Programme,
Eötvös Loránd University,
Faculty of Humanities

2008, Budapest

Thesis Topic and Aims

The language of the Northern Sami speech community in Finnish Lapland, belonging to the Finno-Ugric branch of the Uralic language family, is genuinely threatened and the speakers of Northern Sami have been experiencing cultural and linguistic assimilation into the majority community over the past centuries. This has led to the eventual decrease in the functions of the minority language making it increasingly difficult for the Samis to pass their mother tongue on to young generations. The linguistic situation of the minority community has been shaped both by language shift and the measures implemented by the minority and the majority to preserve the Sámi language. The legal status of the Sami and both minority and majority attitudes have improved considerably in recent decades.
There were two overlapping aims to this research. The first aim was to identify the major patterns of language shift and the factors motivating linguistic assimilation of the Sami speech communities of Enontekiö and Sodankylä into the majority Finnish speech community. Second, the aim was also to describe the present bilingual situation in both communities through the current norms of language use and minority language attitudes. Thus, the following major topics have been touched upon in the thesis: (1) the domains and degree of Northern Sami language use, (2) preferences for language choice, (3) the attitudes of minority members to Sami, Finnish and Sami-Finnish bilingualism.

In my research I attempted to test the following hypotheses:

1. There are differences in the norms of minority language use across generations.
2. The use of Sami is the most prevailing in the informal domains of language use.
3. The Sami community has favourable attitudes towards the Sami language and culture, as well as to specific features of its bilingual situation.
4. The patterns of language use stand in correlation with the social and demographic variables of age, gender, occupation or education.
5. The language attitudes of the community do not stand in correlation with the norms of language use or with the social and demographic variables.

I tested the hypotheses by applying simple quantitative analysis and described the language shift situation qualitatively. I collected the data through questionnaires enquiring about language use and attitudes.
**Thesis Structure**

The thesis is comprised of five chapters. In the first, introductory one I describe the topic and lay down the general aims of the thesis. In the second chapter I make reference to some of the well-established body of literature in language shift and language attitudes, as well as to the key issues in research on both. In the third chapter I give an overview of the historical, social, political and linguistic characteristics of the Northern Sami community in Finland. The next three chapters are devoted to the description of the research. In the fourth chapter I define the context of the research, provide a brief description of the research setting, the informants and the questionnaire, present the research questions and set out the procedure of analysis. In the fifth chapter the focus is on the analysis of the data contained in the questionnaires followed by the sixth chapter in which I present the social and demographic variables and examine their relationship with current language use and attitudes, as well as the relationship between the two. The conclusions are drawn in the seventh chapter and the thesis ends with the list of the cited literature and the appendix.

**Research Setting**

The Northern Sami territories of Enontekiö and Sodankylä have been selected for the purpose of the research for the sole reason that systematic sociolinguistic research aiming at the investigation of language use and attitudes has not yet been carried out in the Sami communities of the region.

In 2007 according to Finnish statistics 185 people of Sami nationality lived scattered in the area of the municipality and concentrated in the central village of Hetta and in some other smaller communities.

In the same year Sodankylä had 123 Sami nationals, who spread along the main road leading through the central
village of Sodankylä and the major reindeer pastures of the region.

**Informants**

In the research I stratified the sample according to age, gender and occupation and thus included 116 informants from Enontekiö and 109 from Sodankylä. Following the distribution of the questionnaires 60 of them were returned for analysis.

The speech community was divided into four generations and included 35 women and 24 men. 60% of them (25 informants) earned their living from reindeer herding and the remaining 40% included some unemployed people, a few teachers, and several entrepreneurs from the service sector engaged mostly in selling Sami handicraft items. 66% of the informants had obtained secondary, college or university degree. 90% of them had acquired Sami at home, the rest of them, mostly the youngest at school. All of the informants were bilingual, half of them multilingual.

**Methods and Results**

1. **Language Use**

The data were collected by means of a questionnaire which had been designed to allow both qualitative and quantitative analysis. The questionnaire was composed of two major parts. The first part concentrated on gathering data on the informants’ language use in informal and formal domains with specific partners. The languages or their combinations were arranged along a scale of five. The informants were required to link each domain or partner with either the exclusive or general use of Sami or Finnish or with the mixed use of Sami and Finnish.

The first set of questions focused on the primary domain of language use, i.e. the informal one involving family
members, schoolmates, teachers, neighbours as partners of interaction. The data show that Sami is mostly used in the family with parents and siblings. The mixed use of Sami and Finnish is characteristic of the interactions between the informants and their children or spouse.

Through the second set of questions, involving the same partners as the first one, the informants instead of their own language choice gave account of the language choice of their partners. The data illustrate that both the informants and their partners mostly choose the same language in their interactions, which implies that interactions are featured by mutuality, i.e. each participant of the interaction choosing the same language for communication.

The answers to the third set of questions, inquiring about language use in formal situations where partners are dominantly Finnish speaking, point to the tendency for Samis to rely on Finnish as a means of communication for most of the time. Yet, there are some formal domains with Sami partners, including the cultural events organised for the Samis, the church and the reindeer herding communities, where they seem to use Sami and Finnish or generally Sami in their interactions.

Through the fourth set of questions I intended first to investigate the role the Sami media play in influencing the patterns of language use and second, to gain insight into the practice of reading and writing skills in Sami. Here I also designed some questions related to the linguistic automatisms in Sami. The data reveal that the informants, being bilinguals, read newspapers and literature, as well as follow TV and radio programmes mostly in both Sami and Finnish. Their writing skills, however, are largely dominated by Finnish. As for the automatisms the data demonstrate that they are mostly connected with Sami.
2. Language Attitudes

The second part of the questionnaire highlighted 45 statements through which I wished to investigate informants’ attitudes. The first set of 20 statements was related to the informants’ attitudes to their own language, the usefulness, the use, the learning and teaching of Sami. The second set of 25 statements was concerned with attitudes towards Sami and Finnish, as well as to several aspects of bilingualism. The informants were required to react to the statements by indicating their agreement or disagreement on a five-point scale.

Having compared the two sets of data I have found that the Sami community strongly agrees with the importance of preserving their own language and culture, and that they do not consider the Sami-Finnish bilingual situation restrictive or negative in any way, but thinks about it as something natural and positive.

The final part of the questionnaire consisted of some questions about the beauty of the Sami language, as well as about the oral skills in Sami. The results here convincingly show that the informants’ language choice is not so much affected by their minority language competence but by the strong emotional ties they have with their mother tongue.

The questionnaire included some open questions to allow informants to express why they like or dislike Sami and Finnish respectively. The data reveal that the love of Sami is rooted in its role as a mother tongue. It has also become clear that the richness and beauty of Sami is just as much important as its value as a means of establishing contacts with other Sami members of the community.
Correlations

1. Correlations of Informal and Formal Language Use

Having compared the social and demographical variables with the norms of informal and formal language use I have found that none of the variables stand in strong correlation with informal or formal language use. Some of the correlations, though, must be underlined here: (1) it is mainly young women with primary education who are inclined to use Sami at Sami cultural events; (2) it is also women who tend to use Sami more often in formal situations; (3) the patterns of language choice of elderly people are characterised by the use of both Sami and Finnish at the church and at Sami cultural events.

2. Other Correlations of Language Use

In the first part of the questionnaire the data also point at the fact that the language choice of the informants concerning the media and language skills does not much depend on any of the variables. Some of the key findings here include the following: (1) all informants listen to Sami radio programmes more often than to Finnish ones; (2) older generations tend to read more books in Sami than young informants do, but young generations favour newspapers in Sami more than the older Samis do; (3) young generations have better writing skills in Sami than the elderly do; (4) the more educated the informant is, the better his or her Sami writing skills are; (5) highly educated women write in Sami more often than less educated informants or men do.
3. **Correlations of Language Attitudes**

Concerning both attitude questionnaires as well as the one enquiring about the value of the Sami language and Sami language skills the data reveal the following: (1) each generation has favourable attitudes towards the Sami language and to certain aspects of bilingualism; (2) the youngest generation has the most favourable attitudes to the minority language and to bilingualism; (3) informants have positive attitudes irrespectively of their gender or occupation; (4) the informants attached strongly to their mother tongue have the most favourable attitudes to the Sami language and bilingualism; (5) those who claim to be able to express themselves the most fluently in Sami have the most positive attitudes.

4. **Correlations Between Language Attitudes and Language Use**

As it has become clear from the investigations above that the examined variables stand in loose correlation with language use in formal and informal domains as well as with language attitudes, I went on to analyse the relationship between language use and attitudes. The analysis has yielded the following results: (1) the informants who mostly communicate in Finnish have mostly neutral, to a certain extent positive, but not negative attitudes to Sami; (2) all of the informants have positive attitudes irrespectively of their language choice in formal or informal situations.
5. Correlations of Specific Attitude Statements Regarding Attitude to Minority Language

I then examined the relationship between some of the attitude statements, instrumental and integrative, and the variables of age, gender and occupation. First, I looked at language attitudes towards Sami. The analysis of instrumental attitudes has revealed that informants’ attitudes towards the pragmatic value of their mother tongue are mostly neutral or more positive than negative irrespectively of their age. 60–70% of them agreed that it is worth learning Sami and most of them also believes that Sami can be preserved. Yet, 30% of women are undecided or neutral, 30% of them are convinced and 20% are not convinced at all about the usefulness of Sami. 40% of men can think of more useful languages than their mother tongue, while 30% of them cannot make up their mind. As for integrative attitudes, the data show that all age groups completely agree that it is important to speak Sami if they want to belong to the Sami culture, except for the youngest generation as 40% of them do not agree with the statement.

I have not found any correlation between age and attitude statements which emphasise the significance of language preservation and the passing down of Sami to children. 80% of all informants completely agreed with both statements with women being more positive than men as regards the teaching of Sami to children.

Finally, I examined the relationship between TV viewing and radio listening habits and language attitudes to watching and listening to Sami language programmes. According to the data informants who prefer watching Finnish language programmes do so as well. Similarly, informants who do not prefer listening to Sami speech listen to Finnish language broadcasts on the radio.
6. Correlations of Specific Attitude Statements Regarding Attitude to Bilingualism

Next, I selected some of the attitude statements, again instrumental and integrative, concerning certain aspects of bilingualism and examined their relationship with some of the social variables and with informants’ writing and reading habits. I was particularly interested to look at attitudes on bilingual language education and on the Sami-Finnish bilingual situation.

The data suggest that 80–90% of all age groups consider bilingual language teaching as an essential way of passing Sami on to children. It also seems that the elderly are more convinced than the young that the knowledge of both languages increases their intelligence. Women’s attitudes to the bilingual situation in Finnish Lapland are 15–20% more positive than men’s but all generations consider the bilingual environment natural and positive. Informants also have positive attitudes towards reading in Sami even if most of them generally read in Finnish. Acquiring Sami writing skills is equally important for the whole community irrespectively of the fact that its members mostly write in Finnish.

7. Other Correlations of Language Attitudes

Finally, I investigated the effect of the social variables on informants’ attitudes to the beauty of both languages and on Sami oral skills.

It can thus be inferred from the data that all generations favour their mother tongue over the majority language, irrespectively of their education, with the youngest having the most favourable attitudes to their mother tongue. The middle-aged indicated a move towards Finnish with respect of favourability. However, the Sami language is more valuable for men and reindeer herders. The data here also implies that
although informants generally agree on having deteriorating oral skills in Sami, reindeer herders claim to be able to express themselves better in their mother tongue.

Conclusions

Following the analysis of the data obtained from the questionnaires and the relationship of minority language use and language attitudes with the variables of age, gender, occupation and education, the preliminary hypotheses have been verified or modified as follows:

1. There are differences in the norms of minority language use across generations.
2. The use of Sami is the most prevailing in the informal domains of minority language use.
3. The Sami community has favourable attitudes towards the Sami language and culture, as well as to specific features of their bilingual situation.
4. The patterns of language use do not stand in strong correlation with the social and demographic variables of age, gender, occupation or education.
5. The language attitudes of the community do not stand in strong correlation with the norms of language use or with the social and demographic variables.

Taking note of these hypotheses, the language shift situation of the Sami speech communities of Enontekiö and Sodankylä can be described as follows: (1) the exclusive use of the Sami language is characteristic first of all of the family domain and, second of all, of other informal domains of language use, including that of the interactions with neighbours, friends, schoolmates, Sami workmates and the interactions in the church or at Sami cultural events. (2) Sami community members tend to use Finnish with young speakers
as well as in formal domains of language use; (3) Sami speakers are inclined to use Finnish more often than Sami; (4) the interactions of children of interethnic marriages are dominated by the use of Finnish; (5) the norms of language use in formal and informal domains or language attitudes are barely influenced by the individual variables of age, gender and occupation; (6) the members of the community almost entirely consider it particularly important to preserve and teach Sami; (7) they regard the Sami-Finnish bilingual situation natural; and (8) they are strongly attached to the positive values of the Sami language, but are not sure about its usefulness.

The Sami community is evidently in a language shift situation. Although it is impossible to predict when this phase of mixed language use will be replaced by the exclusive use of the majority language, the present patterns of language use and the favourable attitudes of the community towards minority and majority language use indicate that the speech community is in an additive bilingual situation. However, functional language loss, i.e. the gradual decrease in the domains of Sami language use is an on-going process which is facilitated mostly by the fact that the community cannot preserve its compactness originating from its traditional livelihoods and that the influence of the majority language has become stronger, partly due to the role of the media, in both formal and informal domains of language use.

Several factors seem to have been contributing to the acceleration of language shift in the examined community. Still there are a lot of other factors which have worked against language shift in the past decades including the ever more popular Sami language teaching, the institutions, both at governmental and local level, engaged in the development of goals, objectives and strategies to develop the Sami language, the activities related to traditional Sami handicraft and reindeer herding as well as Sami cultural events.
Consequently, language shift and language maintenance are parallel processes in the community. From the current language shift situation it cannot be inferred that the Sami ethnic group would quickly assimilate into the majority community. Today the process of language shift is not as fast as it once was, instead it has apparently slowed down and is characterised by a Sami language community with a noticeably favourable attitude to its mother tongue and culture as well as to the present Sami-Finnish bilingual situation which is no doubt a prerequisite for the community and the minority language to survive in its dominantly Finnish bilingual community.