

STRATEGIES OF LANGUAGE REVITALIZATION IN SCANDINAVIA

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Abstract

During the course of some decades, especially since the 1960s, minorities in Scandinavia have experienced important changes in their life, changes that have influenced considerably their identities and language choices. Unfortunately, linguistic assimilation has already taken place in the case of many minority groups, but, on the other hand, there are still local communities which have maintained their mother tongue.

The situation of the Tornedalians (Finnish population living in the valley of the Tornio river in Sweden) and the Kvens (Finnish population in Norway) is very little known, because, due to the assimilation policy practised by the Swedish and the Norwegian government, respectively, they have been considered as non-existing minorities up to the near past.

Both the Tornedalians and the Kvens have lived for centuries outside the area where primarily Finnish dialects have been used. They have not been acquainted with standard Finnish in Finland, and if that is to be considered the norm, then, by that standard, their own languages could always be judged the *lesser*. This frustration persists without end, until such time the Tornedalian and the Kven language came to be accepted as independent from Finnish.

In this study I would like to present some of the most important sociolinguistic factors which have influenced the development of the Tornedalian and the Kven minority identity and the rise of the status of their language.

Key words: ethnic minority, language and identity, linguistic emancipation, language planning, language revitalization.

Introduction

It is widely known nowadays, that there are similar problems ethnic minorities living all over the world fight against. The only differences that can be detected is to what extent they are getting assimilated, how consciously they have maintained their language and culture, what measures they took to bring them to effect, as well as the amount of rights they managed to obtain from the majority nation they live together with.

Scandinavia (or Fennoscandia, if we include Finland, too) has always been mentioned in our area as the Paradise of welfare where human rights are respected, everybody is valued according to his/her own merit, irrespective of their mother tongue. It is especially Sweden that is thought about like this. And what is reality?

There is only one ethnic group living in Fennoscandia who are granted the same rights with those of the majority nation – by Constitution. And this group are the Swedish in Finland.

In my presentation, I intend to speak about two ethnic groups: the Tornedalians in Sweden and the Kvens in Norway. Both are Finno-Ugric groups and both have been subject of an assimilating policy until a short time ago. There cannot be said that their situation is perfectly in order nowadays either. Still, the process through which they achieved the path leading to revitalization is quite edifying.

How do Fennoscandians relate to the variants of Finnish spoken outside the borders of Finland?¹

The ethnic groups of Finnish origin living in Fennoscandia define themselves in relation to at least two other nations: the one is the nation of the state they live in; the other is the Finnish nation living in Finland. This is not an easy task to fulfil, provided we take into account how the nations in question influence it.

According to Giles (see Liebkind, Broo & Finnäs 1997: 50), those ethnic groups which speak an internationally accepted and valued language find themselves in a better situation than those whose language has a low prestige. Again, one mustn't forget that language and power are essentially interrelated. In the course of history those on power have always considered their languages more evolved, more civilized and more beautiful than other languages, and they have always strived for linguistic hegemony (Dufva 2002: 27). This approach obviously influenced the way Finnish speakers have been qualified in Sweden and Norway.

At the same time the judgment of the Finns from Finland regarding the variants of Finnish spoken by the ethnic groups living outside the borders of Finland has been nothing more positive. Generally the Finnish language spoken in Finland was considered *correct*, while all the others *bad or incorrect*. The main reason for this lies in the fact that the idea of a single, unitary, homogeneous language which unites the nation as a cohesive force was a central element of the creation of Finnish national identity in the 19th century. The ideal of this *pure, uncorrupted* Finnish literary language and its spoken version had vividly prevailed among the Finns until the recent past, making them suspicious to the value or even to the legitimacy of any other version of Finnish. On the other hand, the reason for this derogatory approach is often the fact that they compare the Finnish literary language with the everyday spoken language of another ethnic group instead of comparing for instance two kinds of spoken languages.

The autonomous language as a key factor of identity

It is a challenge, as well as a highly interesting subject for a researcher to examine

¹ For more on this subject, see M. Bodrogi 2006.

how the linguistic and cultural identities of Fennoscandian ethnic groups of Finnish origin have developed in the course of time. It can be stated as a general find that all the ethnic groups in question have turned to this day from evasive to conscious minorities.² It is the Tornedalians who have made the greatest progress on this path, and the Kvens have recently followed their example. Both groups succeeded in having their language variants recognized as autonomous languages and this can be regarded as their most significant result.

One of the basic components of the Tornedalians' identity is their Swedish citizenship, that is, they consider Sweden their home, and Finland as a neighbouring country. They call themselves Tornedalians, and this expresses not only their territorial, but also their cultural identity; by this, they understand a person who has Tornedalian Finnish roots, and was brought up in this region, regardless of his/her present residence or of his/her understanding or ability to speak the Finnish language. It also holds true for the Kvens that they do not regard Finland as a mother-country. Their self-definition is more problematic than that of the Tornedalians', as they mostly define themselves in relation to local communities rather than as parts of an ethnic group.

Who are the Tornedalians?

There are four Finno-Ugric ethnic groups taken into account in Sweden: the Sámi, the Forest Finns, the Finnish immigrants, and the Tornedalians. The last two groups have been recognized as *national historical minorities* (in Finnish: *kansallinen historiallinen vähemmistö*) by the Swedish state since 2000. At the same time, the languages of both groups, that is, Sweden Finnish and Meänkieli, have received an official minority language status, as well as a regional language status in Northern Sweden (Andersson & Kangassalo 2003: 30). The Sámi are present in all three Fennoscandian states, and they are officially recognized as the indigenous people of the area.

Finns had probably inhabited the valley of the river Torne³ as early as pre-medieval times. In 1809, Finland was detached from the Swedish Empire, and became part of Russia. As it usually happens on tracing country borders, the peace treaty did not take into consideration the linguistic situation of the territories, and therefore divided in two the valley of the Torne, which had previously been a unitary territory inhabited by Finns: the eastern side was attached to Russia as part of the Great Duchy of Finland, while the western side remained part of the Kingdom of Sweden. The connections of the two were rapidly and radically broken. From then on the Finns of the Torne valley have followed an independent course of development, and the country border has gradually turned into a linguistic border as well.

² According to Moscovici and Paicheler, a minority can be regarded as evasive if it relates itself in all respects to the majority, if the majority means the norm to be attained. Contrary to this, a conscious minority insists on its difference from the majority and confidently identifies with its own group. See Liebkind 1997: 43.

³ *Tornionlaakso* in Finnish, *Tornedalen* in Swedish.

According to 1998 state statistics data, there are about 50,000 Tornedalians living on the territory of five municipalities of Northern-Sweden (Huss & Lindgren 2005: 257). Many Tornedalians live also outside the valley of the Torne, in the southern and central parts of Sweden.

The Tornedalians had to endure an obtrusive assimilation policy ever since the second half of the 1800s as a result of the strengthening of nationalism. The use of the Finnish language in school was forbidden. Thenceforth the language was preserved as the home language of small village communities, and has taken a completely different course of development than the language spoken in Finland.

Religion or more precisely the language of religion has had an important role in preserving the linguistic identity of this ethnic group. It is a general truth that the pertinence to some religious confession has an important role in preserving the language spoken by a community if that religious confession differs from the religion of the state nation, and if the native language has an important place in practicing one's faith, provided that its conditions are also granted.

Coming back to the status of the Tornedalians, from the middle of the 1800s the movement of Puritanism led by Lars Levi Laestadius became the decisive religious trend. Although Laestadius' native language was Swedish, and as a second language he spoke Sámi, his knowledge of Finnish was so perfect as well that he was able to preach and write in it. The Finnish language he used has become the *lingua sacra* (sacred language) of Pietism and has remained so ever since among the Sámi as well.

Ethnic awakening of the Tornedalians

The Tornedalians have gradually built up their identity. During the 1980s a strong process of ethnic awakening started in their communities. Due to the fact that they did not have the distinctive cultural marks which would have distinguished them from other ethnic groups (as the Sámi people had, for instance), the decisive components of their identity came to be connected to the territory they inhabited and first of all to their language, Tornedalian Finnish. It is nothing accidental that this language variant was also given a distinct name, Meänkieli (meaning 'our language'), which expresses first of all that they consider it a separate language, and not a dialect of Finnish (Andersson & Kangassalo 2003: 103–104).

The first organization of the Tornedalians, bearing the name of *Svenska Tornedalingars Riksförbund – Tornionlaaksolaiset* (STR – T), was founded in 1981, and its primary task from the very beginning was to have the Meänkieli recognized as an autonomous language besides Finnish. The first free school⁴ of Norrbotten (Northern Sweden) with education in Meänkieli language, the *Kangos Kultur- och Ekologiskola* in Pajala, was founded in 1993. Although the knowledge of Finnish or Meänkieli is common with Tornedalian adults, the children and young people no

⁴ Free school: a privately owned school which is financially supported by the municipality and follows the statutes of municipal schools.

longer speak their native language. Parents and grandparents therefore have great hopes for this school (Huss & Lindgren 2005: 258). The language was better preserved in smaller villages where people did not feel ashamed to communicate in this language.

Due to the language act, effective as of 2000, the Meänkieli language has had a role in education, albeit to a limited degree. As there are no official data about it, it is difficult to assess to what extent Meänkieli is present in school education. We know, however, that according to a decision made in Pajala, the municipality must strive to have at least 80 % of the students be able to write and read easy sentences in this language on their graduation from high school. There has also been a decision about nursery school education which, on demand of the parents, must be ensured partly or entirely in Meänkieli language. On a higher education level, Meänkieli is taught at the Technical University of Luuleå, as well as at the universities of Stockholm and Umeå (Huss & Lindgren 2005: 258). Literature was also written in this language, their own publishing house bears the name *Kustantamo Kaamos*. Their best known writer is Bengt Pohjanen, who publishes in three languages, Meänkieli, Finnish, and Swedish. He wrote the first novel (*Lyykeri*, 1985) and also the first drama (*Kuutot*, 1987) in Meänkieli language. He also began translating the Bible; the four gospels have already been published. A grammar (Kenttä & Pohjanen 1996) and two dictionaries of Meänkieli have been completed, and the first Meänkieli textbook for elementary school children has been published in 2008. Radio and television programmes are broadcast in this language, they have their own theatre (Tornionlaakson teatteri), which presents performances in two languages, Meänkieli and Swedish. Language camps and language courses are organized each year for young people, as well as conferences, seminars, and music festivals. Despite all this, it is a fact that the standardization of the language is still in progress, and no official institution has yet been established which would undertake the tasks of language preservation and planning.⁵

According to the two key-figures of Meänkieli language planning, Bengt Pohjanen and Birger Winsa, the differences between various dialects are not significant, at least in syntax. Therefore it has been relatively easy to write a Meänkieli grammar, which has indeed been easily accepted by the speakers of various dialects. Differences in vocabulary are much greater, but the speakers understand each other nevertheless. Bengt Pohjanen has employed the mid-Tornedalian dialect as the basis of his grammar and the literary language, and this has been widely accepted. One may rightfully state thus that the Tornedalians have reached important results in the field of linguistic revitalization.⁶

⁵ The three essential areas of language planning are: the status planning (the formation of linguistic functions and stages of usage pertaining to a language variant); the corpus planning (innovating formation of words, expressions, grammatical forms); and the language acquirement planning (the transformation of the conditions in which the speakers learn a given language variant) (Cseresnyési 2004: 165).

⁶ The above data is taken from my correspondence with Bengt Pohjanen and Birger Winsa.

Who are the Kvens?

According to Saessalo, Kvens are a historical linguistic and ethnic minority, whose culture is based on Finnish culture and their language on the Finnish language. (Saessalo 1996: 15) The traditional areas inhabited by the Kvens are the two Northernmost regions of Norway, Troms (in Kven: *Tromssa*) and Finnmark (in Kven: *Finmarkku*). These territories have been multilingual and multicultural for centuries; historical documents attest to the presence of the Kvens' ancestors living alongside the Norwegians and the Sámi in the 16th century. Later on, in the 18th and the 19th centuries, there were other Finnish immigrant populations who moved from Northern Sweden and Northern Finland to the Norwegian seaside.

It is not known how many Kvens live in Norway today, as there are different statistics regarding their number. I consider that the estimation of Kvens' Association in Norway (Ruijan Kveeniliitto) would be the most reliable. According to them this is about 10,000 and, of these, about 5000-7000 speak their mother tongue. (Lindgren, Eskeland & Norman 2003: 167) The most optimistic estimations speak about some tens of thousands of Kvens, that is people who are of Kven origins, even if they do not speak the language.

In present day Norway, there are four Finno-Ugric ethnic minority communities: the Sámi, the Kvens, the Forest Finns, and the Finns.⁷ Their official status differs considerably, as the Sámi are accepted as an indigenous people, the Kvens and the Forest Finns are regarded as ethnic minorities, and the Finns are considered to be immigrants.⁸ The minority policy of Norway has made a significant difference in the rights these respective populations are assured. Indigenous people enjoy the most rights and immigrants the fewest. However, the Sámi are guaranteed much fewer linguistic human rights than the Norwegian majority is.

Strategies of revitalizing the Kven language

Starting with 2007, since it has been founded, it is the Kainun instituutti, in Pyssyjoki (Børselv in Norwegian) that assumed the task to handle the different revitalization strategies. I only list here some of the most important ones: teaching the Kven language at every level, from kindergarten through schools, up to the university; having a language and cultural committee created, for facilitating standardization; compiling Kven grammar and dictionary; raising funds for the development of the Kven culture (literature, mass media, music, arts). Some of the aims have already been achieved (at least partially).

The first Kven grammar was written by Eira Söderholm, associate professor of the Finnish department at the Tromsø (Tromssa in Kven) University. First of all,

⁷ We have to stress here that these four are old (or historical) and relatively numerous minorities, and besides them, there are others like Romas, Tatars, Jews etc. as well as a new, heterogeneous group of immigrants.

⁸ This population has moved to Norway after World War II and lives today scattered in different parts of the country.

she considered important to clarify for which speakers' community should the Kven grammar (and in a larger sense the standard Kven language) be created. Obviously, this should be the whole Kven community; still things are not that simple. The problem is that there are Kvens who consider the Finnish language to be the standard and their own language *only* a dialect.

Söderholm mentions two causes of the fact that the Tornedalians and the Kvens in Finland do not accept the Finnish spoken in Finland as the standard for them. One of them – according to her – must be the fact that the Kvens live in Norway, while the Tornedalians live in Sweden. Country borders seem to also be language borders. As examples, she speaks about the borders between the Scandinavian languages, as well as Danish and Dutch. As another cause she considers the fact that in case there had been no assimilation policy in Norway and Sweden, both the Kvens and the Tornedalians would have accepted the Finnish language. But as a result of the obtrusive assimilation policy the development of the minority languages has been completely separated from the Finnish spoken in Finland. As they have no notions for the modern phenomena they have borrowed them from the majority languages (Söderholm 2007a: 193).

Both Kven and Tornedalian are spoken by pretty few and standardization of the language is expensive. Seen from the outside, the question may arise: *Why shouldn't the same language be created for these two groups?* As vocabulary and language structure are concerned, Kven and Tornedalian do not differ too much, so this would not be a problem. Neither would – theoretically – the country border, as we have the example of Sámi, the standard literary language of which is spoken on the territory of three different countries. But it should be remembered that in the early period of its revitalization, in 1978, there was the joint Sámi conference that decided the creation of the common literary language pattern. On the other hand, there were very slight links between Kven and Tornedalian and up to nowadays there are no common organizations that could harmonize the revitalization process of the two small languages (Söderholm 2007a: 194).

Söderholm wrote the first Kven grammar for the first course of the Kven language at the University of Tromsø, which started in the spring of 2006. There was much controversy about how the local dialects could be united into one language. Some say that the dialects differ too much from one another, but there is on the basis of factual dialectological measurements that Söderholm affirms that there is no big difference among the three dialects. One of the alternatives of the new unitary Kven could be the pattern of the Finnish or Norwegian literary language, based on all the dialects and a certain extent of compromise. The other possibility could be the way the Swedish or the French language have been born, that is on the basis of the most widely spoken dialect, in which most of the written texts exist. And that is what Söderholm decided for and has taken as a basis the dialect spoken in Porsanger. And she did not do that by mere chance. It is not only the dialect in which most texts are written, but also this is taught in schools and there is a lot of school material written in this language; on the other hand it is the centre of the Kven revitalization process, as well (Söderholm 2007: 1). Taking into consideration that the differences are not basically important, practically it is almost just the same which language they build

the written language on.

For Söderholm it was a mostly important point of view to know that all the Kvens can identify themselves with the Kven literary language, or else there is no use to unify a language. On the other hand, if we take into consideration that there was a very weak connection among the local Kven villages and the Norwegian assimilation policy did not allow the formation of a common identity, as well as the fact that the *common language* has been Norwegian for the last century, to create the Kven standard is a difficult task. There is also quite a high degree of intolerance concerning one another's dialects (Söderholm 2007a: 195).

The grammar created by Söderholm has been object of the Kven Language Council and – as it is quite a time-wasting task – the final decision whether they are going to accept it as a basis for the common Kven literary language or not is still a question of the future. Söderholm considers it very important to have a consistent Kven spelling, while being permitting with everybody writing in their own dialect, according to the unitary spelling rules.

The last word in standardizing the language will be uttered by the Kven Language Council.

Conclusions

I meant to present in my study the situation of two hardly known Scandinavian Finno-Ugric ethnic groups, the Tornedalians and the Kvens, with special regard to the autonomization of their languages. The history of both ethnic groups is to be examined along the obtrusive language-assimilation; and there was the end of the 20th century that brought along positive change for both groups. First there were the Tornedalians, later the Kvens, but both decided that in order to be able to revive their own mother tongue, to preserve their traditional culture and to increase their consciousness concerning identity, it is of utmost importance to admit that their languages are independent and that they need the whole world to acknowledge it as such. Previously both languages were considered to be dialects of Finnish and – as such – of a lower rank than the Finnish literary language. Both for the Tornedalians and the Kvens it was a decisive point – for their own self-evaluation, as well as in dissolving the ethnic and language stigma – the fact that first the Meänkieli (2000) later the Kven language (2005) were declared to be independent languages. After these dates the process of language planning could be started, process that proved not to be that easy, after all, but no doubt it shows results, as well.

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