

Svenska (Swedish in Finland)

Swedish is an Indo-European language that belongs to the Scandinavian (North Germanic) languages within the Germanic group.

Swedish is an **official language in two countries:**

- in **Sweden** where it is the main language, spoken by some 9 million native speakers
- in **Finland** which is an officially **bilingual country** (Finnish and Swedish are national languages on an equal footing). In Finland everybody's mother tongue is registered, which means that there are updated official statistics of the Swedish-speaking population. As of the end of 2014, there were 290,747 persons with Swedish as their mother tongue, which means **5,3 % of the population**. The Swedish-speakers live mainly in the coastal areas and archipelagos of southern and western Finland (in yellow).



Swedish is the sole official language of **Åland** (the Aaland Islands, an autonomous province in south-western Finland), where the vast majority of the almost 29,000 inhabitants speak Swedish as first language.

In Finland as a whole, Swedish is one of the two national languages, with the same official status as Finnish (spoken by 89,3 % of the population) on the state level, and an official language in 32 bilingual municipalities (33 in 2016).

Swedish is one of the official languages of the **European Union** and one of the working languages of the **Nordic Council**.

According to a rough estimation, as of 2010 there were up to 300,000 Swedish-speakers living **outside Sweden and Finland**. The largest populations were in the United States (up to 100,000), the UK, Spain and Germany (c. 30,000 each) and a large proportion of the remaining 100,000 in the Scandinavian

countries, France, Switzerland, Belgium, the Netherlands, Canada and Australia.

Language regulation

The Swedish spoken and especially written in Sweden and Finland are the same language, standard Swedish. The Swedish spoken in Finland can be seen as a regional variety of Swedish, and has some own expressions and words not used in Sweden.

The **Swedish Language Council** (*Språkrådet*) is the official regulator of Swedish in Sweden but does not attempt to enforce control of the language. In Finland a special branch of the **Institute for the Languages of Finland** has official status as the regulatory body for Swedish in Finland, and its priority is to maintain intelligibility with the language spoken in Sweden.

Historical development of the Swedish language in Finland

According to official statistics, in 1900 Swedish-speakers made up 12,89 % of the total population of Finland of 2,6 million. By 1950 the share had fallen to 8,64 % of a total of 4 million people. By 1990 the share was 5,94 % of 5 million people.

An important contribution to the decline of Swedish-speakers in Finland during the second half of the 20th century was that many Swedish-speakers emigrated to Sweden. An estimated 30 -50 percent of all Finnish citizens who moved to Sweden were Swedish-speaking Finns (exact data does not exist, as Sweden did not register immigrants by their language). Emigration has now come to a halt, and the sharp decline has levelled off, which means that the Swedish-speaking population nowadays is more or less stable (note that also the Finnish-speaking population decreases slightly in relative terms, as the proportion of immigrants with other languages increases).

Swedish-speakers in Finland during the last 35 years

1980	300,482	6,3 %
1990	296,738	5,9 %
2000	291,657	5,6 %
2010	291,153	5,4 %
2014	290,747	5,3 %

During most of the 20th century, **marriages across language borders** tended to result in children becoming Finnish speakers, and knowledge of Swedish declined. However, during the last decades the trend has been reversed: many bilingual families choose to register their children as Swedish-speakers and in even greater share register their children in Swedish schools. It is estimated that 70 per cent of the bilingual families (with

one Finnish-speaking and one Swedish-speaking parent) register their children as Swedish-speaking. Population statistics do not recognize bilingualism (you cannot register as bilingual).

Legal status – bilingualism

According to the Finnish Constitution, Finnish and Swedish are the **two national languages** of Finland. The Swedish language therefore enjoys strong constitutional protection. Finland was a part of Sweden for 600 years until 1809, when Russia conquered Finland. During the Russian period, Swedish endured as one of the languages of administration and education, and when Finland declared its independence in 1917, the equality of the two languages was established due to the deep roots of the Swedish language in the history of the country.

Society is committed to catering equally to the social and cultural needs of both the Finnish and Swedish-speaking population. The authorities are liable to arrange education, healthcare and social services, as well as to provide information, in both Finnish and Swedish. The **Language Act** describes the basic linguistic rights in detail. The act applies to **courts of law**, other **state authorities** (such as the police, tax office, ministries and the social security agency) and the municipal authorities of **bilingual municipalities**.

On the **municipal level**, the linguistic status of the municipality determines the level of services provided in Swedish. All Finnish municipalities and towns are either unilingual, or bilingual with either Finnish or Swedish as majority language. When the proportion of the minority language increases to 8 % (or 3,000 inhabitants), then the municipality is defined as bilingual, and when it falls below 6 %, the municipality becomes unilingual. The language status is defined every 10 years.

In Finland 2015, there are 17 unilingually Swedish municipalities, out of which 16 belong to the Aaland Islands (however, in January 2016 the last Swedish municipality on mainland Finland becomes bilingual). In bilingual municipalities, you are entitled to use either language in all communication with the civil servants and get basic services in your own language. Public signs (such as street and traffic signs) are in both languages in bilingual municipalities, the name in majority language being stated first.

Bilingual municipalities	2012	2013	2014	2015
- Swedish majority	12	12	12	14
- Finnish majority	18	18	18	18
Unilingually Swedish municipalities	19	19	19	17
All municipalities in Finland	336	320	320	316

Being a small language group usually leads to functional bilingualism. Finnish is the dominant language in most municipalities and by most employers in Finland. In areas with a Finnish-speaking majority, Finnish is most often used when interacting with strangers and known Finnish speakers. 140,000 Swedish-speakers live in a municipality with Finnish majority. However, half of all Swedish-speakers live in areas in which Swedish is the majority language and in which they can use Swedish in all or most contexts.

The current Language Act of Finland has been criticized as an inadequate instrument to protect the linguistic rights of Swedish-speaking Finns in practice. This has also been verified by the reports by the Finnish Government (in 2006, 2009 and 2013), that showed severe problems in the practical

implementation of the language act. The recent administrative reforms in Finland have been criticized by the Swedish Assembly of Finland and in the Swedish-speaking media, as the proposals tend to weaken the bilingual structures and make the survival of Swedish as an administrative language in Finland more challenging.

Identity, education and culture

Swedish-speakers in Finland, also called the Swedish-speaking Finns, form a language group of their own. They perceive themselves as Finnish people who speak Swedish as their mother tongue. The identity is formed from the language and cultural traditions of the group. Swedish-speakers have their heart in Finland, but through the Swedish language there are also strong bonds to the Nordic culture.

Within the sectors of education and culture, the Swedish-speaking population enjoys a kind of cultural autonomy, with institutions that function in Swedish in parallel with the Finnish. Every child in Finland has the right to attend daycare, preschool and school in their own language, either Finnish or Swedish. This applies to the whole country, not only to the bilingual areas. For the Swedish-speaking population, this right is a precondition for the language and culture to remain vibrant in Finland.

All school pupils are also taught the other national language as compulsory. Following an educational reform in the 1970s, **both Swedish and Finnish became compulsory school subjects**. The primary language in which lessons are taught depends upon the pupil's mother tongue, as the school system is divided in the Finnish-language schools, and the Swedish-language schools. The secondary

language, as a school subject, is called the *other domestic language* (Swedish for Finnish-speakers, and vice versa). Lessons in the "other domestic language" usually start in the third, fifth or seventh form (from autumn 2016 at the latest from sixth form) of comprehensive school and are a part of the curriculum in all secondary education. In polytechnics and universities, all students are required to pass an examination in the "other domestic language" on a level that enables them to be employed as civil servants within bilingual authorities. The actual linguistic abilities of those who have passed the various examinations however vary considerably.

Some municipalities also arrange **language immersion** at daycare facilities and schools. The demand for language immersion is currently much greater than the supply.

It is possible to continue studying in Swedish also following the end of primary education, this applies to all levels and to almost all subjects and sectors. In Finland, second-level education is divided into upper secondary school and basic vocational education. University-level education is arranged at regular universities and polytechnic universities. Apart from unilingually Finnish universities, there are both bilingual and unilingually Swedish ones. The largest university in the country, the University of Helsinki, is bilingual.

Swedish culture in Finland is rich and varied in literature, theatre, film and music, among other fields. Many of Finland's greatest authors and musicians have worked in Swedish. The Swedish-speaking population is also slightly more active in various associations than Finns on an average. Associations are considered important to the sense of community and identity.

Media

Ten newspapers in Finland are published in Swedish. In addition, there are a large number of Swedish language magazines and other regular publications in Swedish.

With the digitalisation of the television broadcasting in Finland in 2001, the Finnish Broadcasting Company YLE has significantly increased its programmes intended for Swedish-speaking audience. Since September 2007 the Swedish-language FST (later named YLE5) channel of the company has been visible all over the country. Due to increased services, Finland has now two Swedish radio channels and one digital full service television channel for broadcasting in Swedish (part of the programmes lately being transmitted from Sweden).

So far there are no private Swedish-language radio or television channels with nation-wide coverage. Instead, a number of local cable television channels transmit privately funded programmes in Swedish. These channels send some hours of local and regional news and programmes per week. The Government does not support the activities financially.

The Charter

The **European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages** was opened for signature by the member States of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg on 5 November 1992, when it was also signed by Finland. Finland ratified the Charter on 9 November 1994, and it entered into force both in Finland and internationally on 1 March 1998.

Upon ratifying the Charter, Finland declared that it will apply 65 of the provisions under **Part III** (specific measures) of the Charter to the **Swedish** language (the less widely used official language) and 59 provisions to the **Sámi** language (a regional language – in fact 3 different Sámi languages are spoken in Finland). Furthermore, Finland declared that it

undertakes to apply, *mutatis mutandis*, the principles listed in (the more general) **Part II** of the Charter to the **Roma** language and other non-territorial languages (i.e. **Tatar, Russian and Yiddish**). In December 2009 Finland

supplemented the latter declaration by including the Karelian language. Swedish is thus one of the 9 languages that Finland reports on vis-à-vis the Charter.

Links:

Finnish language legislation, the Language Act, Ministry of Justice

(includes the latest report of the government on the application of the legislation 2013, and its problems, available in English)

<http://www.oikeusministerio.fi/en/index/basicprovisions/perusoikeudetjademokratia/kielilaki/kielilainistenaikutustenarviointi.html>

The Swedish Assembly of Finland, statutory organisation, safeguarding the Swedish language and culture in Finland

<http://www.folktinget.fi/en/about/>

Institute for the Languages of Finland

<http://www.kotus.fi/en>

Statistics Finland Database, population:

http://www.stat.fi/til/vrm_en.html

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