

LANGUAGE PLANNING, LITERACY AND CULTURAL IDENTITY: THE SKOLT SÁMI CASE

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1. Introduction

The subject of this study is the developments following upon the introduction of the new Skolt Sámi orthography in the early 1970s, considered from the sociolinguistic perspective of language planning. The efforts to implement the new orthography will be seen to be of two decades will be examined by relating them to some of the key factors of present-day reality, among them the most crucial being the demographic factor.

2. Historical background

The Skolt Sámi people who today inhabit the region to the north and east of Lake Inari close to the Norwegian border have been living there only since 1949. Before that they inhabited the Petsamo district, that belonged until the Peace of Dorpat in 1920 to Russia, and thereafter to Finland. In 1945 the Petsamo area became part of the Soviet Union. It was then that the decision was made by the majority of the Skolt Sámi people to move to Finland: in 1945-6 they went to the south-east of Lake Inari, and a few years later further to the north to where they live at present.

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The Skolt Sámi community has been in the centre of interest of much research. The most evident reason for such interest lies in their unique history and cultural development. Because of their relative geographical isolation they had been able to maintain their culture practically unchanged and undisturbed up until the Second World War. K. Nickul (1948) was able to study this culture in its unaltered form in 1938. At that time he focussed on the question "how shall an endemic tribal society be adjusted to our society?" (p. 11) This same question has been the objective of numerous later studies² and the attempts to provide answers the significant (ethnolinguistic) anthropological ancient cultural form to

fonemaattiseksi transkriptioksi.”³ (pp. 69-86) By 1973 a Skolt Sámi alphabet compiled

with text samples and glossary was published.¹² A collection of Skolt Sámi tales employing the new writing system appeared in an important bilingual publication¹³ A handsome edition of a traditional fairy tale was brought out in 1982.¹⁴

In 1978 the first issue of the Skolt Sámi Newsletter was published,¹⁵ containing a bilingual rationale that started with the statement: “Tät lõstt lij tue’jjuum tōn diõtt, što saa’mid le’čči jiijjõs lõstt, ko’st mij vuážžap lokkâd mij aa’sšid.”¹⁶ The Newsletter was published in 350 copies and was sent free to each Skolt home. It appeared four times a year,

own dialect form has been an observable phenomenon, one that no doubt was intended to emphasize identity and loyalty to their own group, as well as being one doubtless slowing down the standardization process aimed at the codification and elaboration of the dialect chosen. While this first attitude was definitely noticeable, it should also be stated that the insistence on remaining loyal to one's own dialect was not accompanied by negative feelings against the Suonikylä dialect being the one the orthography was based on. Everyone I talked to seemed to be in agreement with the choice and understood the rationale behind it.

The second point concerning the attitude issue I wish to refer to here has to be taken more seriously, for it

In all these decisions the good saint acted without the benefit of a sociolinguistic theory or frame of reference, and without any recorded body of previous sociolinguistic experience which he could consult. One must admire St. Stefan's clearcut decisions and successful implementations of them but equally one must bewail the fact that a present-day agent of culture change faced with language problems in a non-literate society still has no sociolinguistic theory and very little in the way of recorded and analyzed case histories to give guidance. We have not progressed much beyond St. Stefan's competence of five centuries ago.

R. Cooper, who cites Ferguson's pessimistic view quoted above, observes that since the comment was made a large number of case studies have been accumulated that can serve as examples for future language planning initiatives. He adds, though, that a theory suitable to guide language planning has not yet been developed.²⁵

Thus if we confine language planning to theory-based treatments, we may need to wait some time to find many examples. (p. 41)

The Skolt Sámi case should qualify as an example of language planning efforts that (i) in a short space of time achieved a great deal for the consolidation of the linguistic situation in the Skolt Sámi community, (ii) reinforced the language rights of a minority group, and (iii) fostered a more positive identity within a culture previously drastically interrupted by outside world political events. Accordingly, we may conclude that the Skolt Sámi example should be closely studied and learned from when similar language planning activities are initiated in a non-literate minority speech community.

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