



Revue internationale
International Webjournal
www.sens-public.org

'Cultural diversity, Multilingualism and Ethnic minorities in Sweden'

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The language situation in Sweden:
the relationship between the main language
and the national minority languages

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Abstract: This article is based on the presentation at the conference "Cultural Diversity, Multilingualism and Ethnic Minorities in Sweden" arranged by The French Institute the 2nd and 3rd of September. The aim of the article is to give a short presentation of the language situation in Sweden today and to make a presentation on the main language Swedish and the five national minority languages.

Cultural diversity, Multilingualism and Ethnic minorities in Sweden * Kulturell mångfald, Flerspråkighet och Etniska minoriteter i Sverige * Diversité culturelle, Multilinguisme et Minorités ethniques en Suède

International Conference 2-3 September 2009 – Stockholm, Sweden

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Suomenkielinen tiivistelmä: Artikkelin perustuu Ranskan kulttuuri-instituutin Tukholmassa 2.–3.9.2009 järjestämässä konferenssissa Cultural Diversity, Multilingualism and Ethnic Minorities in Sweden pidettyyn esitelmään.

Artikkelissa esitellään lyhyesti Ruotsin kielitilanne: Ruotsi sai vuonna 2009 uuden kielilain, joka vahvistaa ruotsin olevan maan pääkieli, mutta viisi kieltä (suomi, meänkieli, romani, saame ja jiddiš) sai kansallisen vähemmistökielen aseman jo vuonna 2000.

Ruotsin valtiopäivät päätti joulukuussa 2005 uudesta kielipolitiikasta, jossa määritellään myös kielipolitiikan tavoitteet. Samana vuonna päätettiin myös, että Ruotsi tarvitsee viraston, jonka vastuualueena ovat kielet, kielipolitiikka ja kielenhuolto. Siksi Kielen ja kansanperinteen tutkimuslaitos organisoitiin uudelleen, ja vuodesta 2006 Kielineuvosto on ollut Kielen ja kansanperinteen tutkimuslaitoksen osastoista se, jonka tehtäviin aiemmin mainitut alueet kuuluvat.

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Some general facts about the language situation

The language situation in Sweden has radically changed during the last few decades. Sweden has, as a result of immigration, become a multilingual country where more than 150 languages are spoken.

After ratifying *The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages* (1) Sweden got five official minority languages in the year of 2000. They are Finnish, Meänkieli (Tornedal Finnish), Romani chib, Sami and Yiddish.

In December 2005 the Swedish parliament decided on a new language policy for Sweden in a Government Bill (2) with four comprehensive goals:

1. Swedish is the main language in Sweden.
2. Swedish should be a complete language, i.e. it should be possible to use in all areas of society.
3. The language of public authorities should be cultivated, simple and comprehensible.

4. Everyone living in Sweden has to be given the opportunity to learn, develop and use Swedish. Everyone belonging to a national minority has to be given the opportunity to learn, develop and use their minority language. Every person who is deaf, hearing-impaired or needs sign language for any other reason has to be given the opportunity to learn, develop and use sign language. Everyone who has a mother tongue other than Swedish, sign language or a national minority language has to be given the opportunity to develop and use their mother tongue.

In 2005 it was also decided that Sweden should get a new language planning and cultivation organization and with that *The Institute for language and Folklore* was established in 2006, *The Language Council of Sweden* being an important part of it.

The next year, in 2006, Sweden joined the other Nordic countries publishing *The Declaration on a Nordic language Policy* (3).

But it was not until 2009 that the new Language Act – *Language for All* – came into effect and the status of the Swedish language as the main language in Sweden was confirmed in legislation (4).

The Swedish language

Swedish is a North Germanic and East Scandinavian member of the Indo-European language family. There are about 8,5 million people speaking Swedish as their mother tongue, and of those about 8 million people live in Sweden. Swedish is also an official language in Finland, where it is spoken by about 300 000 people.

Swedish is commonly said to have become a language of its own by the end of the Viking era, about 1050 AD. It is closely related to Norwegian and Danish. Today Swedish has an official status in Sweden and Finland and it is also an official language in the EU.

The five national minority languages

After ratifying *The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages* and *The Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities* (5), Sweden got five national minority languages in the year of 2000. These are Finnish, Meänkieli (Tornedal Finnish), Romani chib, Sami and Yiddish (6).

To get the status of a national minority language, certain conditions need to be fulfilled. Firstly, the language must be a language, not a dialect. Secondly, the language must have been spoken in Sweden during three generations or about hundred years.

There are of course many languages in Sweden that are in a minority compared to the main language, Swedish, but according to the convention only such languages that have been spoken in Sweden for a long time can be regarded as potential minority languages. Thus, for example

Romani can be regarded as a minority language since it has been spoken in Sweden since the 16th century, but not for example Arabic or Turkish since they are relatively new languages; immigrants have spoken them only since the 20th century in Sweden.

The following presentation of each language is based mainly on the booklet *Sveriges officiella minoritetsspråk* (The official minority languages in Sweden) (7). The focus will be on number of speakers, education and language cultivation.

It should be emphasized that the numbers of speakers of each language are nothing but rough estimates, because in Sweden compiling statistics on numbers of speakers of different languages or statistics on mother tongue or ethnic background is not allowed.

Finnish

Finnish has a special position amongst the minority languages in Sweden. It has been spoken in Sweden for at least 800 years. This is due to the fact that Finland and Sweden once were one country, and Finnish was spoken not only in the whole eastern part of the country (the current state of Finland) but also in large areas in the western part of the country (the current state of Sweden).

Since Finnish is a majority language in the neighbouring country Finland and Finnish language cultivation, standardization etc. have long traditions there, the language cultivation work with the Finnish language in Sweden has been a lot easier than with for example Romani or Meänkieli, which could be said to be at the beginning of the whole process of standardization, documentation and cultivation. The number of speakers of Finnish in Sweden is about 250 000.

According to *The Swedish National Agency for Education* (Skolverket) there were 3 033 pupils studying Finnish at comprehensive schools in October 2007. Finnish was on 11th place in the statistics in regard to the mother tongues studied in the Swedish comprehensive school (other than Swedish). There are also seven independent public schools in which the education language is Finnish. All seven schools have together about 1 000 pupils.

At university level Finnish can be studied at the universities in Stockholm, Uppsala and Umeå, in the Mälardalen University and in Luleå University of Technology.

The Language Council of Sweden is the organization that takes care of the language cultivation of Finnish, but there are several special interest groups and organizations working for the Finnish language and the Finnish-speaking people in Sweden.

Two of the organizations are *The National Association of Finns in Sweden* and *The Sweden Finnish Delegation*. The Swedish public service broadcasting companies, i.e. the Swedish Radio, as well as the Swedish TV, have programs in Finnish and there is also a weekly Finnish newspaper.

Meänkieli

According to the booklet *Sveriges officiella minoritetsspråk* there could have been about 75 000 people speaking Meänkieli in 1980.

According to statistics from The Swedish National Agency for Education there were 153 pupils studying Meänkieli at comprehensive school in 2007. Meänkieli was on 42nd place in the statistics amongst the mother tongues studied.

On a higher level you can study Meänkieli at two universities in northern Sweden. These are the University of Umeå and Luleå University of Technology.

Language documentation of Meänkieli is conducted by The Institute for Language and Folklore, though not by The Language Council of Sweden but its department in Umeå. A great part of the Meänkieli-speakers live in northern Sweden and it is regarded to be practical that the person taking care of Meänkieli is situated near the users of the language.

There are several special interest groups working for Meänkieli and the Swedish public service radio sends programs in Meänkieli. There is also at least one newspaper in Meänkieli.

Romani chib

It is estimated that the number of Romani speakers in Sweden could be somewhere around 20 000, but estimates vary a lot.

In October 2007 there were 360 pupils studying the three different varieties of Romani. These varieties are Lovari, Kelderash and Kale. At comprehensive school, Romani was on 31st place in the statistics.

The Swedish public service radio has news programs in Romani. There are also several special interest groups looking after the Roma peoples interests. One of them is *The Delegation for Roma Issues*, which was founded in February 2007 by the Swedish government (8).

You can study Romani Chib at the University of Linköping. They are giving a 15-credit course in Romani Chib and the Romani culture.

There are two persons working with the Romani language at The Language Council of Sweden. They represent the Arli and Kale varieties.

Sami

The Sami language is spoken by the Sami people, the only indigenous people amongst the official minority groups in Sweden.

There could be about 20 000 Sami people living in Sweden, and about 7 000 of them speak Sami. It should be mentioned that the Sami language in fact includes several varieties or dialects, which are not always understandable among the different Sami groups themselves.

According to statistics from The Swedish National Agency for Education the total number of pupils studying Sami in October 2007 was 384. Sami was on 30th place in the statistics. On a higher level, the Sami language can be studied at the universities of Umeå and Uppsala.

The Swedish public service broadcasting companies have programs in Sami.

The Sami Parliament (9), Sametinget, is an important special interest organization and public authority representing the Sami people in Sweden.

Swedish government has a Sami Policy (10) and the Government Offices of Sweden offer more information about the subject.

Yiddish

According to the booklet *Sveriges officiella minoritetsspråk* there are about 2 000–3 000 speakers of Yiddish in Sweden. Yiddish has been spoken in Sweden since the 17th century, but the Jewish people in Sweden have always been at least bilingual, often multilingual.

You can study Yiddish at comprehensive school, often through distance tuition. And the University of Lund offers base level courses in Yiddish.

Administrative areas for minority languages

There is special legislation that makes it possible for speakers of Finnish, Meänkieli and Sami to use their own minority languages in contacts with public authorities in the administrative areas. In these areas the minority languages have been used for a long time. The legislation first included only some municipalities in northern Sweden. The administrative area for Sami were the municipalities of Arjeplog, Gällivare, Jokkmokk and Kiruna and for Finnish and Meänkieli the administrative area were Gällivare, Haparanda, Kiruna, Pajala and Övertorneå.

However, because of the new legislation regarding to national minorities and minority languages in Sweden, which will enter into force the 1st of January 2010, the administrative areas will be extended.

There are also other reforms. The right to use one's minority language will include also other contacts than communication with public authorities. Now it will be possible to use the minority languages also when dealing with the preschool for six-year olds and with the healthcare for the elderly. The state of Sweden is supporting the extension of the administrative areas by giving the municipalities in question government subsidies worth 50 million Swedish crowns. It is possible for other municipalities to join the administrative areas voluntarily, but they have to be able to offer the earlier mentioned services to the citizens.

The administrative area of the Finnish language

The administrative area of the Finnish language will include 18 new municipalities around the lake Mälaren. These are Botkyrka, Eskilstuna, Hallstahammar, Haninge, Huddinge, Håbo, Köping, Sigtuna, Solna, Stockholm, Södertälje, Tierp, Upplands Väsby, Upplands-Bro, Uppsala, Älvkarleby, Österåker and Östhammar. The five northern municipalities will also remain a part of the administrative area, thus the administrative areas new number of municipalities will be 23.

The administrative area of the Meänkieli language

The administrative area of Meänkieli is not extended, since the area already includes the municipalities in which Meänkieli is mostly spoken. These municipalities are Gällivare, Haparanda, Kiruna, Pajala and Övertorneå.

The administrative area of the Sami language

The administrative area of Sami will include 13 new municipalities. These are Arvidsjaur, Berg, Härjedalen, Lycksele, Malå, Sorsele, Storuman, Strömsund, Umeå, Vilhelmina, Åre, Älvdalen and Östersund. The five earlier municipalities – Arjeplog, Gällivare, Jokkmokk and Kiruna – will remain a part of the administrative area.

Education in minority languages

The Swedish government decided in 2008 that education in the national minority languages (lessons in comprehensive school and in upper secondary school) is to be equal with the education in the mother tongue Swedish.

This means that the municipality, in which a pupil speaking one of the five minority languages lives, must arrange lessons in the minority language in question. The minority language doesn't have to be in everyday use in the pupil's home. The municipality also has to offer education even though there is only one pupil who wants to be tutored.

The government made this decision to fulfil the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages and the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities.

The Language Council of Sweden and the language cultivation

Language cultivation, or language planning, involves the making of handbooks, giving lectures and linguistic guidance and raising people's linguistic awareness, but it does also entail long-term efforts to influence the language situation in the country.

The Language Council of Sweden (in Swedish Språkrådet) is the primary institution for language cultivation in Sweden. It is a department of the official language authority *The Institute for Language and Folklore* (in Swedish Institutet för språk och folkminnen).

The Institute for Language and Folklore has departments in five cities in Sweden. Those are Gothenburg, Lund, Stockholm, Uppsala and Umeå. The Language Council of Sweden is placed in Stockholm, but the departments in the other cities concentrate on for example names, place names and dialects. The Institute has about 100 employees.

There are about 20 people working at The Language Council and most of them work as language advisors. Swedish, Finnish, Romani and the Swedish Sign Language are the languages represented in The Language Council. There are also people working with plain language at the Council. Plain language advisors work for the Swedish language being well formulated, simple and comprehensible in official and public use.

The language cultivation in Sami is taken care of by The Sami Parliament and the Institute's department in Umeå in northern Sweden represents Meänkieli.

The Council's mission is to monitor the development of spoken and written Swedish and also to monitor the use and status of all other languages spoken in Sweden. Primarily, that means promoting the use of Swedish sign language and our five official minority languages Finnish, Meänkieli, Sami, Romani and Yiddish.

The Council gives advice by telephone and e-mail in questions of language usage. The Council also publishes handbooks, newsletters and word lists and organizes conferences and seminars.

Yet another task for the Council is to strengthen the Nordic language unity. Similar language councils exist also in the other Nordic countries.

Source material and for further reading

1. For further information about *The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages*, see the website of The Council of Europe:

<http://conventions.coe.int/treaty/Commun/QueVoulezVous.asp?NT=148&CL=ENG>

2. For further information, see the Bill *Bästa språket – en samlad svensk språkpolitik*:

<http://www.regeringen.se/sb/d/108/a/50761> (in Swedish)

3. *The Declaration on a Nordic Language Policy* is available in the Nordic languages Danish, Faroese, Finnish, Greenlandic, Icelandic, Norwegian, Sami and Swedish and also in English. The Declaration is also available for downloading on the website

http://www.norden.org/en/publications/publications/2007-746/at_download/publicationfile).

The ISBN-number of the publication is 978-92-893-1590-6.

4. For further information, see the Summary of the Government Bill *Language for All* by the Government Offices of Sweden (in English):

<http://www.regeringen.se/content/1/c6/12/33/49/8f390fda.pdf>

5. For further information about *The Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities*, see the website of The Council of Europe:

<http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/Commun/QueVoulezVous.asp?NT=157&CL=ENG>

6. For further reading, see the information sheet *National Minorities* by the Government Offices of Sweden:

<http://www.sweden.gov.se/sb/d/2184/a/19444>

and The Swedish Government's Human Rights Website:

http://www.manskligarattigheter.gov.se/extra/pod/?id=55&module_instance=2&action=pod_show

(both in English)

7. *Sveriges officiella minoritetsspråk – Finska, meänkieli, samiska, romani, jiddisch och teckenspråk*. Småskrift utgiven av Svenska språknämnden 2003 (in Swedish). Published by Norstedts Akademiska Förlag 2003 with the ISBN-number 91-7297-611-X.

8. For further reading, see the information sheet *The Delegation for Roma Issues* by the Government Offices of Sweden:

http://www.romadelegationen.se/dynamaster/file_archive/080924/8649012cecd4affc58173c3a2dcbfc84/Infofolder_engelsk_080904.pdf (in English)

9. For further information about The Sami Parliament, see the website:

<http://www.sametinget.se/english> (in English).

10. For further reading, see the information about *the Sami policy* by the Government Offices of Sweden (in English):

<http://www.sweden.gov.se/sb/d/2184/a/66267>