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A note on language preservation — with special reference to Sami in northern Scandinavia

This paper discusses the situation of the Sami (Lapp) language of northern Scandinavia in the context of increasing language loss all over the world. Optimistic estimates suggest 30,000 speakers of Sami today, with a clear majority in Norway. After a long period of suppression from local and central authorities the Norwegian state now supports actively the use of Sami. It is pointed out that two areas or domains are especially vital for the continued use of the language: 1) traditional Sami activities such as reindeer breeding, hunting, fishing, and handicrafts; and 2) the families. Here the linguistic development of mixed families (Sami/non-Sami) seems to be of fundamental importance.

Language loss and language preservation

The topic I want to address in this paper is a serious one. It affects millions of people around the world, and it calls for action, first from committed linguists, but then — eventually, and hopefully — from the international community at large.

We who inhabit this earth have finally come to realize that we all suffer if the diversity in our natural environment decreases. If the world loses an endangered animal or bird, plant or tree, we have all suffered a loss. Thus, today, we are all concerned about preserving the present variety we find in the natural world around us. The importance of this has finally been accepted by the global community, and steps and measures are being taken to change the course of unwanted development.

We should, however, be equally concerned about and, indeed, alarmed by the dramatic loss of languages, of language death, which is going on at an accelerated rate around the globe. This development is part of a much larger process of loss of cultural and intellectual diversity in which politically domi-

nant languages and cultures simply overwhelm indigenous local languages and cultures. It is, in my view, equally important to argue for the preservation of human language diversity in the world as it is to argue for the preservation of biological diversity.

There are probably between 5000 and 6000 different languages spoken in the world. These languages represent in their diversity a tremendously important cultural heritage which belongs to all mankind. Each individual language is like a pair of glasses through which one interprets the surrounding world. They often represent different specializations in relation to the environment, and as such they, in a way, summarize and help the transmission of important collective knowledge down through the generations, e. g., of how to harvest natural resources and, in many places, even how to survive in a hostile environment. The many words for snow in Greenlandic, and for reindeer in Sami, are often referred to as examples of such specializations, reflecting the surrounding environment in the first instance (Greenlandic) and an occupation or means of living in the other (Sami).

Thus, each individual language is a product of human mental industry and reflects a unique view of the world. It mirrors and sheds light on the manner in which a speech community has resolved its problems in dealing with its environment, how it has arrived at its values and religion, and in general its understanding of the world around it. Thus, it is evident that each language is a means of expression of the cultural heritage of a people.

Every language is a genuine product of the human brain which testify to the intellectual life, labor, and capacity of our species. Every dead language represents a loss of collective knowledge on the part of all mankind. When a language disappears completely, when it has no native speakers left, we all have, as human beings, lost something that can never be retrieved or revived.

With the attrition and disappearance of a language, an irreplaceable component of our knowledge and understanding of human thought and possible world-views has been lost forever, unless efforts were made in time to record and study the language and its role as the reflection of a culture. (Wurm 1991.)

If, for the sake of argument, we posit 5000 different languages in the world today, it is a fact that only one hundred of these languages are used by about 95% of the world's population. What this implies, then, is that only 5% of the population in the world use the remaining 4900 languages. (Trudgill 1991.) It is a sad fact that these 4900 languages are all at risk. Many of them are spoken by a mere handful of people, and they are indeed more endangered than the Chinese panda or the tiger in India.

The world loses many languages every year, and at an increasing rate, especially in Africa, the Americas, and in the Pacific, but also in other places, even in Europe. It is estimated that Australia had about 250 languages 200 years ago when European immigration started. Today there are between 50 and 100 languages left there. This means that the Australian aborigines have lost on average almost one entire language every year since the Europeans arrived on the continent.

The drama of the situation is illustrated by the fact that if this current development continues, at least half of the world's languages will have disappeared by the end of the next century, and many of the remaining will then be endangered in the 22nd century. The most pessimistic estimate is even worse, it predicts that by the end of the next century, as many as 90% of mankind's languages will have disappeared or be very close to extinction. (Krauss 1992.)

It is imperative that the magnitude of the problem of language preservation be recognized by the world community. It is necessary that the linguists of the world join in an effort to alert international public opinion and help counteract this efficiently. What we may need is perhaps a "Greenpeace" organization to fight for and protect the world's linguistic environment.

However, it is encouraging that the international community of linguists has begun to address this issue in the past few years. An important step was to choose the topic "Endangered languages" as one of the two main themes of the last International Congress of Linguists, held in Québec, Canada, in August 1992. Also, since 1992, the UN organization UNESCO has been involved in a project entitled "The Red Book of Languages in Danger of Disappearing". In addition, *Language* (published by the Linguistic Society of America) has recently (1992 and 1993) given this topic special attention, and has, I think for the first time in the history of that journal, opened up a more political than purely scientific discussion.

It is essential to emphasize that the question of language endangerment is basically a political, not a scholarly one. And even though linguists are losing valuable data for their research whenever a language disappears, this certainly does not entitle them to tell people to keep their threatened languages alive at whatever costs. If these people consider it best for themselves and for their children's future to shift to a majority language, it is their right to make that decision. What is important, however, is to ensure that people, if at all possible, do have a real choice. This can only be achieved by allowing them equal access, with their own language, to all domains of social, economic, and cultural life. Then they may feel that they have a real option and may feel able to choose to maintain their language and transmit it to the next generation.

This, however, is obviously very often not the case today. Speakers of small languages feel urged, coerced, and sometimes even threatened to abandon their inherited language and to shift to a more prestigious one.

It is important not to be unrealistic about what linguists can accomplish in this matter. Linguists as such cannot prevent any language from disappearing. Whether or not a seriously imperiled language will actually die is decided within a framework of political, social, and economic conditions. It would be intolerably paternalistic of linguists to assume that they know what is best for a small speech community.

What linguists *can* do, however, is to combat ignorance and prejudice which lead to the denigration of a language, often by political and educational authorities, and, unfortunately, also frequently by the general public. Too often such a language is described as inferior and completely useless in a modern society.

It is essential in planning for the survival of any small language that this ignorance be corrected, and in this matter linguists should be called upon before others.

In this context, it is promising that UNESCO now attaches great importance to language preservation and protection (as is evidenced by the decision of the Executive Board at its session in October 1992, cf. Wurm 1994, and also by the organization's support of the Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights which was signed by representatives of close to 90 countries in Barcelona, Spain, on June 6th 1996). It is of tremendous importance not to lose the momentum created over the past few years, in order to keep the question of language endangerment not only on the agenda of the community of linguistic scholars, but also to try to involve an increasing number of international organizations and bodies to face this issue on a broad political scale. The 1996 Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights is very encouraging, and may form the necessary basis for a future international UN convention.

The multitude of different languages in the world, our linguistic diversity, bears witness to the richness of this unique human faculty, to our ability to adapt to all kinds of natural environments and habitats, and to our versatility in creating societies and cultures. It is an invaluable part of our common human heritage, and the present dramatic developments concern us all.

The case of Sami in northern Scandinavia

The Sami language of northern Scandinavia is one of the small languages of the world today. Sami, or Lapp(ish) as it used to be called, is the westernmost Finno-Ugric language and is spoken in four countries: Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia. The smallest Sami group is the one in Russia, the largest is the one in Norway. Sami is definitely not as threatened as many other small minority languages around the world (cf. Krauss 1992, Brenzinger 1992), and today — in addition to the efforts of many of its native speakers — it receives governmental and legal support. According to the most optimistic estimates, there are up to 30,000 speakers of Sami today, 20,000 of them in Norway (cf. Keskitalo 1981). Nevertheless, it is an endangered language, largely because of the increasing and rapid assimilation of Sami people to the Norwegian, Swedish and Finnish majority languages and cultures, as well as the migration of Norwegians, Swedes and Finns into regions formerly inhabited almost exclusively by Sami people. In the following, I will concentrate on the situation in Norway, since the majority of the Sami people live there.

Traditionally, the Sami population in northern Norway has been divided into two major groups: the coastal or sea Sami, and the inland or mountain Sami. In many places along the coast of northern Norway, the sea Sami have shifted to using Norwegian, and therefore the Sami language is far better preserved in inner Finnmark (NOU 1985: 164f, cf. Martinussen 1989). Several factors may be suggested to account for this difference. The more important ones include the relative isolation (until recently) of the inland Sami from Norwe-

gians and, therefore, also from the Norwegian language, and the fact that reindeer herding has been an exclusively Sami occupation among the inland population.

In principle, the policy of Norwegianization through the schools, which dates back to the second half of the 19th century (Eriksen 1979) and was implemented as the official policy of the Norwegian authorities until the late 1950s, was to be carried out in inner Finnmark in the same way as in coastal regions. However, the situation inland was quite different, and the Norwegian school failed to engage the inland Sami community. Knowledge of Norwegian was unnecessary for them, and with the exception of more technical skills such as elementary mathematics, and perhaps religion, schools had little to offer that was regarded as necessary in the local Sami community. Subsistence in their society was more or less based on the traditional exploitation and utilization of natural resources, with reindeer herding, hunting and fishing being the most important. Therefore, knowledge of the Sami language and Sami traditions were much more valuable than what schools had to offer. And when schools increasingly advocated using only Norwegian, i. e. when the official policy of Norwegianization became more coercive towards the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries (Eriksen 1979:8f), these institutions failed to become part of inland Sami society. As a consequence, the schools were not able to provide the intended cultural influence. Contrary to its aim of assimilation to Norwegian, the failure of this policy may have helped to preserve the Sami language and its culture (Jernsletten 1972:19, Jernsletten 1993, cf. also Jernsletten 1982).

It is a commonly held misconception that all Sami breed reindeer, but the fact is that less than 10% of the total Sami population in Norway are directly involved in reindeer breeding. In 1992, the number of reindeer-breeding Sami in Finnmark was 2,141 (*Stortingsmelding* 1992). However, this traditional Sami occupation has been, and still is, of tremendous importance for Sami culture, language and in general for Sami identity and their way of life. In Finland, about one-third of the Sami population are involved in the reindeer industry, in Sweden 10–15% (cf. Helander 1981:152).

The following table gives an indication of how well Sami is kept as the first language of the reindeer-breeding Sami population in the five central Sami municipalities in Finnmark, Norway. The table is based on the results of the 1970 census (Aubert 1978: 30, cf. also NOU 1985: 157):

Table 1: Norwegian as first language among reindeer breeders

Municipality	Individuals involved in reindeer breeding	Number of individuals with Norwegian as first language
Kautokeino	858	2
Karasjok	455	5
Porsanger	80	0
Tana	40	5
Nesseby	28	4
Total	1,461	16

In the coastal or sea-Sami areas, on the other hand, both Norwegians and Sami lived as fishermen and farmers. In such regions, the Sami in many cases became economically dependent upon Norwegian industries (cf. Paine 1958) and, eventually, the Sami language was marginalized. In this way, the process of Norwegianization was reinforced, resulting in a dramatic decline in the number of speakers of Sami. Because many of the sea Sami long ago consciously began teaching their children only Norwegian, there has been a tendency to claim that the sea Sami in many of the villages abandoned their language voluntarily (cf. Hoel 1982). There is, however, sufficient evidence to suggest that many sea-Sami parents felt coerced into accepting the process of Norwegianization (cf. e.g. *Hverdag* 1979/4, p. 13). They felt it necessary to teach their children Norwegian so that they would not suffer, e.g. at school where Norwegian was the only language of instruction.

On the whole, at that time the coastal Sami did not openly express the need to protect Sami values in a wider sense. Only in the last two decades have members of the younger generation of Sami from the coastal villages been willing to promote their culture through organized activities. (Cf. Pedersen 1989 for an account of important changes in the traditional coastal Sami industries, initiated by the introduction of modern technology.)

Until recently, it was assumed that Sami was no longer in use in most of these coastal regions and that Norwegian had taken over completely. But now, when Sami values in general have enjoyed a growth in status (cf. Smolicz 1992 for partly parallel situations in Australia), it turns out that Sami has been transmitted to younger generations in at least some of these coastal communities which earlier were considered to be totally Norwegianized (cf. Kåven 1979). Apparently, Sami has been spoken in private homes, hidden away almost like a secret language and therefore seldom, if ever, used outside the family (Nils Jernsletten, personal communication).

Two areas of vital importance for language preservation

The Sami situation described above seems to indicate that two special areas of language use are of vital importance for language preservation.

a) One is the defence of language use in those, often very specialized, domains of the minority society where threatened languages may have had the upper hand for generations.

For Sami, most important are probably the domains connected with reindeer breeding, hunting, fishing, and Sami handicrafts. The president of the Sami Parliament, Ole Henrik Magga, who is also a professor of Sami linguistics, is claimed by a Norwegian daily to have stated that the reason why reindeer breeding has attracted so many young Sami recently is that what they consider to be “Sami-ness” has been able to survive in this industry against all the previous attacks from the Norwegian state. According to Magga, the Sami are still struggling to overcome the results of these attacks (*Nordlys*

5/11/1991; concerning the importance of the reindeer-breeding industry, cf. also Helander 1981:156, NOU 1985:157, Aarseth and Bjørklund 1987:14, Jahr 1990, Hyltenstam and Stroud 1991:131). In the 1990s, however, the grazing grounds in Finnmark are too limited for the present number of reindeer, and the whole industry has been in a crisis. According to the authorities (cf. *Storingsmelding* 28, 1992), the number of reindeer breeders should be reduced considerably. The crisis in the reindeer-breeding industry also represents a severe threat to traditional Sami culture. As one 30-year-old reindeer-breeding Sami put it to a Norwegian newspaper: “Don’t forget that reindeer herding to us is primarily a way of life, not an occupation!” (John M. Hætta, *Aftenposten* 25/1/1992, p. 23; my translation.)

The importance of the language employed in connection with the reindeer herding industry is also focused on by Aikio (1984 and 1989). In Finland, the language of administration for reindeer herding has been Finnish, not Sami. This is different from the situation in Norway and Sweden, where Sami may be used on the administrative level. Aikio found that the situation in Finland poses a major threat to the use of Sami in the industry and in general. She believes that it “will in time prove to be disastrous for the Same culture and, indirectly, for the use of the Same language” (Aikio 1984:290, repeated in Aikio 1989:113). She claims that, unless fundamental changes are made, the situation “will inevitably lead to the death of the Same language [i.e. in Finland]” (Aikio 1984:290).

Hopefully, this view — expressed in the 1980s — will prove too pessimistic. Nevertheless, it testifies to the fact that the language used in the reindeer industry is also considered to be of major importance for Sami in Finland. In Sweden, Johansson (1975) found that while 90% of the Sami population *not* connected with reindeer breeding declared that their children could not speak Sami, the proportion in the reindeer-breeding population was 50%.

b) Since the role of the family is extremely important for the transmission of a language from one generation to the next (cf. Fishman 1993) the second aspect on which one should focus more attention is the linguistic development of mixed families.

Since an increasing number of Sami, also in the core Sami area, seem to marry non-Sami, the language of these families will soon prove to be very important for the question of language maintenance. It is necessary to argue strongly for the use of both languages in order to help the children from these families achieve bilingualism. Today, according to Nils Jernsletten (1993), one can indeed observe a change towards a positive attitude to bilingualism in some of these families. As Hyltenstam and Svonni (1990) have shown for Sami in Sweden, there is a clear correspondence between the parents’ use of Sami at home when the children are very small and the linguistic competence of the children when they reach their teens.

If parents become convinced that bilingualism is good for their children and that it is indeed possible to learn and use both languages without either of them being impoverished in any way — i.e. on a par with the language of

monolingual children — then the linguistically mixed families could be turned into an instrument of language maintenance instead of representing the road to language shift.

Let me end with a pertinent quotation from Loreto Todd (1992:283) who in a few words sums up the major points which I have tried to develop in this paper:

In the 1990s, young people, in particular, are fighting to save the equatorial rain forests, and struggling to preserve the richness of our animal and plant life. And this is good. But who is fighting to retain our rich linguistic multiplicity? Every year, world languages cease to be used and all communities are, in consequence, made poorer, because another unique repository of knowledge has been lost. We should not squander our linguistic wealth any more than we should be profligate with our natural resources.

(Parts of this paper are taken from my Dr. h. c. speech at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland, 19 October 1995.)

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*Bilješka o očuvanju jezika — s posebnim osvrtom na jezik
Sami u sjevernoj Skandinaviji*

U radu se razmatra stanje jezika Sami (laponskoga) u sjevernoj Skandinaviji, a u kontekstu činjenica da u cijelom svijetu izumire sve više jezika. Prema optimističnim procjenama danas tim jezikom govori oko 30 tisuća ljudi, od kojih je velika većina u Norveškoj. Nakon dugog razdoblja potiskivanja od strane mjesnih i državnih vlasti norveška država danas djelatno podupire porabu jezika Sami. U radu se ističe kako su za trajno korištenje ovoga jezika posebno vitalna dva područja: 1) tradicionalne djelatnosti naroda Sami kao što su uzgoj sobova, lov, ribolov i ručni rad; te 2) obitelji. Čini se da je jezični razvitak u miješanim obiteljima (Sami / ne-Sami) ovdje od ključne važnosti.