

On a longitudinal study of Finnish-Sámi language shift in Northern Sámi speech communities in Finland (2002–2012)

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Abstract

Although the simplest way to study language shift is to concentrate on collecting data in the present, the results cannot demonstrate the existence of a linguistic change in progress. Considering the Labovian concept of apparent time vs. real time investigations, the only way to solve the problems posed by studies in apparent time is by providing support for the research findings based on linguistic observation in real time, i.e. observing a speech community at two discrete points in time. In the field of research into Northern Sámi, there have only been a few studies inquiring into language shift and hardly any have taken the methodological approach featured in longitudinal studies of language shift.

In this paper I will introduce a longitudinal study I carried out in the Sámi speech communities of Enontekiö and Sodankylä, Finland. I will outline the research methods, analyse the results and consider the issues to be resolved in the second phase of the research. The first phase focused on exploring the major patterns of minority language use of Northern Sámi and Finnish bilinguals as well as their language attitudes towards minority and majority language use. Although the results implied that the Sámi community was in a language shift situation, the patterns of language use and the favourable attitudes of the community towards minority and majority language use indicated that the speech community was in an additive bilingual situation. The new research constitutes the second phase of the longitudinal study in the same minority community with the overall aim to follow-up on the 2001–2002 apparent-time research and collect real-time evidence to be able to justify the hypothesis that Sámi-Finnish language shift is truly an on-going process and obtain a reliable picture of the linguistic status of the Northern Sámi language in the area today.

1. Introduction

1.1 Linguistic minorities

A minority community can be defined according to its concentration, its territory, the way its minority situation evolved, and it can also be classified as an ethnic, linguistic, religious or political minority. Although there is no single established definition for a minority

community, theoretical literature gives priority to definitions which emphasize the fact that a minority community has fewer members than the majority. Similarly, according to the definition applied in international law a minority community is numerically smaller than the rest of the population of a state, it is in a non-dominant position, its members make efforts to preserve their culture, traditions, religion or language, and it has a strong sense of togetherness (Girasoli 1996). Yet, relatively large numbers of the minority community cannot be the key element of minority definitions, as in some cases (for instance, in some African countries) it is the non-dominant community which represents the majority. Similarly, Fishman's definition (1991) does not consider large numbers as a criterion for defining minorities. In his view, there are only two criteria for a minority group: (1) the community should have a common history and culture, and (2) its members should have a continuous feeling of togetherness. Although the criteria vary, there is one feature common to all minority communities: their members live in a society where the mechanisms regulating the society mostly exist for the benefit of the majority, and thus the minority community is in a disadvantaged position.

Time is an essential aspect of minority definitions, as it helps in making the essential distinction between indigenous and immigrant minority communities. The Sámi community of this study is an indigenous one; its members are native to the territory they occupy, they regard themselves as belonging to the same indigenous community, their native language is not a majority language of any other state, and their community has managed to preserve its social, economical, cultural and political institutions. Minority definitions do not necessarily include minority language skills as a necessary criterion. According to Smolicz (1981), although the maintenance of the mother tongue is essential if one wishes to be a part of the minority community, in many cases it is the unique features of the minority culture that survive instead of the native tongue. Yet it would also be unusual to define a community as a minority if its members would not speak their mother tongue at all or if they would not express any wishes to revive and to maintain their heritage language.

1.2 Language shift and some related concepts

The analysis of the linguistic situation of a minority community requires some terminological remarks to be made with respect to language shift and related concepts.

It is estimated that in today's world between 3 000 and 10 000 languages are spoken, rarely in monolingual, more likely in bi- or multilingual communities. Thus most authors consider multilingualism a worldwide norm, a natural phenomenon as opposed to monolingualism (Grosjean 1982, Romaine 1995, Bartha 1999, Borbély 2001). In stable multilingual communities the languages in use are functionally separated, which helps speakers maintain the language they use. The majority of multilingual situations, however, are unstable and characterized by the diversity of skills, functions and attitudes. In an unstable multilingual

situation, the multilingual community will gradually shift from minority to majority language use (Weinreich 1953, Fishman 1968, Gal 1979). Multilingual situations are only viable if the community supplies the minority language with specific functions, i.e. the minority language can fulfil a role that the majority language cannot and thus remains a tool of communication. The stages of a continuous language shift are illustrated by Haugen (1990) as follows:

$$A > AI/BII > BI/AII > B$$

A and B represent the languages involved in the language shift process, I and II show the dominance of language use in the speech community. The process of language shift involves code-switching when the speaker switches from one language to the other depending on the linguistic and social environment. Thus, code-switching can be considered as an individual and language shift a social phenomenon.

Language shift can in the long run result in language death. According to some estimates, 20–50% of the world's languages might become extinct in a couple of generations, and the majority of the world's 3,000–10,000 languages are spoken in regional varieties (Kraus 1992). Only some 10% of the languages, mostly majority languages with official status, are safe. Due to the fact that languages and linguistic situations change, the disappearance of language varieties as well as the emergence of new language varieties are natural phenomena. With regard to the Uralic language family, all Uralic minority languages spoken in the Russian Federation are endangered (Pusztay 2006).

As the process which a speech community experiences can be defined either as language shift or as language death (extinction), some authors consider these two terms synonyms. According to Paulston (1994), an extinct language can be defined as such if (1) it has no native speakers, (2) no member of the speech community uses it in everyday situations, (3) it is not characterized by the natural processes of linguistic change. It is also possible that nobody in the speech community at issue speaks the minority language but the language is still used on daily basis in another speech community, mostly situated in another state. According to what Bartha (1999) writes about the process of language shift, it is most likely to lead to language death in the Sámi communities of northern Scandinavia and in Finnish Lapland, as there is no other community outside these areas where Sámi could be spoken. Although the terms *language shift* and *language death* can both denote either a process or its consequence, sharing Gal's (1979) views about language shift as a process, I will use the term *language shift* when describing the linguistic situation of the Sámi and other endangered Finno-Ugric minority languages.

Language shift and language maintenance, together with their research, go hand in hand in a minority speech community. Language maintenance refers to a series of efforts that a minority speech community implements in order to defend themselves against the dominance of the majority language. Language maintenance implies the revitalization of the

minority language; for this, the minority community will have to increase the number of domains in which the minority language is used. The success of language maintenance depends on several factors, including the linguistic practices in families, the consistent use of the minority language within families, social and political support of the minority language and most of all the attitudes of the majority and the minority community towards minority language use. Negative attitudes towards the minority language, emphasizing its insignificance, form the basis for linguicism, i.e. linguistic discrimination; this has long served as the ideological background for the assimilation of minority languages into the majority one. Such linguistic discrimination works against language maintenance and thus fosters language shift.

Aikio (1994) claims that language revitalization works on two levels. On the individual level, the speaker uses the minority language in an increasing number of domains, mostly in the family. On the societal level, the state makes decisions concerning minority language teaching, the public use of the minority language and minority language rights. The recognition of language rights is essential for the survival of a minority language. According to Skutnabb-Kangas (1997) the recognition of language rights on the level of the individual means that the minority speaker has the right to expect positive attitudes towards his mother tongue and to have others respect this positive attitude, no matter whether his mother tongue is a majority or minority language. The individual can have the right to learn the minority or majority language, to participate in minority or majority language education on elementary level and to use the languages in official situations. On the societal level, the recognition of language rights means that speakers of a minority language can expect that their language and culture are recognized by the majority community, that educational and cultural institutions can be established, that speakers can participate in affairs regarding national and ethnic minorities and represent their rights in political dialogues. The state will have to provide the legal background which makes it possible for the minority to enjoy those rights and fund the activities related to the maintenance of such rights.

1.3 The linguistic situation of a minority community

The minority speech community will not necessarily cease to exist when its language vanishes, as there are numerous factors influencing the process of language shift and assimilation. The majority of research on language shift focuses on detecting the factors which trigger the process of language shift, which slow this process down or speed it up. There is no one uniform list of factors that would characterize the language shift process in any minority community, i.e. each and every multilingual situation requires a unique model to be set up. In what follows, I will present some of the factors which are most frequently mentioned in connection with the process of language shift in a minority speech community.

The factors influencing language shift are generally not of linguistic nature, but are related to social, economical, political and geographical conditions (Swadesh 1948). Gal (1979) emphasizes the effects of economical, social and political changes on language shift, claiming that if an underdeveloped region experiences industrialization, urbanization and mobility, the social network of the community will loosen and language shift will accelerate (see: Comrie 1981, Haarmann 1985).

Language shift is promoted not only by economical development, industrialization and urbanization; it can also be motivated by a higher socio-economic status. Status here is determined by qualifications and income. Gal (1979) concludes that for the Hungarian minority in Austria shifting to German was essential in order to achieve a higher socio-economic status. According to Li (1982) those with lower socio-economic status are more inclined to shift to majority language use.

Another important factor, as already mentioned, is the number of minority speakers. If the community has only a small number of speakers and is thus unable to maintain specific institutions which support language maintenance, the process of language shift will speed up. The distribution of the community affects language shift more than the number of speakers: even if the number of speakers is high, if they live scattered in a large area, efforts to maintain the minority tongue are more likely to fail, facilitating language shift. The size of the speaking community is thus not a predictor of language shift. More relevant is the composition, i.e. age, gender and educational background, as well as the territorial distribution of the speech community. If the community preserves its territorial compactness, the contact network of its members is likely to change more slowly.

It is a natural process that speech communities in the same territories mingle, and this leads to an increasing number of interethnic marriages which can induce language shift. Research on interethnic marriages shows that the more prestigious language variety will prevail and become the dominant language of communication in the family. There is a tendency for the mother to preserve her own minority language, especially if it enjoys higher prestige than the variant spoken by the father (Romaine 1995). Language use in the family is also influenced by the power relations of the speech communities living together and their cultural norms.

1.4 Language attitudes

The notion of attitude is most often discussed in psychology (Allport 1935; Ajzen–Fishbein 1980; Cooper–Croyle 1984; Ajzen 1988), sociology (Kahle 1984) and education (Gardner 1982; Sharp et al. 1973; Lewis et al. 1982; Baker 1988). Measuring attitudes is most thoroughly dealt with in psychological research (Thurstone–Chave 1929; Likert 1932; Shaw–Wright 1967).

The definitions of attitude range from the specific to the general. According to Lambert (1967), Baker (1998) and Ladegaard (2000) attitudes are closely related to behaviour as far as they predispose people to a certain behaviour. Brudner and White (1979), however, claim that attitudes do not influence behaviour or vice versa. Research into language attitudes often accepts the socio-psychological definition proposed by Ryan and Giles, according to which language attitude is “any affective, cognitive or behavioural index of evaluative reactions toward different language varieties and their speakers” (Ryan et al. 1982: 7). Language attitudes are considered stable and thus, unlike other linguistic behaviour, they cannot be observed directly, nor can certain forms of behaviour be considered unequivocal proofs of a certain attitude. Yet, attitudes can help predict behavioural patterns. Opinion differs from attitude in a way that it expresses conviction about something and lacks the emotional nature of attitudes. Attitude should also be differentiated from interest or task-oriented motivation (Lewis 1982).

As language constitutes an integral part of society and individuals’ identity, people’s attitudes towards it have strong effects on its status within a given community. According to Lewis (1981) attitude is just as important a dimension of social structure as the size and the age distribution of the minority community and thus can indicate language health (Baker 1998). Similarly, a positive attitude is claimed to be a prerequisite for successful revitalization (Grenoble & Whaley 2006). When it comes to language maintenance the most important types of attitude are the attitudes of the minority community towards its mother tongue and its value as well as attitudes of the majority towards the minority language and culture (Gal 1979). Patterns of language use mirror language attitudes (Bartha (1995, 2001). The analysis of language attitudes and language use in the same survey can help reveal the potential mismatch between the hopes the minority community have regarding the survival of its mother tongue and the reality.

Sociolinguistic research on language attitudes in a minority situation can concern the attitudes of minority speakers towards various aspects of the multilingual situation, e.g. language preferences, language varieties, the role of varieties in contact, language maintenance etc. and the attitudes of majority speakers towards the minority language and its use. An investigation like this may shed light on the relationship between the minority and the majority community. In a wider sociolinguistic research context, language attitudes towards the role of minority/majority language in the community, its speakers and their language preferences, language use, maintenance and policies, are correlated with the social variables of age, gender, education etc. (Fasold 1984: 148).

The tools of attitude research are most often interviews and questionnaires. More rarely, diaries are used in which informants can report on their actual language choices and attitudes.

2. Research design

This paper will present some of the results of the first phase of a longitudinal research I started in 2002 in the Sámi speech communities of Enontekiö and Sodankylä in Finnish Lapland (Duray 2008). I selected these two municipalities because systematic sociolinguistic research which investigates language use and attitudes had not yet been carried out in the region. The overall aim of the research is to observe the multilingual situation in both communities over a long period of time, in this case a decade apart. A longitudinal research was launched in order to get more accurate observations about the process of language shift in these communities. The second phase of the longitudinal study was launched in 2012 and is in a preliminary stage. The focus at the moment is on evaluating the data from the questionnaires filled in by the same informants and on preparing the interviews with them.

The research project has two overlapping aims. The first is to identify the domains and degree of minority language use by looking at preferences of language choice. Secondly, I am also interested in how language use is reflected in attitudes towards Sámi and Finnish language use and Sámi-Finnish bilingualism. Thus, the following major topics are touched upon in the research: (1) the domains and degree of Northern Sámi language use, (2) preferences for language choice, (3) the attitudes of minority members to Sámi, Finnish and Sámi-Finnish bilingualism.

The following hypotheses have been tested throughout the research and verified:

- (1) There are differences in the norms of minority language use across generations.
- (2) The use of Sámi is strongest in the informal domains.
- (3) The community has favourable attitudes towards the Sámi language and culture, as well as to specific features of their bilingual situation.
- (4) The patterns of language use do not stand in strong correlation with the social and demographic variables of age, gender, occupation or education.
- (5) The language attitudes of the community do not stand in strong correlation with the norms of language use or social and demographic variables.

The language of the North Sámi speech community in Finnish Lapland is considered threatened, and the speakers of North Sámi have been experiencing cultural and linguistic assimilation into the majority community over the past centuries. This has led to the eventual decrease in the functions of the minority language, making it difficult for the Sámi to pass their mother tongue on to younger generations. The linguistic situation of the minority community has been shaped both by the language shift situation and the measures which both minority and majority communities are implementing to preserve Sámi. The legal status of the Sámi and both minority and majority attitudes have improved considerably in recent decades.

Today there are about 1900 Sámi in whole Finland. 176 ethnic Sámi are living scattered in the area of the municipality of Enontekiö, concentrated in the central village of Hetta and in some other smaller communities. In Sodankylä there are 131 Sámi, living mostly along the main road leading through the central village of Sodankylä and the major reindeer pastures of the region.

Both communities are ethnically mixed, consisting of (1) Sámi, (2) Finns, and (3) Sámi-Finnish families and their descendants who consider themselves either Sámi or Finnish, on the basis of their family background or, mostly, on the basis of their self-experienced linguistic and cultural affiliation.



Figure 1. Finnish Lapland

In the research I stratified the sample according to mother tongue, place of living and age (25+). The survey included 60 informants, 35 women and 25 men, 60% of them (25 informants) earned their living from reindeer herding, while the remaining 40% included some unemployed people, a few teachers, and several entrepreneurs from the service sector engaged mostly in selling Sámi handicraft items. 66% of the consultants had obtained a secondary, college or university degree. 90% of them had acquired Sámi at home, the rest of them, mostly the youngest at school. All informants were bilingual, half of them also knew some other language(s) in addition to Sámi and Finnish.

The data were collected by means of a questionnaire which had been designed to allow both qualitative and quantitative analysis. Norms of language use and language attitudes were examined in relation to the social variables of age, gender, occupation and education.

3. Methods and Results

3.1 Language Use

The questionnaire consisted of two major parts. The first part concentrated on gathering data on the informants' language use in informal and formal domains with specific partners. The first set of questions focused on the primary domain of language use, i.e. the informal one involving family members, schoolmates, teachers, neighbours etc. as partners of interaction.

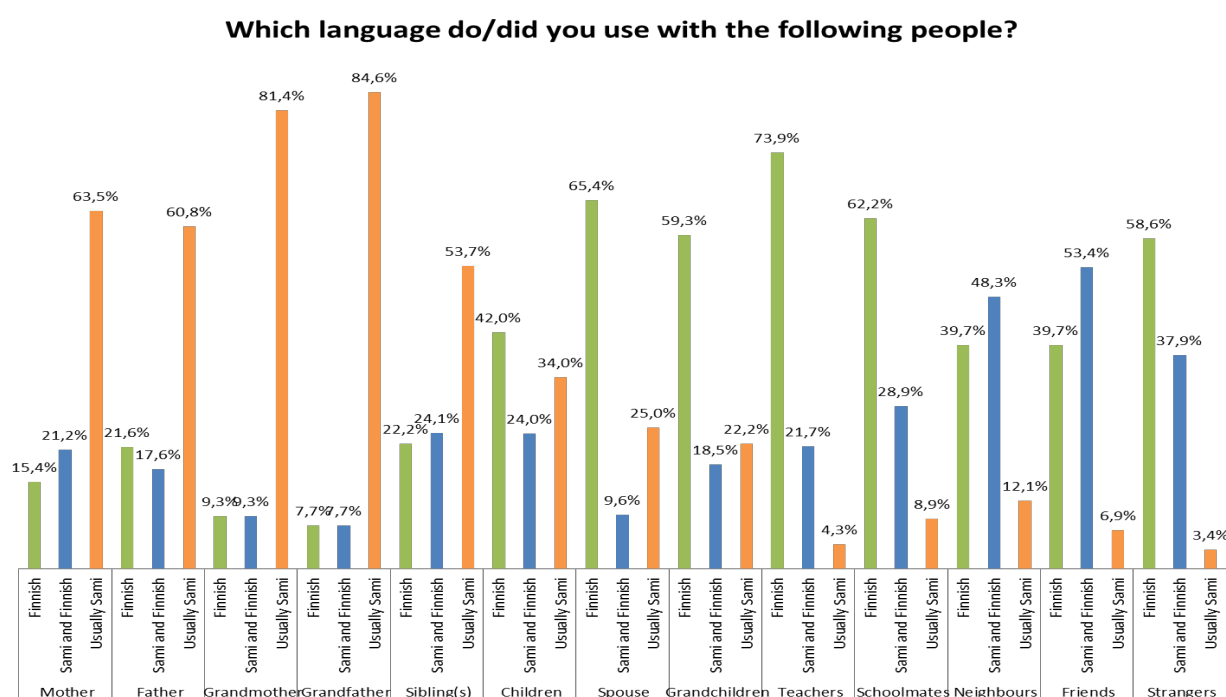


Figure 2. Language choice in informal domains of language use

The data clearly indicate that Sámi is mostly used in the family with parents and siblings. The mixed use of Sámi and Finnish is characteristic of the interactions between the informants and their children or spouse. These interactions are characterized by mutuality, i.e. each participant of the interaction choosing the same language variety for communication. Another set of questions inquired about language use in mostly formal situations where partners are dominantly Finnish speaking.

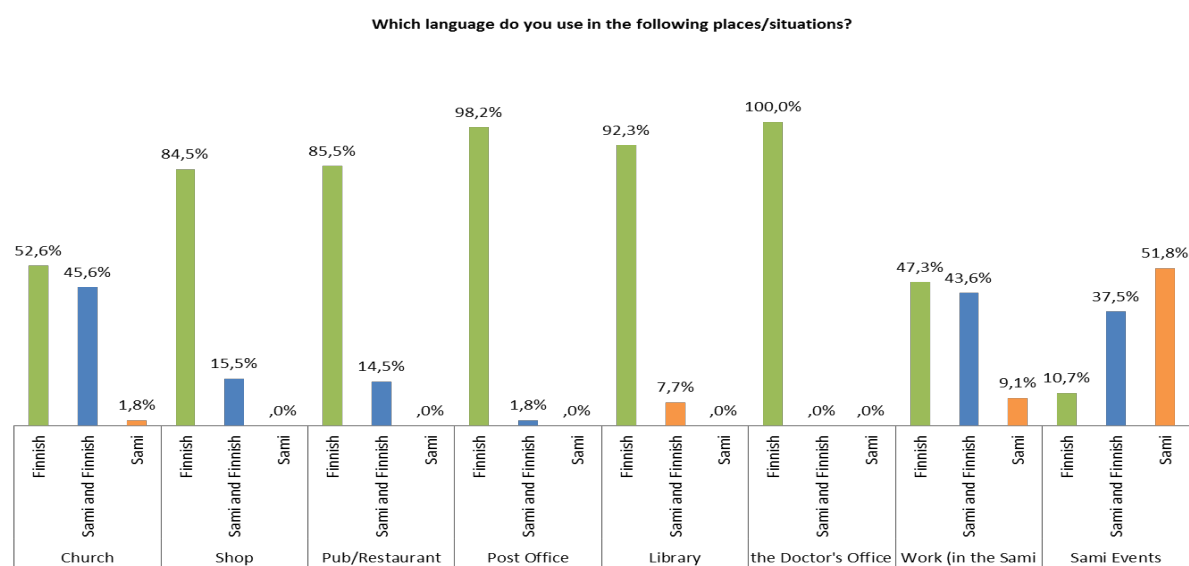


Figure 3. Language choice in formal domains of language use

The data above point to the tendency that informants for most of the time rely on Finnish in formal situations. Yet, there are some domains, i.e. cultural events organised for the Sámi, church and reindeer herding communities, which involve Sámi partners and in which situations the informants tend to use Sámi and Finnish or generally Sámi in their interactions.

Having compared the social variables with the norms of informal and formal language use I have found that none of the social variables of age, gender and occupation stand in strong correlation with informal or formal language use.

Through another set of questions I intended first to investigate the role the Sámi media play in influencing the patterns of language use and second, to gain insight into the practice of reading and writing skills in Sámi. Here I also designed some questions related to the linguistic automatisms in Sámi.

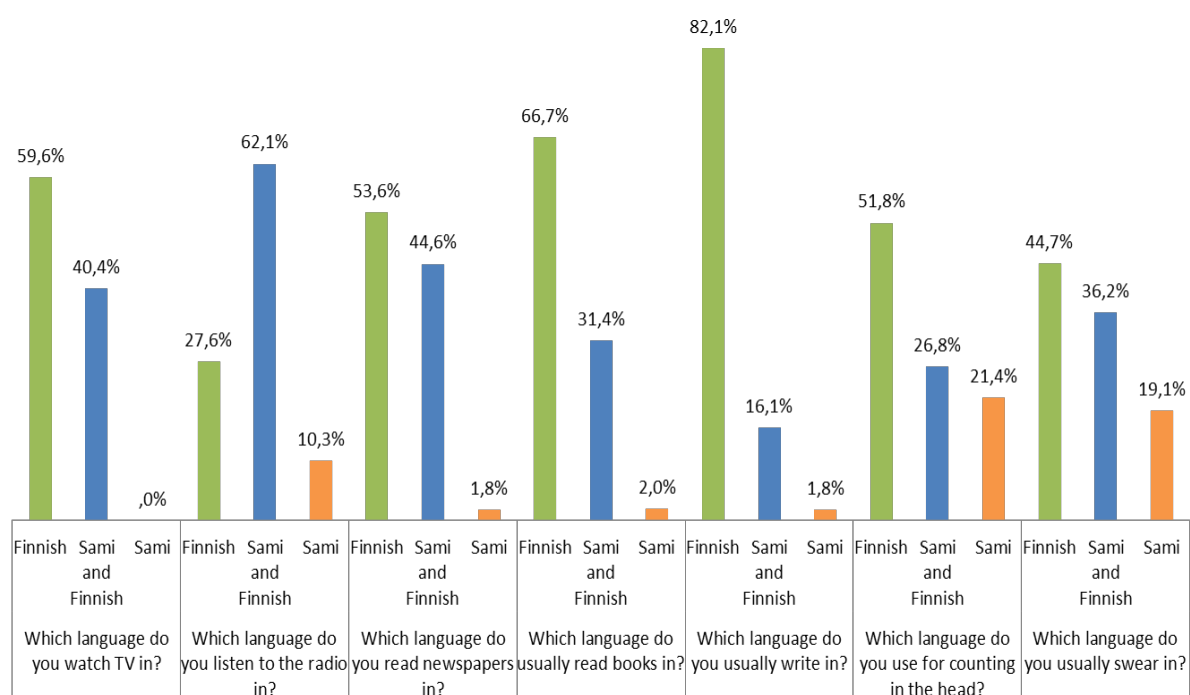


Figure 4. Language choice – Media, Language Skills

The data here reveal that the informants, being bilingual, read newspapers and literature as well as follow TV and radio programmes mostly in both Sámi and Finnish. Their writing skills, however, are largely dominated by Finnish. As for the social variables of age, gender and occupation the language choice of the informants concerning the media and language skills does not much depend on any of those. As for the automatisms the data demonstrate that Sámi speakers mostly rely on their mother tongues when it comes to counting in the head or swearing.

3.2 Language Attitudes

The second part of the survey contained 45 statements through which I investigated the informants' language attitudes. The first set of 20 statements was related to attitudes towards the mother tongue, the usefulness, the use, the learning and teaching of Sámi. The informants were required to react to the statements by indicating their agreement or disagreement on a five-point scale. The questionnaire included some open questions to allow informants to explain and elaborate on their language preferences.

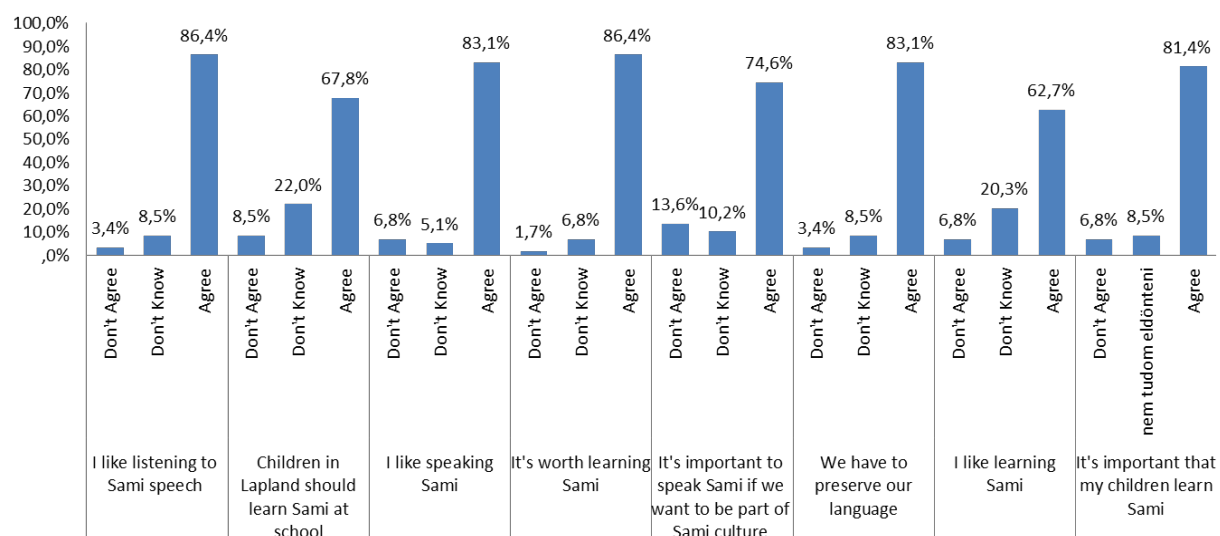


Figure 5. Language Attitudes towards Sámi

The analysis of instrumental attitudes has revealed that most informants' attitudes towards the pragmatic value of their mother tongue are either neutral or rather positive than negative, irrespectively of their age. 60–70% of them agreed that it is worth learning Sámi and most of them also believe that Sámi can be preserved. As for integrative attitudes, the data show that all age groups completely agree that it is important to speak Sámi if they want to belong to the Sámi culture.

The second set of 25 statements was concerned with attitudes towards Sámi and Finnish, as well as to several aspects of bilingualism.

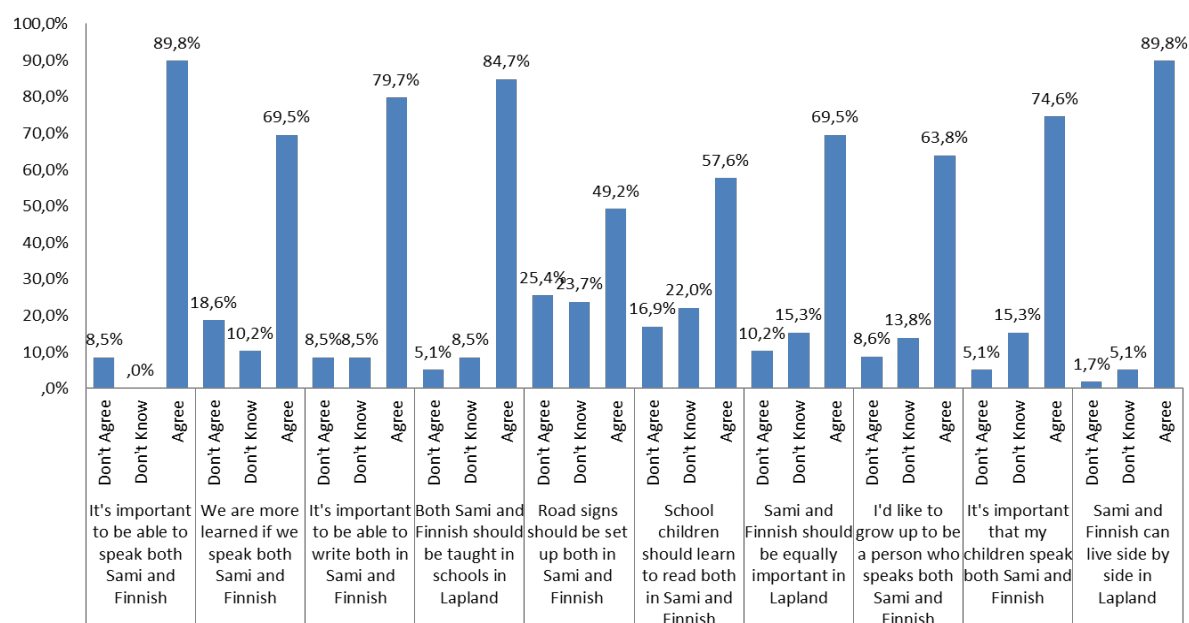


Figure 6. Language Attitudes towards Sámi and Finnish

Comparing the two sets of data in figure 5 and 6, I can claim that the Sámi community strongly agrees with the importance of preserving their own language and culture, and that it does not consider the Sámi-Finnish bilingual situation restrictive or negative in any way; rather, bilingualism is seen as something natural and positive.

In the survey I selected some of the attitude statements, again instrumental and integrative ones, concerning certain aspects of bilingualism and examined their relationship with some of the social variables and with the informants' writing and reading habits. I was particularly interested in the informants' attitudes towards bilingual language education and the Sámi-Finnish bilingual situation.

The data suggest that 80–90% of all age groups regard bilingual language teaching as an essential way of passing Sámi on to children. The informants also have positive attitudes towards reading in Sámi, even if most of them generally read in Finnish. Acquiring Sámi writing skills is equally important for the whole community irrespective of the fact that its members mostly write in Finnish.

The final part of the questionnaire consisted of some questions about the beauty of the Sámi language. The results below convincingly show that the informants have strong emotional ties with their mother tongue. The richness and beauty of Sámi is just as much important as its value as a means of establishing contacts with other members of the Sámi community.

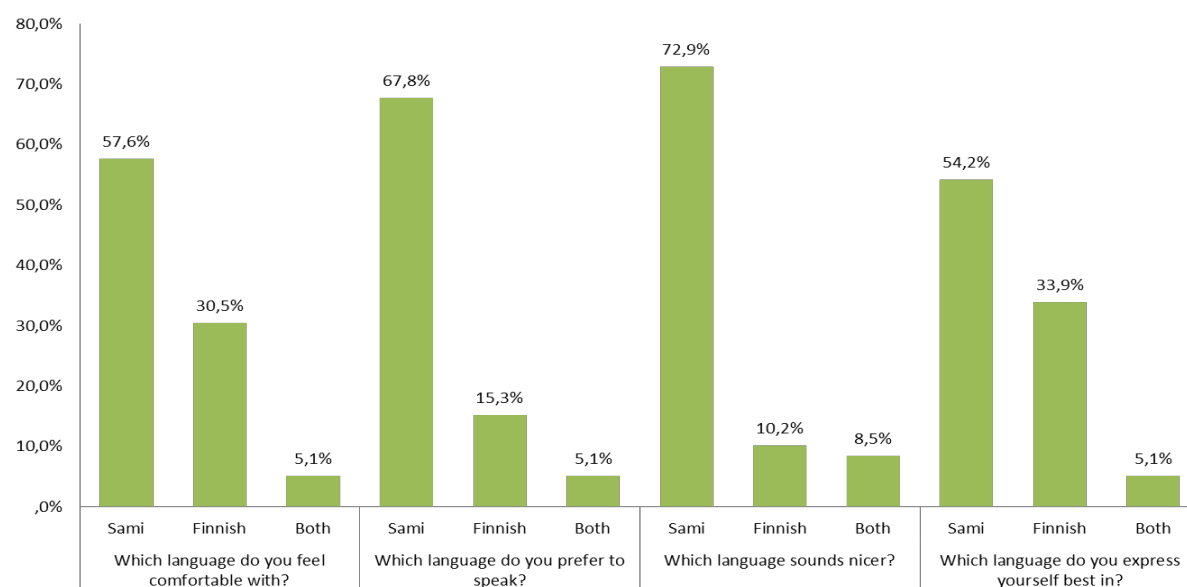


Figure 7. Integrative Language Attitudes towards Sámi and Finnish

Concerning both attitude questionnaires as well as the one enquiring about the value of the Sámi language and Sámi language skills the data indicate that each generation has positive attitudes towards the Sámi language and to certain aspects of bilingualism, irrespective of gender or occupation. I have not found any correlation between age and attitude in the

statements which emphasise that it is important for Sámi speakers to preserve their mother tongue and pass it down to their children. The analysis has also shown that all of the informants have positive attitudes towards Sámi irrespectively of their actual language choice in formal or informal situations.

4. Conclusions

Following the analysis of the data obtained from the questionnaires and the relationship of minority language use and language attitudes with the variables of age, gender, occupation and education, the following conclusions were drawn.

The Sámi community is evidently in a language shift situation. Although it is impossible to predict when this phase of mixed language use will be replaced by the exclusive use of the majority language, the present patterns of language use and the favourable attitudes of the community towards minority and majority language use indicate that the speech community is in an additive bilingual situation. However, functional language loss, i.e. the gradual decrease in the domains of Sámi language use is an on-going process which is facilitated mostly by the fact that the community cannot preserve its compactness originating from its traditional livelihoods and that the influence of the majority language has become stronger, partly due to the role of the media, in both formal and informal domains of language use.

Several factors seem to have been contributing to the acceleration of language shift in the examined community. Still there are a lot of other factors which have worked against language shift in the past decades including the ever more popular Sámi language teaching, the institutions, both at governmental and local level, engaged in the development of goals, objectives and strategies to develop the Sámi language, the activities related to traditional Sámi handicraft and reindeer herding as well as Sámi cultural events.

In sum, from the current language shift situation it cannot be inferred that the Sámi ethnic group would quickly assimilate into the majority community. Today the process of language shift is not as fast as it once was, instead it has apparently slowed down. The Sámi language community has a noticeably positive attitude towards its mother tongue and culture as well as towards the present Sámi-Finnish bilingual situation which is no doubt a prerequisite for the community and the minority language to survive in its Finnish-dominant bilingual context.

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